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HARVESTING SOULS ONLINE: ISLAMIC STATES' MEDIA PROPAGANDA

PRIYADARSHINI BARUAH

The world has once again witnessed a flurry of Islamic State (IS) activities recently. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the regional tentacle of the IS in South Asia, has carried out multiple successful operations. To name a few, one can begin with the recent 2024 Kerman attack in Iran. This attack, in January 2024, resulted in the death of nearly 91 people;¹ thus, marking it as one of Iran's deadliest attacks in its recent history. Another sophisticated, successful, and deadly coordinated operation conducted by the ISKP was in March 2024: the Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow. This attack resulted in the death of almost 145 individuals and an additional 551 were injured.²

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1. Marc Espanol, "The Nightmare of the Islamic State Resurfaces in Iran", *El Pais*, January 6, 2024, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-01-06/the-nightmare-of-the-islamic-state-resurfaces-in-iran.html>. Accessed on July 18, 2024.
2. "Moscow Crocus City Hall Attack: Death Toll Climbs to 134, 551 Injured", *Business Standard*, March 31, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/moscow-crocus-city-hall-attack-death-toll-climbs-to-134-551-injured-124033100032_1.html. Accessed on July 18, 2024.

The ISIS, often known as the 'Islamic State' (IS) or more commonly known by its Arabic acronym *Daesh*, is a violent extremist organisation that advocates the establishment of a Caliphate, similar to the ones from the 7th century, that is, basically a unified Muslim state which runs according to the *Shariah*—a strict interpretation of the Islamic law. The organisation originally rooted in various parts of Iraq and Syria, using 21st century new media platforms, has been shockingly successful at propagating its ideologies and messages to the world. The IS began utilising various social media platforms in the summer of 2014 to post and disseminate videos of executions and beheadings of hostages, along with other atrocities as well as the recruitment of its sympathisers, and to promote its claim of having effectively established a Caliphate.

In the evolution of the modern *jihadist* propaganda, the IS is of the newest generation. The first being Osama bin Laden's era, when he depended on video to communicate his messages. Bin Laden filmed his long-winded rhetoric in extremely formal Arabic, with a single static camera.³ These films had to be smuggled to Al Jazeera or other television networks before they could be broadcast.⁴ Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric, who was assassinated in a drone attack in Yemen in 2011, represented the second generation of the evolution of modern *jihadi* propaganda.⁵ While Al-Awlaki had a YouTube channel, a blog, and a Facebook profile, he also helped in creating *Inspire*, a full colour English language magazine.⁶ The IS represents the third generation, with its complete embrace of cutting-edge communications technology. The IS has thousands of Twitter accounts that convey its message in several languages; it has also pioneered in producing movies with Hollywood-style effects and uses a variety of other social media platforms and internet domains.⁷

3. Scott Shane and Ben Hubbard, "ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media", *The New York Times*, August 30, 2014, <https://eurasianet.org/tajik-islamic-state-network-fundraises-in-russia>. Accessed on July 18, 2024.

4. Ariel Victoria Lieberman, "Terrorism, the Internet, and Propaganda: A Deadly Combination", *Journal of National Security Law & Policy*, vol. 9:95, January 13, 2027, pp 104, https://jnslp.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Terrorism_the_Internet_and_Propaganda_FINAL.pdf. Accessed on July 18, 2024.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

6. Shane and Hubbard, n.3.

7. Lieberman, n.4, p. 95.

This article seeks to identify and assess the nature behind the IS' use of social media. It also aims to understand the objectives of the IS, and the way it has dominated social media. In doing so, the article will explore the various social media outlets and platforms used by the terror outfit. Lastly, it will trace the IS propaganda efforts in India.

NATURE AND OBJECTIVE BEHIND IS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The most common misperception while studying and examining the IS on a surface level is that it is like any other terrorist organisation. Even though terrorism is used as a tactic by the IS, it does so in a distinct manner as compared to other terrorist organisations in the world.⁸ The distinctions can be seen in every possible aspect of its operations, recruitment processes and even in terms of governance. The final aspect is the most important discriminator: terrorist organisations terrorise, and do not govern.⁹ Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership, the IS was able to establish clear lines of authority, taxation, educational systems, trade markets, along with implementation of policies ranging from the civil, criminal, and religious.¹⁰

The objective of establishing a proto-state was linked to the narrative and idea/concept of the 'Caliphate'. To that end, the IS and its regional proxies tried to get huge swathes of territory under its control. Digitally, the organisation used social media to improve the ISIS brand. The organisation would send out a very precise picture to the world, to impact targeted viewers, depending on their beliefs and views. A combination of slick marketing and cyber expertise was used to spread its message. As a result, the IS' social media presence used to routinely beat that of other competing *jihadi* groups in the Levant region, with the same or more followers.¹¹ Unlike Al Qaeda, which

8. Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS is Not a Terrorist Group: Why Counterterrorism Won't Stop the Latest Jihadist Threat", *Foreign Affairs*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-02-18/isis-not-terrorist-group>. Accessed on July 22, 2024.

9. Jarred Prier, "The Command of The Trend: Social Media as a Weapon in the Information Age", School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Air University, June 2017, pp 33. Accessed on August 3, 2024.

10. Ibid.

11. J.M. Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter", *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

mostly restricted its online activity to websites, the ISIS used social media like X (Twitter) to connect with a larger audience directly.

The IS core is now past its heyday, but its regional proxy in Afghanistan, the ISKP, continues to fight. The ISKP's emergence and sustenance has been marked as the second wave of the Islamic State's expansion beyond its core territories of Iraq and Syria.¹² After the fall of Mosul in 2017, the ISIS rapidly started losing its territory in Syria and Iraq.¹³ How to rebuild the group and secure its global network became a priority for al-Baghdadi. After much brainstorming, the group concurred that the IS did not require land to live in and prosper when it could expand virtually and set up a 'Virtual Caliphate'.¹⁴ Since then, the group's focus has shifted towards the digital domain, encouraging its fighters to expand the virtual Caliphate—encouraging lone wolf attacks in the respective home countries.¹⁵ This phase marked the beginning of *networking online*, with the shift from being a proto state to a transnational terrorist group. In this phase, the IS is trying hard to brand itself as a 'Resurrected Caliphate' to maintain its relevance after its territorial loss in Iraq and Syria.

An example of the IS' virtual activity in recent times was the November 2022 call by a pro-ISIS Telegram account to its followers, encouraging them to carry out terrorist attacks at the 2022 FIFA (Federation Internationale de Association Football) World Cup, hosted by Qatar. "Messages on the account urged ISIS supporters to take this event as a 'golden opportunity' to carry forward what they call their fight against the *kafirs*, be it in the form of biological or any other form of innovative attacks".¹⁶ It is important to note that similar

12. Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, "The Growing Threat of the Islamic State in Afghanistan and South Asia", United States Institute of Peace, No.520, June, 2023, pp. 4, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/sr-520-growing-threat-islamic-state-afghanistan-south-asia.pdf>. Accessed on July 22, 2024.

13. Major Amos C. Fox, "The Mosul Study Group and the Lessons of the Battle of Mosul", Association of the United States Army: Land Warfare Paper 130, February, 2020, pp. 2, <https://www.ausa.org/sites/default/files/publications/LWP-130-The-Mosul-Study-Group-and-the-Lessons-of-the-Battle-of-Mosul.pdf>. Accessed on July 22, 2024.

14. Robin Wright, J.M. Berger, William Braniff, et. al., "The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Beyond", United States Institute of Peace, January, 2017, p. 13, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf>. Accessed on July 22, 2024.

15. Ibid.

16. Priyadarshini Baruah, "ISIS: Efforts to Expand Media Presence", Centre for Air Power Studies, January 12, 2023, <https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/>

threats to carry out attacks were made by the IS and its sympathisers even during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, hosted by Russia, but nothing unfortunate occurred. However, the Wafa Foundation, a media unit of the IS, used an image of Lionel Messi to send terror threats during the above-mentioned event.¹⁷

Just like its motherboard in the Levant, the ISKP suffered the same fate of territorial decline as the ISIS after several highs in territorial conquests in Afghanistan. To stay relevant, the group retreated to the virtual sphere of 'network online'. Since 2020, the ISKP revised its strategic direction as its operational strategy now centred around lone wolf attacks, via online recruitment and propaganda. These attacks were carried out as the operational strategy of *urban warfare* under the leadership of their Emir, Shahab al-Muhajir.¹⁸ He, according to pro-ISKP sources, was regarded as an expert in urban warfare tactics.¹⁹ Today, the ISKP's virtual reach has expanded to such an extent that it managed to come in contact with an 18-year-old Chechen man, who they instructed to plot an attack at the 2024 Paris Olympics. However, on May 31, 2024, the French police arrested him.²⁰ The expansion of its reach has been possible through the creation of content in various languages to engage with larger audiences and diaspora communities beyond its core geographical scope.²¹ The ISKP focusses as much on

CAPS_InFocus_PB_12_1_23.pdf. Accessed on August 3, 2024.

17. Ibid.

18. Ayaz Gul, "IS-K Leader in Afghanistan Reported Dead", Voice of America, June 9, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/is-k-leader-in-afghanistan-reported-dead-/7130444.html>. Accessed on July 22, 2024.

19. Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines, "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan", *Combating Terrorism Centre Sentinel*, vol 1, issue 1, January, 2022, pp. 36, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-state-threat-in-taliban-afghanistan-tracing-the-resurgence-of-islamic-state-khorasan/>. Accessed on July 22, 2024.

20. Jérémie Pham-Lê, Damien Delseny and Jean-Michel Décugis, "The Worrying Profile of Rokhman B.: 18 Suspected of Planning an Attack During the 2024 Olympics", *Le Parisien*, May 31, 2024, <https://www.leparisien.fr/jo-paris-2024/linquietant-profil-de-rokhman-b-18-ans-soupconne-dun-projet-dattentat-pendant-les-jo-2024-31-05-2024-7VHAEX4FGVEXXDUGFCVH4SS4SM.php>. Accessed on July 18, 2024.

21. Riccardo Valle and Lucas Webber, "The Growth and Internationalization of Islamic State Khurasan Province's Media Operations", February 17, 2022, <https://www.militantwire.com/p/the-growth-and-internationalization>. Accessed on July 18, 2024.

internationalisation as it does on regionalisation.²² Its network for fund raising and recruitment is also largely becoming transnational.²³

To further its core objective of the 'Caliphate', the IS propagates through a social media narrative of strength for the supporters, and terror and fear for the enemy. The visuals are horrific and disturbing, especially to those who are non-believers. These visuals signal identical messages successfully to two separate groups: the believers and the non-believers. However, the impact is meant to be different between these two groups. The impact intended for the believer is one of strength and authority, while the impact intended for the non-believer is one of terror. The messages envisioned for both groups are amplified through the creation of trends on X (Twitter) which garner more attention than what is possible through first-generation or second-generation terror propaganda tools.

Despite the constant vigilance by the government authorities, the IS has also been successful in manipulating the minds of its targeted audiences through social media. In other words, it can be said that the cyber warriors of the IS have been successful in blending propaganda with the newest trend through social media platforms.

CYBER WARRIORS OF THE IS

A network of legitimate retweets, paired with bots and unsuspecting Twitter users, is used to spread the reach of a single IS message or hashtag. Every message is supposed to go viral on X (Twitter). To that end, an Arabic form of Twitter application named 'Dawn of Glad Tidings' or 'Dawn' was used by the IS in 2014 for constructing a bot network.²⁴ The software, developed by IS cyber warriors provided users with real-time information on IS operations and included religious instructions. Upon downloading the application, users were prompted to create an account that was connected to their X (Twitter) account, and this connection granted access to the application, to tweet

22. Lucas Webber and Riccardo Valle, "Islamic State Khorasan's Expanded Vision in South and Central Asia", August 26, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/islamic-state-khorasans-expanded-vision-in-south-and-central-asia/>. Accessed on July 18, 2024.

23. Lucas Webber and Laith Alkhouri, "Tajik Islamic State Network Fundraises in Russia", Eurasianet, June 13, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/tajik-islamic-state-network-fundraises-in-russia>. Accessed on July 18, 2024.

24. Faisal Irshaid, "How ISIS is Spreading its Message Online", BBC, June 19, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27912569>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

using the user's account.²⁵ When a tweet with the IS/ISIS brand was posted by a main account, the application automatically retweeted it on behalf of the users.²⁶ Enough tweets over time under the hashtag would then develop specific trends. When a trend emerged, it was publicised on trend-monitoring networks such as the Arabic Twitter account @ActiveHashtags.²⁷ As a result, the hashtag would gain popularity across the region and was retweeted by both actual followers and bot accounts. When the trend goes viral globally, it is known as the final step in the propaganda process.

This is how the IS has benefitted from the global trends on X (Twitter) by creating and hijacking trends. This has helped it gain significant attention which otherwise would have gone unnoticed on social media. The 2014 FIFA World Cup witnessed an unprecedented level of IS trend hijacking, a testament to the event's immense global popularity. As one of the world's most followed sporting competitions, it came as no surprise that the hashtag "#WorldCup2014" trended relentlessly on Twitter throughout the tournament.²⁸ Instead of soccer, all tweets under this hashtag became synonymous with the ISIS.²⁹ The network of IS supporters and bot accounts hijacked the trend. Twitter was unable to suppress the use of the hashtag, which allowed the IS propaganda to spread, as users discussed the matches and companies marketed themselves using the trend.³⁰

The cyber warriors of the IS and its followers thwarted almost all of X (Twitter)'s initial attempts to prevent them from utilising the social platform to disseminate propaganda. X (Twitter)'s immediate reaction was to suspend accounts that broke the users' terms of service agreement. As a result, IS supporters came up with

25. Berger, n.11.

26. Ibid.

27. Ali Fisher, "Eye of The Swarm: The Rise of ISIS and the Media Mujahedeen", USC Centre of Public Diplomacy, July 8, 2014, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/eye-swarm-rise-isis-and-media-mujahedeen>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

28. Jacob Siegel, "ISIS is Using Social Media to Reach You, Its New Audience", *The Daily Beast*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/isis-is-using-social-media-to-reach-you-its-new-audience>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

29. Ibid.

30. "How ISIS Used Twitter and the World Cup to Spread its Terror", *The Telegraph*, June 24, 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10923046/How-Isis-used-Twitter-and-the-World-Cup-to-spread-its-terror.html>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

unique account names such as- “@jihadISIS42” which was formed after “@jihadISIS41” was suspended, which was put up after “@jihadISIS40” was removed.³¹ Each new account exhibited a profound commitment to the IS’ motives and agenda, i.e., when paired with the group’s apparent substantial presence on social media, it gave the impression that the group dominated this platform. IS handles also used co-opted hashtags to build global trends related to IS issues, such as ‘#StevensHeadinObamasHands’,³² which directed users to memes criticising the US president’s response³³ on the freeing of an American citizen, Steven Sotloff, from IS captivity.³⁴ Despite these social media tactics, the outfit continued to appear inexplicably strong. The message was that the American president was helpless to prevent the murder of an American citizen which projected the IS’ strong footprint to the world.

The use of hostages in IS films showcases its revolutionary approach to propaganda. In the 1980s, Western hostages held in Lebanon were compelled to appear on camera: this was mostly done to prove and display evidence that they were alive, and to convey the demands of their captors.³⁵ This tactic was taken a step further by Al Qaeda as it began executing hostages on camera. The ISIS adopted an even more sophisticated technique in 2014, by producing professional-looking English-language movies of hostages being executed.³⁶

Furthermore, the IS has also established the Al Hayat Media Centre, that produces media content exclusively for non-Arabic speakers, especially targeting the younger audiences.³⁷ Its output is similar to the mainstream media broadcasts but its videos are differentiated by identifying marks that are shiny and glossy, i.e.,

31. Prier, n.9, pp.36.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. “A Short History of ISIS Propaganda Videos”, HuffPost, March 11, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/isis-propaganda-videos_n_6846688. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

36. Ibid.

37. Steve Rose, “The ISIS Propaganda War: A Hi-Tech Media Jihad”, *The Guardian*, October 7, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/07/isis-media-machine-propaganda-war>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

either a logo that is in the shape of a teardrop in Arabic calligraphy materialising from a digital cascade of water or a black and white IS flag in the corner of the screen.³⁸ The centre has also created films in various languages and forms, ranging from minute-long “mujatweets” for X (Twitter) to hour-long Hollywood style documentaries, with special effects and action scenes. It also produced audio content and an online English magazine called *Dabiq*.³⁹

For instance, “Eid Greetings from the Land of *Khilafah*” was a *jihadi* style travel show which was included in Al Hayat’s media programming. The show, recorded in Raqqa, Syria, featured IS sympathisers who had migrated from Western countries, expressing how happy and delighted they were to be physically there.⁴⁰ The programme ended with the words, “I wish you were here”.⁴¹ A feature-length film of the IS titled, “The Flames of War”, promoted and glorified the military heroism of the IS through horrific images and beautiful language.⁴² The extremely violent images of the film had been edited and turned into a fast-paced action montage followed by a hymn of recruitment. Just like other content produced by the IS, even this film claims that warfare in the true sense is like the real-life GTA-‘Grand Theft Auto’ video game.⁴³

Thus, one can say that the IS has very cleverly presented a highly appealing portrayal of the group to the global audience.

MEDIA OUTLETS USED BY THE IS

The IS’ ability to influence its supporters via social media is inextricably linked to a well-organised sequence of IS publications. For example, sites that convey various violent and extremist ideologies created by the ISIS or other radical organisations are openly accessible in Indonesia.⁴⁴ *Jihadists* can visit the sites, download magazines, or material issued by the IS without needing to gather in person.

38. Lieberman, n.4, pp.105.

39. Rose, n.37.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Tantan Hermansah and Nofia Natasari, “The *Khilafah* Discourse in Online Magazine of ISIS: *Dabiq*”, *International Journal of Progressive Sciences and Technologies*, vol.19, no.1, February 2020, pp.134, <https://repository.uinjkt.ac.id/dspace/>

The IS had a few official media outlets such as *Al Furqan*, *Al Hayat*, *Al Nab*, *Al Bayan*, *Maktab Al Hammah*, and *Ajnad*. Each medium had its own content to focus on. For instance, *Al-Furqan*, *Al Hayat*, and *Maktab Al Hammah*, produced various audio and video content, along with some magazine content. Whereas *Al Furqan* regularly broadcast content related to the IS' war footage in the mp3 and mp4 format, along with the speeches of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and the IS official spokesperson Abu Muhammad al Adnany, that were all issued in Arabic.⁴⁵ *Al Hayat*, broadcast combat footage of the IS and movies depicting life under its control in English and various foreign languages, whereas, *Al Bayan* published an e-newspaper in the pdf format that provided a comprehensive account of the situation in West Asia with regard to the IS.⁴⁶

Dabiq was the IS' propaganda e-magazine, published via the deep web from 2014 to 2016, with its first issue carrying the date 'Ramadan 1435' in the Islamic Hijri calendar.⁴⁷ The aim of this magazine was to promote the notion of *Hijrah*, i.e., migration to Syria, and the importance of *Khilafah*. This magazine was published by the Al Hayat Centre.⁴⁸ The IS' *Khilafah* discourse mentioned in *Dabiq* is linked to role of the *Khilafah*; indicating the potential to restore the honour and dignity of Muslims globally, and emphasising this as a highly esteemed pursuit for all Muslims worldwide.⁴⁹

BATTLE OF HEARTS AND MINDS IN INDIA: IS PROPAGANDA

IS modules in India present a significant threat in the form of virtual recruiting and propaganda. This could possibly be seen as a continuous effort towards reviving the group and expanding its tentacles deeper into South Asia by leveraging the faultlines and radicalising

bitstream/123456789/61913/3/The%20Khilafah%20Discourse%20in%20Online%20Magazine%20of%20ISIS%20DABIQ.pdf. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Giles Fraser, "To Islamic State, Dabiq is Important, But it's Not the End of World", *The Guardian*, October 10, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2014/oct/10/islamic-state-dabiq-important-not-end-of-the-world>. Accessed on July 24, 2024.

48. Hermansah and Natasari, n.44, pp. 139.

49. Ibid.

the Muslim population, mostly youths.⁵⁰ Since the inception of the Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK), an individual named Umar Nisar Bhat had occupied a pivotal position within the pro-IS network in India, actively contributing to the dissemination of propaganda until he was arrested in mid-2021.⁵¹ Despite the significant setback caused by the arrest of Nisar and his close associates, the IS network continued its regular release of propaganda. These propaganda efforts are closely intertwined with the IS' central command: *terrorist-networking* with the aim of reviving and expanding its tentacles deeper into South Asia.⁵²

In early 2019, the ISJK launched an English-language publication, the *Risalah* (Message) magazine, which was later renamed as *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of Hind) after the transition from the ISJK to the Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP).⁵³ Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund mention in their report:

Investigations by intelligence agencies have revealed that the production of the magazine involves elaborate international linkages among pro-Islamic State supporters within South Asia. The individuals who collect the content for the magazine are based in India and Afghanistan but collaborate with supporters in the Maldives and Bangladesh to obtain coverage from those countries. Eventually, the magazine is edited in Pakistan.⁵⁴

In February 2020, the ISHP began publishing the *Voice of Hind* in both Urdu and English, predominantly directing its content towards the Muslim community in India. Three focal issues that the ISHP and its adherents usually focus on are: the decision of the Supreme

50. Priyadarshini Baruah, "Growing Threat of ISKP in Afghanistan", Centre for Air Power Studies, September 15, 2023, https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CAPS_IB_PB_15_9_23.pdf. Accessed on August 22, 2024.

51. "Security Forces Trace Direct Footprint of Islamic State in Jammu & Kashmir with Arrest of Qasim Khorasani", Times Now India Digital, July 20, 2021, <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/security-forces-trace-direct-footprint-of-islamic-state-in-jammu-and-kashmir-with-arrest-of-qasim-khorasani/787440>. Accessed on August 22, 2024.

52. Baruah, n.50.

53. Sayed and Refslund, n.12.

54. Ibid.

Court of India to allow reconstruction of the Ram temple which was demolished in the 16th century to build a mosque on its ruins in Uttar Pradesh; the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, eliminating the temporary special status of Jammu and Kashmir; and, finally, the amendment of the Citizenship Act.⁵⁵ All the three above mentioned issues are propagandised by the IS as anti-Muslim policies of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.⁵⁶ Other such examples of the ISHP's media activities and propaganda narratives include a prominent article in *Voice of Khorasan* which incites Indian Muslims against the Hindu population, according to the August 2023 report by the Spotlight on Global Jihad of the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre– Al Aziam.⁵⁷ The article proposed harming Hindus economically by setting fire to their properties. This essentially calls for the rampant destruction of urban properties, which is consistent with the ISKP's doctrine of urban warfare.

In 2022, the ISHP took further measures to strengthen and concentrate its media output. In April 13, 2022, the group announced the establishment of a new hub, *Nashir al-Hind*, as its official news outlet, suggesting that previously recognised entities such as *al-Tazkirah*, *al-Burhan*, and *al-Qitaal* may no longer operate as independent media organisations.⁵⁸ In January 2023, *Serat ul-Haq*, the inaugural edition of the ISHP's English language magazine was released by the al-Jauhar Media Centre, a new media outlet. However, it still remains unclear whether al-Jauhar functions as an official ISHP outlet or is managed by sympathisers, introducing an element of uncertainty regarding the group's centralised strategy.⁵⁹

The extensive propaganda efforts of the ISHP are strategically crafted to create a sense of victimhood in the minds of the Muslim

55. Ibid.

56. Raffaello Pantucci, "Indians and Central Asians are the New Face of the Islamic State", *Foreign Policy*, October 8, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/08/isis-indian-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-uzbekistan-central-asians-are-the-new-face-of-islamic-state/>. Accessed on August 23, 2024.

57. Baruah, n.50.

58. Riccardo Valle and Lucas Webber, "Islamic State Hind Province Amalgamates Media Branches; Pro-IS East Asia Group Claims Bombing in Thailand", *Militant Wire*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.militantwire.com/p/islamic-state-hind-province-amalgamates>. Accessed on August 23, 2024.

59. Sayed and Refslund, n.12, p.8.

community in India. Although instances exist where the network has sought to enlist individuals for operational activities, its primary emphasis is on disseminating propaganda. Utilising encrypted platforms of communication, recruiters engage with sympathisers, instructing them to contribute to areas such as translation, production, or dissemination of content.⁶⁰

Despite the aggressive propaganda against India, the terror group has failed to carry out any significant attack, due to India's improved counter-terrorism capabilities. The country's revised and improved counter-terrorism strategies and its zero tolerance policy for terror were effectively fortified after the devastating 26/11 Mumbai attacks in 2008. According to India's counter-terrorism agency, the National Investigation Agency (NIA), as of September 2021, 168 individuals had been accused of affiliation with the IS in 37 cases, underscoring the robustness of India's counter-terrorism efforts.⁶¹

CONCLUSION

Since the IS' inception, it aims to position itself as a 'Resurrected Caliphate', striving to assert its presence in both the physical and digital domains. Although the outfit has lost significant control, it has compensated for these losses by intensifying its digital presence. The IS employs various strategies, producing high-quality propaganda videos and exploiting popular trends and patterns such as strategic hashtags on platforms like X (Twitter), to attract a wide array of potential recruits. While utilising the benefits of the inexpensiveness of social media platforms, the group's online presence has significantly enhanced its perceived strength and power, which was earlier lacking, thus, establishing a sophisticated digital network, allowing it to manipulate popular trends and project an image of being a global existential threat.

60. "India's NIA Tightens Grip on Islamic State Operatives with Eye on Kashmir", *India Narrative*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.indianarrative.com/india-news/indias-nia-tightens-grip-on-islamic-state-operatives-with-eye-on-kashmir-30250.html>. Accessed on August 23, 2024.

61. Sharangee Dutta, "Islamic State Trying to Spread in India through Constant Propaganda Online: NIA", *Hindustan Times*, September 17, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/islamic-state-trying-to-spread-in-india-through-constant-propaganda-online-nia-101631884042751.html>. Accessed on August 23, 2024.

For India, the virtual activities of the group are ever troubling because of the its relentless circulation of propaganda, appealing to Indian Muslims to join their cause. India has so far withstood this barrage online of propaganda; however, the security establishment needs to continue its tight vigil as countering both radical ideologies and terrorism in the digital realm has become complex in nature as compared to conventional terrorist threats to national security, thus, posing a challenge to the traditional counter-terrorism apparatus.

Technology, undoubtedly, in the current era, has significantly influenced war-time dynamics, especially in generating narratives and propaganda. The emergence of the internet and social media has revolutionised the dissemination of propaganda, offering terrorist organisations an expansive and accessible platform. This digital transformation has fundamentally altered the nature of terrorism in the 21st century, enabling terrorist groups to leverage these digital tools and platforms in novel ways to further their objectives. As social media continues to evolve and new platforms emerge, terrorist outfits like the IS are likely to further expand their digital footprint, adapting to the shifting landscape of the second stage of terrorist networking, i.e., the digital domain, if not entirely in a geographical sense.