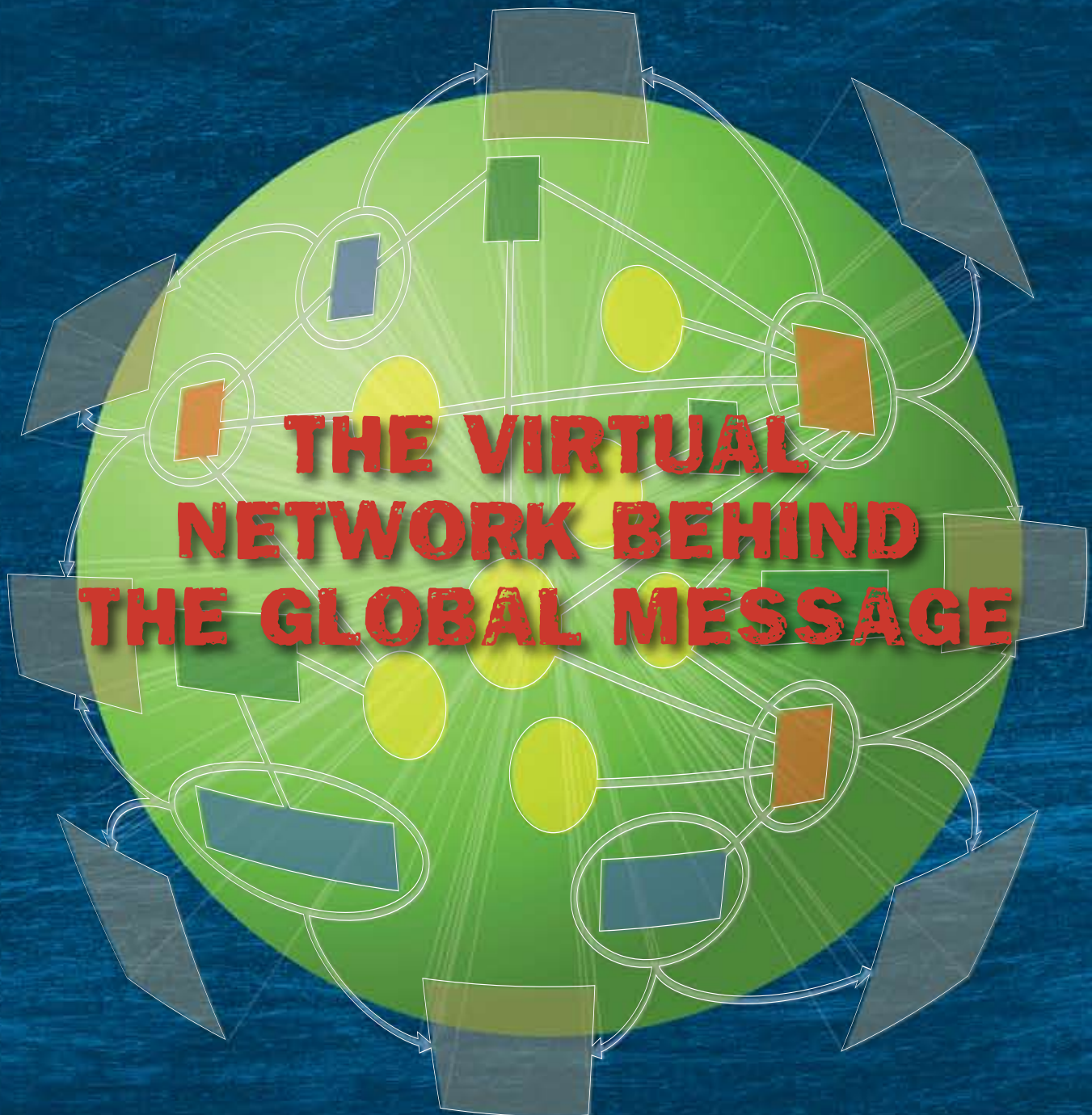


MARCH 2008

An RFE/RL Special Report
By Daniel Kimmage

THE AL-QAEDA MEDIA NEXUS



The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus:
The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message
An RFE/RL Special Report
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THE AL-QAEDA MEDIA NEXUS

**THE VIRTUAL
NETWORK BEHIND
THE GLOBAL MESSAGE**

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Key Findings

- **The "original" Al-Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden accounts for a mere fraction of jihadist media production.**
- **Virtual media production and distribution entities (MPDEs) link varied groups under the general ideological rubric of the global jihadist movement.** The same media entities that "brand" jihadist media also create virtual links between the various armed groups that fall into the general category of Al-Qaeda and affiliated movements.
- **Three key entities connect Al-Qaeda and affiliated movements to the outside world through the internet.** These three media entities — Fajr, the Global Islamic Media Front, and Sahab — receive materials from more than one armed group and post those materials to the internet.
- **Information operations intended to disrupt or undermine the effectiveness of jihadist media can and should target the media entities that brand these media and act as the virtual connective tissue of the global movement.**
- **While video is an important component of jihadist media, text products comprise the bulk of the daily media flow.** Within text products, periodicals focused on specific "fronts" of the jihad are an important genre that deserves more attention from researchers.
- **The vast majority of jihadist media products focus on conflict zones: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia.**
- **The priorities of the global jihadist movement, as represented by its media arm, are operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and North Africa.**
- **Jihadist media are attempting to mimic a "traditional" structure in order to boost credibility and facilitate message control.** While conventional wisdom holds that jihadist media have been quick to exploit technological innovations to advance their cause, they are moving toward a more structured approach based on consistent branding and quasi-official media entities. Their reasons for doing so appear to be a desire to boost the credibility of their products and ensure message control.
- **In line with this strategy, the daily flow of jihadist media that appears on the internet is consistently and systematically branded.**

1 Introduction

As the world marked the sixth anniversary of Al-Qaeda's 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, Osama bin Laden appeared in two new video addresses in September 2007. The terrorist leader's sudden reemergence after a nearly three-year hiatus focused renewed attention on the phenomenon of jihadist media — the daily flow of press releases, statements, essays, books, video clips, and films produced by organizations that identify themselves as participants in a global jihad against “crusaders, Jews, and apostates.”

This brief study surveys a representative sample of Arabic-language jihadist* media from July 2007 and attempts to answer two simple, yet crucial, questions: What does the structure of jihadist media tell us about the relationship between Al-Qaeda central and the movements that affiliate themselves with it? And what can the priorities of jihadist media tell us about the operational priorities of Al-Qaeda and affiliated movements?

These are important questions to answer because the jihadist movement has drawn a vast amount of attention despite a notable paucity of credible information and a troubling lack of relevant language skills among the majority of English-language writers on the subject. Jihadist media are one of the few publicly available sources on this diffuse movement, and while the limitations of the insights they can provide need to be recognized, they have received far less serious scrutiny than they deserve.

This report explains how the online jihadist media network works. It traces the links between armed groups, media production and distribution entities, and internet forums to reveal the hidden structures that disseminate Al-Qaeda's claims and ideas. It also provides policymakers, analysts, and interested readers with a conceptual vocabulary to describe this guerilla media network in order to clarify our discussion of how best to counteract its influence.

The relationship between the original Al-Qaeda, sometimes referred to as Al-Qaeda central, and the various movements that have affiliated themselves with it is one of the most pressing questions in the world today for terrorism analysts. Since a U.S.-

led military operation toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 and Al-Qaeda's core leadership fled, most likely to the frontier regions of Pakistan, the world's best-known terrorist organization has spawned a wide variety of regional “franchises.” The most prominent of these are the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib. A number of ideologically affiliated movements also exist, such as the Taliban.

Al-Qaeda central, regional franchises, and affiliated movements all place a high premium on media and release a constant stream of media products, from political statements to films. A number of global media production entities assist in the production and distribution of these products. By examining the patterns and relationships embedded in this media network, we can gain insight into possible links between the movements themselves and draw closer to answering the central question of what Al-Qaeda has become, and what it is not, in its global diffusion since 2001.

Open sources cannot tell us what jihadists are thinking and saying to each other, but we can easily find and analyze what they are saying to their supporters and sympathizers. While the correlation between a violent revolutionary movement's media priorities and its operational priorities is imperfect, a careful analysis of media priorities can provide insights into operational objectives.

The study begins with a definition of jihadist media and a short overview of its distribution channels. The second section examines the Al-Qaeda media nexus and explains how it links Al-Qaeda central with franchises and affiliates through an interlocking network of media production and distribution entities. The third section looks at the priorities of jihadist media as a whole and analyzes the composition of media production emanating from specific groups and production entities. The final section draws a number of analytical conclusions and suggests subjects for future research.

* Some have objected to the term “jihadist,” arguing that it confers false legitimacy on an aberrant strain of thought that promotes an exclusively martial interpretation of the word “jihad.” This report uses the term neutrally to refer to armed groups that describe themselves as fighting a violent “jihad” against all perceived enemies.

2 Overview of Jihadist Media

2.1 Definition of Jihadist Media

While jihadist forums make available a wide array of materials that express support for Al-Qaeda and affiliated movements (AQAM), this study looks specifically at media products that are posted with a clearly stated affiliation to a known armed group and made available through an established media production or distribution entity (MPDE). Taken together, these are the two baseline factors for inclusion in what I have termed the Al-Qaeda media nexus, a concept that is further elucidated in **Section 3, The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus**.

The connections demonstrated in **Section 3** reveal that these jihadist organizations and media production entities form a cohesive network that is bound together by identifiable, openly stated links. **Tables 1 and 2** list the main armed groups and MPDEs that make up the Al-Qaeda media nexus. They are given here for identification purposes; **Section 3** details the links that bind them together.

Name	Acronym	Geographic Location
Islamic State of Iraq (Al-Qaeda in Iraq)	ISI	Iraq
Ansar al-Sunnah	AS	Iraq
Taliban	—	Afghanistan
Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib	AQIM	Algeria and Morocco
Young Mujahidin Movement	YMM	Somalia
Jaysh al-Islam	JI	Gaza
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	AQAP	Saudi Arabia
Al-Qaeda	AQ	Global ¹

The armed groups in **Table 1** share an ideology that espouses a harshly monolithic interpretation of Islam, divides the world into believers and unbelievers, frequently defines Muslims who do not accept this ideology as unbelievers, advocates “jihad” to impose a new world order, interprets “jihad” as violent struggle, and legitimizes virtually all forms of violence against those defined as unbelievers. The table does not include Islamist armed groups that fall outside this rubric, such as the Islamic Army of Iraq.

¹ Although numerous reports place the central leadership of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan, the group does not explicitly claim to be located there and it has not issued specific statements claiming operations inside Pakistan. For the purposes of this study, it is treated as a global group.

Name	Acronym or Short Name
Global Islamic Media Front	GIMF
Echo of Jihad Media Center	EJMC
Sharp Swords Media Institute	SSMI
Jihadist Media Brigade	JMB
Media Front of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan	MFT
Sawt al-Jihad (Taliban)	SJ
Jihadist Media Elite	JME
Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad	MTJ
Al-Sahab Institute for Media Production	Sahab
Al-Furqan Media Institute	Furqan
Al-Fajr Media Center	Fajr
Al-Isra Media Institute	Isra
Al-Ansar Mail Group	Ansar

It should be noted that most of these armed groups and entities underscore their “official” status with graphic logos (see **Figures 1 and 2**)². These logos have the added advantage of rendering their materials instantly recognizable when they are posted to forums (see **Section 2.2, Distribution**).



Figure 1. Thumbnail logos of the main armed groups and media production and distribution entities that espouse and promote Al-Qaeda’s ideology.

² Interestingly, Al-Qaeda itself does not employ a graphic logo.



Figure 2. Banner logos of the Taliban's media wing and the Global Islamic Media Front.

2.2 Distribution

There is no centralized online location for the distribution of jihadist media. Instead, a shifting array of forums acts as the primary distribution channel. Forums that specialize in the distribution of jihadist media contain special sections featuring statements released by groups and media organizations. **Figure 3** shows the home page of Al-Ikhlās, a popular forum that requires registration. The page lists a number of sections, including *News and Statements from Jihad Correspondents*.

Figure 4 shows a sample of the contents of the *News and Statements from Jihad Correspondents*³. Note the logos running down the right margin of **Figure 4**; they identify the organization or MPDE that issued the statement posted to the forum.

These distribution channels are perhaps best described as quasi-official. The groups involved are real, and they are engaged in real acts of terrorist violence and insurgent warfare in concrete geographic locations. They are, however, necessarily secretive, and maintain a constant presence only on the Internet. The MPDEs are virtual and function both as branding mechanisms and, as we shall see, as connective tissue linking the groups that carry out acts of violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Algeria, Somalia, and elsewhere.

العدد	التاريخ	الموضوع	التعليقات	الردود
قسم أخبار الصحابة				
121,965	10,745	15-0-2007 أخبار الصحابة موضوع: الصحابة		
قسم التصنيف العامة				
267,320	27,291	موقع جويوس للصحابة موضوع: الصحابة		
78,232	10,975	محل التي... موضوع: الصحابة		
3,669	424	أخبار من 11 أغسطس موضوع: Dr Fajal		
39,233	6,292	88 برقية الفرس التي تعود موضوع: PM 09:58		
9,082	1,228	التي من تعرف الصحابة موضوع: PM 07:46		
423	207	Al-Ikhlās English Section موضوع: PM 06:12		
قسم التصنيف العامة				
10,842	2,124	أخبار الصحابة موضوع: PM 08:41		
486	40	موقع جويوس موضوع: PM 01:00 13-09-2007		
3,781	723	البرقية الفرسية موضوع: PM 02:58		
قسم التصنيف الأخرى				
3,893	1,147	الصحابة موضوع: PM 03:24 07-09-2007		
574	116	الصحابة موضوع: PM 03:24 07-09-2007		

Figure 3. The home page of the Al-Ikhlās jihadist forum.

الردود	التاريخ	الموضوع	التعليقات	الردود
1,901	69	PM 10:42 28-09-2007 موضوع: الصحابة	5 4 3 2 1	
4,470	134	PM 10:42 28-09-2007 موضوع: الصحابة	9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1	
9,071	225	PM 08:33 27-09-2007 موضوع: Press		
1,470	66	PM 04:54 27-09-2007 موضوع: الإسلام	5 4 3 2 1	
1,916	94	PM 11:45 26-09-2007 موضوع: الصحابة	7 6 5 4 3 2 1	
96	21	PM 08:59 24-09-2007 موضوع: الصحابة	2 1	
96	22	PM 08:17 24-09-2007 موضوع: الصحابة	2 1	
99	20	PM 08:17 24-09-2007 موضوع: الصحابة	2 1	

Figure 4. *News and Statements from Jihad Correspondents* on the Al-Ikhlās jihadist forum. Note the logos on the right, which identify armed groups and MPDEs.

³ Figure 3 was accessed and recorded on September 16, 2007; Figure 4 on October 3, 2007.

2.3 Attribution, Authority, and “Exuberance”

The current quasi-official distribution system, with media releases posted to dedicated news sections of forums and attributed to known MPDEs, implements many of the recommendations found in a detailed critique of jihadist media strategies issued by the Al-Boraq Media Institute's Jihadist Media Development Unit in September 2006. The 23-page paper, titled *Media Exuberance* (see **Figure 5**), confronts the challenge of establishing reliable attribution and credibility for the products of an Internet-based guerrilla media movement. Structured as a policy paper with definitions, case studies, and recommendations, *Media Exuberance* merits serious attention as the clearest exposition of a conceptual framework for the Internet-based distribution of jihadist media.

The Al-Boraq policy paper defines “media exuberance” as efforts undertaken “without official authority or prior study,” which apparently refers to scattershot individual postings of jihadist media materials without the sanction of a recognized MPDE. The paper notes that while some individuals engage in this activity out of a genuine desire to help, or perhaps to gain attention, others have “lost a sense of the importance of distribution rights and the authority to conduct work.”

“Exuberance” takes a variety of forms, including the “distribution of jihadist audio and video products without official sanction or permission from the producer, the distribution of statements by jihadist groups under personal names and user IDs, [and] the release of personal [audio and video] products and works under the names of jihad groups.” The author, or authors, argue that these practices undermine the “credibility” of jihadist media and distract attention from “official sources.”

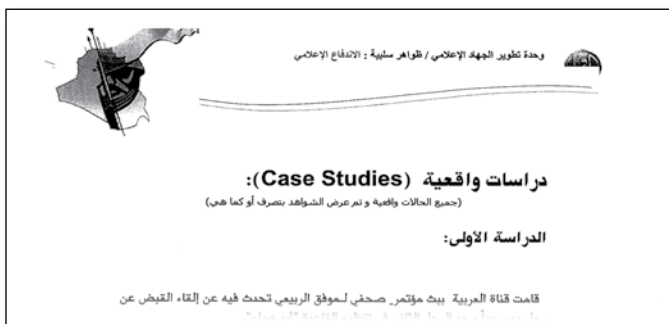


Figure 5. Excerpt from *Media Exuberance*, a September 2006 study that provides a conceptual framework for the Internet-based distribution of jihadist media.

The paper notes that Western media outlets such as ABC and CNN have maintained their “credibility” even as the “information revolution” progresses. As evidence, the authors note that information leaks *to* such outlets, rather than *from* them; the implication is that jihadist media must strive for the same status. Exiled to the Internet and bereft of the television stations and brick-and-mortar presence that convey respectability and credibility, forums must be especially careful with the information they provide or they will “lose a weapon that we desperately need.”⁴

After providing a number of examples of “media exuberance” in case studies, the paper concludes with recommendations that advocate an official distribution network for jihadist media products through recognized MPDEs:

We call [on supporters] to rally around [jihadist] media organizations and official bodies. If one of the brothers should find an important release or news item or pictures from the inhabitants of an Iraqi city (for example), he should contact the administration of the Al-Hisbah Forum of the Global Islamic Media Foundation or the Al-Fajr Media Center for the appropriate work in calm and wisdom.

In light of the recommendations offered in *Media Exuberance*, a recent incident illustrates that jihadist organizations and MPDEs take the concepts of attribution and authority as seriously as the authors of the policy paper intended. On September 3, 2007, the Islamic State of Iraq, the latest iteration of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, posted the following statement to jihadist forums in reference to a disputed video clip of an insurgent operation:

This is a response to a statement by the dear brothers in the Media Committee of the Mujahidin Army dated 16 Sha’ban 1428 [August 29, 2007] in which they claimed that the Al-Furqan Institute distributed [a video clip of] one of the operations belonging to the Media Committee that had been distributed on 5 Safar 1428 [February 23, 2007]. An investigation revealed that the operation, involving the

4 A section of the paper titled “We are not alone” urges contributors to jihadist forums to remember that prying eyes are always present, including “intelligence services of the tyrant, members of media institutes opposed to “electronic terrorism,” and journalists and correspondents from various stations and news agencies.” The authors quite accurately note that “members of crusader media institutes analyze and study releases and take from them extremely important information, for example: To what extent has media work developed, and is it possible to learn the identity of an individual through a style that recurs in more than one product? What is the nature of the message that a product is sending to the masses, the extent of incitement, changes in rhetorical style, and to what extent do Muslims rely on news of the mujahidin, to what extent are they influenced by media counter-campaigns, and is there an effect from Western stations and Arab hypocrite stations?” They conclude, “It is regrettable that Western media institutes treat jihadist forums with care, attention, and rigor that we do not find among the supporters of such forums...”

destruction of a car belonging to the apostate police in Al-Fallujah and distributed by the Al-Furqan Institute on 13 Sha'ban 1428 [August 26, 2007], originated with one of the large core brigades of the Mujahidin Army in Al-Karmah District and its surroundings. It swore allegiance to the commander of the faithful after the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and its media archive subsequently was transferred to the Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production. The Institute then distributed the operation after a period of time. We in the Al-Furqan Institute strive for accuracy in the distribution of videotaped operations and media releases, and we call on all of the media committees and sections to observe this policy, for it lies at the heart of jihadist media practice.

The author's observation of jihadist media practice in recent years confirms the thrust of this statement. Organizations and MPDEs take seriously both their "ownership" of a given media product and their various stated affiliations. The veracity of the claims made in statements is another issue entirely, of course. The key point in the context of this study is that the media affiliations revealed here are not a happenstance occurrence, but rather the result of careful efforts that betray a higher level of coordination than is often evident at first glance.

2.4 Note on Methodology

This study relies on material collected primarily from two forums, Al-Ikhlas and Al-Fallujah ("The Islamic Flugha Forums"), in early September 2007. The materials themselves were posted in July 2007. Selection criteria were, as noted above, a clearly stated "official" affiliation with a known jihadist armed group or MPDE in the form of a graphic logo and/or written attribution. Unless otherwise noted, all materials are in Arabic.

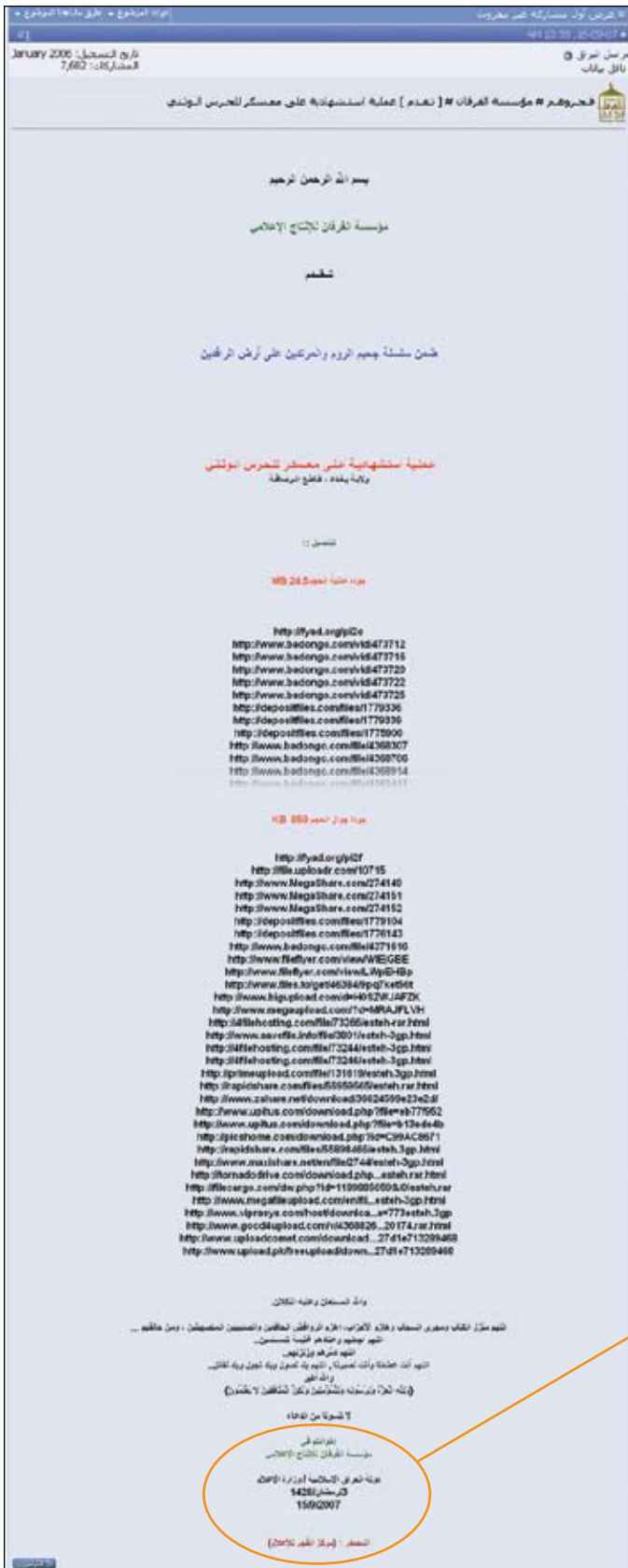
These materials were used to create a database. Entries reflect all stated affiliations for a given media product, its title, type, geographic focus, and a number of technical parameters (word length, duration of video, file type and size, date posted, etc.). Statements by ISI, it should be noted, are already released in the form of monthly databases compiled by the Jihadist Media Brigade (see Figure 6). The 177 entries in the Jihadist Media Brigade's database of July ISI statements were included in the general database, which contains a total of 453 items. Queries to this database served as the basis for the analytical conclusions presented in the study.

It is important to note that the conclusions reached here rest on general, not scientific, criteria. While the selection of material was relatively simple thanks to the presence of clear markers of organizational and media entity affiliations, the assignment of a geographic focus to a specific statement, for example, is necessarily subjective. While most of these designations were unambiguous, some were problematic.⁵ I have attempted to base my conclusions on data that are as "objective" as possible in the sense that they do not depend significantly on subjective interpretation.



Figure 6. A downloadable database of July 2007 statements by the Islamic State of Iraq. The file, which was created by the Jihadist Media Brigade using Microsoft Access, contains 177 items.

5 For example, a statement by a well-known jihadist leader may deal with both political and operational issues, or it may focus on more than one geographical region. It is usually possible, however, to single out a primary focus.



In the ISI announcement shown here, it would appear that ISI carried out and videotaped the attack, Furqan produced the final video, and Fajr distributed it to the Internet. In the database, ISI is listed in the fields “organizational affiliation,” because ISI has signed the statement, and “organizational association,” because the statement details activities ISI claims to have carried out. Furqan is listed as the “producer” of the material and Fajr as its “distributor.”

In point of fact, outside users who access this material through the Internet have no real way of knowing the exact functions of the MPDEs associated with the statement. Only the undisputed associations, which are repeated for numerous statements across a variety of forums, are clear. The database includes separate fields for “producer” and “distributor,” but it is not at all clear that the various MPDEs associated with particular products are, intact, carrying out the functions of production and distribution. For this reason, the study treats MPDEs associated with a particular media product as markers, and it refers to an MPDE, or group of MPDEs, associated with a particular group as a “media nexus.”

For example, we know on the basis of open-source information that all ISI video products posted to the Internet carry the following markers: ISI, Furqan, and Fajr. ISI text products are marked by ISI and Fajr. Thus, the two nexuses that emerge for ISI, for example, are: Furqan-Fajr and Fajr.



Figure 10. The “signature” at the bottom of an announcement for an Islamic State of Iraq video, which identifies the media product’s organizational affiliation and two MPDE affiliations.

Table 3 identifies all of the media nexuses associated with specific groups in July 2007 jihadist media products.⁶ It lists the organization, media nexus, and number of media products distributed through the nexus (for acronyms, see **Tables 1** and **2**):

ORGANIZATION	PRODUCER	DISTRIBUTOR	MEDIA NEXUS	NUMBER OF PRODUCTS
AQ	Sahab	Sahab	Sahab - Sahab	5
AQ	Sahab	Ansar	Sahab - Ansar	1
AQ	Fajr	Fajr	Fajr - Fajr	1
AQ Total				7
AQIM	AQIM	Fajr	AQIM - Fajr	8
AQIM Total				8
AS	AS	Fajr	AS - Fajr	142
AS Total				142
ISI	Al-Boraq	Al-Boraq	Al-Boraq - Al-Boraq	1
ISI	Fajr	Fajr	Fajr - Fajr	175
ISI	Furqan	Fajr	Furqan - Fajr	13
ISI	Furqan	Ansar	Furqan - Ansar	1
ISI	GIMF	GIMF	GIMF - GIMF	7
ISI	ISI	JMB	ISI - JMB	3
ISI	JME	JME	JME - JME	1
ISI Total				201
Jl	Fajr	Fajr	Fajr - Fajr	1
Jl	GIMF	EJMC	GIMF - EJMC	4
Jl	GIMF	GIMF	GIMF - GIMF	1
Jl	SSMI	GIMF	SSMI - GIMF	1
Jl Total				7
Taliban	Sahab	Sahab	Sahab - Sahab	6
Taliban	MFT	SJT	MFT - SJT	36
Taliban Total				42
YMM	GIMF	EJMC	GIMF - EJMC	14
YMM Total				14
Grand Total				421

⁶ The table is based on organizational associations, not affiliations. An organizational affiliation indicates that the organization has directly endorsed the media product by attaching its name to it; an association indicates that the media product's content focuses on the organization in question and, in virtually all cases, expresses support for it. In the vast majority of cases, affiliation and association are the same. The only notable divergence occurs in the Al-Battar (Sharp Sword) Campaign by GIMF, which distributes materials in support of ISI but not directly affiliated with ISI. The campaign distributed seven media products in July 2007.

Table 4 is a simplified version of **Table 3**, limiting information to the six primary armed groups featured in jihadist media in July 2007 and providing only those media nexuses associated with more than a single product.

ORGANIZATION	PRODUCER	DISTRIBUTOR	MEDIA NEXUS	NUMBER OF PRODUCTS
AQ	Sahab	Sahab	Sahab - Sahab	5
AQ Total				5
AQIM	AQIM	Fajr	AQIM - Fajr	8
AQIM Total				8
AS	AS	Fajr	AS - Fajr	142
AS Total				142
ISI	Fajr	Fajr	Fajr - Fajr	175
ISI	Furqan	Fajr	Furqan - Fajr	13
ISI	GIMF	GIMF	GIMF - GIMF	7
ISI Total				195
Taliban	Sahab	Sahab	Sahab - Sahab	6
Taliban	MFT	SJT	MFT - SJT	36
Taliban Total				42
YMM	GIMF	EJMC	GIMF - EJMC	14
YMM Total				14
Grand Total				406

The tables show that MPDEs create visible links between the groups that make up the jihadist movement. Binding the media products of these groups together with identifiable stamps of approval, MPDEs are the connective tissue in a virtual construction that reflects the contours of the jihadist movement in its entirety, from Al-Qaeda, with its global pretensions, to the locally centered franchises in Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa, and East Africa.

3.2 The Nexus

Figures 11-17 provide a visual representation of the media nexus that emerges from **Table 3**, beginning with the basic configuration and building to the full nexus showing all of the relations between armed groups and MPDEs.

In **Figure 11** we see the basic relationship between armed groups and the MPDEs that channel their media offerings to the outside world through the Internet. The circle at the center of the diagram represents all of the media products that originate with armed groups. The ring surrounding the circle represents the MPDEs that “mark” those media products when they are posted to forums.

As depicted in **Figure 11**, the process has two stages: the group (or, in this case, its media products) and the MPDE. In practice, the second stage may involve up to two MPDEs. For example, videos released by ISI are produced by Furqan and distributed by Fajr; but text operational statements by ISI are both produced and distributed by Fajr. Similarly, all media products released by AS are produced by the media wing of AS, the group's so-called "media pulpit," but are distributed by Fajr. What is important is that the structural relationship, which involves at least one group and at least one MPDE, holds for all of the media products. The path to the public is always mediated by an MPDE.



Figure 11. Jihadist media products' path to the internet, and the public, is mediated by media production and distribution entities (MPDEs).

Figure 12 shows the media nexuses associated with ISI in July 2007. It is derived from the associations noted in the media products posted to forums by MPDEs on behalf of ISI.

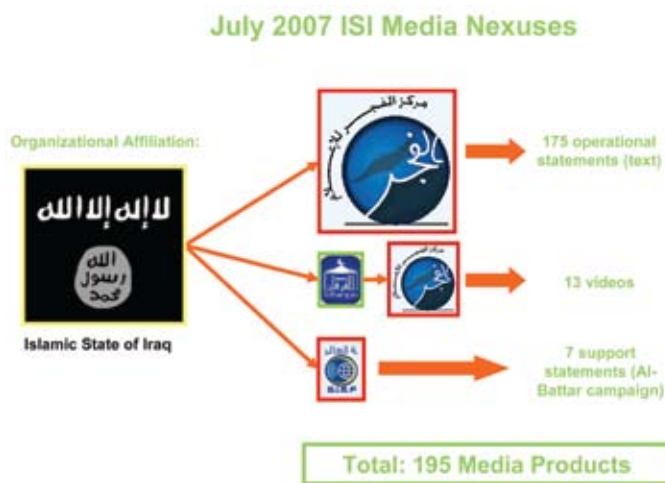


Figure 12. Media nexuses associated with the Islamic State of Iraq in July 2007.

Figure 13 breaks the total amount of media production down into the seven groups with which the media products are associated. The size of each circle corresponds to the total amount of media production associated with that group in July 2007.

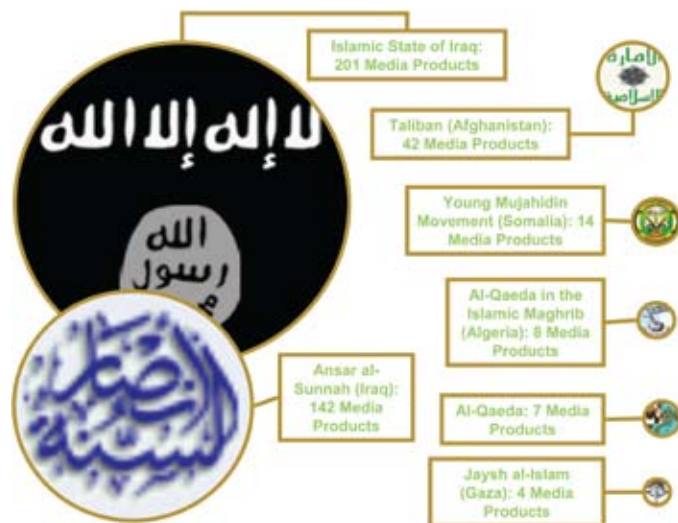


Figure 13. The seven armed groups that accounted for the media production of Al-Qaeda and affiliated movements in July 2007. The size of each circle corresponds to the number of media products associated with the group.

Figure 14 (page 12) depicts relationships between groups and MPDEs, with a line between a group and an MPDE showing that that the MPDE either produces or distributes a product affiliated with that group. The relationships map to the information provided in **Table 3**.

Figure 15 (page 12) is a simplified version of **Figure 14**, leaving out relationships represented by fewer than five media products. It depicts not one, but two nexuses.

Figure 16 (page 13) shows the full media nexus with subsequent links to internet forums. MPDEs that post material to forums are circled.

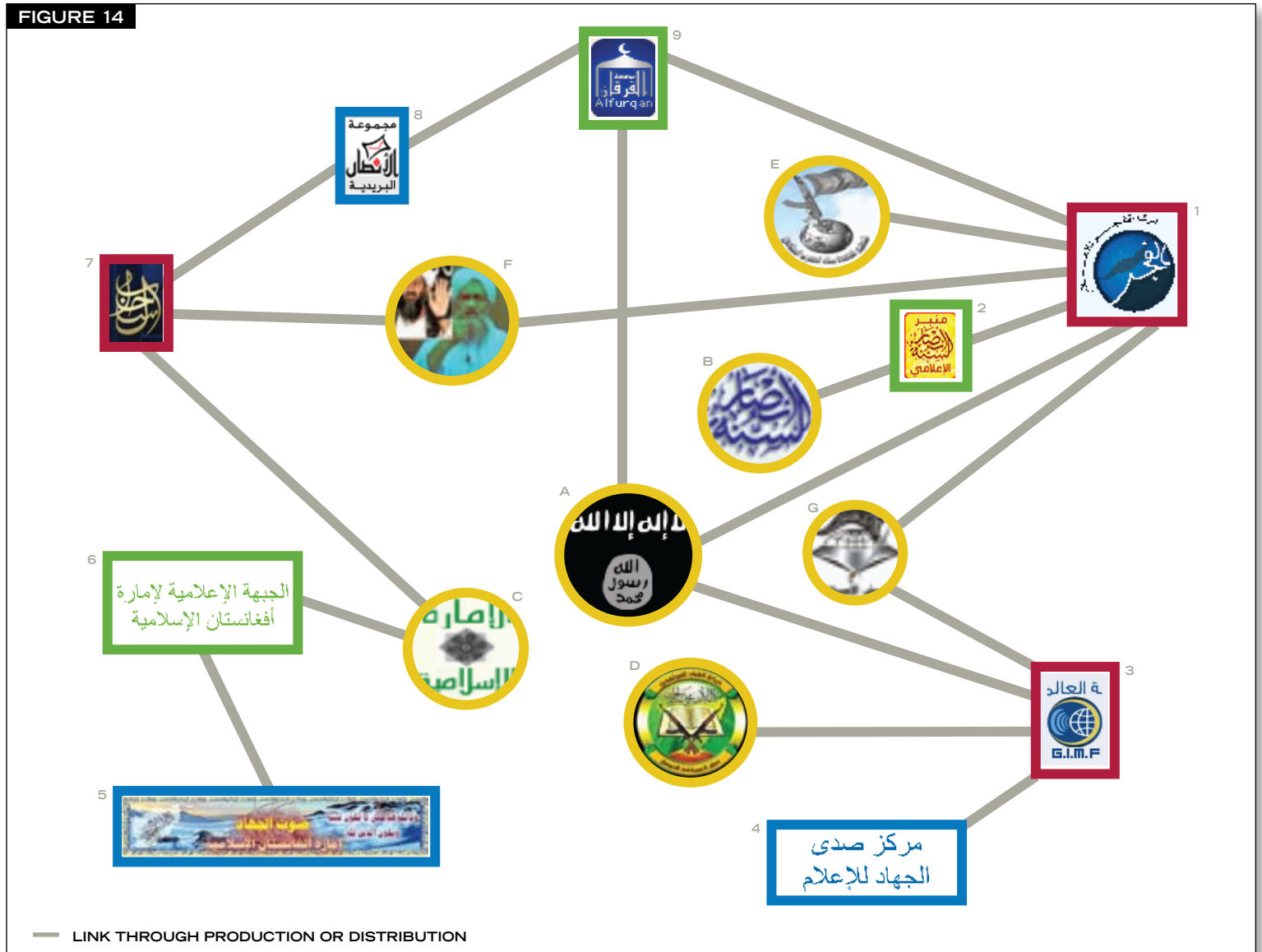
Figure 17 (page 14) shows the full media nexus with links to forums, highlighting the MPDEs that both post material to forums and have links to more than one armed group.

Taken in its entirety, this is the full Al-Qaeda media nexus for jihadist media production in July 2007. It is an interconnected production and distribution network that in July 2007 made available through a wide variety of websites media offerings from Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib, Ansar al-Sunnah, the Islamic State of Iraq, Jaysh al-Islam, the Taliban, and the Young Mujahidin Movement.

Full Al-Qaeda Media Nexus (July 2007)

All Main Links between Armed Groups and Media Production and Distribution Entities

FIGURE 14



ARMED GROUP

- A Islamic State of Iraq: 201 Items
- B Ansar al-Sunnah (Iraq): 142 Items
- C Taliban (Afghanistan): 42 Items
- D Young Mujahidin Movement (Somalia): 14 Items
- E Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (North Africa): 8 Items
- F Al-Qaeda: 7 Items
- G Jaysh al-Islam (Gaza): 4 Items

MEDIA PRODUCTION ENTITY

- 2 Ansar al-Sunnah Media Pulpit
- 6 Media Front of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
- 9 Furqan

MEDIA DISTRIBUTION ENTITY

- 4 Echo of Jihad Media Center
- 5 Voice of Jihad (Taliban)
- 8 Ansar

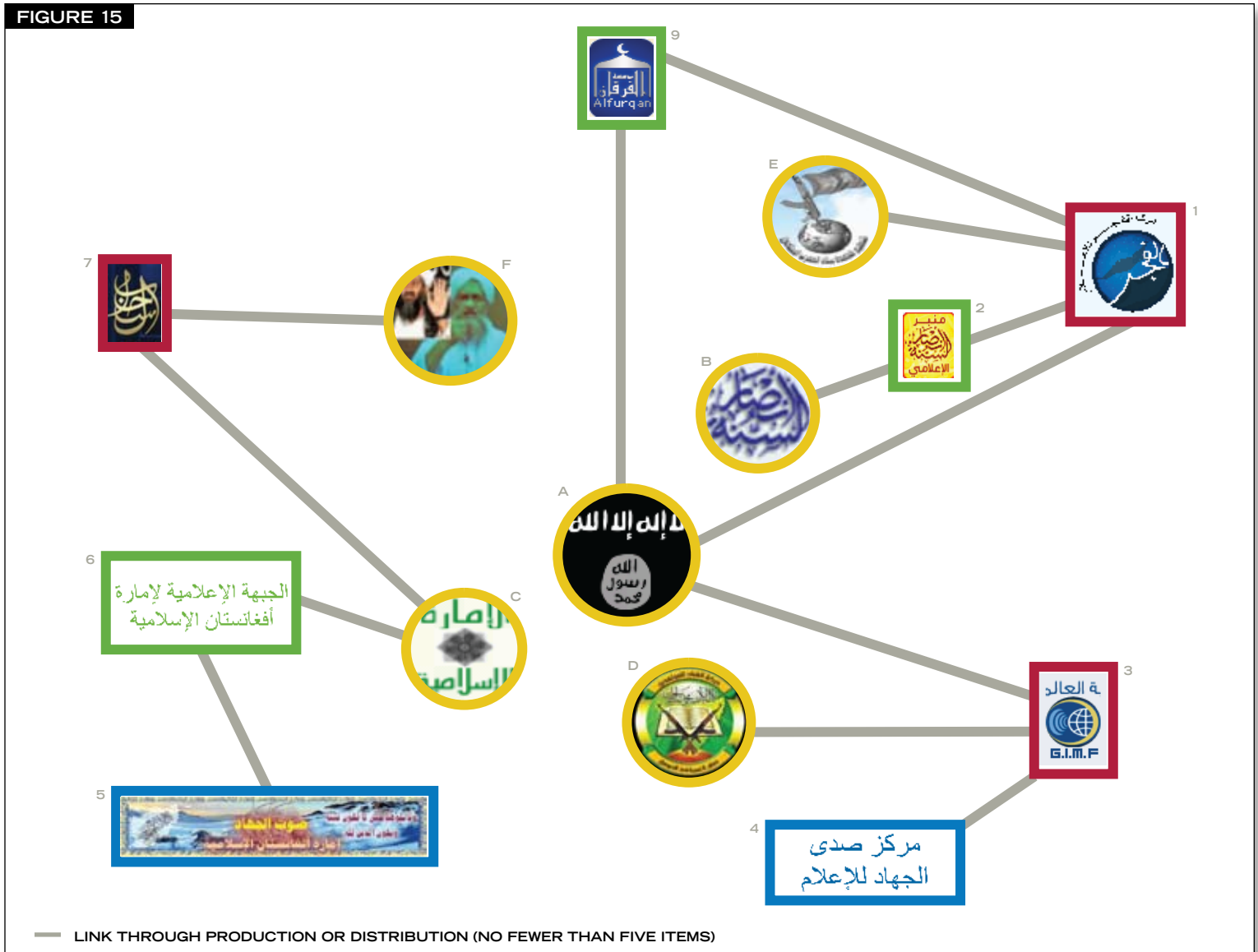
MEDIA PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION ENTITY

- 1 Fajr
- 3 Global Islamic Media Front
- 7 Sahab

For full media nexus table, see page 9

Simplified Al-Qaeda Media Nexus (July 2007)
 Links Represented by no Fewer than Five Items

FIGURE 15



— LINK THROUGH PRODUCTION OR DISTRIBUTION (NO FEWER THAN FIVE ITEMS)

ARMED GROUP

- A Islamic State of Iraq: 201 Items
- B Ansar al-Sunnah (Iraq): 142 Items
- C Taliban (Afghanistan): 42 Items
- D Young Mujahidin Movement (Somalia): 14 Items
- E Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (North Africa): 8 Items
- F Al-Qaeda: 7 Items

MEDIA PRODUCTION ENTITY

- 2 Ansar al-Sunnah Media Pulpit
- 6 Media Front of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
- 9 Furqan

MEDIA DISTRIBUTION ENTITY

- 4 Echo of Jihad Media Center
- 5 Voice of Jihad (Taliban)

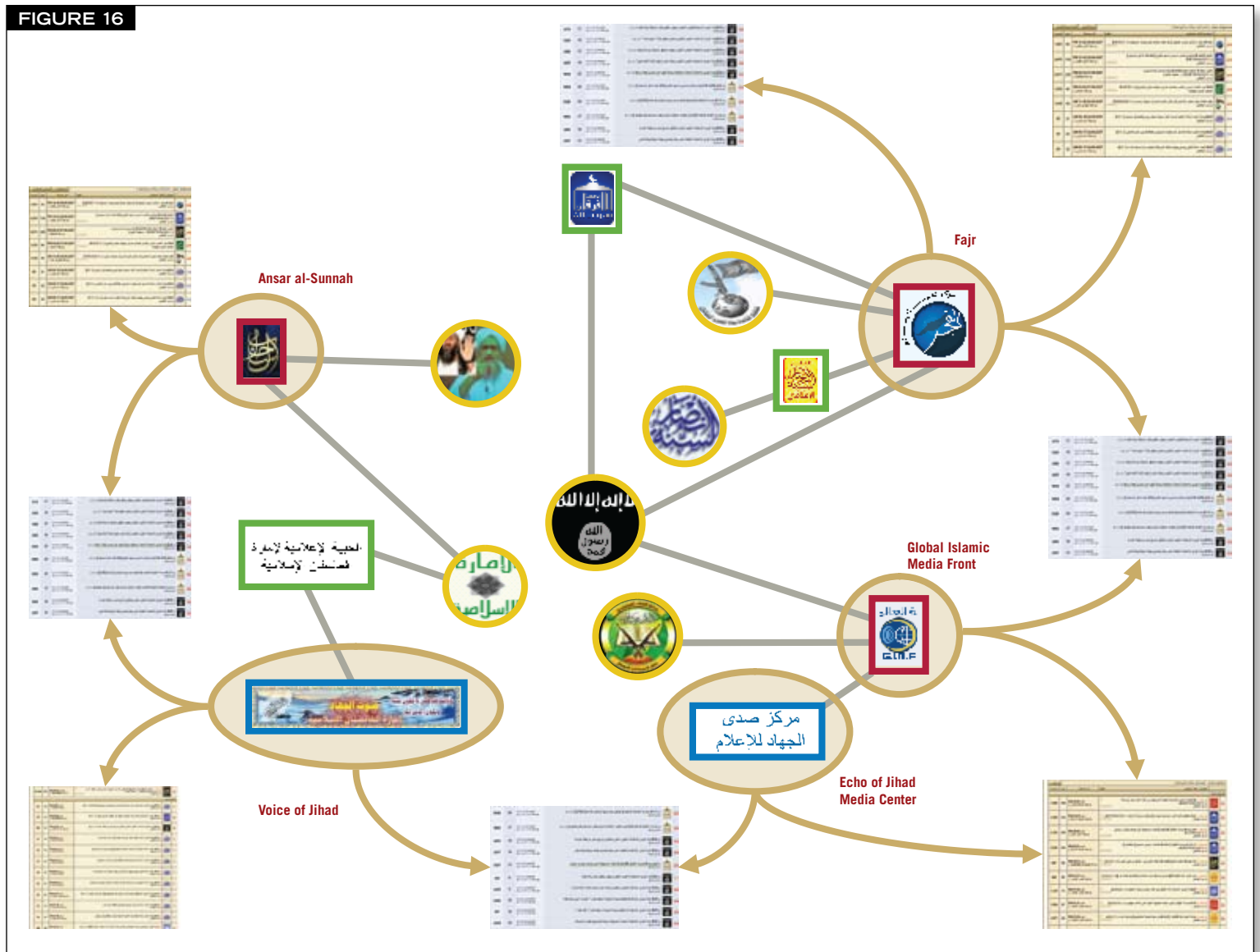
MEDIA PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION ENTITY

- 1 Fajr
- 3 Global Islamic Media Front
- 7 Sahab

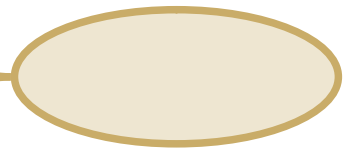
For full media nexus table, see page 9

The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus and the Internet (July 2007)
Links between the Al-Qaeda Media Nexus and Internet Forums

FIGURE 16



- ARMED GROUP
- MEDIA PRODUCTION ENTITY
- MEDIA DISTRIBUTION ENTITY
- MEDIA PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION ENTITY

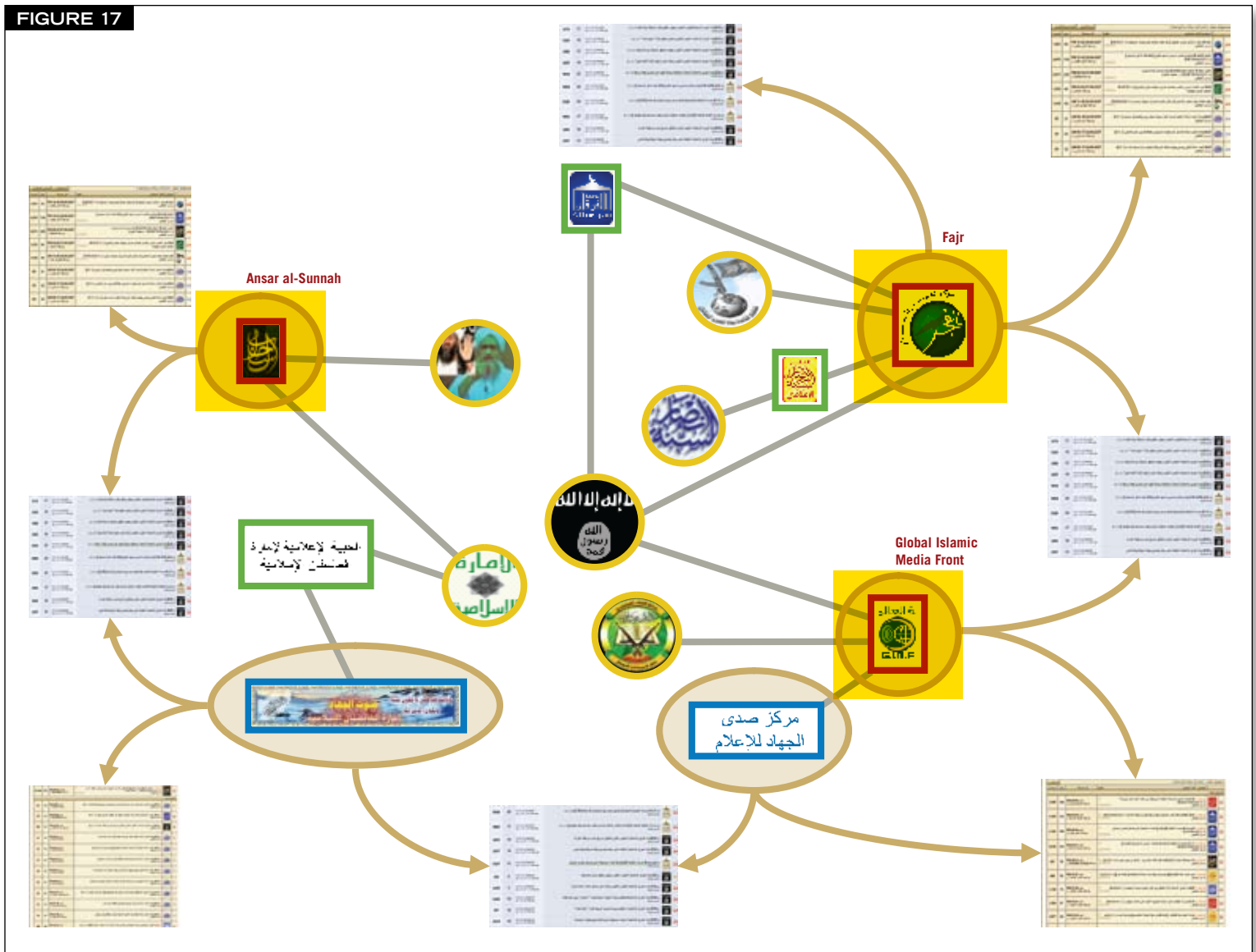


Media distribution entity with a link to at least one armed group and to the Internet.

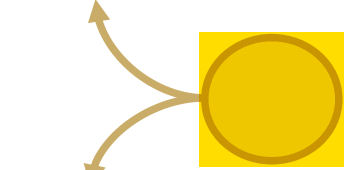
Key Links in the Al-Qaeda Media Nexus (July 2007)

Media production and distribution entities linked to both armed groups and the internet

FIGURE 17



- ARMED GROUP
- MEDIA PRODUCTION ENTITY
- MEDIA DISTRIBUTION ENTITY
- MEDIA PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION ENTITY



Media distribution entity with a link to more than one armed group and to the Internet.



3.3 What Does It Mean?

What significance do these connections have and what can they tell us about the global jihadist movement?

The ties are not purely virtual. While Internet-based media do not provide the best basis for inferring operational links, the constantly reinforced and carefully supervised associations between MPDEs and jihadist groups must at some point involve concrete individuals. When a video clip of an attack by ISI appears on a forum tagged with the Fajr and Furqan markers, it suggests that an individual affiliated with ISI forwarded footage of the attack to an individual with the authority to act on behalf of Furqan, who then transformed it into a more polished video product and passed it to an individual with the authority to distribute it under Fajr's imprimatur, whence it was posted to a jihadist forum by a registered member — or forum administrator — empowered to make ISI-Furqan-Fajr materials available to forum users.

In practice, of course, the links may work somewhat differently. Once footage of an attack is available,⁷ a single individual affiliated with ISI and authorized to act on behalf of Furqan and Fajr and subsequently post to a forum could, in theory, perform the rest of the work. Moreover, as we have noted, the terms “production” and “distribution” in the context of an Internet-based media effort may not refer to actual production and distribution. The terminological imprecision reflects the difficulty of applying concepts developed in the brick-and-mortar era to newer technologies that simplify the necessary processes to an extent that eliminates the need for a dedicated infrastructure to support them.⁸ The same imprecision affects our use of the word “link,” which can mean here something as ephemeral as e-mail contact between two individuals who have never met and do not know each other's identities.

Nevertheless, the ties exist. However ephemeral they may be, and whatever form they may take as they package messages from actual theaters of operations to Internet forums, groups as geographically distant as fighters in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq could not make information, true or false, about their exploits available through a limited number of consistently branded distribution channels without coordination and contact in some form. Open-source analysis cannot reveal the nature and extent of these links; it can only point to evidence of their existence.

But why do these ties exist at all? Couldn't jihadist groups simply post their own materials to the Internet through forums? Why go to the trouble of creating such an elaborate system, with MPDEs linking some groups but not others?

We lack a definitive answer because we cannot ask the creators of this network about their motivations. Nevertheless, it seems that the rather peculiar form of the Al-Qaeda media nexus results from both the loose-knit structure of the “global jihadist movement” and the conflicting pressures that jihadist groups and their supporters experience as they attempt to maximize synergies from their media efforts, ensure the credibility of the products they make available, and minimize vulnerabilities.

In theory, the jihadist “movement,” or what would be called in Arabic the “salafist-jihadist current,” is a global push by like-minded individuals and groups to restore pure Islam by overthrowing the “apostate” regimes of the Muslim world, ensure that “the word of God is supreme” by imposing everywhere a strict interpretation of Islamic law, and defeat the forces of “unbelief” by destroying the United States of America and Israel.

⁷ The attack in question may or may not document an actual attack carried out on the claimed target by a specific group. All that is needed is footage that can plausibly be used to produce a media product highlighting such an attack.

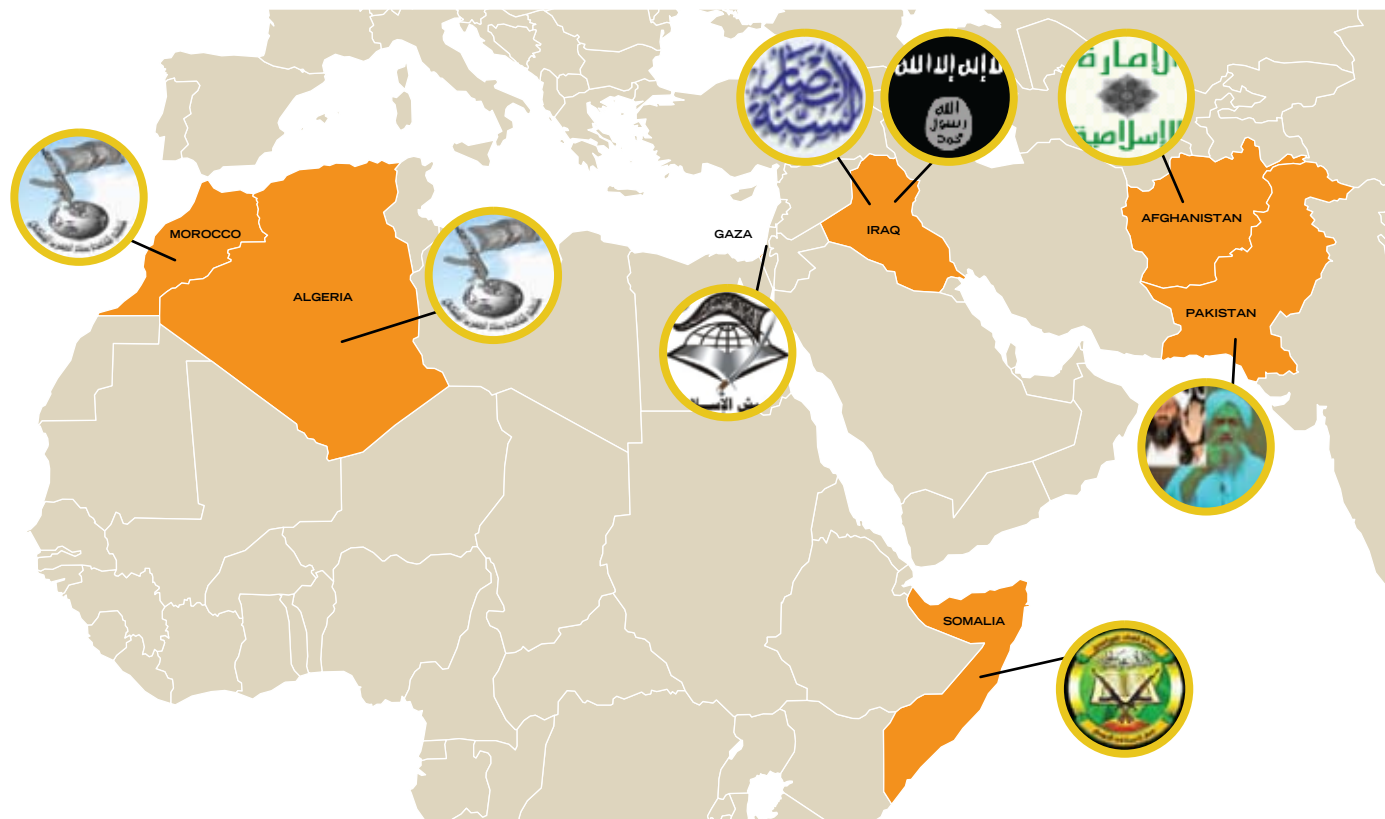
⁸ Infrastructure, of course, is still needed — from electrical power to network connections — but it is general in purpose and often shared. The same infrastructure that allows jihadist groups to “produce” and “distribute” their media products just as efficiently, and just as indifferently, serves many other media networks, from the individual to the collective to the official.

In practice, it is a chaotic amalgam of international terror cells and localized insurgencies that espouse loosely articulated common goals yet lack the organizational cohesion of a movement and face an unprecedented global security clampdown. Both internal and external factors — namely, a lack of overall organizational cohesion and concerted counter-efforts by security services — have impelled jihadists to channel their efforts through a variety of decentralized structures.

In this light, the Al-Qaeda media nexus accurately reflects the loose structure of the would-be movement itself. The nexus links a variety of entities, some real and some virtual, through a decentralized web of connections that were likely spontaneous ties of both convenience and contrivance at their origination but have since hardened into ties of convention. In this, the Al-Qaeda media nexus resembles other online guerilla media networks that present themselves as an alternative to mainstream media.

Despite this decentralization, the network’s activists attempt to pursue common goals through the coordinated use of online media. MPDEs maximize synergies that would otherwise be lost if armed groups simply posted statements on their own. An MPDE such as Fajr, which distributes statements by a number of groups operating in different theaters, creates an implied link and suggests a larger movement. At the same time, the links created by MPDEs, which post media products to recognized jihadist forums through “accredited” correspondents, establish the authenticity of the media products and make it difficult to introduce spurious offerings that might confuse the information battlespace. These links are also a virtual recreation of the financial and organizational ties between the brick-and-mortar structures that exist in the world of mainstream media. At the same time, the tenuous, virtual nature of these links minimizes the risk to a global network of individuals and groups that are the object of a worldwide dragnet by the security services of numerous states.

Geographic Distribution of Armed Groups



- 

Al-Qaeda
(Pakistan, global)
- 

Islamic State of Iraq
(Iraq)
- 

Jaysh al-Islam
(Gaza)
- 

Young Mujahidin Movement
(Somalia)
- 

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib
(Algeria, Morocco)
- 

Ansar al-Sunnah
(Iraq)
- 

Taliban
(Afghanistan, Pakistan)

4 Jihadist Media in July 2007

4.1 Geographic and Organizational Focus

Charts 1 and 2, respectively, show the geographic and organizational focus of jihadist media products that appeared in July 2007. Both tell the same story — Iraq is the overwhelming focus of attention. In **Chart 1** we see that 78 percent of jihadist media products with a readily identifiable geographic focus (348 out of a total of approximately 446 items) concentrated on Iraq. **Chart 2** shows that two Iraq-based organizations, the Islamic State of Iraq and Ansar al-Sunnah, together were the focus of the bulk of jihadist media in July 2007; 48 percent and 33 percent, respectively, of media items released in that period focused on those two groups.

One caveat and two conclusions follow from these results. The caveat is that the information provided in **Charts 1 and 2** speaks only to crude totals; it does not tell us which of the media products in question reached the greatest number of viewers and readers, which had the greatest impact, or which were amplified through coverage in mainstream media. One could plausibly argue, for example, that the three statements by Ayman al-Zawahiri that appeared in July 2007 were significantly more important than the 14 statements by the Somalia-based Young Mujahidin Movement. Obvious as such a conclusion might seem, however, it would require significant additional research to prove, and it is not at all obvious that we currently possess reliable methods for evaluating the true reach and influence of internet-based jihadist media.

The first firm conclusion that flows from the data is that the three regions on which the bulk of jihadist media focuses — Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia — are all zones of armed conflict, albeit to varying degrees. The second is that Al-Qaeda central, which releases comparatively few media products, has been eclipsed in terms of aggregate jihadist media attention by affiliates actively engaged in ongoing armed struggle in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

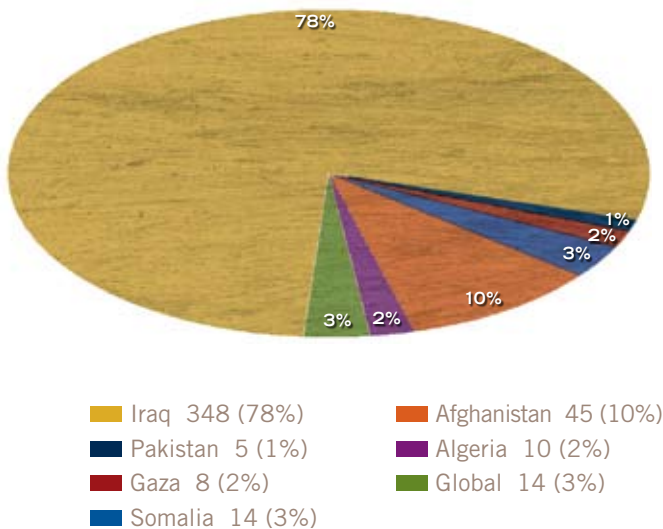


Chart 1

Afghanistan was the second-most important topic of concern for jihadist media in July 2007, accounting for approximately 10 percent of total production, whether measured in terms of geographic or organizational focus. Somalia was the third-best represented region in terms of both geographic and organizational focus, with the latter coming in the form of the Young Mujahidin Movement. Seen purely in terms of geographic focus, “global” products, an admittedly subjective category, were as prominent as Somalia-centered items. Media products focused specifically on Al-Qaeda central or Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib accounted for only a fraction of July 2007 jihadist media production.

ORGANIZATIONAL FOCUS

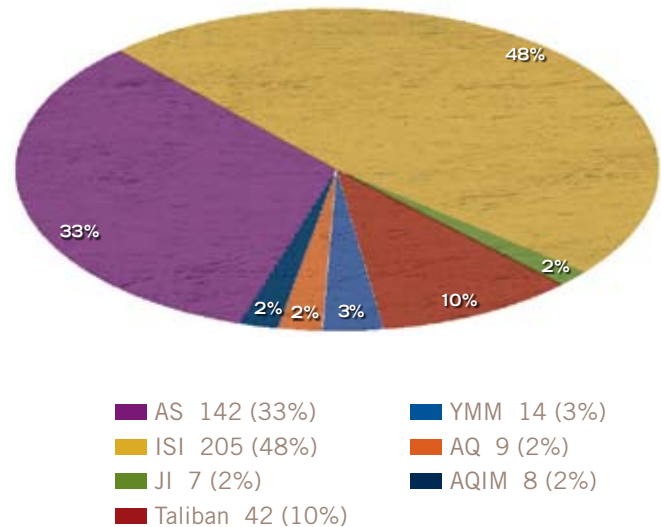


Chart 2

4.2 Format and Genre

Charts 3 and 4 show, respectively, the format and genre of July 2007 jihadist media. Chart 3 shows the breakdown between text and video for items that fell into one or the other of those two categories in July 2007. Text products totaled 408 items, or 90 percent, while videos totaled 41, or 9 percent. Chart 4 shows that operational and topical statements comprised the vast majority of media products — 431 items, or 96 percent. More in-depth materials focusing on broader issues were significantly less well represented: 10 books (2 percent), four essays (1 percent), and five periodicals (1 percent).

Periodicals are an important genre of jihadist media production. July 2007 saw the release of five significant online periodical publications: a collection of past issues of *Biographies of Eminent Martyrs*, a periodical from the Islamic State of Iraq produced by Furqan and distributed by Fajr that focuses primarily on Arab fighters who come to Iraq in search of martyrdom; Issue 39 of *Sada al-Rafidayn* [Echo of Mesopotamia], produced and distributed by GIMF; Issue 17 of *Sada al-Jihad* [Echo of the Jihad], also produced and distributed by GIMF; Issue 2 of *Hattin*, an Urdu-language publication produced and distributed by Fajr; and Issue 9 of *Vanguard of Khorosan*, a publication about Afghanistan and Pakistan produced and distributed by Fajr.

Charts 3 and 4 indicate that while video remains the most attention-getting genre of jihadist media, this should not lead us to discount the importance of text materials, which account for the majority of media production. In particular, periodicals released by established MPDEs and focused on specific theaters of combat can and should receive greater scrutiny.

FORMAT

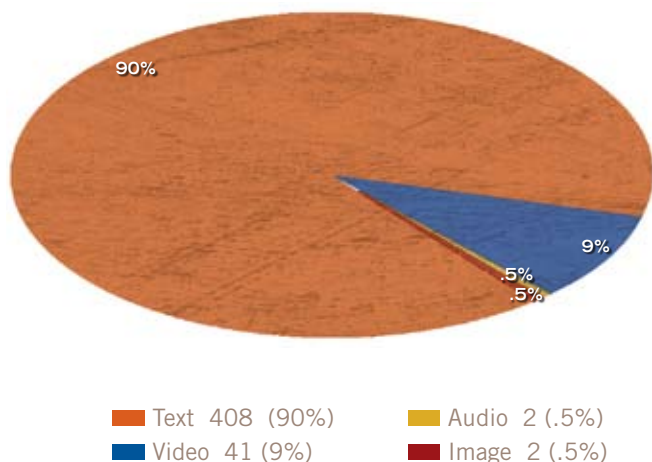


Chart 3

The preponderance of text materials is an important indication that we cannot and should not discount the importance of books, essays, and periodicals. The 10 books that were posted among quasi-official jihadist media products, primarily on the “news” sections of forums, were mainly global in focus and generally appeared without “branding” by an MPDE (although the Global Islamic Media Front issued three books). Titles included a collection of poetry about Al-Qaeda by Muhammad al-Zuhayri, *The Largest Rare Military Encyclopedias*, *Rulings on the Martyr in Islamic Law* by Abd al-Rahman bin Ghirman bin Abdallah, and the full Adobe Acrobat text of Bob Woodward’s *Plan of Attack*.

GENRE

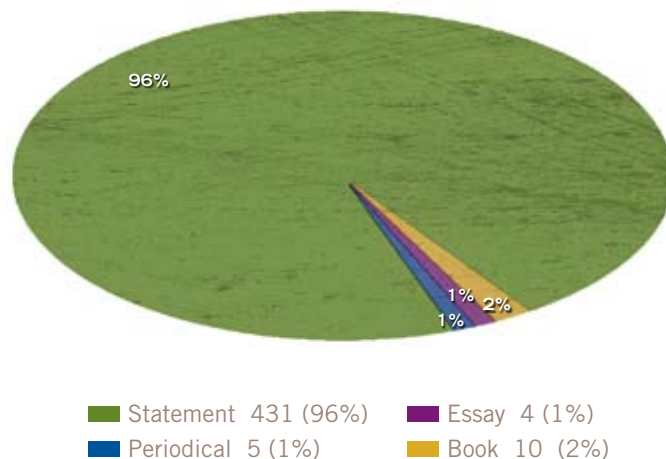


Chart 4

4.3 Producers and Distributors

As was noted earlier, the division of MPDEs into “producers” and “distributors” is largely symbolic. In point of fact, these are branding mechanisms, as it is impossible to determine with any accuracy on the basis of available open-source information whether the “organizations” represented by logos on jihadist media products are actually producing or distributing statements, or even whether they really exist. Yet they play an important role, both in establishing the legitimacy of a given media product and in linking products that come from various armed groups and geographic regions.

Charts 5 and 6 show the main “producing” and “distributing” MPDEs for July 2007. Taken together, they provide a general overview of the most widely encountered branding mechanisms that establish the legitimacy of jihadist media products. Excluding those MPDEs that are affiliated or associated with a single group, we arrive at the following list of MPDEs that either produce or distribute media products on behalf of more than one jihadist group: Fajr, GIMF, and Sahab.

A number of conclusions emerge from this result. First, these three MPDEs are the consistent and predictable branding mechanisms for media products associated with more than one jihadist group. They are also the point of contact, through

an “accredited correspondent,” with the forums that actually distribute materials on the Internet. This means that at the very least links of trust must exist between both the MPDE and the armed group, and the MPDE and forum administrators. In other words, for Fajr to have a consistent association both with ISI and AQIM, as well as a “correspondent” capable of posting materials to the dedicated “news” sections of jihadist forums, there must be at a bare minimum a trusted channel of communication that links all of the entities. The individuals involved may not necessarily be personally acquainted, and they may change over time, but the trusted communications channel itself must exist.

PRODUCERS

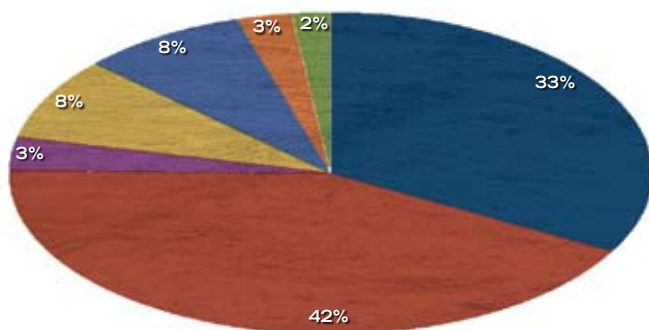


Chart 5

DISTRIBUTORS

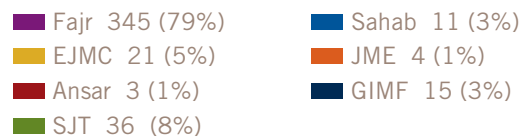
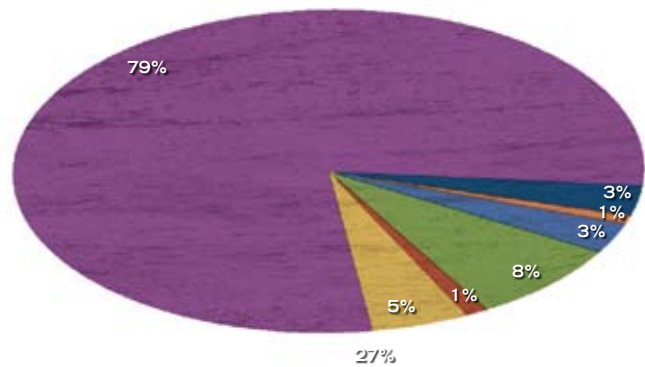


Chart 6

Second, Fajr, GIMF, and Sahab are, by virtue of their consistent ties to more than one armed group and a number of forums, crucial guarantors of authority and credibility. Information operations intended to undermine the effectiveness of jihadist media should target these “brands” in order to sow confusion and muddy the information space that jihadists have carved out for themselves.

Finally, just as Al-Qaeda represents a mere fraction of total jihadist media production, its main MPDE, Sahab, is a relatively minor player, quantitatively speaking, in the overall flow of jihadist media.

5 Conclusions

The material collected and analyzed here gives rise to a number of key findings and suggestions for future research on jihadist media. I present first the key findings and then suggested topics for further research.

5.1 Key Findings

- The “original” Al-Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden accounts for a mere fraction of jihadist media production
 - While statements by Al-Qaeda leadership figures like Ayman al-Zawahiri draw significant attention in mainstream media, particularly in the English-speaking world, a careful review of jihadist media production in July 2007 shows that Al-Qaeda central is a relatively minor quantitative presence. This is not to discount the possible importance of statements by Al-Qaeda leadership figures, but rather to suggest that they should be viewed in the overall context of the media products that make up the bulk of the daily jihadist news flow.
- Media production and distribution entities serve to link varied groups under the general ideological rubric of the global jihadist movement
 - The same MPDEs that “brand” jihadist media also create virtual links between the various armed groups that fall into the general category of Al-Qaeda and affiliated movements. Gaining quasi-official status through consistent usage, these MPDEs not only certify for consumers of jihadist media that they are receiving “genuine” products, but also create the impression of a single, interconnected armed effort proceeding under the ideological umbrella of Al-Qaeda.
- Three key entities connect Al-Qaeda and affiliated movements to the outside world through the Internet
 - Three key MPDEs — Fajr, GIMF, and Sahab — not only receive materials from more than one armed jihadist group but also post those materials to the Internet. **Figure 17** shows the full media nexus with those three MPDEs highlighted. At the very least, this points to the existence of a trusted communications channel linking these MPDEs both to the groups in question and to forum administrators.
- Information operations intended to disrupt or undermine the effectiveness of jihadist media can and should target the MPDEs that brand these media and act as the virtual connective tissue of the global movement.
- The bulk of jihadist media production is text
 - While video is an important component of jihadist media, text products still account for the overwhelming majority of the daily media flow posted to forums. Within text products, periodicals released by MPDEs and focused on specific “fronts” are an important genre that deserves more scrutiny from researchers.
- The vast majority of jihadist media focus on conflict zones
 - The study found that media products focused on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia, or on armed groups operating in those areas, account for the vast majority of jihadist media in July 2007. Each of these areas includes zones of armed conflict.
- The priorities of the global jihadist movement are Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and North Africa
 - Using media attention as a gauge of priority, the geographic regions that are of the greatest importance to the global jihadist movement are, in order, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and North Africa.
- Jihadist media are attempting to mimic a “traditional” structure in order to boost credibility and facilitate message control
 - Recent years have seen the rapid development of increasingly interactive Internet-based applications and social networks sometimes termed Web 2.0. While conventional wisdom holds that jihadist media have been quick to exploit technological innovations to advance their cause, the development trend seen in this study suggests that jihadist media are moving toward a more structured approach to online media based on consistent branding and quasi-official MPDEs. Their reason for doing so is likely a desire to boost the credibility of their products and ensure message control.

- The branding of jihadist media is consistent and systematic
 - The daily flow of jihadist media that appears on the Internet is consistently and systematically branded. For example, video clips of attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq are always released under three “brands”: the ISI, Furqan, and Fajr. The branding of other products is similarly consistent, although associations and affiliations may vary from group to group and may change over time.
- How have jihadist media changed over time, and what do the changes tell us about the global movement’s structure and priorities?
 - The snapshot of jihadist media presented in this study is necessarily static, focusing as it does on products released in July 2007. A review of a broader chronological sample could provide important insights into the changes that have occurred over time in the structure of jihadist media and the extent to which those changes reflect shifts in the movement’s structure and priorities.

5.2 Further Research

The following questions emerge from the material analyzed in this study and could form the basis for future investigations of jihadist media and related topics.

- Does the “attention profile” of jihadist media map to the financing of operations?
 - Ethan Zuckerman’s research on Global Attention Profiles⁹ has shown that the amount of attention mainstream media devote to particular regions generally reflects the gross domestic product of the regions in question. Transferring this insight very broadly to jihadist media, which focus on zones of armed conflict, we arrive at the hypothesis that the “attention profile” of jihadist media may reflect the distribution of financing for the operations carried out by groups under the ideological umbrella of the global jihadist movement.
- Which jihadist media products attract the greatest number of readers/viewers on forums, and which media products are amplified through coverage in mainstream media?
 - The current study limits itself to an examination of jihadist media production through the prism of the MPDEs that are responsible for its release and the regions and groups on which it focuses. The analysis could be broadened in two directions. First, the application of methods for measuring the reach and impact of online materials could give us a better sense of how many viewers and readers jihadist media are affecting in their original form. Second, augmenting this material with an analysis of mainstream media coverage, both in Arabic and English, could help us to arrive at a more complete and methodologically grounded understanding of the real impact jihadist media efforts are having on hearts and minds both in the Arabic-speaking world and in the broader international context.

⁹ See <http://h2odev.law.harvard.edu/ezuckerman/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DANIEL KIMMAGE is a senior regional analyst at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). Most recently, he is the coauthor, together with Kathleen Ridolfo, of *Iraqi Insurgent Media: The War of Images and Ideas*. Kimmage joined RFE/RL in 2002, providing analysis about Russian affairs. From December 2003 to 2007, Kimmage covered developments in Central Asia for RFE/RL, where he edited the *RFE/RL Central Asia Report* and wrote for the daily *RFE/RL Newsline*.⁹ His current research focuses on the interplay of communications technology, ideas, and politics.

Kimmage writes frequently about security issues, terrorism, and the evolving ideology of violent jihad. He has worked as an independent Arabic-English translator and consultant, providing translations and analyses of texts by Al-Qaeda theorists, as well as jihadist Internet forums. He received his undergraduate education at the State University of New York at Binghamton and went on to earn an MA in history in 1996 from Cornell University.

www.rferl.org



Prague, Czech Republic

Jeffrey Gedmin
President
Vinohradská 1, Prague 1
110 00, Czech Republic
(+420) 2 2112 1111

Washington, DC

Donald Jensen
Director of Research and Analysis
1201 Connecticut Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20036, USA
(+1) 202 457 6900