

**RESEARCH PAPER****Information Operations: A Comparative Analysis of Al-Qaeda V.S. Islamic State (ISIS)****<sup>1</sup>Abdul Hussain\*, <sup>2</sup>Naaila Batool, and <sup>3</sup>Mansoor Ali**

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**\*Corresponding Author:** hussainjunejo90@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on each group's utilization of information warfare regarding recruitment, radicalization, and influencing local and global populations. The paper identifies the strategic differences in their IO approaches. ISIS and Al-Qaeda have changed the global security landscape. The groups both utilize information operations to further their ideational, strategic, and even tactical goals. The qualitative analysis is conducted on primary secondary sources that include propaganda materials, social media campaigns, and expert reports. The content analysis and case studies are applied to analyze these groups' information strategies. The results show that the scope of information operations differs; ISIS uses more aggressive and global media campaigns than Al-Qaeda, which uses more local and ideological zeal in its operations. Both remain good at using media for propaganda purposes. The information systems of Al-Qaeda and ISIS pose a great threat to humanity that should be taken seriously by the global powers.

**KEYWORDS** ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Information Operations; Terrorism**Introduction**

In international politics, states exercise information as an element of soft power and a force multiplier. It has both offensive and defensive purposes. With the growing technological advancements and globalization, the non-state actors have gained much importance and are now actually challenging the states. Terrorist organizations like Islamic State and Qaeda are the ones that are threatening not only national security but global security. The information environment in which Al-Qaeda operates is different from that of Islamic State. They employ different tactics to spread their message. Information operations are undoubtedly attractive to Al-Qaeda and IS since the technology is readily available, easy to use, and capable of being used from anywhere. The brisk rise of the Islamic State and the attention that it has gotten in such a short time is very alarming. Because of information operations, Al-Qaeda and IS have been successful in getting support from the people and also in getting recruits. Their non-kinetic means, such as IO elements, electronic warfare, computer network operations, deception, operational security, and psychological operations, complement their kinetic actions. There is a dire need to counter this phenomenon. The international community needs to realize the grave implications of these information operations because the kinetic or physical actions of the terrorists damage the state property, the lives of the people, and the infrastructure. However, through information operations, they spread radicalism and violence in the minds and hearts of the people.

## **Literature Review**

Through Information Operation, systems and societies run by adversaries are disrupted and ultimately distorted to limit their decision-making abilities. The efforts carried out by both Al-Qaeda and ISIS focus on IO practices as a core operational component which is attained using cutting-edge communication methodologies. In this review, the material available on Al-Qaeda and ISIS's IO activities is analyzed, focusing on the critical differences and similarities in practices of media capture, propaganda, and recruitment.

The use of propaganda and the legitimacy of violence between Al-Qaeda and ISIS are present, while the scope and methods of executing such violence differ. Al-Qaeda's main internal focus for years has been shifting long ideological messages infused within a religious frame and sermons of sweeping communal grievances (Hoffman 2006). ISIS encourages this approach with the production of well-made videos, magazines like *Dabiq*, and social media. Moreover, whereas Al-Qaeda primarily aimed at a sophisticated clientele, ISIS did not hesitate to 'shock and awe' utilize the strategy of words towards an extremely broad global audience.

While changing the structure of an organization, terrorist groups carefully analyze and adapt their recruiting strategies to fit their needs. Traditionally, these strategies stem from personal and ideological networks on behalf of the group. There is a strong indication like in the example of Al-Qaeda that as religious networks become minimizable through personal connections, recruitment becomes more streamlined for operational secrecy. On the other hand, ISIS has completely redefined the recruitment processes by integrating social media to appeal to various Islamic groups such as disillusioned youths and foreign fighters. Klausen (2015) claims that ISIS shifted from the veteran subtlety of Al-Qaeda by employing emblematic outreach laced with identity, purpose, and adventure.

The changes brought about by media technology have impacted both group's IO abilities. As-Sahab, Al-Qaeda's media division, operated mainly as a distributor of videos and audio recordings on private networks and Islamist forums. Burke (2007) argues that Al-Qaeda's media strategies were more orthodox, using targeted campaigns and controlled communication. On the other hand, the exploitation of social media sites like Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube completely changed how terrorists communicated with ISIS. As ISIS displayed a unique ability to create viral content, live-stream events, and interact directly with audiences, Ingram (2018) notes that they exhibited unparalleled mastery of digital tools.

The ideological underpinnings of IO vary in both groups. Messaging within Al-Qaeda is more focused on global jihad by using the "far enemy" (Western countries) as a target and positioning themselves as a vanguard for Muslims to unite under. ISIS, on the other hand, focused on the immediate capture of a caliphate region while framing itself in a more "apocalyptic" and territorial narrative. This difference in framing has a great impact on their respective IO strategies, as Wiktorowicz, 2005 argues. Al-Qaeda presents itself as a long-term ideology movement while ISIS is presented as an imminent revolutionary force.

This operational impact of information operations (IO) on the endeavors of these groups has also become a subject of study. Al-Qaeda, for example, applied its IO frequently and aimed for strategic patience. Contrary to this, ISIS utilized IO to achieve rapid actions and accumulation of territory. They were not interested in long-term sustainability. Jones and Libicki (2008) note this difference and argue that aggressive IO utilization by ISIS was counterproductive. While it brought immediate attention, it also elicited unprecedented counter-terrorism operations against them.

Using countermeasures against the IO weeded out by Al-Qaeda and ISIS is still a matter of contention. Governments and technical organizations have tried to contain the spread of terrorist propaganda but with little success. For example, Conway et al. (2019) contend that ISIS has time and time again circumvented countermeasures by remaining decentralized and easily adaptable. Al-Qaeda has proved to be innovative, but not in the area of structural organization. In comparative studies, these groups are shown to have effective counter-IO strategies but only based on the specific tactics employed by each group.

The literature suggests key discrepancies between the IO strategies used by Al-Qaeda and the IO strategies used by ISIS owing to their ideological objectives, operational focus, and level of technological sophistication. ISIS's modern, decentralized, and sensationalist strategies sharply differ from Al-Qaeda's traditionalist and hierarchical approach. Researchers and policymakers need to note these differences to devise strategies that can effectively deal with terrorist information operations and their repercussions on world safety.

During the Cold War era and after the disintegration of the USSR, no key war was fought among the major powers. This does not mean the states' animosity has faded, and they do not compete. However, most of the time, these states pursue non-military policies to force their adversary to act in a particular manner or abstain from following or pursuing a specific policy. States exercise Information as an element of soft power and a force multiplier. It has both offensive and defensive purposes. Information power has challenged the traditional concepts of power such as military, economic, and diplomatic. In the 21st century, Information is taking a central place in states' foreign policy. Information can serve the purpose of a weapon if used correctly, but if not, it can backfire just like any other kinetic device. With the dawn of the 21st century and growing technological advancements and globalization, the non-state actors have gained much importance, and they are now actually challenging the states. Out of the non-state actors, terrorist organizations like TTP, Islamic State, and Al-Qaeda are the ones who are threatening not only national security but global security. Terrorism became an important phenomenon in the last decade of the 20th century. The current age of Information has brought terrorist organizations in line with the great powers in terms of spreading the message at the global level. With the change in the tactics and the strategies of the states, the strategies of the terrorist organizations have also changed. (Yin, 2008).

## **Material and Methods**

### **Conceptual Framework**

Information Operations (IO) emerged in the 1990s to operationalize the power of Information. The United States introduced the umbrella term, information operations, for its military and diplomatic forces and developed doctrinal approaches to utilize the power of information. According to the United States Department of Defense (DoD) Joint Publication 3-13, Information Operation is defined as: "The integrated employment of electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception (MILDEC), and operations security (OPSEC), in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own (Ismael, 2020).

### **Five Pillars of IO**

The capabilities which fall under the rubric of information operation are:

1. **EW:** It is the use of the electromagnetic spectrum and direct energy to attack an adversary. It destroys or interrupts the enemy's ability to communicate Information.
2. **CNO:** Computer Network Operations have three functions: computer network attack, computer network defense, and computer network exploitation.
3. **OPSEC:** The rationale behind OPSEC is to reduce one's vulnerability to the exploitation of critical Information. It protects critical Information and applies to all activities that prepare, sustain, or employ forces.
4. **MILDEC:** It involves actions executed to deliberately mislead the opponent's decision-makers. As a result, the adversary will take or refrain from taking certain actions that will serve one's interests.
5. **PSYOP:** These are planned operations in which selected Information is communicated to the target audience to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning (Ahmed, 2015).

The objective of such operations or the above-mentioned capabilities is to affect the adversary's decision-making process, coerce the person into taking or not taking a specific action, and influence the information environment to achieve the desired objectives.

### **Planning Methodologies for Information Operation**

There are three main processes related to IO planning:

1. **Offensive Information Operations:** include network attacks exploitation from CNO, electronic attacks EW, and physical attacks. Sensitive Information Operations (DIO) include computer network defense (CND), Electronic Protection (EP), Operations Security (OPSEC), Military Deception (MILDEC), physical security, and counterintelligence.
2. **Influence Operations:** Influence operations are psychological operations. Their objective is to influence people, organizations, or governments' behavior, emotions, and perceptions by communicating selected information (Theohary, 2011).

### **The Conversion Theory**

This theory was given by Serge Moscovici in 1976, stating that to gain the confidence of the 'silent majority', the minority portrays itself as being on the right path and that they are not like the leadership of the majority<sup>8</sup>. They oppose the leadership or government and express sympathy with the target people. The minority gradually weakens the majority by convincing them to join their alternative group. Four major factors that give the minority its power as listed below:

1. **Consistency:** The minority is consistent in expressing its opinions. It does not change its opinions with time.
2. **Confidence:** The minority group shows confidence in expressing their ideas or views and remains poised about the correctness of the views presented.
3. **Unbiased:** They pretend to be rational and unbiased in presenting ideas.

4. **Resistance:** The minority group resists the social pressure and abuse that the majority may exert on minority members. (Nemeth, 2010).

In this context, if we take the terrorist organizations as a minority, then we can see that both Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have been propagating against the governments where they are operating. They have constantly been propagating the same ideology and opinion. The regions with governance issues provide perfect opportunities for terrorist organizations to strengthen their hold and grow. Al-Qaeda is strong in South Asia and the Middle Eastern region, while ISIS is getting stronger in Syria and Iraq. There are governance issues in the Middle East that ISIS has been using in its favor to gain recruits and convert the general masses toward their cause. The US-led coalition is striking the Islamic State; in response, ISIS is building a narrative that this is a Western-led onslaught on their religion and independence. The internal fissures in these regions have provided an opportunity for Al-Qaeda and IS to thrive and come up with their form of government. They project their ideology consistently and confidently. Their ideas resist the contemporary social structure and pretend to be unbiased.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Formation and Structure of the Groups**

#### **Al-Qaeda**

Al-Qaeda was formed by Osama bin Laden back in the 1980s, and since then, it has been operating in various parts of the Middle East, South Asia, and some other regions. The primary purpose of this organization is to spread a specific version of Islam in the world and to oust the US forces from Saudi Arabia. The organization does not recognize nation-states and does not consider the Shiites to be Muslims. It wants to set up a 'global caliphate' by toppling the Muslim government. Currently, the activities of this organization are minimal. There seems to be a lack of proper leadership in this organization, but it has a proper structure, and its significance and lethality can never be denied. (Mishal, 2005).

#### **Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)**

Since 1999, the Islamic State passed through various phases before coming into the stature it is today. It is led by Al-Baghdadi, who announced the establishment of a 'caliphate' in June 2014. The turmoil and social vacuum created in Syria and Iraq made the space available for jihadi groups like Islamic State to thrive and rise. It is a highly bureaucratic and financially independent organization. ISIS, previously known as ISIS, basically was the result of the authoritarianism of Maliki, the ruthlessness of Assad, the intervention of the US in Iraq, and the disintegration of Al-Qaeda after bin Laden<sup>15</sup>. It is a movement that started as terrorism, turned into an insurgency, and now has turned into proto-statehood. This organization has a complete and perfect structure. It does not focus only on the military side; it also has perfect plans for administering cities. (Cronin, 2015).

#### **Means of Information**

History contains examples of states engaged in the information domain against the adversary. However, in recent times, terrorist groups with ever-growing technological advancements have also been engaged in the information domain to achieve their desired objectives. Terrorism is an information-based conflict. There are many examples where the outcome of the battles against terrorists and insurgencies has been in favor of the insurgents due to Information Operations. They readily embrace modern information techniques or communications technologies and asymmetrical media warfare tactics as major weapons. Terrorist groups have been using media as a combat multiplier. Al-Qaeda

and Islamic State have created their own media outlets to spread their message exponentially and more effectively. (Ismael, 2020).

One of the purposes of terrorism is to terrify. Another purpose is to gain attention and publicity for whatever cause the terrorists claim to embody. The third purpose of terrorism is to provoke an overreaction by the authorities. If the government overreacts and behaves violently against one segment of the population who sympathizes with the cause of terrorists, they may do the terrorists' job for them. This results in anti-state sentiments and portrays the brutal and oppressive image of the government. All this makes the information and communications process more significant for the terrorists. A RAND study on information and communications processes and their importance to terrorists observed that "propaganda grants authority to its makers. Firstly, they can disseminate the information the government has banned. Secondly, they manipulate people's minds, so they act in a particular manner. Even if they cannot do so, propaganda helps them get attention from those who read, hear, or see them." (Ahmed, 2015).

In recent times, the modern trends in terrorism show that terrorists are more irrational in their logic and phonetic in their ideological manifestation. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State are now global in their reach and are innovative in formulating strategies to spread their narratives. Previously, the vertical communication command structure was used by al-Qaeda leaders, but now it has been replaced by horizontal communication because of the availability of the Internet. Information operation fuels any terrorist organization as it is critical for their survival. Through it, they shape their narrative and exercise influence over the masses. The information means used by terrorist organizations in the conduct of their information operation, IO, includes internet, social media, Topical books, Newsletters, Revolutionary newspapers, speeches, sermons, and edicts, Media statements/releases, Jihadi guiding manuals, social networks, thematic leaflets, magazines, and videos. (Emery, 2004). Terrorist networks are capable of using information tools. They exploit the local population's social grievances, such as economic deprivation, political oppression, and the State's failure to provide public goods. To convince the population and gain their support, they rely on religion or local beliefs. Through information means, terrorists seek to generate effects without the use of any kinetic device. In other words, IO is used by terrorist groups to align the people towards their strategic interests. Through information operations, terrorists try to communicate a particular message to a target audience. The purpose of the message can vary depending on the target audience. Such strategies are used deliberately to educate in, form, or gain support to rally the masses behind the insurgents or terrorists. The means used by terrorist organizations depend upon the information environment and target audience. For example, the successful means in Europe would be media and the internet. Thus, with the proliferation of information technologies, terrorist organizations use the information tools innovatively to their advantage. (Emery, 2004).

## **Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Information Environment**

### **Information Environment**

The global information environment is compound because it is rapidly changing, and several contending narratives exist. Joint Publication, JP 3-13 defines the information environment as "the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on Information.

### **Dimensions of Information Environment**

To analyze the information environment rationally, it is important to understand the interconnection between its three domains, i.e. physical, cognitive, and Information, which constitute the information environment. This helps us explain the importance of

Information to military operations and the terrorist organizations to spread their propaganda. The three domains are described as follows:

### **Physical Dimension**

This dimension is related to the command-and-control systems and supporting information infrastructure. All physical networks, technical and non-technical information systems, individuals, and organizations exist in this domain, such as radio towers, fiber-optic and telephone networks, and face-to-face communications networks. It is the real-world land, sea, air, and space environments. All plans are implemented in this domain, in which conventional combat operations occur. (Gartenstein-Ross, 2018).

### **Cognitive Dimension**

The cognitive dimension plays a significant role in shaping the information environment. It is associated with the mind of the decision-maker and the target audience. Under this domain, the values, beliefs, and perceptions of decision-makers, organizations, or key individuals matter; the Information or the decision made, in turn, is used to influence the perception of others. Thus, the collective consciousness of individuals and organizations exists in this domain. (Thomas, 2003).

### **Informational Dimension**

The physical and cognitive domains collectively shape the information dimension. This domain encompasses the collection, processing, and dissemination of information. It deals with how Information flows and its content. The flow of Information is an important aspect of this domain, which covers the exchange of Information in terms of conduct, form, and speed. The above-mentioned domains are closely interrelated and overlap. Decisions made in the cognitive domain are passed as orders and intent through the information domain, and then they are executed as actions in the physical domain. Therefore, to understand the adversary's information environment, it is important to have knowledge of all three domains and how they are linked to the battlefield. (Hamming, 2020).

## **Difference between Al-Qaeda And Islamic State's Information**

### **Environment**

Some of the differences in the information environment of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State are discussed as follows:

#### **Cognitive domain:**

The cognitive domain of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State: Al-Qaeda and ISIS leadership have different views regarding the Salafist/takfiri interpretation of Islam. Salafist/takfirism means that anybody who opposes their rule or authority is either an apostate (murtad) or an infidel (kafir). Islamic State has a very narrow interpretation of takfir, and it believes in eliminating all those who do not accept its Caliphate. Due to this, they hold extremist views about those Sunnis who have been cooperating with 'apostate' rulers or unbelievers. IS has frequently been attacking other sects as well as Sunnis, which they call deviant sects. On the other hand, Al-Qaeda has criticized Islamic State for their absolutism. (Lassalle, 2016). Al-Qaeda's leadership has become conscious of the violence of jihadis. In their jihadi manual, they have called for moderation, the protection of civilians, and avoiding the indiscriminate attacks against deviant sects. There is a sharp difference in the leadership thinking of both organizations regarding their strategy. Al-Qaeda has an outward-looking strategy and considers targeting far- the enemy. They emphasize targeting the West before trying to establish a caliphate. They envision

establishing regimes sympathetic to their interpretation of Islam in the Middle East. Economic warfare is an important aspect of their strategy of targeting the West. Meanwhile, the Islamic State has an inward-looking strategy, such as establishing the State first. They believe in targeting near-enemy to purify the Islamic community. Their targets are individuals of the Shi'a sect, other religious minorities, and rival jihadist groups. (Lassalle, 2016). Their primary target is apostate regimes in the Arab world, like Syria and Iraq. ISIS leadership believes that the necessary step to unify the Ummah is to create a Caliphate. Therefore, the credentials of al-Baghdadi, who is from the tribe of Quraysh, qualify him as a legitimate Caliph. Al-Qaeda has not accepted the IS Caliphate. Instead, they believe that IS has imposed the Caliphate upon Muslims without fulfilling the conditions. Recently, Al-Qaeda has also been criticizing IS for its media publicity of beheadings of prisoners and foreigners and urges to kidnap in exchange for prisoners. Al-Zarqawi introduced the practice of beheading. Al-Qaeda affiliates used to kill hostages with bullets. (Lassalle, 2016).

### **Physical Domain**

The physical domain of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State: The physical infrastructure and capabilities of Islamic State are somewhat different from Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda has media outlets in different areas concerning its branches in different regions. Its central propaganda wing is Al-Sahab Media or "the cloud", which releases audio, video, and graphic production online. Al-Fajr Media coordinates with Al-Qaeda affiliate's media outlets, such as al-Malahim, al-Furqan, al-Andalus, and al-Malahim, for the dissemination of propaganda. (Turner, 2015). Al-Qaeda is also reliant on many web forums like Al-Faloja and Shumukh al-Islam. One of its famous magazines that targets foreign audiences is Inspire, an online English magazine. One other important aspect of Al-Qaeda's physical domain is the role of Jihobbyists, its sympathizers, who on their own have been propagating for Al-Qaeda's cause. Recently, Al-Qaeda has also become active on social media. They do not have a centralized information structure as compared to Islamic State. Islamic State is more dynamic in developing physical information infrastructure because of its centralized structure and objective of building a state first. Islamic State is a versatile organization with capable and skilled people. They have a production team, an internet connection, and a team of hackers. (Turner, 2015). Islamic State is a financially resilient organization that helps them support their physical infrastructure. They are well-advanced and can shoot and upload videos on their websites. ISIS disseminates its view on happenings in Syria and Iraq to an audience of millions using different social media networks such as Twitter, Instagram, Ask.fm, and Facebook. They have media houses like Al-Furqan Media, Al-Itisam Media, and Al-Hayat Media. IS uses its radio network, Al-Bayan, and releases news bulletins in English to target the foreign audience. Islamic State issues a monthly magazine, Dabiq, in different languages like English, French, Albanian, and German. The purpose is to influence public perception and to get recruitment. This is how the physical information infrastructure helps both organizations to disseminate their ideas. Therefore, regarding the real-world environment, ISIS is more organized in its dealings than Al-Qaeda, which has a dispersed network. (Turner, 2015).

### **Information Domain**

Information domain of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State: In the case of information operations, the intangible element of the information environment, i.e. Information, is of great importance. Because the content and flow of Information within a specific geographic area produces real, tangible effects in the physical world. In this context, if we analyze the current information domain of Al-Qaeda and IS, it seems that Al-Qaeda lags in the form and speed of the flow of content. IS disseminates Information in two ways, i.e., official communiqués released by Al-Hayat Media and unofficial communications by its members. They use catchy phrases, straightforward language, and striking imagery to gain



the sympathy and support of the people. Al-Qaeda is also bringing innovation in terms of how Information is released. For example, they launched a magazine, Al-Shamikha, in March 2011, using American advertisement approaches to attract Muslim women. How IS releases its videos is very attractive. They name the movies in Hollywood style, like 'Clanging of the Swords, and release the trailers. This shows the audience they hope to attract. In the informational domain, one can identify the difference in the narrative of both organizations as Al-Qaeda's publications, like Inspire, focus more on actions against the West and less on the essentials of Islamic governance. The articles range from lessons on "how to make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom" to Q&As with prominent Al-Qaeda members. At the same time, the content of IS magazines focuses on building a state, governance, social services, security, and dignity of the people. It also calls for doctors, engineers, and other professionals to migrate and help them in building an Islamic government. (Hamming, 2020).

### **Information Operations of Al-Qaeda**

#### **Electronic Warfare and Computer Network Operations by Al-Qaeda:**

The Al Qaeda manual guides the militants in its lesson, 'Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants', to use anti-surveillance techniques and adopt countermeasures in response to adversary electronic warfare capability. To encourage the use and institutionalize the electronic warfare method in the organization, one of the Al-Qaeda leaders, in April 2010, urged the militants to show interest in hacking, and anyone who possesses such talent needs to be encouraged so that we may infiltrate and destroy the enemy' websites. (Habib Ali Katohar, 2024). Al-Qaeda leadership considers electronic warfare as one of the most important and effective wars of the future. The EW aspect of Al Qaeda's operations is highlighted by the countermeasures that they take to prevent attacks and secure or monitor their communications and their ability to protect themselves from intelligence agencies. Al-Qaeda has frequently used radio-controlled improvised explosive devices or detonating explosives through the use of cell phones and wireless technology against security forces. Al-Qaeda and its sympathizers have also conducted several cyber-attacks. They connect themselves to legitimate websites where they serve as 'parasites' and hijack legitimate websites. As of March 2013, Al Qaeda Digital Army, in coordination with the Tunisian Electronic Army, conducted 'Operation Black Summer' in which the hackers extracted important Information from US government databases and the Pentagon. As part of computer network defense, Al-Qaeda has developed encryption technologies and software to protect their communication and data transfers. The first encryption software was launched in 2007 for use with email, named Asrar al-Mujahideen. Another encryption software used by Al-Qaeda is Asrar al-Dardashah, launched in February 2013. (Emery, 2004).

#### **Operational Security and Deception by Al-Qaeda**

Secrecy and deception are significant features of Al Qaeda operative training. They consider it as a means to ensure success in the conduct of operations. Al-Qaeda training manual teaches its operatives about forging documents and counterfeit currency, meeting and communicating covertly. The main objective and purpose of the manual is to help the operatives carry out their work without being detected while infiltrating the enemy area. It provides complete teaching to its operatives and teaches them how to live undercover in the enemy's archenemy area. Al-Qaeda trains its individuals to use written techniques, use codes in operations, and emphasize secure communications. (Gartenstein-Ross, 2018). They also have their chat rooms and email systems. They change their servers, the names of their websites, and the URLs to avoid detection. In this way, the organization can stay in touch with its supporters and continue to convey the Information. Al Qaeda uses the Hawala banking system to deceive the authorities and transfer funds from corrupt NGOs. Al-Qaeda is composed of numerous cells where members do not know each other. A

compartmentalization strategy helps them to deceive and maintain operational security. (Lassalle, 2016).

### **Psychological Operations by Al-Qaeda**

The efforts of Clerics like Anwar al-Awlaki, Abdullah el-Faisal, and Sheikh Khalid bin Abdul Rahman al-Husainan Abu Yahya al-Libi have supported Al-Qaeda's PSYOP. They give online lectures and propagate Al-Qaeda's ideology to influence the foreign audience. In April and May 2011, Al-Qaeda's web forum Shumukh al-Islam introduced e-learning courses titled "Special explosives course for beginners." Written and audio-visual learning aids were used to explain the different aspects of lessons. (Sageman, 2006). Similarly, as a part of their propaganda strategy, Al-Shamikhah (majestic Woman) magazine was launched by Al-Qaeda in March 2011 to target Muslim women. It published articles like "Sharia Law That Applies to You," "The Female Martyr," "Meeting with a Jihad Wife," "Marrying a Jihadist", and "Your House Is Your Kingdom." It featured interviews of 'martyrs' wives praising suicide bombings. This propaganda magazine is being used to attract marginalized women by calling them to action. Al-Qaeda has been using social networks to spread its propaganda material and radicalize people. For example, when 76,000 tweets of Al-Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria) were examined, they contained more than 34,000 links that led to other jihadist content and propaganda material. The status of being a "mujahid" is attractive, drawing young people to their cause. In this regard, Al-Qaeda's online jihadists issued a document on "electronic jihad" in January 2012 on the leading jihadist forums al-Fida and Shumukh al-Islam. It describes a person as a mujahid praying electronically against the enemy, even if he is far from the battleground. Apart from that, as discussed earlier, Al-Qaeda's media houses have been disseminating propaganda material to influence public perception. (Sageman, 2006).

### **Information Operations of ISIS**

#### **Electronic Warfare and Computer Network Operations by Islamic State**

Recently, in the strike against IS by the US-led forces, various vehicles of Islamic State were destroyed, and the forces claimed that in one of the vehicles, there was a complete electronic warfare garrison. The Islamic State has a complete team of hackers who hack the various websites of the authorities. (Habib Ali Katohar I. A., 2023). Some of the hackers claimed that they had their allegiance to Islamic State and hence hacked the Twitter accounts of the US Central Command and posted propaganda videos and threatening messages like "American Soldiers, We are coming to watch your back" and "ISIS is already here, we are in your PCs, in each military base." To be more effective, the Islamic State has been building encryption technology, and they released an encryption program, Asrar al-Ghurabaa, in November 2013. The French media, TV5 Monde, was hacked by the IS in April 2015. The broadcasts were blacked out, and their Facebook pages and websites were hacked. (Ismael, 2020).

### **Operational Security and Deception by Islamic State**

Operational security and deception tactics are important to Islamic State's operations. As of Dec 2014, a supervisory committee of ISIS ordered the militants to turn off GPS devices to avoid detection. Their fighters minimize their vulnerability to air strikes by adapting to the changing battlefield conditions. For example, they move to urban areas, dividing their forces into smaller tactical units and operating at night. They try not to leave any clue about the people running their operations, and when there are air strikes against them, they limit the use of insecure phone and radio communications. The Islamic State beheading videos are an important element of military deception, in which they target Western public opinion and try to create fear in their minds. (Hamming, The Al Qaeda-Islamic State rivalry: Competition yes, but no competitive escalation, 2020). Deception

tactics of ISIS can be seen in the travel guide, 'Hijrah to the Islamic State', issued in February 2015, in which it gave instructions to the 'wannabe jihadists' while traveling to Syria. It advises them to purchase a return ticket so nobody could suspect them, not to keep a religious book in the bag, not to dress religiously and guides them in evading a security check. (Habib Ali Katohar s. A., 2023).

### **Psychological Operations by Islamic State**

ISIS designs and conducts its PSYOP to appeal to a wide range of audiences. Their magazines like 'Dabiq' show images of executions and quote Islamic text to justify their actions. ISIS has been successful in getting foreign recruits through its web-based radicalization programs. There PSYSOPS uses all social networks to spread its messages. In the 2014 World Cup, they attached tags such as #Brazil2014 and #WC2014 in their media releases to appear on all related social media searches using the same term. (Farang, 2017). They have also developed smartphone apps, games, and distinctive online messaging systems, creating a strong psychological impact. They are also targeting Arab females to get recruits. Its sympathizers circulated a document in the Arabic language, 'Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study' in January 2015. In it, they criticized the Western civilization, gave an account of life in the territories being administered by IS, and outlined the role expected from women. IS has also released a series of propaganda videos like "The Flames of War", "Lend Me Your Ears", "A Message to America", "A Second Message to America", and "A Message to the Allies of America". In one of the videos, they used British journalist John Cantlie as a conduit to mock the hypocrisies of the countries involved in air strikes against ISIS. (Farang, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

In contemporary affairs, terrorist organizations have been able to draw the attention of a large number of people. Al-Qaeda has realized the importance of IO and IS and is making full use of it compared to states and international alliances. The innovative use of IO has helped them survive and strengthen their respective organizations. Through it, they recruit new converts, strengthening the morale of the fighters within the organizations and observance through threats and, above all, influencing public opinion worldwide. With the use of these strategies, they have justified and legitimized their controversial decisions or operations.

The use of the IO by Al-Qaeda and Islamic State is a serious threat to global security, and there is a dire need to counter this whole phenomenon. The international community needs to realize the grave implications of these information operations because the kinetic or physical actions of the terrorists can only damage the state property, the lives of the people, and the infrastructure, but through information operations, they spread radicalism and violence in the minds and hearts of the people. The bullet, once fired, cannot come back, but the words continue to echo. Through this, they spread their message to a larger audience and try to legalize and justify their activities. Important steps will have to be taken by the United States and the US-led international coalition to counter this phenomenon, focusing more on military efforts having little influence on the perception of vulnerable individuals. Little is being done to build a counter-narrative, and both Al-Qaeda and IS have outdone the United States in quality, quantity, and speed. Although it will be difficult to counter the threat altogether, efforts have to be made to mitigate the effects of the IO used by terrorist organizations.

### **Recommendations**

This research venture suggests the following areas as part of the recommendations:

- i. **Improved Surveillance of Digital Platforms:** Governments in partnership with tech companies need to build AI systems for terrorist propaganda monitoring and detection, as well as removal.
- ii. **Targeted Counter-Messaging Techniques:** Narratives that can directly counter the ideological and emotional appeal of the Al-Qaeda and ISIS groups' audiences need to be defined and crafted.
- iii. **Intervention Focused on Recruiting Vulnerable Groups:** Social, economic, and psychological underlying factors while doing outreach programs targeted at recruitment-prone populations need to be addressed.
- iv. **Increased International Collaboration:** Collaboration with foreign partners to acquire practical and theoretical knowledge for countering information warfare from terrorist organizations needs to be promoted.
- v. **Increase Funding for Research:** Demand of resources for research over a longer period of time looking into new avenues tackled by terror IO to develop anti measures that are timely and flexible.

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