

TITAN



TERRORISM INSIGHT THROUGH
THE ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES

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CONSTRUCTING THE APOSTATE

Intra-Muslim Justifications of Violence in al-Qaeda and the Islamic State's Rhetoric.

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Introduction

The charge of apostasy^[1] stands among the most powerful instruments of moral and political exclusion in jihadist discourse. Both al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (ISIS) have consistently portrayed Muslim rulers, state institutions, religious establishments and relevant figures as *murtaddīn*—apostates who have betrayed divine sovereignty by legislating outside God’s law, collaborating with non-Muslim powers, or obstructing the establishment of shariah. By deploying the concept of apostasy flexibly and repeatedly, both organizations succeed in framing violence against Muslims not as civil strife, but as a divinely sanctioned act of purification.

In addition to serving doctrinal purposes, jihadist propaganda strategically exploits this framing to manipulate societal perceptions. Through their propaganda, both AQ and ISIS aim to disinform and influence public understanding of political and religious authority, presenting themselves as legitimate alternatives to existing governance structures. By portraying rulers as tyrannical, heavily influenced by foreign powers, and acting against the interests of the population, these organizations consolidate an aura of religious purity that validates their challenge to existing authority. The absence of a centralized Islamic institution capable of regulating *ijtihād*,^[2] combined with selective appeals to historical precedents that allow the conditional use of violence, provide a fertile environment for such narratives to resonate and mobilize supporters.

This article examines the rhetorical construction of the apostate in AQ and ISIS propaganda, aiming at providing answers regarding how each organization defines, justifies, and operationalizes intra-Muslim violence. Drawing on data from the TITAN Project, which compiles and analyzes a digitized corpus of all official audiovisual materials released between 2020 and 2025 by the main

¹ In Arabic *ridḍa* or *irtidād*, usually defined as the abandonment of Islam by a Muslim in thought, word, or by means of deeds.

² *Ijtihād* is the Arabic term that refers to the process of independent reasoning employed by qualified scholars to derive legal rulings from the foundational sources of Islam. In contemporary contexts, the absence of a universally recognized authority to oversee *ijtihād* contributes to interpretive fragmentation and allows competing actors to claim religious legitimacy for their political agendas.

media arms of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State,^[3] this study provides a comparative, discourse-based assessment of how global jihadist organizations articulate theological authority, establish moral boundaries, and translate doctrinal excommunication into a communicative strategy of mobilization and legitimation.

Apostasy in Islamist Thought

The notion of apostasy in Islamic political-legal history has a long and complex history and has always been more than a purely theological offence: it has functioned as a marker of political loyalty, communal cohesion and governance legitimacy. In the early period of Islam, the Wars of Apostasy (632-634 CE) under Abu Bakr—first caliph—illustrate how the nascent Muslim state equated desertion of communal obligations with a withdrawal of allegiance to the caliphate.^[4] Later, during the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods the concept continued to expand: governors or scholars accused of failing to implement shariah or allying with non-Muslim powers were rhetorically cast as apostates or tyrants, demonstrating the elasticity of the term in political-theological discourse.^[5]

Classical jurists approached apostasy not merely as a matter of private disbelief but as a category intertwined with actions perceived to endanger communal stability and political order. Early legal and theological debates reveal that questions such as rebellion against the ruler, obedience to authority, and the boundaries of legitimate coercion were negotiated through pragmatic considerations aimed at preserving social cohesion. This flexible, context-dependent reasoning—rooted in institutional practices of adjudication and governance—provided later actors with a repertoire of arguments that

³ The dataset used for the purpose of this document includes all audiovisual products published by the main media arms of the world's two leading jihadist organizations, al-Qaeda (*Mu'assasat al-Saḥāb lil-Intāj al-l'āmī*) and the Islamic State (*Mu'assasat al-Furqān lil-Intāj al-l'āmī*), between 2020 and September 2025. Although the TITAN Project also incorporates the official written publications of both organizations into its database, for the purposes of this document, it was deemed more appropriate to focus solely on the audiovisual products to conduct the analysis based on a more balanced sample, as these primarily convey messages from the leadership.

⁴ Donner, F. M. (2010). *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*. Harvard University Press, pp. 97-106.

⁵ Peters, R. & De Vries, Gert J. J. (1976-1977). "Apostasy in Islam". *Die Welt des Islams, New Series*, Vol. 17, Issue 1/4, pp. 1-25.

could be selectively reinterpreted or expanded in response to new political realities.^[6]

Modern Islamist and jihadi movements inherit this legacy of flexible, politically inflected reasoning. In their hands, certain doctrinal notions become vehicles for redefining communal boundaries and translating theological judgment into political action. Two doctrinal concepts are particularly important for understanding how charges of apostasy can acquire political force: *al-ḥākimiyya* (God's exclusive right to legislate) and *al-walā' wa-al-barā'* (loyalty and disavowal). The doctrine of *al-ḥākimiyya*—developed in the twentieth century by thinkers such as al-Mawdudi and later reframed by Sayyid Qutb—holds that sovereignty belongs exclusively to God, and that political authorities who legislate through non-revealed norms effectively usurp a divine prerogative.^[7] Second, the concept of *al-walā' wa-al-barā'*, which classically refers to loyalty toward God and the community of believers and disavowal of practices deemed contrary to Islam, has been reinterpreted by Salafi-jihadi ideologues as a rigid criterion for drawing communal boundaries and legitimizing accusations of unbelief.^[8] Together, these notions provide contemporary movements with a doctrinal vocabulary through which theological judgment can be translated into political delegitimization.

Building on this long doctrinal and rhetorical lineage, contemporary jihadist organizations incorporate these concepts into their political-religious vocabulary, presenting apostasy as a category that extends beyond creed to questions of authority, obedience, and legitimate governance. In their media output, notions such as *al-ḥākimiyya* and *al-walā' wa-al-barā'* appear not as abstract theological principles but as operative terms used to classify rulers, institutions, and social actors within a broader moral landscape. This conceptual scaffolding provides the backdrop against which al-Qaeda and ISIS articulate their respective portrayals of the apostate, forming the basis for the empirical analysis that follows.

⁶ Rabb, I. A. (2014). *Doubt in Islamic Law: A History of Legal Maxims, Interpretation, and Islamic Criminal Law*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 37-55.

⁷ Adams, Charles J. 1983. "Mawdudi and the Islamic State," in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, edited by J. L. Esposito. New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 99-133.

⁸ Wagemakers, J. (2008). "Framing the 'Threat to Islam': al-Wala' wa al-Bara' in Salafi Discourse". *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 30(4), pp. 1-22.

Al-Qaeda's Graded Architecture of Apostasy

Al-Qaeda's reliance on apostasy as a communicative resource is systematic rather than incidental or ornamental. The data extracted from the TITAN corpus reveals a coherent strategy in which theological concepts—especially *al-ḥākimiyya*, *al-walā' wa-al-barā'*, and *tawba*^[9]—are mobilized to achieve three functional objectives: delegitimizing existing political orders, policing intra-Muslim boundaries, and leaving a door open to redemption. These components operate together to produce a graded system of apostasy, one that distinguishes between hardened enemies, compromised elites, and misguided or passive Muslims. The internal logic of this system becomes evident when AQ's doctrinal claims are read alongside the organization's rhetorical performance across its media output.

At the core of AQ's political theology of apostasy lies *al-ḥākimiyya*, repeatedly used by the organization in its propaganda as a diagnostic tool to measure the legitimacy of entire political systems. AQ casts contemporary Arab regimes as entities that have usurped divine prerogatives by legislating through constitutions, parliaments, and international treaties. This doctrinal position is expressed rhetorically through categorical statements about obedience and authority, such as “God's right is more binding than the right of the President of the Republic, and God is more deserving of being obeyed, so there is no obedience to a creature in disobedience to the Creator.”^[10] With juxtapositions like this one, typical in AQ's product, the organization accomplishes three things at once: it asserts the supremacy of divine legislation, frames obedience to secular rulers as a religiously compromised act and situates itself as the voice that restores the proper hierarchy of loyalties.

A closely related move reframes participation in international institutions as a form of theological infraction. In AQ's discourse, joining the United Nations is not a neutral act of statecraft but an explicit acceptance of legal authority external to the revealed law. The organization repeatedly asserts that “whoever accepts membership in the UN accepts adjudication by law other than shariah and thereby abandons it,”^[11] reframing participation in global institutions as

⁹ In Islamic theology, *tawba* refers to the act of repentance—returning to God after a sin or moral lapse with sincerity, remorse, and a commitment to amend one's behavior.

¹⁰ “صفحة القرن أم حملات القرون الحقة,” *Mu'assasat al-Sahāb lil-Intāj al-Ālāmī*, September 2022.

¹¹ “نصيحة الأمة الموحدة بحقيقة الأمم المتحدة,” *Mu'assasat al-Sahāb lil-Intāj al-Ālāmī*, November 2021.

a tacit recognition of a binding framework for arbitration and normative standards, thus casting such participation as a renunciation of *ḥākimiyya*.

If *al-ḥākimiyya* enables AQ to strip rulers and institutions of legitimacy, *al-walā' wa-al-barā'* supplies the vocabulary for sorting Muslims into morally differentiated categories. In AQ's propaganda *al-walā' wa-al-barā'* is not presented as a narrow theological principle but as a totalizing interpretive framework that reclassifies political stances, alliances with state institutions, cooperation with foreign actors, and even rhetorical posture as signs of betrayal. AQ's output includes direct calls to revive this doctrine and turn it into "a way of life,"^[12] signaling the organization's willingness to transform this concept into a daily criterion for social and political judgment.

From this framing emerges a tacit hierarchy of apostasy. At the top are political rulers and security forces —treated as fully apostate because they exercise legislative power and coercion. Below them sit state-aligned clerics and official religious bodies, depicted as intermediaries who mask or legitimize apostate rule. A third tier encompasses ordinary Muslims portrayed as confused, manipulated, or socially pressured into complicity. This graded taxonomy allows AQ to calibrate its responses: exhortation and education for the misled, exposure and delegitimization. This internal elasticity is central to AQ's communicative strategy.

Finally, while *ḥākimiyya* and *walā'-barā'* harden boundaries, the concept of *tawba* creates a controlled channel for reintegration. At first glance, the concept of repentance might appear spiritual, but its rhetorical function is very much strategic as AQ lowers through it the psychological and social cost of shifting loyalty. While *tawba* may not be a realistic pathway, its presence in the corpus serves two communicative purposes. First, it portrays AQ as a moral authority capable not only of condemning but also of guiding and restoring. Second, it expands AQ's potential audience beyond committed supporters to include those who feel religiously inadequate or socially marginal.

Taken together, these themes reveal a coherent architecture rather than disparate doctrinal elements. *Al-ḥākimiyya* delegitimizes political authority; *al-walā' wa-al-barā'* structures a hierarchy of moral proximity and *tawba* offers selective pathways for return. Apostasy is thus not treated as a single

¹² "صفحة القرن ان حملات القرون - الحلقة الأولى" Mu'assasat al-Saḥāb lil-Intāj al-Īlāmī, September 2020.

verdict but as a flexible, graded framework through which AQ interprets society, defines its adversaries, and imagines potential constituencies.

ISIS's Totalizing Architecture of Apostasy

ISIS treats apostasy not simply as a theological label but as a performative instrument that merges accusation, coercion, and conditional offers of reintegration. ISIS's rhetorical architecture around apostasy differs in emphasis and tone from AQ's: it privileges categorical denunciation, public spectacle, and an instrumental, overtly coercive version of repentance. Three patterns dominate the corpus materials: (1) uncompromising denunciation of rival authorities and social actors as agents of *ṭāghūt* and apostasy; (2) deployment of *al-walā' wa-al-barā'* as a polemical boundary marker that delegitimizes intermediate actors (clerics, security forces, tribal elites); and (3) a rhetorically conditioned *tawba* that is simultaneously an invitation and a warning—a mechanism to absorb defectors only on the strict and non-negotiable terms set by the organization.

In ISIS media output, the doctrine of *ḥākimiyya* appears in a strikingly different register than AQ's doctrinal formulations. Rather than elaborate juridical arguments about sovereignty, ISIS foregrounds a litany of grievances and signs of divine punishment that are read as divine confirmation of the organization's political claims. ISIS repeatedly frames the replacement of God's law by "man-made" laws as an existential betrayal, and it links such betrayal to visible calamities as signs of God's wrath: "*Immorality did not appear among a people without then a plague spreading among them [...] and when they break God's covenant and that of His Messenger, God sends them an enemy from elsewhere.*"^[13] Such claims sacralize geopolitical misfortune as moral retribution and transform everyday governance into direct evidence of apostasy, thereby licensing rejection in absolutist terms.

On the other hand, the doctrine of *al-walā' wa-al-barā'* in ISIS discourse is notably expansive and accusatory. Where classical formulations stress spiritual solidarity and disavowal of idolatry, ISIS frames the doctrine as a categorical repudiation of anyone who supports or serves the *ṭawāghīt*. Consider the following rhetorical bluster: "*If the Islamic State had done*

¹³ "وسيعلم الكفار لمن عقبى الدار" Mu'assasat al-Furqān lil-Intāj al-Īlāmī, May 2020.

nothing but prevent tens of thousands of Muslim youth from fighting and dying under the banners of unbelief [...] how could you still reject the rule of God?"^[14] The passage collapses political disagreement with treachery: collaborative or non-aligned institutions are not merely mistaken, they have actively misled and thereby forfeited any claim to Muslim loyalty. This allows ISIS to binary-sort populations into comrades and instruments of the enemy, giving moral sanction to exclusion, ostracism, and, where the movement holds coercive power, violence.

In ISIS discourse the concept of *tawba* surfaces with ambivalent intent. ISIS includes repeated exhortations to return, but these calls are almost always paired with explicit threats: repentance is conceivable, yet the conditions are strict and the penalties for recidivism brutal. The following passage captures this logic: “Whoever fears God in himself and returns, he will find only brotherhood from us; but whoever persists in error and harms the Muslims, there is nothing for him but the sharp sword [...] and whoever apostatizes then repents, and apostatizes again after aligning with them, has nothing with us but beheading.”^[15]

Rhetorically and strategically, these features produce a distinctive communicative logic. ISIS’s mode is less concerned with juridical nuance and more with spectacle, moral absolutism, and immediate behavioral impact. This difference is not merely stylistic—it maps onto organizational priorities as ISIS claim to statehood and control over territory rewards absolutist, enforcement-friendly categories that simplify governance (divide-and-rule, purge and co-opt). Where AQ relies on doctrinal argumentation and conditional language that can accommodate political gradients, ISIS prefers dramatic denunciation and conditional reintegration framed around loyalty tests and physical consequences. The result is a political theology in which apostasy is not graded but total, not circumstantial but ubiquitous—an architecture calibrated for control rather than persuasion.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “دمر الله عليهم وللكافرين أمثالها” Mu’assasat al-Furqān lil-Intāj al-Īlāmī, January 2020.

Two Architectures of Apostasy: What the TITAN Data Shows

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State use a shared theological worldview, but their approach to apostasy differs sharply. The TITAN corpus allows us to move beyond purely qualitative claims and anchor those differences quantitatively. A first look at the distribution of some of the doctrinal terms on which this analysis rests (*tāghūt*, *ridda*, *murtaddīn*, *ḥākimiyya*, *tawba*) captures important contrasts between the two organizations. Table 1 below presents the first, descriptive snapshot—raw and normalized counts for some key terms used in the corpus.

Table 1: Normalized lexical frequency of key doctrinal terms.^[16]

Term	Total Hits in AQ Corpus ^[17]	Total Hits in ISIS Corpus ^[18]	AQ Hits per 10K words	ISIS Hits per 10K words
<i>Tāghūt</i>	29	100	2.68	30.90
<i>Apostasy</i>	31	99	2.87	30.60
<i>Ḥākimiyya</i>	9	0	0.83	0.00
<i>Tawba</i>	17	3	1.58	0.92

As Table 1 makes clear, contrasts are stark. ISIS uses idolatry and apostasy-related vocabulary at rates more than ten times higher than AQ, while AQ references *ḥākimiyya* and *tawba* far more consistently. These patterns already point toward two distinct communicative architectures:

- ISIS foregrounds denunciation and boundary-policing, saturating its discourse with accusatory lexicon.
- AQ distributes its doctrinal attention across sovereignty, loyalty and disavowal, and controlled reintegration.

¹⁶ Counts are derived from the TITAN corpus including for the purpose of this study all official audiovisual materials released between 2020 and 2025 by both organizations, segmented by organization and normalized per 10,000 words. Counts include all morphological variants for each term (e.g., under *tāghūt* the count also includes *ṭawāghīt*, *ṭāghia*, etc.).

¹⁷ The size of al-Qaeda's corpus is currently 107.877 words.

¹⁸ The size of ISIS corpus is currently 32.359 words.

Although this initial frequency contrast provides a first layer of evidence, the structural picture becomes clearer when concepts are examined in relation rather than isolation. Individual terms tell only part of the story. Doctrinal ideas acquire rhetorical force when they co-occur—when they appear near each other in discourse, shaping narrative frames. TITAN allows the examination of the co-occurrence of codes, focusing on where *al-walā' wa-al-barā'*, *ḥākimiyya*, and *tawba* align with threat-related categories coded in the corpus (for illustration, local regimes, other jihadist organizations, other religious groups). The tables below show how often two categories appear in close textual proximity (either overlapping codes or both codes coexist in the same paragraph).

Table 2: Theological Concepts and Enemy Categories Intersection in AQ's Discourse.^[19]

-	Local Regimes-Governments	Other Jihadist Organizations	Other Religious Groups
<i>Al-walā' wa-al-barā'</i>	37	3	0
<i>Ḥākimiyya</i>	24	0	0
<i>Tawba</i>	18	3	0

Table 3: Theological Concepts and Enemy Categories Intersection in ISIS Discourse.^[20]

-	Local Regimes-Governments	Other Jihadist Organizations	Other Religious Groups
<i>Al-walā' wa-al-barā'</i>	16	4	7
<i>Ḥākimiyya</i>	19	8	14
<i>Tawba</i>	9	3	5

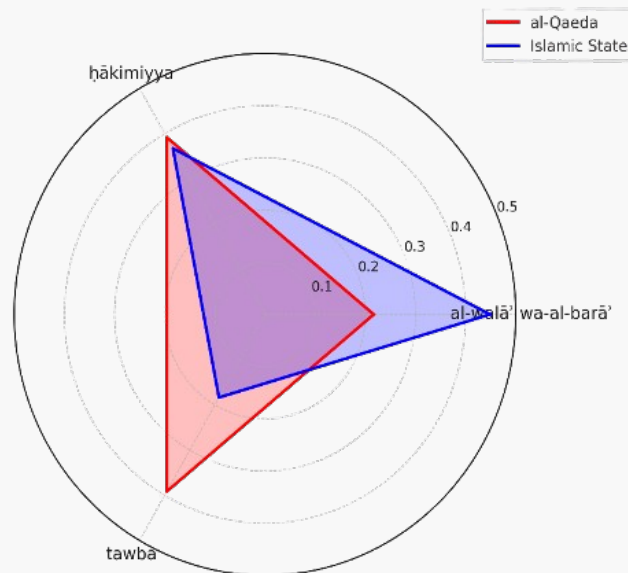
¹⁹ Co-occurrence counts reflect the number of text segments in AQ's media output (2020-2025) where the examined doctrinal codes (*al-walā' wa-al-barā'*, *ḥākimiyya*, and *tawba*) overlap or appear in close textual proximity to an enemy-related category. Counts therefore capture rhetorical clustering, not frequency of isolated terms, allowing us to see how concepts are deployed together as part of broader narrative frames.

²⁰ As in Table 2, values represent the number of text segments in ISIS's media output (2020-2025) where doctrinal codes and enemy-related categories co-occur within the same segment or paragraph.

Again, the distribution diverges sharply. In AQ’s discourse *ḥākimiyya* and *tawba* co-occur disproportionately with “Local Regimes,” indicating that political authority—and its potential reversal through repentance—anchors much of the organization’s apostasy framing. In contrast, ISIS disperses the same doctrinal tools across all adversarial categories, a pattern consistent with a worldview in which apostasy saturates every layer of the social and political order.

These co-occurrence patterns require brief unpacking. In AQ’s discourse, the tight linkage between *ḥākimiyya*, *tawba*, and critiques of political authorities points to a juridical-pastoral logic: sovereignty is inverted, but recoverable through repentance. This aligns with AQ’s graded theory of apostasy. ISIS, by contrast, treats these doctrinal elements as interchangeable instruments of condemnation: the same vocabulary deployed against rulers appears with comparable intensity against rival jihadists and other religious communities. This reinforces the impression of a flatter, more absolutist moral map.

Image 1: Relative Doctrinal Weight of *al-walā’ wa-al-barā’*, *ḥākimiyya*, and *tawba* in AQ and ISIS (Normalized %).^[21]



²¹ Values in Image#1 show the relative share of each doctrinal category object of study within each organization’s total ideological coding structure in the TITAN corpus. Values are normalized to allow comparison despite differences in output volume.

A final layer of evidence comes from aggregating doctrinal code distributions across the TITAN dataset. Image 1 above visualizes this distribution by plotting the relative intensity with which each organization deploys the same concepts. Unlike simple frequency tables, this representation allows the structural difference to emerge at a glance: AQ concentrates its rhetorical energy on *ḥākimiyya* and *tawba*, whereas ISIS saturates its discourse with *al-walā' wa-al-barā'*.

Taken together, the three levels of evidence presented here—frequency contrasts, co-occurrence structures, and aggregated doctrinal weights—form a cumulative picture: AQ and ISIS do not differ because they employ different concepts, but because they deploy the same concepts to build two distinct architectures of intra-Muslim enmity. In this sense, the quantitative analysis does not merely corroborate earlier qualitative impressions—it clarifies how each organization operationalizes doctrine into communicative strategy, sharpening the contrast that the next section summarizes in its comparative conclusions.

Conclusion

The analysis presented above shows that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State construct the figure of the apostate through shared doctrinal tools but divergent communicative architectures. Across lexical frequencies, co-occurrence patterns, and aggregated doctrinal weights, a consistent divide emerges: ISIS weaponizes apostasy as a totalizing, boundary-enforcing instrument, while AQ deploys it as a graded, strategic framework embedded in a broader political theology of authority, deviation, and selective reintegration.

For ISIS, the charge of apostasy functions as an immediate moral sorting device. Its discourse collapses political dissent, institutional cooperation, and rival jihadist activity into a single accusatory register—one that justifies coercion, spectacle, and unconditional demands for loyalty. Through *al-walā' wa-al-barā'* and a threat-laden version of *tawba*, ISIS renders its universe starkly binary: those who align are brothers; those who hesitate fall under the banners of unbelief. The organization's doctrinal minimalism—high intensity, low nuance—translates directly into an enforcement-friendly political theology suited to an entity that claims to govern.

AQ, by contrast, operates through layered moral evaluations rather than categorical rupture. Its use of *ḥākimiyya* as a diagnostic of illegitimate sovereignty, its differentiated application of *al-walā' wa-al-barā'*, and its strategic deployment of *tawba* create a spectrum of culpability that can be expanded or contracted depending on political need. This graded architecture allows AQ to condemn rulers forcefully while still appealing to broader constituencies, offering pathways for rhetorical rehabilitation and justifying coalition-building in insurgent environments.

Taken together, the empirical results reveal that the two groups do not merely apply doctrine differently—they translate the same theological repertoire into distinct models of political authority and intra-Muslim enmity. ISIS builds a system optimized for exclusion, immediate compliance, and the performative dramatization of loyalty; AQ constructs one optimized for delegitimization, persuasion, and controlled reintegration. In a landscape where religious authority is contested and institutional coherence is weak, these divergent architectures help explain each organization's strategies of mobilization and the kind of audiences they seek to shape.

About

The TITAN Project (Terrorism Insight Through the Analysis of Narratives) is a research initiative developed by the Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, officially launched in February 2026. The project is designed to advance the systematic study of jihadist narratives and strategic communication through an empirically grounded, data-driven research framework.

TITAN is structured around the systematic compilation and exploitation of an electronic, monolingual Arabic, diachronic, balanced, and representative corpus of propaganda produced by the world's two most prominent jihadist organizations: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. By adopting a corpus-based, mixed-method framework that integrates critical discourse analysis, computational linguistics, and subject-matter expertise, TITAN enables rigorous, verifiable analysis across large-scale datasets while retaining sensitivity to ideological nuance and discursive strategy. This design allows for both macro-level analysis of global jihadist narratives and fine-grained comparative studies across organizations and time periods, supporting cumulative research on the strategic evolution of jihadist discourse.

Research outputs derived from the corpus, together with detailed technical documentation, including methodological choices and coding strategies, are available on the project's website: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/titan-project>



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