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# Individualism as an improvised strategy in the spreading of jihadist videos on YouTube

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## Abstract

**[EN] Introduction:** The jihadist global movement changes its mechanics of ideological diffusion when amplifying its message thanks to the viral expansion on social networks and the role of individual users. **Methodology:** This study analyses a total of 234 videos collected from the searches with more visualizations using four definitions considered by the UN about the jihadist organization Jabhat al Nusrah, which changed its name on July 2016 to Jabhat Fateh Al Sham. **Results and conclusions:** We confirm that jihadist organizations do not have the capacity to fully control their discourse on YouTube due to the huge spreading and to the role of individual users in the generation of new contents that easily avoid the platform’s restrictions. Besides, we conclude that the accessible videos are of amateur, violent type, with jihadist aesthetic, without barely any postproduction process and with scarce presence of traditional media acting as amplifiers for the violent discourse.

## Keywords

YouTube; terrorism; jihadism; virality; video; propaganda.

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Translation by **Yuhanny Henares**  
(Academic translator, Universitat de Barcelona)

## 1. Introduction

The birth and expansion of social networks enabled a transformation process of the jihadist phenomenon in the last years. However, there are few researches that analyze the diffusion of jihadist messages in the social network of YouTube videos. Roy (2017) defines this phenomenon as a nihilistic turn under the shelter of what other authors have conceptualized as: jihad 3.0 (Al-Rawi, 2016; Shane and Hubbard, 2014), neojihadism (Lentini, 2009; Bourekba, 2015) or cultural revolution (Atran, 2015). Renard (2017) adds that this new situation responds to a moment of change in the way of understanding the offensive action of the jihad and entails a new stage in the construction of the current jihadist scenario (Renard, 2017). In this context, the role of sympathizers (Prucha, 2011) outstands as vector for the spreading of jihadist contents on social networks that, without belonging to a terrorist organization, assume a dominant position when creating a certain unit outlook in the movement (Sageman, 2008). Its role demonstrates the pertinence of this new sectarian drift characterized by an unleaded jihad that gathers a position of avant-garde for itself, sponsored by Abu Musab Al Suri, a Syrian, nationalized as Spaniard. In his work “The call to the global Islamic resistance”, Al Suri articulated the foundations of a new stage of jihadism when establishing the concept of individual action (*Al amal al fardi*) to refer to the practice of violent acts promoted by individuals without any affiliation with organized terrorist structures (Lia, 2007).

The boost of this new stage chronologically coincided with the gestation of YouTube in 2005, a month after the online spreading of the work of the Spaniard-Syrian jihadist Al Suri. Social networks succeeded in turning into a new jihadist indoctrination vehicle, like it happened with fax and satellite televisions in the past, acting over a public of digital natives (Kapel, 2016). As final recipients of the product, these young lads immediately assimilated the new interaction process once the boom period of jihadist forums was surpassed, blurred before the lack of contents’ amplifications and excessive restrictions (Klausen, 2015).

The consolidation of social networks converges with the burst of the “Arab Spring” between 2010 and 2011, in an atmosphere of generalized dissatisfaction. MENA citizens (Middle East and North Africa) had a series of tools available to counteract the authoritarian drifts of their governments for the first time in their history (Soengas, 2013). Nevertheless, in this framework of confrontation, the jihadist organizations knew how to make the most of the undefinition of the moment, especially in Syria and Iraq (Prucha and Fisher, 2013). In order to do this, they used already existing terrorist networks with the purpose of consolidating a new form of International Jihadist, which call was answered by numerous occidental individuals, specially European (Trujillo, 2013; Argumosa-Pila, 2015). Young lads born in a 3.0 culture for whom the use of Facebook, YouTube or Twitter turned into a distraction

in the battle field and in a way of spreading its violent activity (Klausen, 2015; Shane and Hubbard, 2014). Fighters affiliated to the ranks of terrorist groups that operated in Syria or Iraq, access their accounts on social networks from mobile phones to interact with their family and friends or practice *dawa* or predication into a form of pop culture or “cool jihad” (Cottee, 2015). The spreading of multimedia contents was amplified thanks to the role of ideologically related influencing users, not necessarily linked to accounts of the organization, who downloaded videos and reproduced them on different profiles (Prucha and Fisher, 2013).

In this process of contents viralization, in recent times YouTube has turned into one of the main recipients of viralized material, due to its low cost and contents decentralization (Klausen, 2015). Thus, jihadism has used the benefits offered by social networks, thanks to its simplicity and intuition to generate, reproduce and distribute multimedia content (Noguera-Vivo, 2010). And this is produced in a context where the viewer of YouTube videos acquires the same habits of passive reception from traditional television (Gallardo and Jorge, 2010).

### **1.1. Hypothesis and research objectives**

The first hypothesis (H1) affirms that YouTube amplifies the jihadist discourse through the role of individual users in the spreading of videos, despite the platforms’ restriction policies about violent contents.

The second hypothesis (H2) sustains that jihadist organizations do not have the capacity to control their own propagandistic discourse on YouTube due to the virality and spreading of contents.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to know how the spreading activity of violent content associated to searches on YouTube is solved. We will focus on the analysis of videos linked to the jihadist organization known as Jabhat al Nusrah (called afterwards Jabhet Fateh Al Sham on 2016). We want to know whether there is a monitored discourse from said entity to expose specific propagandistic references or if, on the contrary, there is no defined strategy for that contents dissemination.

### **1.2. The origin of Jabhat al Nusrah**

On January 23, 2012 a statement was spread on jihadist forums that announced the creation of a new terrorist organization called Jabhat al Nusrah, translated as Victory Front. Risen from the ashes of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Jabhat al Nusrah, through its spokesman, declared war to the Syrian regime of Al Assad and proclaimed the need to impose the Islamic law in Syria (Lister, 2016). This new terrorist structure ensured to make profit out of the dissatisfaction of the Syrian population before the atrocities committed by the regime in the context of the riots known as the Arab Spring. On the first half of 2013 Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, acknowledged Jabhat al Nusrah as its branch in Syria (Cafarella, 2014). Previously, the Islamic State of Iraq confirmed that Jabhat al Nusrah was its Syrian branch changing its name to ISIS, something the leaders of the Front Al Nusrah refused (Lister, 2015). On July 2016, responsible for the terrorist structure announced the end of their affiliation to Al Qaeda and made the most of the situation to announce their change of name to Jabhet Fateh Al Sham (Chulov, 2016).

The reason why we focus our research on Jabhat al Nusrah is because it is a terrorist organization that in some cases has shared violent scenarios in Syria and Iraq together with ISIS, but which didn’t have a special monitoring from the media nor in the academic field. To a great extent, because its

responsibles have not considered that the audiovisual productions were one of the indispensable pillars in their propagandistic strategy. All this despite they had their own mediatic system. On the year 2012 *Abu Adnan*, spokesman of the jihadist organization manifested on the Magazine TIME that “we do not concern about press. (...) If we film an action, we film it; it is not relevant, but for many other groups films are a priority, it helps them get funds” (Abouzeid, 2012).

## 2. Methodology

This research has been developed during a year of viewing videos on YouTube from January 2016 and January 2017. On the first stage of the research (January 2016), we collected the addresses of the 400 videos (and the channels hosting them) that met the needed criteria. On the second stage (January 2017) we confirmed the status of those videos to know whether they were still accessible and if still active videos could be downloaded (between January 5 and 8) to be able to work offline without needing to submit to new blockages.

The methodological process has faced the difficulties derived from the revitalization and the mutation of jihadist contents on social networks, in a warlike scenario, of the Near East, where alliances and disputes between organizations and jihadist factions have altered the progression of the conflict, in a specially significant manner in Syria and Iraq. One of the most relevant changes was produced with the modification of the name of Jabhat al Nusrah, which from July 28, 2016 it was called Jabhat Fateh al Sham as we mentioned before. In order to avoid altering the sample and the need to observe the evolution of contents over time, we decided to continue with the initial terms used in the searches.

### 2.1. Sample selection process

In 1999, the Security Council of the United Nations adopted the Resolution 1267 identifying entities and individuals linked to the terrorist organization Al Qaeda who must undergo international sanctions. The list of terrorist entities has been updated uninterruptedly, using for this research the amendment dated December 17, 2015, which included a jihadist organization called “Al-Nusrah Front for The People of the Levant”, an Arab denomination transliterated into English, written in Latin alphabet and translated as “The Victory Front”. The legislative text itself showed the different writing formulas referred to said organization in English, as well as those names transliterated to the Latin and Arab alphabet, but nevertheless identified as the same term (Security Council, 2015).

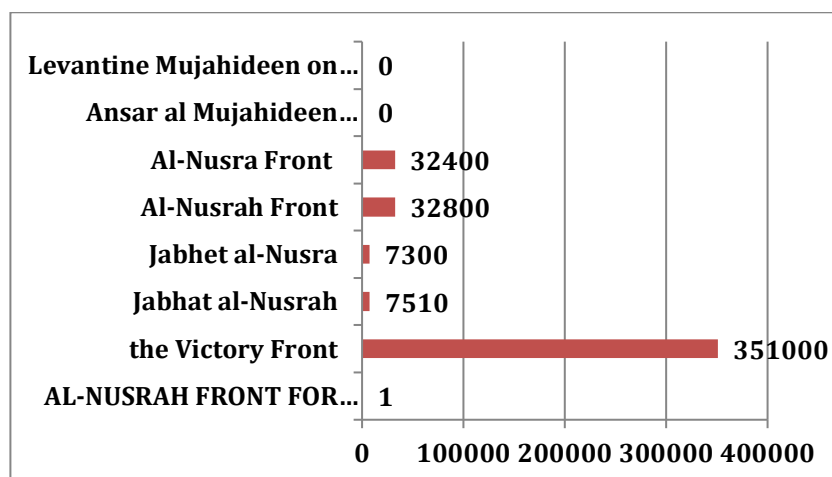
We decided to omit the terms in the Arab alphabet because its use on searches reduced the users’ target, however, we were interested about selecting the transliterated terms to the Latin alphabet. The methodological sense of this selection was dictated by the global dimension of YouTube, which allowed that internauts of any part of the world could browse contents without idiomatic restrictions. This is due to English being considered as *lingua franca* in Internet, to which there adds the will of jihadist networks to focus many of their contents to an occidental public.

In this group of very specific recipients we find Muslims that do not know Arab but who, simultaneously, are considered an essential target for the spreading of the propagandistic message.

To analyze what multimedia content was shown on the YouTube of this jihadist organization and how it configured its propagandistic activity, we searched using each one of the definitions in the Latin alphabet, applying filters such as “This year” and “number of visualizations” (without quotation marks) and eliminating the reproduction lists of the extraction, considering they lack of any value since

they altered the search formula. This approach allowed to discriminate terms by the number of results, as observed in Figure 1

**Figure 1. Results of searches in YouTube of the different denominations of Jabhat al Nusra**



Source: authors' own creation

As we observe, the definitions “Levantine Mujahideen on the battlefields of Jihad” and “Ansar al Mujahideen Network” showed zero results, therefore they were discarded, while “Al-Nusrah Front For The People Of The Levant” only showed one registry, which lead to refuse this formula as well, due to its lack of contents. In the case of “the Victory Front” the 351.000 registries obliged to discard them as well due to the high dispersion that could lead to confusions in the sample, therefore the four definitions used for searches were finally the following: *Al-Nusra Front*, *Al-Nusrah Front*, *Jabhet al-Nusra* and *Jabhat al-Nusrah*.

**Table 1. Information obtained with the free software *YouTube data Tools***

ID of channel
ID of analyzed video
Title of the channel in which the video is inserted
Date of publication of video
Title of video
Duration of video
Numbers of views of video
Description of video
Number of "likes"
Number of "unlikes"
Number of comments

Source: authors' own creation



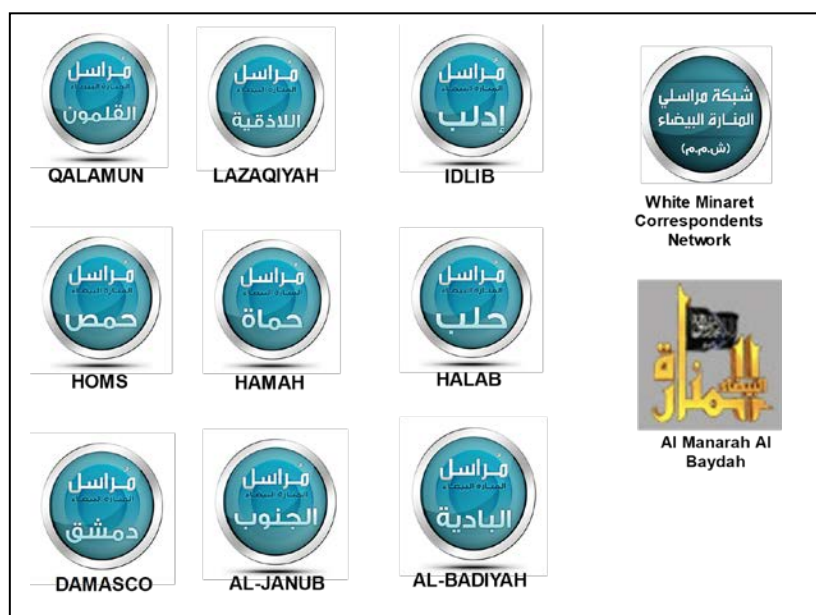
Once the four terms to be developed were defined, we extracted the 100 most viewed videos of each one of the definitions using the YouTube search engine, which comprised a total of 400 links. Next, they were introduced in the free software “*YouTube data tools*” designed by the study group on Internet “*Digital Methods Initiative*” from the Amsterdam University. For its functioning, it uses an applications’ programming interface provided by YouTube developers, that allows the user to extract raw data from links (YouTube API v3). Through this software all data that can be seen on Table 1 were extracted.

The extraction of data performed on January 2016 could be done in 399 out of 400 links since, during the data extraction period, YouTube censored one of the videos due to its inappropriate content. The view of the 399 video links allowed to confirm the presence of duplicated addresses, therefore after eliminating repetitions, the fieldwork limited to the information provided by 234 videos. After a year (January 2017) we accessed these channels again to know the effects of the YouTube contents restriction policy in the sample.

## 2.2. Identification of jihadist content of Jabhat al Nusrah on YouTube

The terrorist organization Jabhat al Nusrah uses a different strategy compared to other groups for the spreading of propagandistic content, to a great extent making the most of the fact that its activity on the Internet has been as monitored as DAESH’s case (Voxpol, 2016). Its activity has been specially significative on Twitter, where it used 9 main accounts until its subsequent blockage by the platform.

**Figure 2. Regional correspondents of Jabhat al Nusrah and the mediatic producer on Twitter**



Source: authors’ own creation

Each account had a significative logo and it corresponded to different regional correspondents in Syria (Figure 2), as well as a tenth central account called “White Minaret Correspondents Network”. These accounts disseminated links that redirected accounts with videos of jihadist content to YouTube (Prucha and Fisher, 2013). Trujillo (2013) highlights that videos to be analyzed must have the logos

of those Twitter accounts or the one of the mediatic producer of Jabhat al Nusrah: called Al Manarah Al Baydah (mediatic entity made known thanks to the founding manifesto of the Al Nusrah Front on January 2012).

We deemed necessary to mention these emblems (Figure 2) since they allowed us to identify what videos viewed on YouTube corresponded with propagandistic material of the organization.

This way, it is necessary to follow a methodological criterion to determine what elements of the channels and videos analyzed have a jihadist aesthetic. Regarding videos, we adapted the external signs of jihadist radicalization and militancy of Jordán and Mañas (2007) with these criteria gathered on Table 2.

**Table 2. Elements of jihadist aesthetics**

Elements of jihadist aesthetics	Traditional Arab clothes
	Occidental clothes with paramilitary vests
	Paramilitary clothes (not belonging to a regular army)
	Ski mask
	Palestinian scarves
	Long loose hair
	Shaved hair
	Beard without mustache

Source: authors' own creation

We determined that any character on these videos should meet at least three of these elements to affirm he is a jihadist. On the other hand, regarding the channels hosting these videos in the sample, we established a categorization according to its jihadist content as exposed on Table 3.

**Table 3. Categorization of channels by content**

Media channel	When there is will to inform
	When there is its own content
	Presence on other social networks and not exclusively on YouTube
	Having a characteristic logo
	Showing continuous activity in time
	Media identifiable as organization
Institutional channel	<i>Think Thank</i> (thinking centers)
	Official propaganda associated or apparently associated with an Islamic or jihadist state entity, group or organization
	Public or private institutions or companies
Other channels	Channels associated with individual users_
	Channels difficult to classify

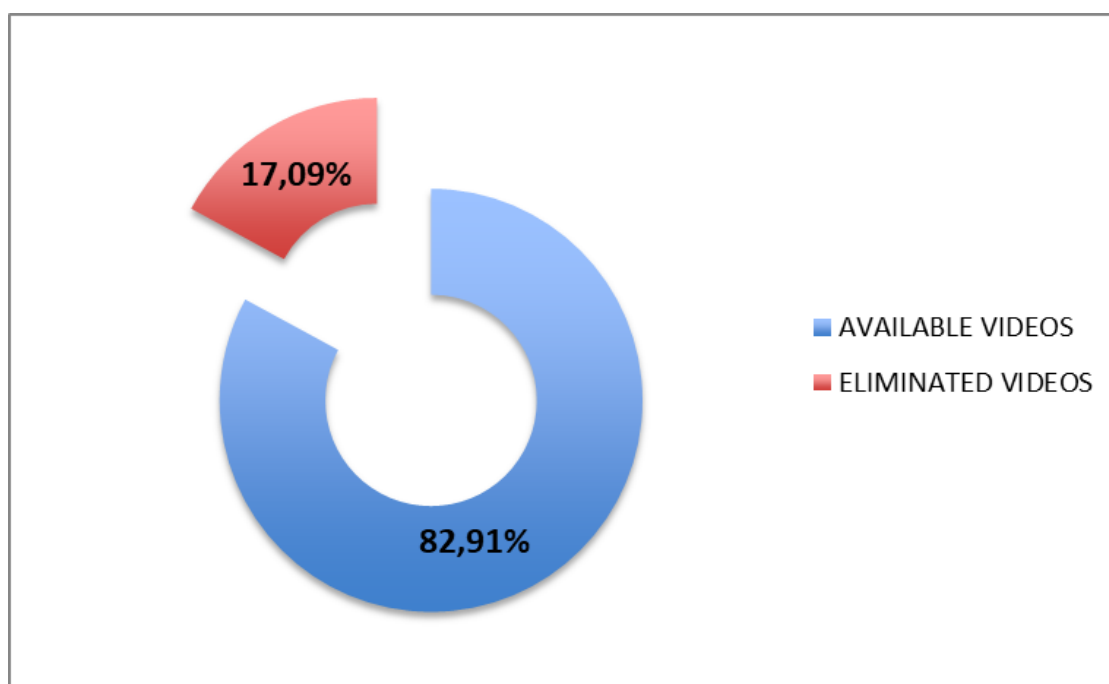
Source: authors' own creation

To establish these categories, we considered as premise that at least they met 50% of the characteristics of each version.

### 3. Results

After a year of activity, the viewing of the 234 videos included in the research allowed to know that 194 were still available for viewing, which meant 82.91% of videos still available. Only 40 videos have been eliminated in compliance with YouTube's contents restriction policies as we see on Figure 3 (17.09% of them).

**Figure 3. Eliminated and available videos after a year of presence on YouTube**



Source: authors' own creation

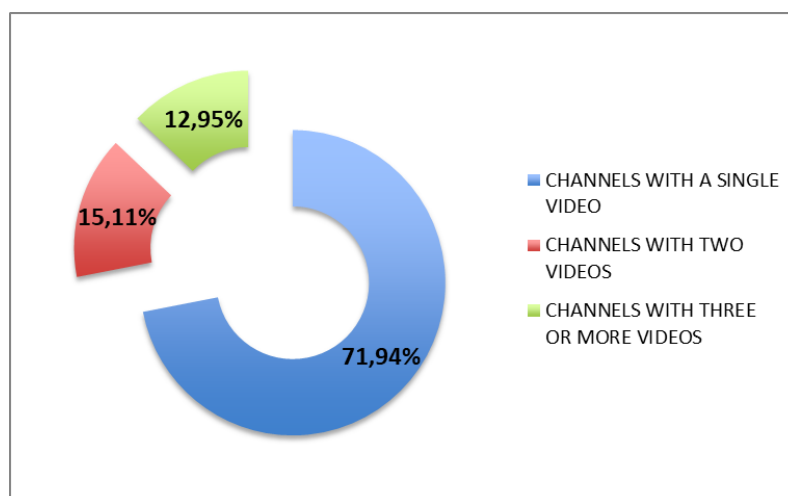
We must highlight that, despite the elimination of duplicated links from the sample, there were 7 videos that were reproduced by different users despite having different addresses, but for methodological purposes they are considered autonomous and hence, not screened, considering their individual impact and viral effect is completely singular.

#### 3.1. Spreading of contents through YouTube channels

When grouping the channels by number of videos, we identified that 139 channels grouped all videos of the sample (N=234). On Figure 4 we observe that 71.94% of 139 channels only contribute one video to the sample, while 15.11% add two videos and only 12.95% of channels provide three or more videos to the sample.



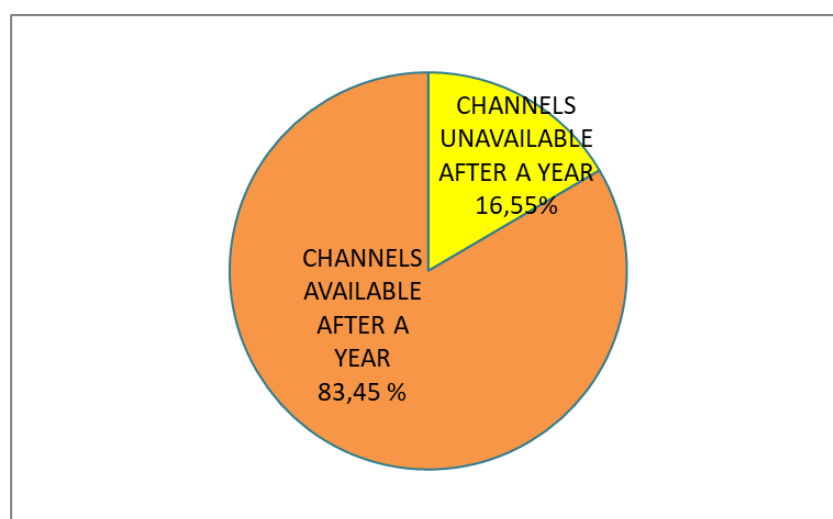
**Figure 4. Analysis of the number of videos of the sample disseminated by each channel**



Source: authors' own creation

Regarding the elimination of channels after a year of activity on YouTube (Figure 5), there were still 116 channels available out of the 139 initial ones.

**Figure 5. Available and eliminated channels after a year of activity on YouTube**



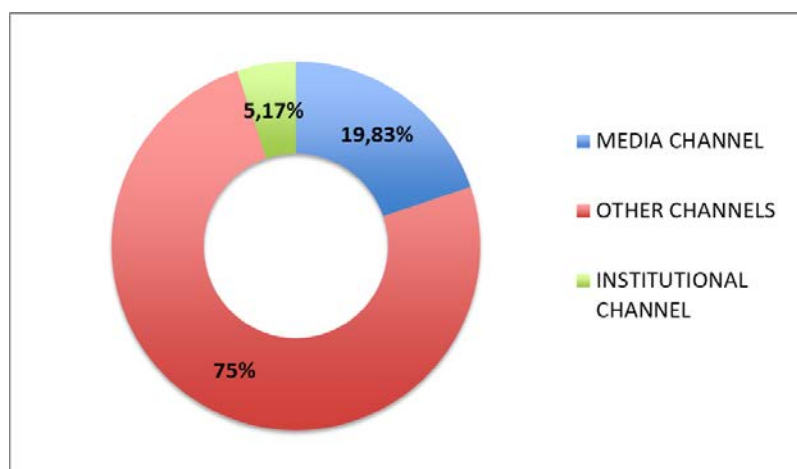
Source: authors' own creation

On Figure 5 we confirm there were 83.45% of channels still available on the date of analysis, which means that 23 of them have already been cancelled: 21 due to cancellation of the channel and 2 by elimination of all channel videos according to information provided publicly by the platform.

### 3.2. Categorization of channels

If we consider the categorization of channels determined on Table 3 of the methodology, in Figure 6 we classify channels in three types: media, institutional or others.

**Figure 6. Categorization of channels by content**



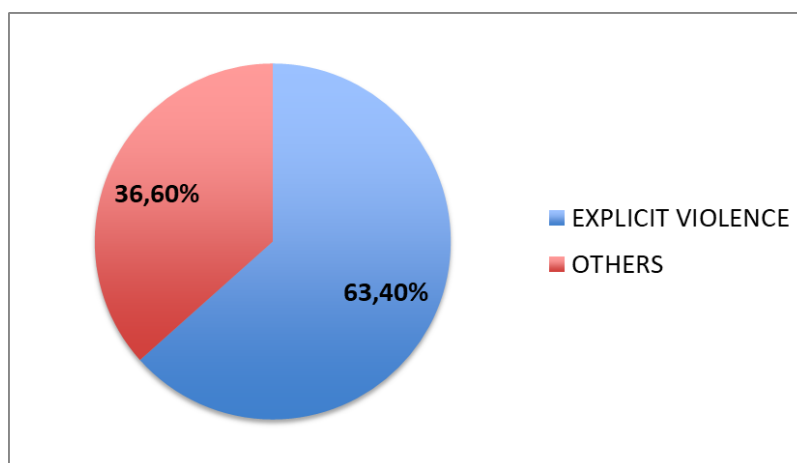
Source: authors' own creation

This way, on Figure 6 we observe that channels belonging to media have a reduced presence with 19.83% of cases. However, channels grouped in “Other channels” with 75% are the most numerous since most of analyzed videos are disseminated by channels without any state or business infrastructure, nor supported by jihadist organizations. In fact, with only 5.17%, institutional channels are quite reduced.

### 3.3. Content of resulting videos after a year of activity on YouTube

A year after the extraction of analyzed links, we downloaded the 194 videos that were still available to carry out their content analysis.

**Figure 7. Level of violence on analyzed videos**

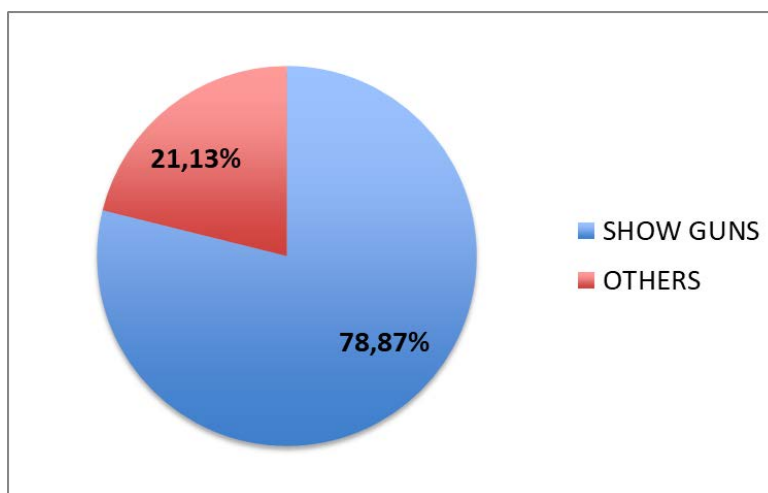


Source: authors' own creation

Therefore, on figure 7 we identified that in 63.40% of videos of the sample we identify explicit violence (essentially combat actions in war scenarios). In Others (36.6%) there are images in the battle fields but there are no gunshots, explosions or weapons.

Likewise, we must highlight the presence of weapons in videos of the sample (Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Visualization of guns in analyzed videos**

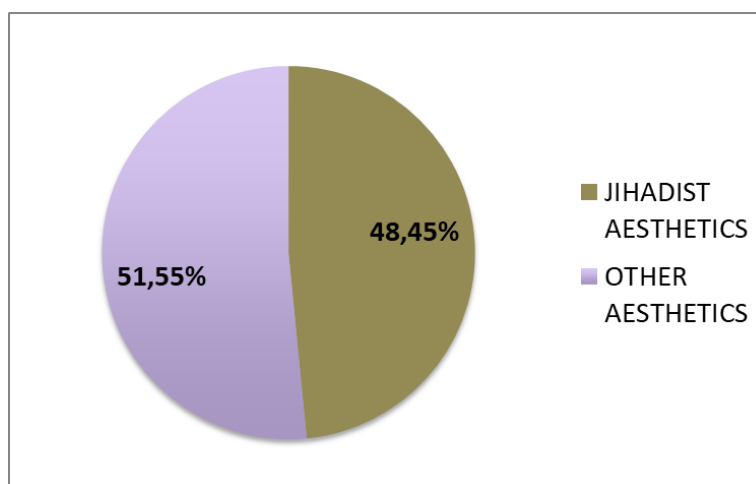


Source: authors' own creation

This way, on Figure 8 we observe that in 78.87% of videos guns are shown, discarding in the quantification those videos that even though they show scenes of violence, do not clearly exhibit the use of weapons.

To determine these aspects, we considered the classification of the jihadist aesthetic shown on Table 2 of the methodology. Thus, on Figure 9 we observed that in 48.45% of the videos actors of jihadist aesthetics play the leading role.

**Figure 9. Aesthetic of actors that appear on analyzed videos**



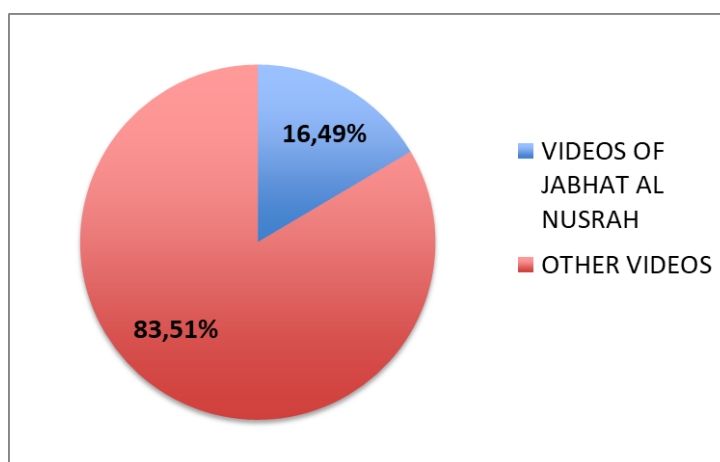
Source: authors' own creation

We must consider that in the cases where a war landscape has been identified, fighters are not always seen and therefore we wanted to keep strict about this qualitative view of the phenomenon.

### 3.4. Presence of the mediatic system of Jabhat al Nusrah

It is important to consider how many of those jihadist videos belong only to Jabhat al Nusrah. As detailed in the methodology, these videos have the logo of their mediatic production or the one of the regional correspondents of Twitter (Figure 1).

**Figure 10. Videos belonging to the mediatic producer of Jabhat al Nusrah**

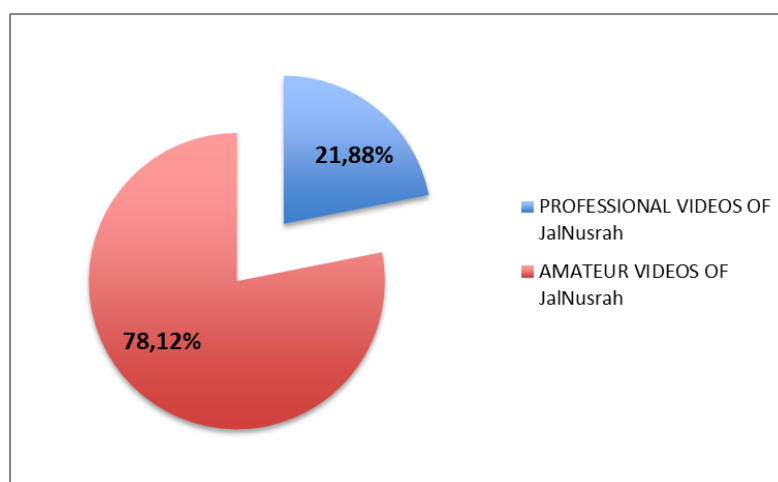


Source: authors' own creation

According to these criteria, the presence of the mediatic system of Jabhat al Nusrah in the sample is quite reduced, with only 16.49% (32) of videos attributed to the Jabhat al Nusrah conglomerate.

In Figures 11 and 12 we analyzed the professional or amateur nature of videos elaborated by its origin. We understand as amateur videos as those showing any of these criteria: unfocused planes, bad quality image and audio, lack of editing process, abrupt edition or unusual camera movements for a professional production.

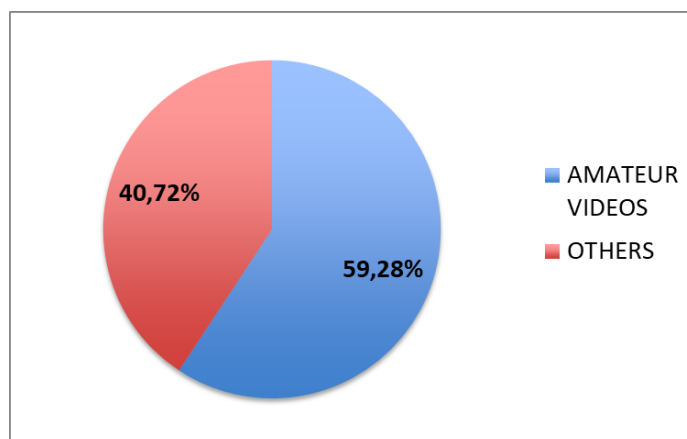
**Figure 11. Analysis of the amateur nature of Jabhat al Nusrah productions**



Source: authors' own creation

In Figure 11, we observe that 78.12% of videos explicitly identified as belonging to Jabhat al Nusrah show characteristics typical of amateur videos compared to 21.88%. Likewise, 59.28% of all active videos (194 that include the 32 of Jabhat al Nusrah) offer non-professional or amateur content (Figure 12).

**Figure: 12. Percentage of amateur videos out of the 194 active videos**



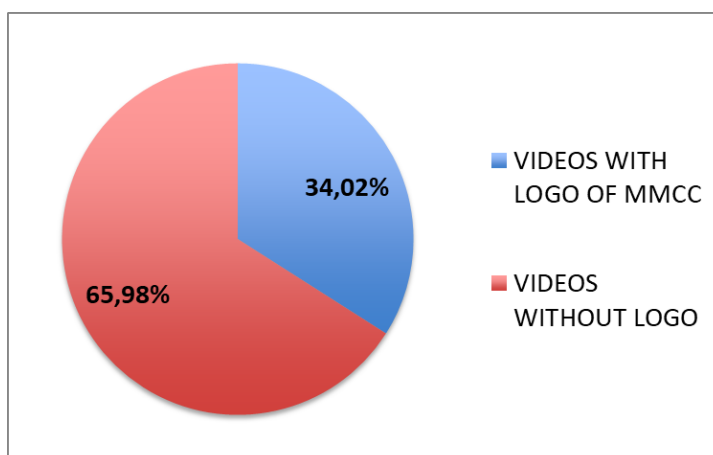
Source: authors' own creation

This percentage of amateurism is reduced significantly in the 194 videos (Figure 12) because in the rest of the percentage (40.72%) the productions of media are incorporated, despite of being total, resource images or elaborated reports (VTR, *Video Tape Recorder*). We must clarify that we consider as journalistic production, those contents that use the logo of the journalistic entity and that have a will to inform.

### 3.5. Presence of media

In this same line, out of the total of 194 videos, 34.02% use a significative logo of a media, while in the remaining 65.98% no logo can be seen. (Figure 13).

**Figure 13. Videos belonging to media**



Source: authors' own creation

We do not evaluate the quality of the images in this section but instead we limit to evaluate the use of said images, and in this case the condition to consider a video linked to a media is that it fulfils its informative function.

#### **4. Discussion**

Once results have been exposed, we verify the fulfilment of the first hypothesis when identifying in the sample an elevated dispersion in the diffusion of videos and a bet for the generation of channels exclusively for the dissemination of ideological content, so that 71.94% of the 139 analyzed channels only contribute with one video to the sample (Figure 4). In the context of H1 we also confirm that the YouTube's contents restriction policy is not an impassable barrier for the generators of jihadist contents, considering that 82.91% of sample videos were still available for viewing even though a year has passed (Figure 3). A data that is complemented by the fact that in that same period of time, 83.45% of channels hosting active videos were still open (Figure 5).

The role of individual users is identified again as essential for the spreading when confirming that 75% of channels correspond with the category of individual users or difficult to classify (Figure 6), leaving media with a very reduced participation: only 19.83% of sample channels. And even more meager is the participation of institutional channels with 5.17% of analyzed videos. This aspect connects with H2 and it complements it. In such a way, we confirm that jihadist organizations do not have real capacity available to monitor YouTube contents. A data that is also reinforced by the fact that only 16.49 % of videos is distributed under any of the seals belonging to the mediatic system of Jabhat al Nusrah (Figure 1, Figure 10). Or in other words, 83.51% of videos have not been created and supervised by the organization.

We also confirm that an elevated content of active videos one year after is of amateur type (59.29%); a data that demonstrates the lack of capacity of the mediatic producer of Jabhat al Nusrah to establish a quality format (see Figure 12). If we focus on the productions exclusively associated to the organization's mediatic system, we see that 78.12% of them also have an amateur content, in a form of improvisation that differs from the communication strategies established by terrorist organizations such as Daesh or Al Qaeda. These results coincide with the arguments set forth by Klausen (2015) and Prucha (2011) when highlighting the role of individual users or sympathizers not affiliated to an organization in the successful diffusion of violent content of jihadist type on social networks.

As observed on Figure 7, the searches done by YouTube users about Jabhat al Nusrah are associated with an eminently violent content (63.40% of videos), where guns are present in 78.87% of cases (Figure 8) and there is a relatively reduced presence of media (34.02%). It is also worth mentioning how hard it can be for a user to locate jihadist content explicitly related to a specific terrorist movement like the one analyzed here, because out of the 400 searches done initially, we only find 32 active videos of Jabhat al Nusrah one year after.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Considering the aforesaid, we conclude that YouTube is a platform of viralized content that, due to its own configuration, it impedes that large jihadist organizations can monitor their message. However, the study sample allowed us to confirm that YouTube has difficulties restricting violent material, precisely due to the fact that materials that must be censored are not affiliated to a jihadist organization but to individual users instead. This activity incorporates multimedia material of violent actions,



mainly amateur type, often reproducing other materials that have previously been uploaded to the network.

It is about a form of virality that feeds the spreading of amateur content, recorded using broad diffusion technology, with scarce presence of traditional media acting as amplifiers of the jihadist discourse, in the context of an elevated spreading through individual YouTube channels or channels not defined in any of the suggested categories.

Therefore, the apparent success in the spreading of uncensored violent content seems to lie precisely on the presumable improvisation and the lack of a strategy to carry out specific propagandistic objectives. A conclusion that is perfectly applicable to other terrorist structures with presence on this social network. However, said dynamic seems to feed a form of subculture of violence that is settling impassively on social networks, quite despite the efforts of large platforms to filter inappropriate material.

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