

## RESILIENCE AND DIVERSITY OF TERRORIST SOCIAL MEDIA PROPAGANDA

### Digital Vacuum: The Evolution of IS Central's Media Outreach in Southeast Asia

Ahmad Helmi bin Mohamad Hasbi and Benjamin Mok

### Afghanistan-Pakistan's Radical Social Media Ecosystem: Actors, Propaganda Comparison and Implications

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Saddiq Basha



# Resilience and Diversity of Terrorist Social Media Propaganda

The fractured global threat landscape, split between faith-based extremists and ethno-nationalist groups, produces diverse and incoherent propaganda narratives on social media.

Though the incidence of terrorist violence, barring some exceptions in Asia and Africa, has decreased in lethality and frequency, extremist propaganda online, has been mushrooming despite curbs, content moderation and de-platforming by world governments and social media companies. In the digital sphere, terrorist groups have demonstrated adaptability and resilience against an ever-evolving and hostile digital environment.

Though governments, big tech and social media companies have made great strides in reducing the visibility and reach of these groups and their propaganda contents, a decline in focus on counterterrorism issues among policymakers has coincided with growing financial pressures on Big Tech. As such, many firms have struggled to effectively moderate police the local and regional versions of extremist materials on their domains and platforms. Due to persistent de-platforming, terrorist groups have also moved their digital presence to more secure and encrypted platforms.

In such an environment, terrorist groups have formed personalised virtual bonds with their operatives, supporters and sympathisers at a more granular level -the former view the latter as their digital warriors keeping their brands and messages alive. In contrast, online counter responses remain broad stroke, and reactive lack granularity or customisation for content moderation.

While the terrorist groups have persisted in the cyber sphere with resilience and adaptability, the big tech and social media companies seem less inclined to invest more resources amid a global financial crunch and shrinking profit margins. Their current resource (human, technical and financial) allocation is necessary but not sufficient to deprive space to terrorist groups in the digital sphere for recruitment, communication and publicity. Consequently, tech firms and governments might be winning the battle of ideas in the short term, but they could lose the war in the long term.

Against this backdrop, the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses' current issue highlights three distinct aspects of terrorist groups' social media propaganda across a geographical spread. The three cases discussed highlight how terrorist groups in Asia and parts of the West navigate the hostile cyber terrain by continuously innovating and adapting.

The first article by **Ahmad Helmi bin Mohamad Hasbi** and **Benjamin Mok** examines the evolving relationship between the Islamic State (IS) and its Southeast Asian affiliates through the lens of digital media outreach. Contrasting IS-centric online activities in the pre- and post-Marawi Siege periods, the authors highlight that, since 2017, IS has markedly scaled down engagement with its SEA province in terms of content production and media coverage. As a result, a host of unofficial pro-IS media outlets based in this region have emerged to fill the gap, in spite of mainstream censorship and lack of acknowledgement by IS Central. The authors conclude by assessing the implications of this shift on counter terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts.

The second article by **Abdul Basit** examines the social media propaganda arms of the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the implications of their militant narratives, recruitment and communication strategies on violent extremism in South and Central Asia and beyond. The author notes that TTP and IS-K's respective propaganda arms, Al-Umar Media and Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Productions, have grown in size and stature in the last two years. They exploit existing socio-political fault lines in Afghanistan and Pakistan to increase their appeal and influence through their propaganda and provide justifications for their violence, vilify their opponents, publish attack infographics, maintain relevance and further their ideological frameworks.

Finally, **Saddiq Basha** notes that the increased targeting of vital infrastructure in North America, Europe, and Australasia shows that individuals and groups associated with the extreme far-right are diversifying their strategies. They seem increasingly interested in disrupting infrastructure, such as power grids and communication networks, to bring about political and social disorder. The article

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examines two factors that have played a role in radicalising individuals and contributing to an increase in such attacks - a) online discussions and ideological narratives about extremist content related to infrastructure and b) the bonds built within these online communities. According to the author, ideas underpinned by militant accelerationism have motivated far-right extremists to target critical infrastructure. Additionally, online community dynamics amplify and interpret infrastructure-focused extremist ideologies, contributing to the far-right's increasing interest in such attacks.

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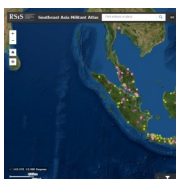
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## SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS



Our centre has launched the **Southeast Asia Militant Atlas**, a dynamic and growing interactive map designed to provide researchers with a consolidated visual database of ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. Please access it via <https://tinyurl.com/ru8mjwbd>

# Digital Vacuum: The Evolution of IS Central's Media Outreach in Southeast Asia

**Ahmad Helmi bin Mohamad Hasbi and Benjamin Mok**

*This article sheds light on the changing relationship between the Islamic State Central (IS Central) and its Southeast Asian (SEA) affiliates in the digital realm. The article revolves around some key findings. First, evidence points to a decrease in both the quality and frequency of SEA-focused content produced by IS Central. This suggests IS Central is reducing its digital engagement with SEA factions. Second, it highlights recent moves by regional propagandists to rely on borrowed legitimacy from IS Central to establish themselves. Even as IS Central's digital involvement declines, these regional groups continue their propaganda activities, drawing on IS Central for legitimacy. Their approach includes translating and adapting IS propaganda to fit local contexts. These groups, branding themselves as media centres, use the association with IS Central to boost their messages' reach. These developments contrast with the period prior to the 2017 Marawi Siege, when the digital relationship between IS Central and SEA groups was much stronger. Then, IS Central was deeply involved in official translations, videos and SEA influencers in Syria who directly followed IS Central leadership. In conclusion, the article emphasises a clear digital separation between IS Central and SEA groups, which has major implications for future counter terrorism efforts.*

## **Introduction**

Analysing the ebb and flow of digital propaganda has become an instrumental part of understanding modern-day extremist movements. In recent years, a marked shift has been observed in the dynamics of digital propaganda production between the Islamic State Central (IS Central) and pro-IS Southeast Asian (SEA) terrorist factions. Analysing this shift offers a window into how key recruitment tools and platforms for ideological dissemination have changed in the region. It also hints at both the regional goals of SEA pro-IS propagandists and the wider strategic goals of IS Central.

Many recent studies have investigated the current state of IS Central's influence in the region. Some scholars have employed Network<sup>1</sup> and State Border<sup>2</sup> theories to examine this influence at a country-level perspective,<sup>3</sup> while others have undertaken quantitative analyses of IS-related operational activities in SEA to tease out ongoing relationships between regional groups and IS Central.<sup>4</sup> A key conclusion drawn, particularly since 2020, is that the Islamist militant threat in SEA has significantly abated following the 2017 Marawi Siege. This is in large part due to the aggressive actions taken by regional governments.<sup>5</sup>

However, given the amorphous and ambiguous nature of digital propaganda, studies on the changing nature of SEA-related digital propaganda amidst this shift remain limited. This is largely due to the decentralised and fragmented methods of distribution of online content, the anonymous nature of comments and contributors, the intricacies of localised narratives, and the challenges posed by stringent moderation and security measures on mainstream platforms.

This article assesses the shift in pro-IS digital propaganda production related to SEA post-Marawi. This investigation is conducted through primary source examination of propaganda content – newsletters, videos and speeches – produced by IS Central and regional official and unofficial affiliates. A typological backdrop is first provided of the types of content and actors involved. The

article then presents a trilogy of evidence-backed claims that chart the evolution and eventual decline of IS Central's digital influence over its SEA factions.

## Typology of IS Media Production

The propaganda produced by IS originates from an array of independent yet connected and hierarchically structured content producers.<sup>6</sup> These producers share the misconstrued Islamic doctrines central to the group's ideology, while also localising these narratives to reflect the region-specific socio-political and cultural landscapes in which they exist.

Many also operate on different structural levels. Drawing upon existing literature<sup>7</sup> as well as primary source examinations of IS propaganda machinery and productions,<sup>8</sup> three tiers can be identified – the Ministry of Media Bureau (*Diwan Markaz al-Illam*), the Provincial Media Offices (*Al-Makatib al-Ilaamiyah li-al-Wilayat*) and unofficial productions by IS supporters (*Isdaraat Al-Ansar*).<sup>9</sup>

### 1. Ministry of Media Bureau (*Diwan Markaz al-Illam*)

The bureau arguably represents the zenith of IS content creation, manufacturing high-quality audio-visual and textual material that forms the foundation of IS propaganda. Content creation is highly centralised and top down,<sup>10</sup> with operational responsibilities divided amongst different content producers based on their different functions.

Al-Furqan Foundation, the oldest outfit within the bureau, and Al-'Itisam Foundation are the main Arabic production arms of IS Central media,<sup>11</sup> primarily focused on creating videos and releasing audio speeches by IS Central leaders. Al-Hayat Media Center and Al-Furat Media Foundation are the outfits responsible for all official non-Arabic language content as well as non-Arabic language magazines such as *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*<sup>12</sup> and *Al-Fatihin*.<sup>13</sup> The bureau also incorporates Al-Bayan Radio and Al-Ajnad Foundation, which are devoted to the broadcasting of audio productions,<sup>14</sup> and Al-Amaq Agency and Al-Nashir News,<sup>15</sup> which handle news related to IS' global expansion and military operations.<sup>16</sup>

### 2. Provincial Media Offices (*Al-Makatib al-Ilaamiyah li-al-Wilayat*)

IS provinces can be categorised into two primary groups. First, the core provinces, encompassing territories (*wilayat*) within Iraq (12)<sup>17</sup> and Syria (9)<sup>18</sup> that are directly controlled by IS. Second, the 14 distant provinces,<sup>19</sup> including SEA, comprising localised groups that have pledged allegiance to IS. In terms of media coverage, this provincial structure not only augments the primary digital initiatives spearheaded by IS' Ministry of Media, it also legitimises various groups designated as IS mouthpieces targeting non-Arabic speakers.

Wakeford and Smith point out that in response to the exigencies of safeguarding media operatives in conflict zones, IS has embarked on a decentralisation of its media network. Within this framework, the individual provincial media offices bear the responsibility of generating online content in accordance with IS' bureaucratic protocols. Moreover, they are mandated to report to the central media ministry.<sup>20</sup> It is worth highlighting, however, that the decentralisation of the media network, as emphasised by Milton, does not inherently confer unrestrained autonomy to each province. There exists substantive evidence indicating centralised control within this provincial media structure.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Unofficial Productions by IS Supporters (*Isdaraat Al-Ansar*)

This is where a clear departure from the tiered typology emerges. Although the *Isdaraat Al-Ansar*, which consists mainly of unrecognised IS supporters commonly referred to as *Al-Munasirun*,<sup>22</sup> expands the digital footprint of IS, it does so with a conspicuous decrease in professional IS Central or provincial oversight.

Relying on borrowed legitimacy from the former two entities, these supporters reflect a decentralised framework, reshaping and recreating core IS propaganda to resonate with local contexts. In certain instances, these unofficial media outfits autonomously generate their own brand media in their respective native languages,<sup>23</sup> emulating IS Central and thereby propagating its ideological tenets. They produce narratives, such as those that demonise the Jewish people and call for retaliation against 'democratic crusaders', which are unmistakably rooted in the core IS ideology. Yet, their approach often appears derivative, echoing traces of the original narrative rather than directly replicating it.

In comparison with the first two tiers, which are marked by centralised control and professional-grade quality, the decentralised nature of *Isdaraat Al-Ansar* often takes liberties with core content, leading to variations in quality and authenticity.

### **Pre-Marawi Digital Bond: IS Central's Robust Engagement in SEA Propaganda**

Prior to the 2017 Marawi Siege, IS Central's involvement in SEA-related content was prominent, underlining the significance of their digital engagement. First, they regularly published videos in languages native to Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. While there are numerous examples of such content, a few stand out. In 2014, IS released a propaganda video featuring an Indonesian foreign fighter named Abu Muhammad, who spoke in Bahasa Indonesia and called his fellow countrymen to join the fight in Syria.<sup>24</sup>

This was followed in 2015 by a 15-minute-long propaganda video in Bahasa Indonesia with Arabic subtitles, celebrating the activities of youth fighters in Syria.<sup>25</sup> In 2016, another video was released by IS Central in Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, English, Malay and Tagalog, calling its supporters in SEA who were unable to travel to Syria to instead focus their efforts on the Philippines.<sup>26</sup> These videos were ostensibly produced by the Ministry of Media Bureau, and bore all the hallmarks and quality expected of such productions.

This focus on regional languages was structurally integrated into IS Central's propaganda efforts. As pointed out by Moir, the function of the *Majmua al-Arkhabiliy (MA)* group, formerly known as *Katibah Nusantara*,<sup>27</sup> extended beyond accommodating SEA foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria. Not only did MA translate IS propaganda into Bahasa Indonesia for dissemination on Indonesian and Malay social media sites, it also worked directly with the *Al-Hayat Media Center* to produce sanctioned subtitles for IS Central's videos.<sup>28</sup> As such, while MA was not defined as a provincial media office, it nevertheless served functions that aligned with such a role.

Second, much of this content focused not only on appeals to IS supporters in SEA to join the fight in Syria, but also involved narratives touching directly on regional grievances. Such content lionised the image of SEA men who fought in Syria, such as the 2014 video featuring Abu Muhammad. Other examples include an "advertisement-styled spread of Southeast Asian men" in the fourth issue of *Dabiq*,<sup>29</sup> along with concerted efforts to encourage the indoctrination of children.<sup>30</sup> SEA foreign fighters in Syria were also granted prominence within IS Central's propaganda, such as slain Indonesian fighter *Bahrin Naim*<sup>31</sup> for his leadership of MA.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, some of IS Central's SEA-related propaganda pushed narratives that showcased a comprehensive understanding of regional politics and governance. The 2015 video, for instance, not only criticised the Indonesian government, but also included "images from and in-depth commentary on Indonesia".<sup>33</sup> This localised approach bolstered IS Central's influence, positioning it as a significant voice within the SEA extremist milieu.

Third, IS Central's SEA-related propaganda was marked by the meticulous branding and production quality typical of their media content. SEA-related videos carried the group's official logos and were produced in collaboration with or directly by media centres close to IS Central, granting legitimacy to the messages being pushed. The videos also featured adept editing, high-quality visuals and compelling narratives, augmenting their effectiveness.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, the pre-Marawi era was marked by intensive collaboration which involved the upper two tiers of the IS media production typology (i.e., the Ministry of Media Bureau and the Provincial Media Offices).

### **Digital Disengagement: Post-Marawi Siege and IS Central's Declining Commitment to SEA Propaganda**

Post-Marawi, a notable shift in IS' digital propaganda strategy for SEA became discernible. As noted above, IS had historically been adept at crafting potent propaganda that fostered allegiance within SEA. In the wake of Marawi, however, the emphasis on SEA regionalisation or localisation in online content has noticeably waned. There has also been a glaring deficit of SEA-related content emerging from IS Central. A mere two allegiance-pledging (*bai'ah*) videos were released by IS Central in recent years. Both claimed to be produced by the IS SEA network – a claim that serves to perpetuate a narrative of direct IS SEA involvement. However, there is a disparity in content quality between these two videos and previous content.

The first video, "*Wa-al-Aqibatu li-al-Muttaqin*" (The Pious Will Have a Pleasant End), released in June 2019, prominently featured Abu Abdullah Al-Tanumi.<sup>35</sup> Speaking in Tagalog, Al-Tanumi addressed fighters presumably located in the Philippines. The reverence conferred upon him with the title "Sheikh" signified his stature within the organisation. This video captured fighters renewing their *bai'ah* to then IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, culminating in a conflict against Filipino government forces. Yet, juxtaposed against previous IS productions, it lacked the technical sophistication traditionally associated with IS Central's works.<sup>36</sup> The absence of noise-cancellation and cinematic effects arguably underscored a possible reduction in emphasis on or resources for the SEA sector.

An April 2022 video, titled "Madhin Jihad al-Mukminin" (The Jihad of the Believer Will Proceed),<sup>37</sup> offers further insight. A veiled fighter, Abd Rahman, articulately beckoned supporters in Arabic to rally behind the IS cause. It painted a vivid tableau of regional factions, predominantly from the Philippines, pledging allegiance to the then Caliph. Prominently featured was Abu Turaife, believed to be the contemporary IS SEA leader based in the Philippines.<sup>38</sup> The video concluded with a short audio segment from the then IS Central spokesperson, Abu Umar al-Muhajir, accompanied by footage of combatants in skirmishes. Like its predecessor, this video lacked the cinematic distinction typically observed in IS Central's productions.<sup>39</sup>

Beyond these videos, there has been an evident dearth of coverage on IS SEA in the *al-Naba* newsletter.<sup>40</sup> Sporadic *al-Naba* photo reports, capturing SEA fighters pledging *bai'ah* to each new Caliph, reveal another intriguing facet: some images premiered in unofficial group networks, hinting at a dependency on decentralised sources.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, SEA operations are inconsistently spotlighted in *al-Naba*'s routine operational report, "Harvest of the Soldiers".<sup>42</sup> This selective reporting and emphasis, juxtaposed against the utilisation of SEA materials by IS Central, paints a revealing picture. Evidently, IS Central leans on derived materials from distant provinces to bolster its lack of direct media collaboration with, and subsequent media access to, outfits in the region.

In sum, post-Marawi, the upper two tiers of IS' media machinery (the Ministry of Media Bureau and Provincial Media Offices) have offered minimal acknowledgment of SEA. Their engagement, or lack thereof, is exemplified by the infrequent deployment of socio-political narratives pertinent to SEA in *al-Naba*.<sup>43</sup> While there have been sporadic mentions of operations conducted by pro-IS SEA factions, several recent developments were overlooked, including the 2021 Makassar bombing conducted by Indonesian supporters of the pro-IS Jamaah Ansharut Daulah.<sup>44</sup>

### **Unofficial Content Producers Attempting to Bridge the Gap**

Against this backdrop of digital disengagement between IS Central and SEA, there thrives a plethora of unofficial IS media outlets, primarily based in Indonesia and the Philippines. The Indonesian networks are particularly aggressive in promoting IS ideology.<sup>45</sup> One significant player



was the Al-Najiyah Media Center, which was operated by Indonesian pro-IS supporters and, despite challenges, persisted in its digital endeavours until only recently.

Remarkably, these networks have innovatively circumvented mainstream censorship. Upherogy Media,<sup>46</sup> a *nasheed* network, exemplifies this. The network champions IS ideology through songs posted on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. An analysis of viewer responses on these platforms suggests that these songs resonate with segments of the audience.<sup>47</sup> While Upherogy Media started out catering to Malay-speaking audiences on platforms like TamTam and RocketChat–TechHaven, it has now rebranded as Islamic State Indonesia.

Similarly, networks like ShareNewsOk and Tamkin Indonesia distribute translations of IS global operations, while Al-Buruwy and Poster Dakwah<sup>48</sup> position themselves as news outlets that produce posters echoing IS ideology. By repackaging official IS media and *al-Naba* excerpts in Bahasa Indonesia, they align with the broader narratives of IS. Importantly, they have also supported campaigns initiated by IS Central, using campaign-specific hashtags such as #mendukung\_ribat\_dan\_jihad,<sup>49</sup> to align with initiatives like Ribat & Jihad from 2023.<sup>50</sup>

These networks' propensity for localisation is evident. Not only do they produce content featuring SEA leaders and landmarks, they also undertake significant translation projects, ensuring materials from both official and unofficial networks are accessible in Bahasa Indonesia. On platforms like Facebook, individual supporters publicly express their allegiance to IS and narrative-based supporters deliver news from locales like the al-Hol and Roj camps in Syria in Bahasa Indonesia.<sup>51</sup>

In the Philippines, the media scenario appears to be in flux. Efforts are underway to consolidate media power, as evidenced by the merger of the East Asia Knights media outlet (EAK) with Al-Nibras, an alleged pro-IS Thai network. The rebranded Al-Faris Media now operates under the Fursan Al-Tarjuma banner, known as the "Knights of Translation".<sup>52</sup> These Philippines-based entities primarily exploit encrypted platforms like Telegram, TamTam and TechHaven to share updates on skirmishes against local security forces. Meanwhile, embryonic attempts to establish networks in Malaysia have also been witnessed with the emergence of Al-Malaka Media.<sup>53</sup>

An examination of the multifaceted operations of the *Isdaraat Al-Ansar* reveals two key findings regarding their functional architecture and ideological underpinnings.

First, these entities lack inherent legitimacy despite their fervent propagation efforts. They operate with the distinct knowledge that they have not been acknowledged by IS Central and are neither part of the Ministry of Media Bureau nor the Provincial Media Offices. The meticulous reproduction of primary IS propaganda by entities like Upherogy Media and Poster Dakwah, illustrates their reliance on borrowed jihadist credibility. Their constant efforts to weave broader IS narratives into localised stories, along with their detailed translations and adaptations, further underscore the need to legitimise themselves. Essentially, their content – whether translations of IS Central's propaganda into Bahasa Indonesia or the use of local landmarks and figures – highlights an inherent need to connect with an established jihadist authority, primarily IS Central.

Second, the operational ecosystem of the *Isdaraat Al-Ansar* is starkly decentralised. This is evident from their grassroots initiatives and the plethora of self-proclaimed media centres that have emerged in SEA, such as the defunct An-Najiyah Media Center.<sup>54</sup> While this decentralised model offers flexibility and a certain resilience against external crackdowns, it simultaneously poses challenges. The absence of centralised support and resources is apparent in their media quality, which pales in comparison to the sophisticated productions of the IS Media Office. For instance, their utilisation of platforms attuned to SEA audiences, like TamTam and TechHaven, while innovative, does not exhibit the polished production capabilities of videos like "Al-Bunyan Al-Marsus" from 2016.

## **Potential Developments and Implications for CT and CVE**

As the media landscape moves from a period of digital integration to an era marked by disconnect between IS Central and SEA networks, there are implications for both counter terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) endeavours.

CT efforts can be more effective in targeting the circulation of pro-IS propaganda. With the decentralisation of content production, translations and interpretations of IS Central propaganda, and wholly regionally produced propaganda, takedowns of regional producers on mainstream media platforms have been effective on an individual scale,<sup>55</sup> limiting their content's circulation. For example, the arrest of a key Al-Faris Media member and the takedown of his content resulted in a significant decrease in the footprint of the outfit's content within the region, as they had to migrate to unregulated channels.<sup>56</sup>

This can be juxtaposed with the circulation of raw IS Central content, which can be disseminated by pro-IS supporters even if they do not possess content production capabilities. For instance, takedowns of regional actors within the pre-Marawi media landscape did not limit IS Central's narrative footprint as the original content continued to circulate, albeit through a multitude of minor actors operating solely as content circulators instead of producers.

For CVE initiatives, the transition towards more regionally driven narratives presents both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, these narratives, tailored for regional audiences and grievances, might resonate more deeply with the local populace, necessitating adaptive CVE campaigns. On the other, the evident decrease in production quality and the lack of official endorsement from IS Central might render these narratives less convincing to some segments of their intended audience.

However, without centralised oversight, SEA groups might operate with increased autonomy, leading to diversified strategies and tactics. This could result in a more erratic and unpredictable threat matrix. The void left by IS Central's digital withdrawal may provide an opportunity for new regional extremist entities to vie for dominance in the SEA digital propaganda space.

There also remains the credible possibility of reconnection between regional content producers and wider networks. Their inherent desire for legitimacy, as seen in their emulation of IS Central's media strategies, might drive SEA groups to seek reintegration with global jihadist entities, whether IS Central or other global extremist factions.

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## Citations

<sup>1</sup> Network theory highlights how relationships between entities, whether one-way, bidirectional or balanced, shape the flow of extremist ideas. The peripheral location of the terror network in SEA suggests vulnerability to

external influences. Yet, the interconnected nodes and directional flows of these networks play a pivotal role in determining the reach of IS Central's influence.

<sup>2</sup> State Border theory examines how borders, initially shaped by state independence, can impact the flow of ideas, governance and regional identity. While 'frontier' suggests the outreach of IS Central, 'boundary' denotes the limitations posed on this influence, ensuring regional autonomy.

<sup>3</sup> Tri Legionosuko et al., "THE THREATS ANALYSIS OF THE ISLAMIC STATE NETWORK DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA REGION: Case Study of the Border of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines," *Journal of Defense Resources Management*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Amira Jadoon et al., *Rising in the East: A Regional Overview of the Islamic State's Operations in Southeast Asia* (New York: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2020), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/rising-in-the-east-a-regional-overview-of-the-islamic-states-operations-in-southeast-asia/>.

<sup>5</sup> Munira Mustafa, "Reassessing The Extremist Threat in Southeast Asia," *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, June 28, 2022, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/reassessing-the-extremist-threat-in-southeast-asia/>.

<sup>6</sup> Stephane J. Baele et al., *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). See also Daniel Milton, *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts* (New York : Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2016), [https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ISMedia\\_Online.pdf](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ISMedia_Online.pdf); and Jamileh Kadivar, "Daesh and the Power of Media and Message," *Arab Media & Society*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/daesh-and-the-power-of-media-and-message/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> This includes newsletters, videos, speeches, books, operating platforms and others.

<sup>9</sup> Baele et al., *ISIS Propaganda*. This typological exploration of the IS media strategy underlines a layered approach to content creation, amplification and circulation. The distinctions between these layers become pivotal in understanding the subsequent shift in digital propaganda related to SEA post-Marawi.

<sup>10</sup> Milton, *Communication Breakdown*.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Wakeford and Laura Smith, "Islamic State's Propaganda and Social Media: Dissemination, Support, and Resilience," in *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message*, eds. Stephane J. Baele et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Milton, *Communication Breakdown*.

<sup>13</sup> Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq Jani, "Al-Fatihin: Islamic State's First Malay Language Newspaper," *RSIS Commentary* No. 155 (2016), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co16155-al-fatihin-islamic-states-first-malay-language-newspaper/>.

<sup>14</sup> Milton, *Communication Breakdown*.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Productions from the bureau include the official IS monthly newsletter, "*Al-Naba*", as well as the "*Maktabah al-Himma*," a publishing house that which disseminates religious literature, *dakwah* pamphlets, posters, and child-friendly software adapted to multiple platforms. Furthermore, IS Central works are supported by a language and translation department, as well as the *Al-Munasirun* (supporters). See also "The Structure of the Caliphate", – *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, 6 July 6, 2016; and Jamileh Kadivar, "Daesh and the Power of Media and Message."2021.

<sup>17</sup> These include Anbar Province, Falujah Province, Baghdad Province, Dajlah Province, Diyali Province, North Baghdad Province, Salah al-Din Province, Kirkuk Province, Nainawa Province, al-Jazira Province, al-Badiyah Province and Al-Janub Province.

<sup>18</sup> These include Al-Barakah Province, Al-Khair Province, Raqqa Province, Halab Province, Hama Province, Hims Province, Hawran Province, Damascus Province and Al-Furat Province.

<sup>19</sup> These include West Africa Province, Central Africa Province, Sahel Province, Mozambique Province, Yemen Province, Sinai Province, Libya Province, Khurasan Province, Somalia Province, Caucus Province, East Asia Province, Turkey Province, Pakistan Province and Najd Province. Additionally, some cells that pledged allegiance to IS have previously published their own materials, such as in Bengal, the Philippines, Tunisia, Egypt and Azerbaijan.

<sup>20</sup> Wakeford and Smith, "Islamic State's Propaganda and Social Media."

<sup>21</sup> Milton, *Communication Breakdown*. While these offices amplify the central narrative and maintain the illusion of territorial control, they are bound within a structure that showcases both centralised and decentralised elements. Still, they mirror the central ideology with a tangible sense of professional oversight.

<sup>22</sup> Wakeford and Smith, "Islamic State's Propaganda and Social Media."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> "Join the Ranks' from the Islamic State," *Syria Focus*, Youtube video, July 23, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140818025938/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxsPR-fYnk>.

<sup>25</sup> "ISIS Eyes Indonesian Youth With Lengthy Propaganda Video," *albawaba*, May 17, 2016, <https://www.albawaba.com/loop/isis-eyes-indonesian-youth-lengthy-propaganda-video-841534>.

<sup>26</sup> Conor Cronin and Phuong Nguyen, "Recalibrating the Islamic State Threat in Southeast Asia," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 7, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/recalibrating-islamic-state-threat-southeast-asia>.

<sup>27</sup> Jasminder Singh, "Katibah Nusantara: Islamic State's Malay Archipelago Combat Unit," *RSIS Commentary* No. 126 (2015), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co15126-katibah-nusantara-islamic-states-malay-archipelago-combat-unit/>.

<sup>28</sup> Nathaniel L. Moir, "ISIL Radicalization, Recruitment, and Social Media Operations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines," *PRISM*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017), p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Adri Wanto and Abdul Mateen Qadri, "Islamic State: Understanding the Threat in Indonesia and Malaysia," *RSIS Commentary* No.231 (2015), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co15231-islamic-state-understanding-the-threat-in-indonesia-and-malaysia/>.

<sup>30</sup> "Newborns for New Militants: Daesh Uses Baby to Recruit in Indonesia," *alBawaba*, August 8, 2015, <https://www.albawaba.com/editorchoice/newborns-new-militants-daesh-uses-baby-recruit-indonesia-728202>.

<sup>31</sup> Quinton Temby, *Terrorism in Indonesia after "Islamic State"* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof-Ishak Institute, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> This extended even beyond the material published by IS and its affiliates, as seen in the case of two Malaysian foreign fighters who were interviewed by Malaysian mainstream media via Facebook. See Shaul Shay, "The Islamic State and Its Allies In Southeast Asia," *International Institute for Counter-terrorism*, October 2014, <https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/IS-and-Allies-Shay-Oct-14.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> *alBawaba*, "ISIS Eyes Indonesian Youth." The video starts with accusations that Indonesia and the Philippines have long been under the control of 'crusaders'. It claims that Muslims in both countries have been targeted by these 'crusaders' (showing images of Indonesian Muslims being arrested), while also claiming that SEA leaders are conspiring with the West (showing an image of President Jokowi shaking hands with then US President Obama). It then proceeds to provide a lengthy explanation on how this alleged dynamic has led to a shift in policies and laws in SEA away from *shariah* and towards the formation of *taghut* governments.

<sup>34</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "Southeast Asia – The Islamic State's New Front?" *Carnegie Council Asia Dialogues*, October 4, 2016, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/series/asia/southeast-asia-the-islamic-states-new-front>. A notable example is the 2016 video, "Al-Bunyan Al-Marsus" (The Impenetrable Edifice), which featured brutal acts by three fighters. This video, potentially crafted in Syria/Iraq and ascribed to the then newly minted ISIS Philippines media wing, remains impressive in its production value.

<sup>35</sup> "Wa-al-Aqibatu li-al-Muttaqin" (The Pious Will Have a Pleasant End), *Wilayah Sharq Asia*, June 22, 2019. See also "Spotlight on Global Jihad (June 20-26, 2019)," *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-global-jihad-june-20-26-2019/>.

<sup>36</sup> Baele et al., *ISIS Propaganda*; and Kadivar, "Daesh and the Power of Media and Message."

<sup>37</sup> "Madhin Jihad al-Mukminin" (The Jihad of a Believer is Ongoing), *Wilayah Sharq Asia*, April 3, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Zam Yusa, "A New Filipino Leader for Southeast Asia's Islamic State," *The Diplomat*, August 9, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/a-new-filipino-leader-for-southeast-asias-islamic-state/>.

<sup>39</sup> Baele, et al., *ISIS Propaganda*; and Kadivar, "Daesh and the Power of Media and Message."

<sup>40</sup> Based on ICPVTR's research.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> "Suicide Attack Rocks Indonesia Church, Several Wounded," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/28/suspected-suicide-attack-rocks-indonesia-church-many-wounded>.

<sup>45</sup> Jordan Newton, "Indonesian Pro-IS Supporters on Social Media in 2022: Surviving Not Thriving," *Counter Terrorist Trends & Analysis*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2022), pp. 1-8.

<sup>46</sup> Based on ICPVTR's research.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> "Ribat" denotes the act of guarding the frontline.

<sup>50</sup> "Multiple Pro-ISIS Outlets Continue Campaign Calling On Supporters To Wage Media Jihad," *MEMRI*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.memri.org/cjlab/multiple-pro-isis-outlets-continue-campaign-calling-supporters-wage-media-jihad>.

<sup>51</sup> Based on ICPVTR's research.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Rebranding the East Asia Knights: A Reflection of Dawlah Islamiyah's Effort to Learn," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology (GNET) Insights*, March 1, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/01/rebranding-the-east-asia-knights-a-reflection-of-dawlah-islamiyahs-effort-to-learn/>.

<sup>53</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "ISIS Media Machine for Malaysia? 'It's More Like Forging Gale From Gust'," *SEA Militancy*, March 19, 2023, <https://seamilitancy.substack.com/p/al-malaka-media-centre-and-isis-forging>.

<sup>54</sup> In March 2022, Indonesia's Counterterrorism Special Detachment 88 halted the operation of *An-Najiyah Media*. See Teguh Firmansyah, "Densus 88 Bongkar Annajiyah Media Center, Pembuat Propaganda Teroris di Medsos," *Republika*, March 24, 2022, <https://news.republika.co.id/berita/r98uoj377/densus-88-bongkar-annajiyah-media-center-pembuat-propaganda-teroris-di-medsos>.

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# Afghanistan-Pakistan's Radical Social Media Ecosystem: Actors, Propaganda Comparison and Implications

**Abdul Basit**

*Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the intra-jihadist competition in Afghanistan and Pakistan has expanded in the physical and cyber spheres. Though the Taliban have been effective against the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) on the physical battlefield, they have not been as efficacious in the digital space. Despite the Taliban's infiltration of ISK's social media channels and the launch of the multilingual Al-Mirsaad counternarrative initiative, the latter persists in the digital sphere. Likewise, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), ISK's arch-foe and the Taliban's ideological Pakistani brethren, has upgraded its social media propaganda in the past two years. Against this backdrop, a discussion and comparison of TTP and ISK's social media arms are useful in understanding the implications of their propaganda on violent extremism in Afghanistan, Pakistan and beyond, as well as the policy interventions required to check their appeal.*

## **Introduction**

Publicity is the oxygen of terrorist groups as their main aim is not just to intimidate, but to draw attention to their causes, grievances and goals.<sup>1</sup> Terrorism, "as propaganda of the deed, is a communication tool that requires an audience for its violent theatrics".<sup>2</sup> Hence, as a strategy, terrorism is as much about communication as it is about violence. Terrorist groups use propaganda not just for publicity and communication, but also for recruitment and financing.<sup>3</sup>

The Internet and the advent of social media have revolutionised terrorist propaganda by lowering the entry barriers to terrorism, bridging the recruiters-recruits gap and accelerating the decentralised information flow.<sup>4</sup> In the context of terrorism and counter terrorism, the digital world's advancements and permeation in all spheres of life have expanded the battlefield from the real to the cyber world. They have compelled terrorist groups to develop dedicated social media arms.<sup>5</sup>

Jihadist groups refer to social media propaganda as "media jihad".<sup>6</sup> Galloway defines media jihad as "psychological war made of texts, images, iconographies that (terrorist) organisations intend for widespread distribution".<sup>7</sup> Critically, media jihad has allowed groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) to keep their ideological narratives and jihadist brands alive, despite battlefield losses and organisational weaknesses.

Against this backdrop, this paper, relying on primary<sup>8</sup> and published secondary sources as well as the author's own observations, discusses the social media ecosystems of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively. In doing so, it identifies ISK's Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production and TTP's Al-Umar Media's main content materials and social media dissemination strategies, and their implications for violent extremism in South and Central Asia and beyond.<sup>9</sup>

## **Afghanistan-Pakistan's Radical Social Media Ecosystem**

The radical social media ecosystem of Afghanistan and Pakistan evolves rapidly, where new structures emerge as swiftly as old ones fade away due to jihadist groups' mergers, splintering or tech companies' de-platforming efforts.

Since its territorial losses and battlefield defeats in Afghanistan, ISK has been persistent in the digital space as part of IS' global campaign of *Baqiya wa Tatamadad* (remaining and expanding).<sup>10</sup> Following the Taliban's takeover, as many as 374 URLs linked to ISK's official propaganda channels, primarily archiving sites and file-sharing platforms, have been active. According to Tech Against Terrorism, around 211 of these channels have been taken down; however, as many as 163 remain active.<sup>11</sup>

ISK has been a trendsetter in using social media platforms for recruitment, communication, propaganda dissemination and delegitimising its adversaries in South and Central Asia and beyond. Despite setbacks, ISK's propaganda operations on social media have reached a new peak in form, volume and languages.<sup>12</sup> Unlike other jihadist groups in the region, ISK has harboured ambitions of attacking the West by tapping into Central Asian diasporic networks in Europe inspired by the group's social media propaganda. For instance, in January 2023, nine ISK-inspired Central Asian radicals were arrested for funding a terrorist group linked to IS and plotting attacks in Germany.<sup>13</sup> As many as 15 terrorist plots, nine in very advanced stages, which targeted European embassies, consulates, churches and other interests, were traced to ISK in Afghanistan in March 2023.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, ISK inspired and recruited these Central Asian radicals through social media networks, bringing into sharp focus its ability to undermine regional and global peace if its physical and digital footprint is not effectively disrupted.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, TTP's social media propaganda has also flourished since the Taliban's takeover; it has become more disciplined and organised. For instance, in the recent past, TTP's magazines were published haphazardly compared to Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)'s<sup>16</sup> bimonthly Urdu-language periodical *Nawai Ghazwat-ul-Hind*. However, the publication has now become more regular and professional due to a revamped and centralised structure. Under the new structure, Al-Umar Media comes under TTP's so-called shadow Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, headed by Mufti Ghufuran.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, with the absorption of two AQIS factions into TTP's fold, the group's propaganda has improved both in quality and frequency.<sup>18</sup> The former AQIS media propagandist Qari Munib Jatt, who was running the operations of As-Sahab Media, is now overseeing Al-Umar Media.<sup>19</sup>

### **ISK's Al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production (Al-Azaim)**

Al-Azaim is a relatively young media organisation that became visible in 2021 after the Taliban's takeover by improving the frequency and quality of ISK's propaganda. The main thrust of ISK's messaging has been to undermine the Taliban's legitimacy by referring to their regime as *murtad* (apostates).<sup>20</sup> The bulk of ISK's propaganda comes in the form of books, long monographs and manuals by its ideologues and strategists. Though Al-Azaim is not an officially recognised propaganda arm of ISK, it publishes the bulk of the group's original content. Crucially, while IS has never recognised Al-Azaim officially or shared its media content, the group has never disowned it, either.<sup>21</sup> However, some experts believe Al-Azaim is indeed ISK's official media channel.<sup>22</sup>

Though Al-Azaim operates in a centralised fashion, ISK's media content is shared through top-down (official) and bottom-up (semi/unofficial or *munasireen*) channels.<sup>23</sup> The latter are run by its supporters and sympathisers who circulate Al-Azaim's media materials, along with producing content in ISK's name, including translations in more than 12 languages. Al-Azaim has spread its tentacles in South and Central Asia in the past two years; for example, it has initiated the Al-Azaim Uzbek and Al-Azaim Tajik media arms as well.<sup>24</sup> In terms of its propaganda potential, ISK is IS' most capable and ambitious regional franchise, matching the capabilities of the mother group.<sup>25</sup> Al-Azaim has played a crucial role in keeping IS' brand of global jihad alive in South and Central Asia.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes, Al-Azaim takes the lead in claiming attacks in the Khorasan region before IS issues a statement through Al-Amaq, the group's official news agency.

Until 2021, there were several channels involved in creating propaganda materials for ISK, such as Khalid Media producing videos, and the Black Flags publishing audio and text statements, among others. However, after the Taliban's takeover, several pro-ISK media organs were merged into Al-Azaim. Since then, ISK's media content has been published more systematically,

notwithstanding persistent irregularities and haphazard intervals between publications. This haphazard pattern could possibly be due to the Taliban's ruthless crackdown against ISK,<sup>27</sup> both in the physical and cyber space. The Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) successfully infiltrated several ISK channels on Telegram in 2022, compelling the group to urge its operatives and supporters to migrate to safer platforms.<sup>28</sup> This significantly reduced Al-Azaim's media output;<sup>29</sup> however, it has since bounced back following a lengthy reconsolidation period.<sup>30</sup> During this period, the Taliban also killed several top-ranking ISK leaders across Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup>

Though Al-Azaim publishes propaganda in more than 12 different languages, the bulk of its content (roughly 70 percent) is in Pashto and the rest are translations of original materials. It also translates IS' bi-weekly newsletter *al-Naba*'s content into Pashto, Urdu, Dari, Uzbek, Tajik, Russian and occasionally into Bengali and Uyghur. These translations are also shared on l'am on the dark web, the pro-IS content repository.<sup>32</sup>

Al-Azaim occasionally publishes three monthly magazines, the *Voice of Khorasan*, *Khorasan Ghag* and *Yalghar*,<sup>33</sup> in English, Pashto and Urdu, respectively. The group also publishes infographics of its attacks which appear in *al-Naba* as well as audio and video statements.<sup>34</sup>

### **TTP's Al-Umar Media**

Al-Umar Media, named after the Taliban's founder Mullah Muhammad Omar, has been intermittently functional since 2003. It started off anonymously and, in 2006, TTP's trainer for suicide bombers, Qari Hussain Ahmed, named it Umar Studio, which later changed to Al-Umar Media in 2010.<sup>35</sup> TTP's broadcasting during this period was irregular and mostly revolved around video testimonies of suicide bombers and attack footage. TTP then set up a Media Commission in 2014 to improve its information operations, albeit without much success.

Four factors account for the dramatic improvement in Al-Umar Media's propaganda operations in the past two years. First, since July 2020, the mergers of around 40 militant factions into the TTP have enabled the group to publish content more regularly with improved quality.<sup>36</sup> The mergers brought well-trained media operatives like AQIS's Muneeb Jatt, who oversaw As-Sahab Media and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JUA), into Al-Umar Media. Currently, Jatt is in charge of Al-Umar Media and is part of TTP's five-member media commission.

Second, TTP's social media propaganda improved after the group was uprooted from the ex-FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, to Afghanistan's border areas in the Zarb-e-Azb Operation.<sup>37</sup> During this period (2015-2019), TTP revisited its political, military and propaganda strategies, which helped the group perform better after its resurgence.<sup>38</sup>

Third, TTP's organisational restructuring along the Taliban's insurgency model has also contributed to Al-Umar Media's enhanced capabilities. Within a centralised structure, Al-Umar Media falls under TTP's so-called Ministry of Information and Broadcasting led by Mufti Ghufuran. The top-down structure has given Al-Umar Media proper organisation and space, and removed haphazard content production.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the Taliban's shelter in Afghanistan has given TTP the operational freedom to expand and enhance Al-Umar Media's operations. For instance, from 2007 to 2013, TTP produced around 65 videos, but from 2021 to present, it has published more than 64 videos.<sup>40</sup> In the ex-FATA region, Pakistan's counter terrorism pressure forced TTP to keep a mobile and rudimentary media infrastructure before it was uprooted.<sup>41</sup> Now, TTP has the space to buy new equipment (e.g., cameras and laptops), film more frequently and focus on content production.

The majority of TTP's media content is in Urdu and Pashto, and is occasionally translated into Dari/Persian and Arabic. TTP uploads these materials on its websites and WhatsApp and Telegram channels. Supporters also release them on Twitter and Facebook. Al-Umar Media's products include audio and video statements, attack claims, current affairs statements, a daily Pashto radio

broadcast, a bi-weekly current affairs podcast *Pasoon* (uprising) and three periodicals – *Mujallah Taliban*,<sup>42</sup> *Banat-e-Khadijat-ul-Kubra* (for females) in Urdu and *Sada Taliban* (launched in August 2023) in Pashto.

### **A Comparison of Al-Azaim and Al-Umar Media**

In comparing the two social media organs, it is clear that the digital space has become an integral part of both ISK and TTP's propaganda outreach. For ISK, persistence in the digital space is part of its *Baqiya wa Tatamadad* campaign.<sup>43</sup> After losing the so-called Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, retaining the "digital Caliphate" has been essential in keeping its ideological narrative and jihadist brand alive as well as staying in touch with its worldwide network of affiliates, supporters and sympathisers.<sup>44</sup>

Despite its centralised structure, Al-Azaim's propaganda dissemination is both top-down, through official channels, and bottom-up, through semi/unofficial channels of supporters and sympathisers who also produce their own content. In contrast, Al-Umar Media is top-down, and there are very few supporter and sympathiser channels, most of which only recirculate original content for wider dissemination, barring JuA's Ghazi Media.<sup>45</sup>

Likewise, ISK's social media footprint is diverse, extensive and sophisticated. It operates on multiple social media platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook as well as encrypted social media apps like Telegram, Hoop, Matrix, Element and RocketChat. Furthermore, apart from propaganda dissemination, ISK also uses its social media channels for recruitment and communication. For instance, the group has been able to mobilise recruits from South (India, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Pakistan) and Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan), and to make some inroads into vulnerable Central Asian diasporic individuals in Europe.<sup>46</sup> A case in point is ISK's April 2020 botched plot, which attempted to target US and NATO bases in Germany using a cell of Tajik diasporic nationals.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the 15 terrorist plots in Europe traced to ISK in Afghanistan in February 2023 were an outcome of the group's ability to enlist Central Asian diasporic individuals<sup>48</sup> by leveraging the Quran burning episodes in Sweden and Denmark to recruit and incite attacks.<sup>49</sup>

TTP, on the other hand, is only present on X, WhatsApp and Telegram and, to a lesser extent, on Facebook and Instagram. It still relies on more traditional recruitment methods, such as tribal and social networks and families of deceased militants, whom the group looks after under its *Kafalat-ul-Yateem* initiative.<sup>50</sup> TTP also recruits militants through longstanding jihadist links, such as the 40 jihadist factions that pledged allegiance to the group's current leader, Emir Mufti Nur Wali Mehsud.<sup>51</sup>

While Al-Azaim does not have a website,<sup>52</sup> its media content is published in 12 local and regional languages (see Table 1). It bears mention that the bulk of ISK's propaganda materials is in Pashto, which is then translated into other local and regional languages for a broader outreach. ISK's multilingual propaganda matches its regional and global ambitions of reaching a wider audience.<sup>53</sup>

Another major difference lies in the type and quality of output in ISK and TTP's propaganda strategies. ISK has produced more than 300 books to date while TTP rarely publishes books. Yet, on the production and editorial sides, TTP has a decisive edge over ISK, as the former's editorial and linguistic skills have massively improved since AQIS' Muneeb Jatt faction joined it.<sup>54</sup> On the contrary, ISK's print materials suffer from clumsy grammar and poor phrasing.<sup>55</sup> Though the quality of ISK's videos matches that of TTP, the publication of its visual content is limited. In terms of regularity and frequency, Al-Umar Media's content is produced on time while ISK's media content is published haphazardly. The difference in Al-Azaim and Al-Umar Media's content production could be due to the availability of professional and financial resources, or the lack thereof. Al-Azaim's haphazard publications could also be by design to avoid detection. Under the current Taliban's shield, TTP enjoys greater freedom to expand its media capabilities and invest in them intellectually and financially. Conversely, ISK is on the run and is facing financial difficulties, making it challenging for the group to match Al-Umar Media's quality, regularity and professionalism.



**Table 1: Differences between AI-Umar Media and AI-Azaim Foundation**

| No. | ISK   | TTP  |
|-----|---|--|
| 1   | Young, operational since 2021   | Experienced, operational since 2003  |
| 2   | Top-down and bottom-up  | Top-down   |
| 3   | No website  | A dedicated website  |
| 4   | Anti-Taliban  | Pro-Taliban  |
| 5   | Focus: Global, regional and local<br><br>Target audience: South & Central Asia, Europe  | Focus: Pakistan-centric<br><br>Target audience: Pakistan   |
| 6   | Extensive network of supporters and sympathisers on social media channels producing original content  | Few supporter channels which only re-circulate official materials but do not produce their own content |
| 7   | More elaborate and extensive digital footprint (Telegram, X, Rocket Chat etc.)  | On X, WhatsApp and Telegram, and limited footprint on Facebook and Instagram                           |
| 8   | Propaganda in more than 12 languages (Urdu, English, Pashto, Russian, Persian, Tajik, Uzbek, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Arabic, Russian, Dari, Bengali) | In Urdu, Pashto and occasionally in Arabic and English   |
| 9   | Extensively translate media materials   | Rarely translate media materials   |
| 10  | Regularly publishes books   | Rarely publishes books   |

### Implications for (Counter) Radicalisation in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Despite setbacks due to the Taliban's infiltration, ISK has shown digital depth and resilience by producing propaganda materials which continue to challenge regional counter terrorism authorities. The Taliban's infiltration has done temporary damage, since ISK has gradually regained its social media footprint. Interestingly, the Taliban have launched the AI-Mirsaad (the watch over) initiative in Urdu, English, Dari and Pashto languages to ideologically discredit ISK as well as share details of the GDI's operations against the group.<sup>56</sup> AI-Mirsaad represents the Taliban's anti-ISK propaganda, just as AI-Azaim signifies the latter's propaganda against the former. Under this initiative, the Taliban uploads video testimonials of ISK's arrested militants to deter those flirting with the idea of joining the group.<sup>57</sup> However, AI-Mirsaad's impact will be less pronounced on those who are virtually connected or thinking of linking up with ISK. To effectively disrupt this trend, a more robust digital strategy is required, where tech companies and regional counter terrorism authorities will have to work together. To this end, the main stumbling block will be the discomfort and unwillingness of some regional states and international bodies to work with the Taliban as a counter terrorism partner. It is a catch-22 situation: the reluctance will be to ISK's advantage, while a counter terrorism partnership with the Taliban will indirectly legitimise the self-styled Islamic Emirate.<sup>58</sup>

ISK refers to TTP as a "fighting group" instead of a jihadist group in its propaganda literature to undermine it ideologically, the same pattern it has adopted towards the Taliban.<sup>59</sup> Crucially, ISK refers to TTP's top leadership as *murtad* (apostates) but stays silent about the fighters with a view to recruit them. TTP, on the other hand, echoes the Taliban's ideological position on ISK by labelling the group as *khawarij* (deviants) from its top leaders to its fighters.<sup>60</sup> Despite the TTP-ISK ideological and strategic contestations at the top level, the ground reality at the foot soldiers' level is more complex and fluid, where side-switching and shifting loyalties are prevalent due to material considerations.<sup>61</sup> This is crucial for those devising Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) strategies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It brings into sharp focus that the socio-economic uplifting of peripheral conflict-hit zones is as important as promoting counternarratives against extremist ideologies, both online and offline.

Finally, the ISK and TTP's antagonistic propaganda, where they are needling each other, will have implications for violent extremism in South and Central Asia in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, such adversarial inter-jihadist propaganda will increase ISK and TTP's respective appeals among their core constituents, barring the fighter-level fence-sitters discussed above.<sup>62</sup> On the other, adversarial ideological discourses portray jihadist groups negatively in the public sphere, if done properly. Those working on the strategic communication side of P/CVE initiatives can amplify these discourses to further undermine their appeal among the vulnerable segments of society.

## Conclusion

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, ISK and TTP's propaganda materials have been mushrooming on various social media platforms. ISK has shown more sophistication, deeper penetration and widespread appeal in the digital sphere compared to TTP's limited but equally effective footprint. In the offline setting, TTP's influence and violent credentials have expanded in an unprecedented manner. ISK has managed to mobilise recruits from Central Asia as well as inspire some vulnerable Central Asian diasporic individuals in the West over the internet for low-scale attacks in Europe. Hence, the threat of the so-called "digital Caliphate" is not just virtual but physical as well. While the Taliban have shown ruthless efficacy in eliminating ISK's top leaders in past six months through covert assistance from the US,<sup>63</sup> it remains a conundrum as to how regional states and the international community can work with the Taliban to undermine ISK's digital footprint without legitimising the "Islamic Emirate" itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Wakeford and Laura Smith, "Islamic State's Propaganda and Social Media: Dissemination, Support and Resilience," in *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message*, eds. Stephane J. Baele et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 155-187.

<sup>5</sup> Charlie Winter, "Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare," *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence* (London: ICSR, 2017), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Media-Jihad-The-Islamic-State's-Doctrine-for-Information-Warfare.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Jihadist groups also refer to their propaganda operations as pen jihad, tongue jihad, intellectual jihad and psychological jihad.

<sup>7</sup> Galloway, "Media Jihad," pp. 582-583. He maintains that "media jihad is fought with bulletins, not bullets, not with rockets but reports, not with tanks but with timely theological thought pieces."

<sup>8</sup> This study has specifically consulted ISK's monthly English-language magazine, the *Voice of Khorasan's* March 2023 issue, and TTP's monthly Urdu-language periodical *Mujallah Taliban* and female-focused periodical *Banat-e-Khadijat-ul-Kubra's* June and July 2023 issues, respectively. It has also looked at the Islamic State of Hind's *Serat-ul-Haq* magazine's second issue published by Al-Jauhar Media Centre, an unofficial publication.

<sup>9</sup> "Importance of Media in Jihad for Muslims in India," *Serat-ul-Haq*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> The Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) has infiltrated ISK's private Telegram channels, compelling the group to ask its operatives and supporters to migrate to new channels and platforms. As a result, the frequency of ISK's social media propaganda has declined in recent months.

- <sup>11</sup> “After the Taliban Takeover: How Islamic State-Khorasan Are Exploiting the Online Ecosystem and Projecting the Threat,” *Tech Against Terrorism*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/2023/08/24/after-the-taliban-takeover-how-islamic-state-khorasan-are-exploiting-the-online-ecosystem-and-projecting-the-threat/>.
- <sup>12</sup> Amira Jadoon et al., “The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan’s Survival under Afghanistan’s New Rulers,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 16, No. 8 (2023), pp. 8-15, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup> “Nine Arrested in Europe for Terrorism Offences Related to Islamic State Khorasan Province,” *Pool Re*, July 17, 2023, <https://www.poolre.co.uk/nine-arrested-in-europe-for-terrorism-offences-related-to-islamic-state-khorasan-province/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Dan Lamothe and Joby Warrick, “Afghanistan Has Become a Terrorism Staging Ground Again, Leak Reveals,” *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/22/afghanistan-terrorism-leaked-documents/>.
- <sup>15</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*, S/2023/549, July 25, 2023, p. 16, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/189/74/PDF/N2318974.pdf?OpenElement>.
- <sup>16</sup> Official franchise of Al-Qaeda in South Asia.
- <sup>17</sup> TTP has remodelled its organisational framework by imitating the Taliban’s shadow insurgency model. The group has announced seven shadow ministries and nine shadow provinces (*wilayat*) in Pakistan for its organisational spread in the country. Furthermore, it has divided Pakistan into two military zones: the north and the south. For details, see Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, “The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban’s Afghanistan Takeover,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2023), p.4, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-tehrik-i-taliban-pakistan-after-the-talibans-afghanistan-takeover/>.
- <sup>18</sup> Abdul Sayed, “Analysis: Resurgence of Umar Media Boosts Pakistani Taliban Messaging,” *BBC Monitoring*, January 13, 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2040oi5>.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Lucas Webber, “Voice of Khorasan Magazine and the Internationalization of Islamic State’s Anti-Taliban Propaganda,” *Jamestown Foundation*, May 6, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/voice-of-khorasan-magazine-and-the-internationalization-of-islamic-states-anti-taliban-propaganda/>.
- <sup>21</sup> Mina Al-Lami, “Analysis: Al-Azaim Media Boosts IS Afghanistan Messaging,” *BBC Monitoring*, July 26, 2022.
- <sup>22</sup> Jadoon et al., “The Enduring Duel.”
- <sup>23</sup> The bulk of ISK’s supporter channels are on Telegram and Facebook, while others operate on Matrix, Hoop and Element. For details see Iftikhar Firdous and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsood, “TKD EXCLUSIVE: Creeping Ideology: The ‘Generation-Z’ Freelancers of the ISKP,” *The Khorasan Diary*, August 31, 2023, <https://thekhorasandiary.com/2023/08/31/creeping-ideology-the-generation-z-freelancers-of-the-iskp/>.
- <sup>24</sup> Laith Alkhouri and Lucas Webber, “Islamic State launches new Tajik propaganda network,” *eurasianet*, July 20, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/islamic-state-launches-new-tajik-propaganda-network/>; Lucas Webber and Bruce Pannier, “The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’s Enduring Influence on IS-Khorasan,” *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, March 3, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/03/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistans-enduring-influence-on-is-khorasan/>.
- <sup>25</sup> Mona Thakkar and Vineet P, “The State of Play: Islamic State Khorasan Province’s Anti-India Propaganda Efforts,” *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, May 22, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/05/22/the-state-of-play-islamic-state-khorasan-provinces-anti-india-propaganda-efforts/>.
- <sup>26</sup> Dante Schulz, “ISKP’s Propaganda Threatens Asia’s Security Apparatus,” *Stimson Centre*, October 4, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/iskps-propaganda-threatens-asias-security-apparatus/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Iftikhar Firdous et al., “The Persistent Threat of Islamic State Khorasan (ISKP) Against Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) in Bajaur,” *The Khorasan Diary*, August 2, 2023, <https://thekhorasandiary.com/2023/08/02/tkd-analysis-the-persistent-threat-of-islamic-state-khorasan-iskp-against-jamiat-e-ulema-e-islam-fazl-jui-f-in-bajaur-2/>.
- <sup>28</sup> Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, “Islamic State Khorasan Province Grows Increasingly Concerned About Spies and Infiltrators,” *The Militant Wire*, August 7, 2022, [https://www.militantwire.com/p/islamic-state-khorasan-province-grows?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_campaign=post\\_embed&utm\\_medium=web](https://www.militantwire.com/p/islamic-state-khorasan-province-grows?utm_source=substack&utm_campaign=post_embed&utm_medium=web).
- <sup>29</sup> For instance, ISK’s spokesman Sultan Aziz Azzam was issuing audio statements frequently until the Taliban infiltrated the group’s social media channels. Since then, the frequency of Azzam and other ISK propagandists’ audio statements has reduced, indicating that Al-Azaim’s capabilities have been disrupted if not damaged in the Taliban’s ongoing crackdown.
- <sup>30</sup> Lucas Webber, “Islamic State Khurasan Down but Not Out Under Increased Taliban CT and Spy Pressure,” *The Militant Wire*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.militantwire.com/p/islamic-state-khorasan-down-but-not>.
- <sup>31</sup> Between December 2022 and May 2023, the GDI eliminated ISK’s deputy chief Engineer Abbas Omar, intelligence chief Qari Fateh, main propagandist Ziauddin Mullah Muhammad, the founding emir of Jammu, and Kashmir Abu Usman Kashmiri, the chief of the Indian Subcontinent unit Ijaz Amin Ahangar. For details, see Webber, “Islamic State Khurasan Down but Not Out.”
- <sup>32</sup> Al-Lami, “Analysis: Al-Azaim Media Boosts IS Afghanistan Messaging.”
- <sup>33</sup> Abdul Sayed, “Islamic State’s Pakistan Province Launches New Jihadist Magazine,” *Jamestown Foundation*, June 4, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-states-pakistan-province-launches-new-jihadist-magazine-revealing-struggling-propaganda-effort/#:~:text=The%20first%20Urdu%20language%20magazine,P%27s%20first%20indigenous%20propaganda%20product>.

- <sup>34</sup> Al-Lami, "Analysis: Al-Azaim Media Boosts IS Afghanistan Messaging."
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Abdul Sayed (@abdsayed), "Pakistani Taliban (TTP) announced the first-ever merger from Kohat district, saying a militant group led by Salahuddin Ayubi joined TTP," X, August 21, 2023, <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1693533577546264960>.
- <sup>37</sup> Saif ur Rehman Tahir, "A Study of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Social Media Communication: Major Trends, Key Themes and Propaganda Appeals," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2020), pp. 1-26, [https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Journal\\_Volume-II\\_Issue-I\\_2020\\_Final\\_10-July\\_For-Website.pdf](https://nacta.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Journal_Volume-II_Issue-I_2020_Final_10-July_For-Website.pdf).
- <sup>38</sup> Archie Macfarlane, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Operating with Impunity Online," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, April 17, 2013, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/04/17/tehreek-e-taliban-pakistan-ttp-operating-with-impunity-online/>.
- <sup>39</sup> "An Interview With Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Minister for Information and Broadcasting Mufti Ghufuran," *Mujallah Taliban*, August 2023, pp. 13-16.
- <sup>40</sup> Sayed, "Analysis: Resurgence of Umar Media Boosts Pakistani Taliban Messaging."
- <sup>41</sup> In 2015, when the Pakistan Army took over the town of Mir Ali in North Waziristan tribal district in the Zarb-e-Azb Operation, Al-Umar Media was based in a small room with only two computers and a couple of cameras.
- <sup>42</sup> Since 2016, *Mujallah Taliban* has been published on a quarterly basis and the group has published 11 issues, including two in 2022. However, in January 2023, TTP decided to publish it as a monthly periodical.
- <sup>43</sup> Eitan Azani and Daniel Haberfeld, "Media Jihad Campaign: The Islamic State's Response to Deplatforming," *International Institute for Counter Terrorism*, July 2023, p. 16, <https://ict.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Azani-Haberfeld-Media-Jihad-Campaign-2023-07-13-1.pdf>.
- <sup>44</sup> "Strengthen the Media War," *Voice of Khorasan*, March 2023, pp. 9-21.
- <sup>45</sup> Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA)'s propaganda arms, Ghazi Media, produces its original content independent of TTP as well. This is due to JuA's differences with TTP, compelling it to put across its position on some issues separately.
- <sup>46</sup> "Nine Arrested in Germany and Netherlands Over Islamist Terrorist Fears," *Euro News*, July 7, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/07/07/nine-arrested-in-germany-and-netherlands-over-islamist-terrorist-fears>. Authorities arrested nine ISK conspirators of Turkmen, Tajik and Kyrgyz nationalities in Germany and the Netherlands who arrived via Ukraine.
- <sup>47</sup> Nodirbek Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2021), pp. 30-38, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTC-SENTINEL-012021.pdf>.
- <sup>48</sup> Lamothe and Warrick, "Afghanistan Has Become a Terrorism Staging Ground Again, Leak Reveals."
- <sup>49</sup> Armani Syed, "Why Quran Burning Is Making Sweden and Denmark So Anxious," *TIME*, August 15, 2023, <https://time.com/6303348/quran-burning-sweden-denmark/>; Ugur Yilmaz and Anton Wilen, "Gun Attack Leaves Swedish Consulate Employee Wounded in Turkey," *Bloomberg*, August 2, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-02/gun-attack-leaves-swedish-consulate-employee-wounded-in-turkey#xj4y7vzkg>. ISK has been able to make inroads into vulnerable Central Asian diasporic individuals and can use them for attacks on occasions like Quran burning by channelling their anger towards violence.
- <sup>50</sup> "Militancy and Jihadism in the Region," *Times Glo*, YouTube video, May 5, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5wR\\_alu4mE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5wR_alu4mE).
- <sup>51</sup> Abdul Sayed (@abdsayed), "Pakistani Taliban (TTP) announced the first-ever merger from Kohat district."
- <sup>52</sup> ISK's media content is uploaded on l'lam on the dark web, IS's main media dump.
- <sup>53</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, "How Much of a Threat is the Islamic State in Khorasan?" *Royal United Services Institute*, March 28, 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/how-much-threat-islamic-state-khorasan>.
- <sup>54</sup> Sayed, "Analysis: Resurgence of Umar Media Boosts Pakistani Taliban Messaging."
- <sup>55</sup> Al-Lami, "Analysis: Al-Azaim Media Boosts IS Afghanistan Messaging."
- <sup>56</sup> "Insight," *BBC Monitoring*, May 18, 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000f2w>.
- <sup>57</sup> Almirsad English (@AlmirsadEnglish), "Al Mersaad Urdu (website) has been launched," X, August 27, 2023, <https://twitter.com/AlmirsadEnglish/status/1695827751234933061>. Per Almirsad English's X page, it is part of the (Taliban's) "ideological struggle against the secessionists (*Khawarij*). Considering it a religious and human duty, Al-Mirsad aims relentlessly to eliminate secessionists and their suspicions on the basis of religious and logical reasons."
- <sup>58</sup> Edmund Fitton-Brown, "Can Terrorists Become Counter-Terrorists?" *Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies*, <https://www.aissonline.org/en/opinions/can-terror.../1148>.
- <sup>59</sup> "Those Seeking Democracy (JUIF) are Apostates," *Al-Azaim Foundation*, August 18, 2023.
- <sup>60</sup> "TTP's Statement of Condemnation on Bajaur's Horrendous Attack," *Al-Umar Media*, July 30, 2023.
- <sup>61</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Thirty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team*, p. 6.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup> The White House, *Remarks by President Biden on the Supreme Court's Decision on the Administration's Student Debt Relief Program*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/30/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-supreme-courts-decision-on-the-administrations-student-debt-relief-program/>.

# “Death to the Grid”: Ideological Narratives and Online Community Dynamics in Encouraging Far-Right Extremist Attacks on Critical Infrastructure

Saddiq Basha

*Since 2020, a discernible surge in extreme far-right attacks has been observed on critical infrastructure across North America, Europe, and Australasia. This emerging trend represents an attempt at strategic diversification by individuals and groups affiliated with the extreme far-right. The movement appears increasingly focused on disrupting critical infrastructure — particularly, electric grids and telecommunication systems—to foment political and societal chaos in pursuit of their ideological objectives. This article assesses the pivotal role of online interactions surrounding infrastructure-related extremist content on digital platforms, alongside ideological narratives, in facilitating radicalisation and the uptick in infrastructure attacks.*

## Introduction

In February 2023, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) voiced growing concerns about the continued threat of attacks on the country’s critical infrastructure by violent domestic extremists, particularly from the extreme far-right.<sup>1</sup> This warning came amidst a series of attacks and foiled plots on electrical and telecommunication infrastructure in the country. In late 2022, numerous reports surfaced of targeted attacks on electrical facilities in five states, with incidents in North Carolina and Washington, leading to extensive power outages affecting thousands of people.<sup>2</sup> While these instances may not be definitively attributed to the far-right, DHS intelligence officials have raised the possibility of future copycat attacks from the extreme far-right.<sup>3</sup>

A notable development was the arrest of two American neo-Nazis, Brandon Russell and Sara Clendaniel, in February 2023. Both were detained and charged with conspiring to attack an electrical substation in Baltimore, Maryland. Russell, a founding member of the Atomwaffen Division (AWD)<sup>4</sup>, along with Clendaniel, had devised plans to illicitly acquire rifles and attack multiple electrical substations with the intention of causing widespread destruction in pursuit of their white supremacist goals.<sup>5</sup>

The gravity of these developments, with the potential to cause extensive societal disruption and devastation, has increasingly prompted Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) scholars to shed light on the far-right’s alarming shift towards focusing on critical infrastructure.

This shift can be attributed to two factors analysed in this article. First, the role of ideological narratives in underpinning these attacks.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, militant accelerationism has been propagated and adopted by a wide range of far-right extremist movements to advocate for infrastructure attacks. Colin Clarke et al, for instance, argues that the proliferation and

mainstreaming of accelerationist far-right ideologies, which often intersect with conspiratorial and disinformation narratives, played a critical role in the elevation of critical infrastructure as a prime target.<sup>7</sup>

Second, this article will examine the role of online community dynamics within far-right extremist groups in facilitating the consumption of infrastructure-focused extremist ideology towards the intended outcome of radicalisation.

While existing literature acknowledges the influence of digital platforms in propagating these ideologies, the mere online dissemination of extremist ideologies and conspiratorial disinformation narratives is insufficient in explaining the present allure of and shift towards infrastructure attacks. Rather, the extreme far-right's strategic expansion to include critical infrastructure attacks should be understood as a convergence between ideological narratives and online community dynamics. Specifically, online community dynamics serves as a medium through which infrastructure-focused extremist ideological narratives is both amplified and interpreted, thereby influencing the current trajectory of the far-right's violent pursuit of infrastructure attacks.

### **The Rise in Far-Right Extremist Attacks on Critical Infrastructure**

The recent wave of critical infrastructure attacks across Western societies can be traced back to 2020, coinciding with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising prominence of the extreme far-right. Europol's 2023 EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report reveals a persistent advocacy for attacks and sabotage on 5G infrastructure by segments of the far-right driven by COVID-19 conspiracy theories in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Adherents of these groups, convinced of the supposed public health risks and potential for mass control posed by the official responses to the pandemic, had carried out over 100 documented attacks, primarily arson, on cellular towers across Europe by the end of 2020.<sup>9</sup>

As recently as June 2023, two UK Covid-19 conspiracy theorists, Christine Grayson and Darren Reynolds, were convicted of plotting to destroy 5G masts and encouraging the lynching of politicians. The duo believed that 5G masts were a "weapon array" aimed at the vaccinated population, and had engaged in online discussions proposing various methods of destruction.<sup>10</sup> However, the attacks on critical infrastructure in Europe extend beyond the far-right COVID-19 conspiracy theorists, encompassing far-right white supremacists.<sup>11</sup>

Parallel developments are notable in the United States. According to the US Department of Energy (DOE), the number of direct physical attacks on electrical grids has increased by 77% in 2022 from the previous year.<sup>12</sup> In relation to infrastructure attacks linked with the far-right, a recent report from George Washington University's Programme on Extremism found that there was a significant increase in plots orchestrated by far-right extremists specifically targeting electrical facilities between 2016 and 2022. Of these, 11 out of 13 perpetrators were charged after 2020.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the recent Russell and Clendaniel case, there have been other instances of foiled far-right plots aimed at infrastructure. In January 2020, three members of the neo-Nazi group The Base—Brian Lemley Jr., Patrik Mathews, and William Bilbrough IV—were arrested for planning to destabilise the US government by disrupting rail lines and targeting power infrastructure.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, Australia and New Zealand have faced threats against their 5G infrastructure from far-right COVID-19 conspiracy theorists, leading to reported 5 and 17 attacks in 2020, respectively.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, instances of far-right plots to attack electrical infrastructure were evident. In March 2020, 21-year-old neo-Nazi sympathiser Joshua Lucas was arrested and charged for planning to attack an electrical substation in New South Wales, Australia. He was discovered attempting and planning to acquire military equipment, including firearms and materials to make improvised explosive devices.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Role of Far-Right Extremist Ideology in Encouraging Critical Infrastructure Attacks**

This apparent rise in critical infrastructure attacks is caused in part by the proliferation and mainstreaming of far-right extremist ideology— specifically, militant accelerationism— which advocates for such attacks as a means of achieving ideological goals. This trend is recognised by the aforementioned Europol report, which highlighted ongoing online efforts by far-right extremist groups to spread accelerationist propaganda that not only endorses but also provides instructions for large-scale attacks on critical infrastructure.<sup>17</sup>

Accelerationism, as defined by Jade Parker, refers to an “ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to ‘accelerate’ its destruction through the friction caused by its features.”<sup>18</sup> In the context of far-right extremism, accelerationism is predominantly conceived in its militant form, where the belief emphasises the necessity of widespread acts of violence to hasten the collapse of the current ‘corrupted’ political system (i.e., liberal democracies). In turn, this paves the way for the realisation of a desired white ethno-state.<sup>19</sup>

One of the many violent acts advocated by far-right militant accelerationists is the deliberate targeting of critical infrastructure. Specifically, given the large number of potential targets and ease of access, far-right militant accelerationists perceive critical infrastructures as ‘easier’ targets, believing that damaging them could set off a chain reaction to distract and overwhelm security forces, allowing them to begin their takeover.<sup>20</sup>

A notable proponent of militant accelerationism among the extreme far-right is Terrorgram, a loose network of white supremacist Telegram channels and accounts dedicated to advocating and propagating militant accelerationism.<sup>21</sup> With reportedly over 200 public channels, Terrorgram represents “a major online hub for contemporary violent extremist” having shared propaganda materials produced by Atomwaffen and the Base, as well as manifestos of previous far-right shooters such as Brenton Tarrant and Dylann Roof, whom they glorify as “saints”.<sup>22</sup> It is also known for publishing and distributing their own manifestos such as *Hard Reset* and *Militant Accelerationism*, which provided ideological rationale, calls to action and instructions for conducting attacks such as targeting of critical infrastructure.<sup>23</sup>

Another advocator of militant accelerationist is far-right internet influencer Mike Mahoney, also known as Mike Ma. Ma had gained prominence, especially among eco-fascists, for establishing the Pike Tree Movement in 2017 and authoring several accelerationist-themed fictional novels such as *Harassment Architecture* and *Gothic Violence*.<sup>24</sup> Blending elements of Ted Kaczynski’s<sup>25</sup> anti-technology environmentalism with militant accelerationist white supremacy, Mike Ma and the Pine Tree Movement advocate for the use of violence to safeguard nature as a means of promoting the advancement of the white race.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from promoting unbridled mass shootings, Ma also promoted the targeting of critical infrastructure as a means of expediting the destabilisation of the American government and society. This was evident in his book *Harassment Architecture*, where he issued instructions in the guise of a warning: “do not cover your face and destroy the many and largely unprotected power stations and cell towers.”<sup>27</sup>

Given the ongoing online efforts of far-right groups and figures to promote militant accelerationism, it should come as no surprise that some of the COVID-19 conspiracists and white supremacists involved in infrastructure attacks displayed signs of being influenced by militant accelerationism ideology. For instance, in the Grayson and Reynolds Covid-19 conspiracy theorist case, Reynolds was discovered sharing a link in his Telegram group leading to a far-right literature depository that included the manifestos of previous far-right shooters.<sup>28</sup>

Reynold’s exposure to the writings of militant accelerationists<sup>29</sup> and his reiteration of their ideas in a Telegram post in which he lamented the futility of nonviolent protests and called for violent action against the political establishment strongly indicate that he was influenced by militant

accelerationism.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, the case of the US neo-Nazi trio showed signs of being influenced by militant accelerationism.

This influence was evident not merely from their affiliation with The Base, a well-known promoter of militant accelerationism and an associate of Terrorgram<sup>31</sup>, but also through their discussions of accelerationist tactics such as causing disruptions to transportation (e.g., railway and highway sabotage) and electrical systems.

### **The Role of Online Community Dynamics in Encouraging Critical Infrastructure Attacks**

Specifically, by facilitating the acceptance of militant accelerationist ideology, online community dynamics have contributed to the promotion of critical infrastructure attacks as viable and desirable strategies within the extreme far-right community.

An examination of the events preceding Russell and Clendaniel's plot to target an electrical substation reveals two plausible patterns of online community dynamics: (1) the influence of far-right online influencers; and (2) the influence of peer-to-peer encouragement.

An investigation by the Southern Poverty Law Center revealed that Russell, using various pseudonyms, played an active role online as a "white-power propagandist and organiser."<sup>32</sup> Specifically, he was discovered promoting accelerationist propaganda, which advocates for critical infrastructure attacks, and even explicitly called for such attacks across numerous Telegram groups.<sup>33</sup> Apart from acting as a propagandist, Russell was found participating in a 'casual' capacity as a member of the far-right online community.<sup>34</sup>

#### *The Influence of Far-right Online Influencers*

Far-right online influencers— by cultivating close parasocial relationships with their online followers— can strategically position themselves to shape their followers' views and mobilise them in support of their extremist ideological agenda. Here, parasocial relationships refer to a one-sided, non-reciprocal relationship that an online user develops with a far-right influencer, which creates the illusion of real-life interactions that could foster identification with the influencer and generate a sense of intimacy.<sup>35</sup> As posited by Sophia Rothut et al., the "persuasive effect" of far-right influencers is dependent on the strength of the parasocial relationship they develop with their followers.<sup>36</sup>

Specifically, far-right influencers can cultivate close parasocial relationships with their followers through their online prominence (i.e., consistent production and/or dissemination of extremist content) and their sustained online interaction with the community (i.e., direct/indirect engagement with followers).<sup>37</sup> In other words, their extensive online presence and active community engagement, can serve as a catalyst to effectively persuade followers to adopt extremist ideas and beliefs, including by leveraging the trust that these followers place in them.

For example, Mike Ma's eminence in the online far-right community, to the extent that his novels are now acknowledged as indispensable literature for proponents of militant accelerationism<sup>38</sup>, is arguably linked to his adeptness in nurturing parasocial relationships with his followers. In 2020, Mike had built a significant online presence, garnering 20,000 Instagram followers, where he regularly published posts encouraging his followers to reject governmental authority and implicitly advocate for armed violence. Ma also acknowledged and showcased his followers' support by posting Instagram stories highlighting them engaging with his books, among others.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, it is unsurprising that even after Ma's Instagram account was suspended, an eco-accelerationist Telegram channel analysed by this author continued to share PDF files, audiobooks and quotes of Ma's novels, often accompanied by violent imagery associated with white supremacy and militant accelerationism.



Similarly, some Terrorgram affiliates, aside from their consistent propaganda production, frequently attempt to forge parasocial relationships with and influence their online followers. This includes by responding to significant events and developments such as certain infrastructure related attacks. For example, following the substation attacks in Moore County, North Carolina, several Terrorgram-affiliated posts centred on various themes were shared in a militant accelerationist Telegram group observed by the author.

While most posts applauded the perpetrators for “daring to strike back against the American System” and implicitly encouraged others to follow suit, others appeared to address a community-wide divisive debate centred around the effectiveness of shootings versus sabotage.<sup>40</sup> In one instance, a Terrorgram affiliate was observed emphasising the need to appreciate the “TACTICAL DIVERSITY present across White Terror attacks,” as well as asserting that “[b]oth strategies—mass casualty attacks AND sabotage attacks on critical infrastructure— are effective and indeed necessary to achieve our goal.”<sup>41</sup>

### *The Influence of Peer-to-Peer Encouragement*

Peer-to-peer encouragement emerges within a trusting online environment fostered by like-minded far-right adherents socialising over shared interests. In some instances, it may compel individuals to align their beliefs and identities with those of their radicalised peers. By integrating Social Identity Theory (SIT), Anders Strindberg explained how normative conformity, or the internalisation of radical ideas and beliefs, often develops through direct peer-to-peer relations with other in-group members who frequently share with others the appropriate way to think and operate.<sup>42</sup>

In particular, he emphasised how individuals who consider themselves as “peripheral members” within a community are frequently pressured to adhere to the norms of the in-group and may turn into a “zealous extremist” who attempt to exemplify the community’s extremist values and beliefs to demonstrate their loyalty.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Alexandra Evans and Heather Williams explain in the context of online extremist communities how such peer-to-peer influence to conform to the in-group occurs through participation in online echo chambers, where like-minded individuals can discourage the consideration of alternative views and instead encourage the adoption of more extreme views and practises.<sup>44</sup>

An example of the influence of peer-to-peer encouragement was evident in an eco-accelerationist Telegram group surveyed by this author. In this group, members were observed exchanging accelerationist content, which included manifestos from previous shooters and publications from Terrorgram advocating for infrastructure attacks. Additionally, tactical manuals for crafting homemade weapons and explosives like thermite were shared among the members.

However, this sharing was not confined to mere dissemination; instead, it frequently evolved into active discussions where members exchanged their views and thoughts regarding the content. For instance, when a user shared a poster and manifesto of the Bratislava shooter, several users celebrated the shooter’s actions, while another admitted that it was their first-time hearing about him.

In a recent case involving three American men who pleaded guilty for giving material support to terrorism in February 2022, it appears that peer-to-peer relationships had a significant impact. Mirroring the aforementioned case of Russell, the trio—Christopher Cook, Jonathan Frost, and Matthew Sawall—planned to employ high-powered rifles in attacking electrical substations across the US, aiming to incite civil unrest as a means of furthering their accelerationist white supremacist cause.<sup>45</sup> Notably, Frost and Cook first met through an online chat group, where Frost first proposed the idea of targeting power grids to Cook.<sup>46</sup>

Following this, the pair initiated online recruitment—by distributing a list of white supremacist and neo-Nazi readings—to draw individuals into their scheme.<sup>47</sup> Frost’s initial online interaction with Cook underscores how peer-to-peer encouragement plays a pivotal role in attracting similarly-

minded individuals towards radicalisation, and in some instances leading to the embrace of critical infrastructure attacks for realising their ideological objectives.

## Conclusion

To summarise, understanding the extreme far-right's strategic orientation towards critical infrastructure attacks necessitates a dual understanding of both ideological narratives and the influence dynamics within online communities. Examining ideological narratives in isolation falls short of providing a complete picture, as the role of online communities in interpreting and disseminating these ideologies is crucial. While accelerationist narratives may wield influence over various far-right extremist movements, it is the online community dynamics that reveal the mechanism by which these narratives take root and flourish.

Moving forward, effective policy recommendations and strategic measures must go beyond a narrow ideological focus. Instead, policymakers and security agencies should prioritise investigating the online relationships that bind perpetrators to their communities, elucidating the precise mechanisms that steer them towards specific strategies. Only through this comprehensive lens can we gain a better understanding of radicalisation and its subsequent manifestations, fostering a more informed and proactive approach to countering extremist activities.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicole Sganga.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Sganga.

<sup>4</sup> The Atomwaffen Division (AWD), also known as the National Socialist Order (NSO) since July 2020, is an accelerationist neo-Nazi militant organisation based in the United States with affiliates around the world. AWD promotes the use of violence to overthrow the US government, incite a race war, and establish a new society based on national socialism and white supremacism.

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<sup>22</sup> Jacob Davey et al., ‘A Taxonomy for the Classification of Post-Organisational Violent & Terrorist Content’ Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2021): 27.

<sup>23</sup> In their analysis of Terrorgram’s *Hard Reset*, Matthew Kriner and Bjørn Ihler highlighted how the manifesto was heavily focused on infrastructure attacks, with 47 pages out of 261 promoting it as the best for attacks. For instance, within a segment dedicated to electrical infrastructure, the *Hard Reset* not only underscored the historical effectiveness of disrupting power grids during wartime and how it “will drive the masses in to [sic] panic”, but also provided detailed instructions for sabotaging power lines and transformers respectively. See Matthew Kriner and Bjørn Ihler, ‘Analysing Terrorgram Publications: A New Digital Zine’, *GNET* (blog), 12 September 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/09/12/analysing-terrorgram-publications-a-new-digital-zine/>

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<sup>34</sup> For instance, Russell engaged in discussions with members of the Australian far-right Telegram group “Australian Meditations 51,” where topics included the 1992 Australian film *Romper Stomper*, depicting the activities and decline of a violent neo-Nazi group in Melbourne. Additionally, Russell attempted to befriend an online user, later revealed to be an FBI informant, who was provided with accelerationist publications and introduced to Clendaniel for planning attacks on Maryland substations. See Joey Watson, ‘US Neo-Nazi Accused of Sniper Plot Appears to Have Shared Instructions with Australian Far-Right Figures’, The Guardian, 16 April 2023, sec. Australia news, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/17/us-neo-nazi-accused-of-sniper-plot-appears-to-have-shared-instructions-with-australian-far-right-figures>; Gais and Jason Wilson, ‘Leaked Chats, Documents Show Atomwaffen Founder’s Path to Terror Plot’.

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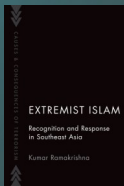
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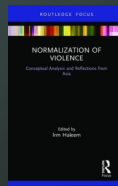


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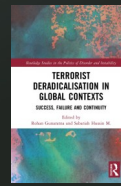
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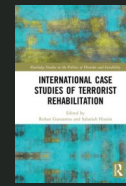
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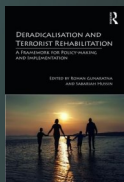
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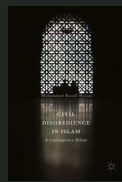
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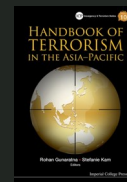
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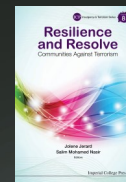
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