



**Create, Connect, and Deceive:
Islamic State Supporters' Maintenance of
the Virtual Caliphate Through
Adaptation and Innovation**

Meili Criezis || September 2022

Program on Extremism

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Introduction

Despite the collapse of the Islamic State (IS)'s control over physical territories in Syria and Iraq and in the face of campaigns by social media platforms to evict IS supporters from virtual spaces, pro-IS online communities are resilient. Prior to IS losing the last vestiges of its physical territory at the battle of Baghouz in March 2019, individuals physically located within Syria and Iraq were responsible for the mass distribution of the group's official propaganda through several online fora, including Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram, among others. However, online pro-IS communities extended far beyond IS territory. Networks of supporters around the world formed *global* communities of individuals, and as IS lost territorial holdings, these *decentralized* communities played an essential role in maintaining an online presence across platforms. In turn, this decentralization ensured the survival of what scholars have termed the "digital Caliphate" or the "virtual Caliphate."¹ In the years following the collapse of IS' physical Caliphate, the virtual Caliphate has survived largely due to pro-IS supporters' ability to build network resilience and evade moderation while maintaining a continuous presence across a wide variety of online platforms.

Focusing primarily on decentralized, unofficial pro-IS networks, this paper proposes that pro-IS activities are oriented towards three strategic goals: create, connect, and deceive. It provides a detailed overview of these activities, including IS supporters' efforts to remain networked, avoid content moderation, and continue the creation of new content. The first section offers a historical overview of shifts that have occurred in pro-IS online ecosystems due to deplatforming efforts and detailing how these shifts impacted both platform migration and decentralization. Additionally, it identifies a guiding framework for this research. The following section groups pro-IS online behaviors by their three overarching goals: connect, create, and deceive. The analysis explores each objective's essential function within the strategies of pro-IS virtual ecosystems. To conclude, the report suggests areas for further research on pro-IS online networks.

¹ Conway, Maura, Khawaja Moign, Suraj lakhani, Jeremy Reffin, Andrew Robertson, and David Weir. 2018. "Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and Its Impacts." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42 (October): 141–60. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513984>.; Winter, Charlie. 2015. "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy." Quilliam. https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20161003_thevirtualcaliphateunderstandingislamicstatespropagandastrategy1.pdf.

A note on terminologies: This report employs the term "virtual Caliphate" in reference to the larger pro-Islamic State cloud of activity throughout online spaces. However, it also takes the view that there are numerous pro-IS virtual ecosystems operating within this somewhat nebulous cloud. Although interconnection occurs across platforms and between communities, the decentralized nature of their structuring means that they also evolve semi-independently from one another.

Contextualizing the Virtual Caliphate: A Brief History

In 2013 and 2014, IS supporters flocked to Twitter and created a massive number of accounts, thus establishing a substantial online presence and the foundation of what would become the “virtual Caliphate.”² Notably, IS members located in Syria and Iraq used the platform for a variety of purposes, including propaganda dissemination, recruitment, internal communications, and incitement of attacks outside IS-held territory.³ By mid-2015, Twitter began implementing systemic anti-IS initiatives, conducting mass deletion campaigns of pro-IS accounts. This forced supporters to seek a new online base of operations where they could freely distribute material and communicate without the interference of frequent suspensions.⁴ Although networks of IS supporters currently remain on Twitter, the overt scale of activity observed pre-2015 has been significantly disrupted.⁵

As a result of waves of Twitter suspensions, supporters found a new home on an application called Telegram. Telegram describes itself as a “messaging app with a focus on speed and security” which offers end-to-end encrypted chat capabilities via its secret chat mode.⁶ Celebrated by pro-IS supporters for its perceived level of heightened security, the networks began to gravitate away from Twitter and focus their energy on Telegram, using the platform to distribute propaganda, interact with one another, and create group chats. Moreover, Telegram offered an additional tool in their arsenal, as recruiters could now engage in cross-platform recruitment. IS recruiters could “start from mainstream social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook... identify and contact individuals who were interested in planning attacks on the behalf of IS” and “direct them to instant messengers with end-to-end encryption (including Telegram)” to “provide instructions on successfully carrying out an attack.”⁷

After approximately two and a half years of nearly uninterrupted IS activity on Telegram,⁸ Europol and Telegram coordinated their first “Action Day” in October 2018 with the goal of hampering Salafi-jihadist

² Conway, Maura, Khawaja Moign, Suraj Ikhani, Jeremy Reffin, Andrew Robertson, and David Weir. 2018. “Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and Its Impacts.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42 (October): 141–60. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513984>.

³ Huey, Laura, Rachel Inch, and Hillary Peladeau. 2017. “‘@ Me If You Need Shoutout’: Exploring Women’s Roles in Islamic State Twitter Networks.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42 (5): 445–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1393897>.

⁴ BBC. 2016. “Twitter Suspends 125,000 ‘Terrorism’ Accounts,” February 5, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35505996>.

⁵ Perez, Heather, and J.M. Berger. 2016. “The Islamic State’s Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions Are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters.” Occasional Paper. Program on Extremism at The George Washington University. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/JMB%20Diminishing%20Returns.pdf>.

⁶ “Telegram FAQ.” n.d. Telegram. <https://telegram.org/faq#q-what-is-telegram-what-do-i-do-here>.

⁷ Clifford, Bennett, and Helen Powell. 2019. “Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram.” Program on Extremism at The George Washington University. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/EncryptedExtremism.pdf>.

⁸ It is important to note that Telegram’s resistance to applying moderation stems from their sensitivity related to free speech issues and they have, therefore, been historically less adamant about enforcing any Terms of Service policy on

online networks on the platform.⁹ The following year, they launched a second Action Day in late November. The combined effect of the Europol Action Days “had a profound [continuing] impact on the number of jihadist posts on Telegram.”¹⁰ Significant disruptions resulted in further decentralization of pro-IS networks as supporters explored alternative and increasingly more obscure apps. This process of trial and error on new platforms created heightened anxieties among IS supporters, as they struggled to find other bases of operation in the midst of massive Telegram bans on pro-IS accounts, channels, and groups.¹¹

Despite continuing enforcement and attempts by supporters to explore other platforms, Telegram remains an important hub for pro-IS online networks. Although activities on the platform have substantially declined since 2018, it remains relatively easy to access pro-IS spaces on Telegram. One major factor in Telegram’s continuing relevance is *private* groups are still able to function over substantial periods of time without detection or deletion. In private chats on Telegram, users need either an invite from an existing member or a unique URL with a link to the group in order to join the group and access the content within. This creates an extra layer of security for IS supporters, because the content shared within the group cannot be seen by those outside of the group, including content moderators.

Throughout the process of migration from one platform to the next, IS supporters have gained experience in online decision-making, affording them opportunities to adjust, innovate, and test various methods to maintain their online presence. A wider culture permitting both semi-organized supporter-driven initiatives and creative innovation allows for needed malleability and fluidity to sustain pro-IS online movements.

The trajectory of real-world events has also, over time, contributed towards the cultivation of decentralized virtual ecosystems. As Michael Krona observes, the disintegration of the territorial so-

platform users. The lack of content moderation became hugely appealing for Islamic State supporters as well as far right and white supremacist extremists.

⁹ Amarasingam, Amarnath, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. 2021. “How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration.” Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>.

¹⁰ “Referral Action Day with Six EU Member States and Telegram.” 2018. Europol. October 5, 2018.

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/referral-action-day-six-eu-member-states-and-telegram.>; Amarasingam, Amarnath, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. 2021. “How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration.” Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>; “Europol and Telegram Take On Terrorist Propaganda Online.” 2019. Europol. November 25, 2019. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/europol-and-telegram-take-terrorist-propaganda-online>.

¹¹ Examples of explored platforms included but were not limited to: Because Communication Matters (BCM), Hoop, TamTam, MeWe, and Element. Amarasingam, Amarnath, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. 2021. “How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration.” Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>.

called Caliphate led to a situation where “online spaces are no longer merely amplifying the brand of IS; instead, with a more robust agency, IS participants are...forming independent entities.”¹² Krona identifies five baseline points from which to expand our understandings of such dynamics: 1) a fragmentation of utilized platforms, 2) an emphasis on religion over IS ideological doctrines, 3) an outsourcing of propaganda production, 4) a migration to encrypted platforms, and 5) a fostering of collective identity through participatory media.¹³ Building from this framework, the report focuses on the specific types of IS supporters’ tactics and activities used to maintain more independent grassroots, and sometimes semi-coordinated, driven objectives.

¹² Dr. Michael Krona. 2020. “Revisiting the Ecosystem of Islamic State’s ‘Virtual Caliphate.’” GNET. <https://gnet-research.org/2020/10/21/revisiting-the-ecosystem-of-islamic-states-virtual-caliphate/>.

¹³ Ibid.

Tactics and Activities of the Virtual Caliphate

Regardless of which platform they use, the online activities of IS supporters are centered around three goals: create, connect, and deceive. To achieve these objectives, supporters seek to grow their networks, ensure the continued spread of IS propaganda, demonstrate resilience to deplatforming efforts, and encourage fellow supporters to sustain autonomous ‘activist’ initiatives such as maintaining unofficial translation services. Accordingly, this section delves further into how pro-Islamic State supporters create, connect, and deceive in their online efforts.

Create: Generating Pro-IS Content

The decentralized nature of pro-IS networks has allowed for the development of supporter-driven initiatives and fostering identity-forming “participatory” engagement. Although they are separate from official IS media operations, independent “content creators” play an essential role in pro-IS virtual ecosystems by producing a continuously steady output of pro-IS materials, providing multi-lingual translations of IS content, and creating semi-centralized trusted collectives. Supporters also direct creative energies into offline contexts, producing items including IS-themed apparel, hand-drawn IS ‘fan’ art, and notes containing messages of support for IS.

Media Outlets and Magazines

Unofficial translation media outlets translate official IS news, magazine, and video releases into a wide variety of languages including Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, English, Farsi, French, German, Italian, Kurdish, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog, Turkish, Urdu, and Uyghur. The innerworkings of this type of grass-roots project can take place on an individual level as well as in private smaller Telegram chats, where a handful of “leadership” accounts provide direction to others in the group through designation of specific tasks. Individuals with graphics expertise are sometimes sought by groups to provide designs for an organization’s “brand name” and create templates for announcement layouts. The various translation collectives also release advertisements seeking translators for specific languages they have not yet covered, and coordinate mergers between themselves.

Given the fluid, independent, and continuously changing nature of this environment, supporters involved in translation initiatives sometimes express confusion and even voice criticisms about the apparent objectives of their translation group. Although some individuals in these collectives prioritize disseminating already-translated IS media, others object to duplicating efforts and believe that translation initiatives should focus on filling a need not already covered by someone else. Such tensions reveal how decentralization can create logistical complications, forcing supporters to balance one type of objective with another—in this case, balancing sheer output versus creating something novel.

Although they are not necessarily in competition with one another, unofficial, supporter-driven outlets also attempt to carve out their own unique space in the wider pro-IS online ecosystem. One of the most obvious ways they do this is by forming their brand around a regional focus as demonstrated by the Indian sub-content-focused magazine, Sawt Al Hind.¹⁴ Another example includes L'Agence Ouest Afrique, which focused on providing weekly summary reports in Arabic, French, and English consolidating West Africa-related IS developments. The outlet ran for a period of four and a half months in 2020, in which it aggressively maintained a multi-platform presence on Telegram, WhatsApp, Hoop, Rocketchat, Mastadon, and Conversations.



Figure 1. Examples of unofficial pro-IS media and translation collectives.

Even though some supporter-created magazines gain notoriety and positive attention among pro-IS communities, it is worth mentioning that they are susceptible to disinformation and/or misinformation. For example, in July 2020, a Sawt Al Hind dissemination Telegram channel posted a warning to followers about a fake copycat issue. This highlights that for unofficial media outlets, the decentralized nature of their community is a double-edged sword. It allows them to produce semi-official IS content without approval from the organization's central leadership, but also makes them susceptible to fakes, false advertising, and an overall environment of suspicion and confusion.

¹⁴ Hari Prasad. 2021. "Still No Storm in the Ocean: New Jihadist Narratives on Indian Islam." Hudson Institute. <https://www.hudson.org/research/16951-still-no-storm-in-the-ocean-new-jihadist-narratives-on-indian-islam>.

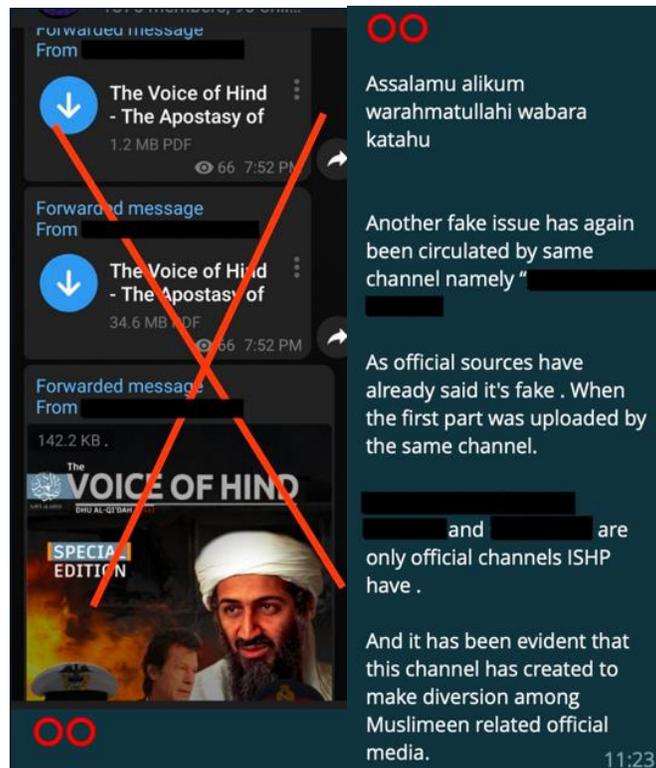


Figure 2. Administrator's warning on the Sawt al-Hind Telegram channel advising followers about a fake issue of their magazine that was disseminated online, July 2020.

Archives and Repositories

The creation of file repositories allows supporters to archive IS content. When disseminating propaganda towards broader audiences across platforms, they can contribute to and draw from the archive.¹⁵ Supporters also design and maintain their own websites where others can download files of IS content in a variety of languages. Despite efforts to remove these URLs from the surface web, supporters have rebounding strategies which will be discussed in more detail under the “Deceive” section.

¹⁵ Amarasingam, Amarnath, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. 2021. “How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration.” Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>.



Figure 3. Screenshots from an IS supporter-created website advertising links to their website on the surface web and a backup website accessible through the TOR browser.

Similarly, unofficial pro-IS semi-centralized collectives produce resources supporters can consult when looking for advice on how to improve their online security, manufacture explosives, or remain updated on the latest announcements from official Islamic State media.

Perhaps one of the more well-known groups of this type is AFAQ Electronic Horizons Foundation (EHF).¹⁶ Founded in 2016, EHF provides a wide array of information related to cybersecurity and it has published extensive step by step guides on how to implement secure settings for numerous platforms.¹⁷ Given this foundation's position as a long-term trusted resource, Islamic State supporters gravitate towards any advice it provides and suggest it to others looking for online security tips.



Figure 4. Screenshot of a conversation in a pro-ISIS chat, March 2022.

As of late March 2022, warnings began spreading throughout pro-Islamic State spaces that an EHF Element server was hacked, and messages advised people to delete their accounts. As one independent researcher notes, this is not the first time EHF has encountered security issues; it will be interesting to see how this latest development impacts wider IS supporter communities as well as their trust in a source they generally deemed quite reliable.¹⁸

¹⁶ Azani, Eitan, and Daniel Haberdorf. 2022. "The End of Islamic State's Cyber Security Unit Afaq?" Reichman University, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism.

<https://ict.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ELECTRONIC-HORIZON-FOUNDATION-AFAQ.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Switched. 2022. Twitter. March 22, 2022. https://twitter.com/switch_d/status/1506373936988266498.

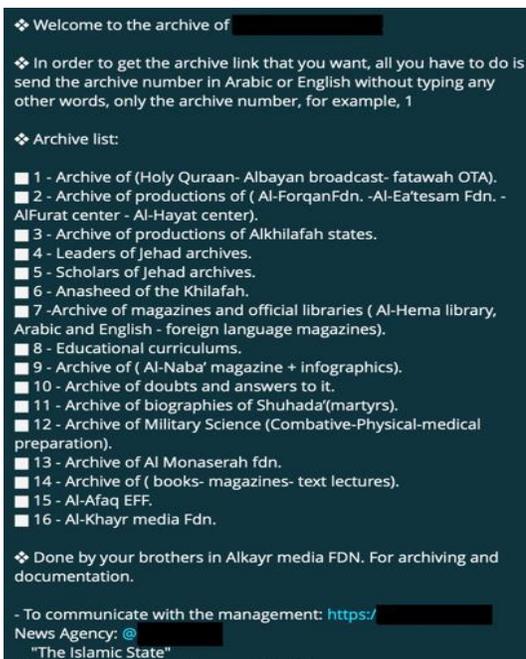


Figure 5. Post from a pro-IS Telegram channel demonstrating a start command-based archive system.

In addition to websites, supporters also create bots and special accounts dedicated to sharing archived information including PDF guides from EHF, official IS propaganda, hacked phone numbers and emails to use for new account creation, and IS *anashid*. If a supporter wishes to acquire specific types of IS content, they can initiate an exchange with a bot by selecting a ‘start’ command. The bot will then provide a menu of options asking if the individual wants to receive files pertaining to IS *anashid*, video releases, audio files, PDFs of IS official newspapers and magazines, or guides released by collectives. Archiving accounts function in a similar manner. An individual messages a specific user by sending a number corresponding to the type of content they are searching for, and the account will reply with the requested files.

Apparel, Fan Art, and Support Letters

Although this section focused on online supporter-driven initiatives, creation is not restricted to virtual environments. Unlike forms of engagement previously discussed, the creation of tangible items outside the virtual realm by groups that predominantly network online adds a heightened sense of a more personalized connection.

On Facebook, pro-IS accounts sometimes advertise what appear to be homemade IS-themed clothing and apparel. The following images below were gathered from explicitly pro-IS profiles; many pieces of apparel have “Islamic State” as well as pro-IS slogans plastered directly on them.¹⁹

¹⁹ It is important to note that the seal of Prophet Muhammad alone does not reveal an Islamic State connection and examining the wider context is key to avoid cases of mistakenly identifying an account or individual as being an Islamic State supporter.

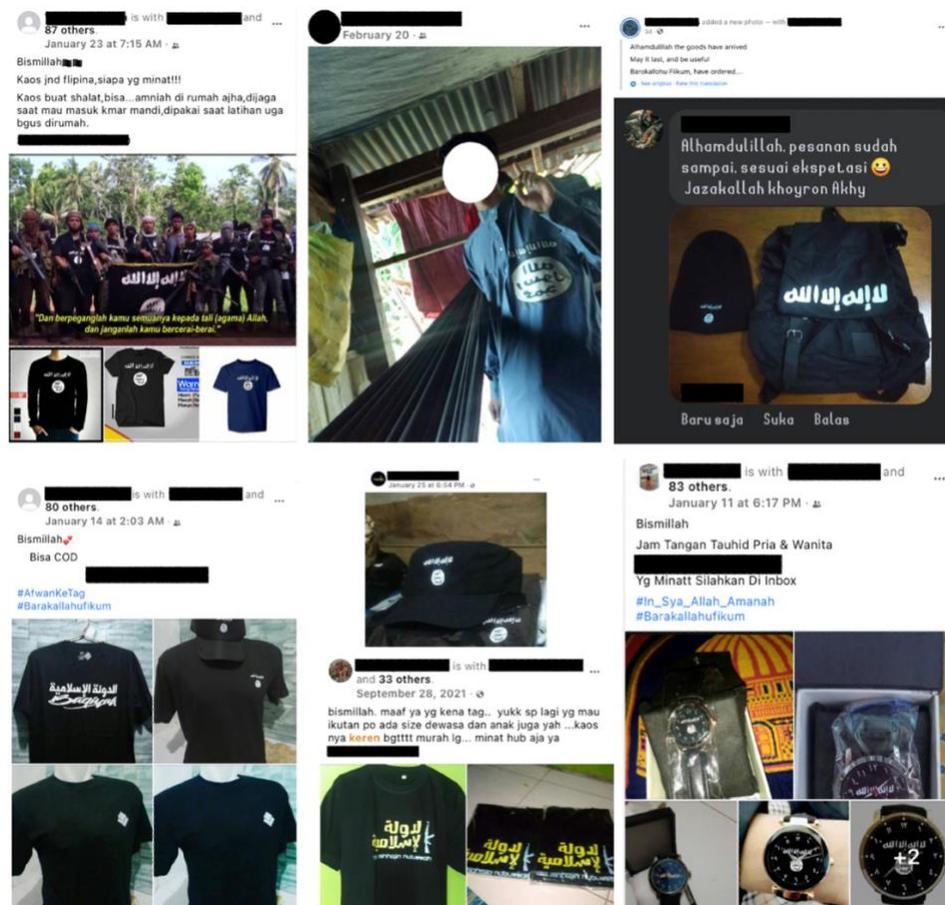


Figure 6. Various examples of pro-IS fan-made apparel.

In the context of Western far-right movements, Miller-Idriss discusses the production of extremist apparel, commenting that the groups that produce it are attempting to mainstream their ideologies through the promotion of hate brand messaging, coded symbology, and efforts to open up new markets.²⁰ While IS supporters cannot expect to mainstream their messages in the way that the far right and white supremacists do, Miller-Idriss's observes that their "hate clothing" permits the literal embodiment of violence, showcases a celebration of hate, "intensif[ies] exposure to ideological claims," and reinforces in/out-group dichotomies.²¹

Throughout Facebook, Telegram, and other apps, supporters also widely circulate hand-drawn Islamic State fan art depicting IS fighters brandishing weapons, taking part in a beheading, or dying as "martyrs" on the battlefield. Telegram channels focused on fundraising for women in Al Hol, Al Roj, and other camps in Eastern Syria feature pictures allegedly drawn by children that depict IS-related imagery.

²⁰ Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. 2020. *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²¹ Ibid.

Following significant developments (such as the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), supporters will send hand-written notes of support for IS.²²

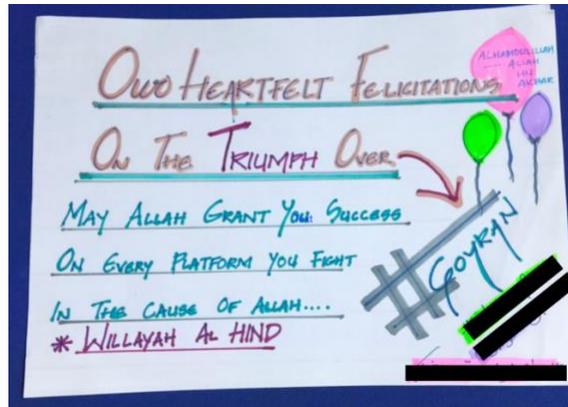


Figure 7. A handwritten note of support from an IS supporter to individuals who escaped custody during the Gweiran prison break, January 2022.

Finally, in 2014, IS released its own app called “Dawn of Glad Tidings” which allowed Twitter users to give account access to IS media personnel. These official media personnel would then mass Tweet messages via each supporter account in what Brian Hughes termed “a chorus for the caliphate.”²³ Another source, Maktaba al-Himma, developed its own app called “Huroof” to teach literacy to children by incorporating IS imagery and militant vocabulary.²⁴ Carrying forth the concept of IS-created apps, supporters have sought to design their own platforms in hopes of offering alternatives and a more secure messaging option. While supporters have yet to create a reliable pro-IS communication app, they continue to promote calls to build apps in Telegram chats, sometimes with applicable source code.

Connect: Networking in the Virtual Caliphate

Facilitating and solidifying virtual connections remains an important objective for pro-IS supporters, especially as they face deplatforming efforts on both mainstream spaces and platforms with encryption capabilities. The characteristics of the social media sites themselves influence the strategies that supporters use to grow and keep their networks.

²² Criezis, Meili, and Ayse Lokmanoglu. 2020. “Baghdadi Fan Mail.” GNET. <https://gnet-research.org/2020/11/13/baghdadi-fan-mail/>.

²³ Pennington, Rosemary, and Michael Krona, eds. 2019. *The Media World of ISIS*. Indiana University Press.

²⁴ Lakomy, Miron. 2017. “Let’s Play a Video Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42 (4). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903>.

To maintain connections, accounts share backup account information with one another for individual profiles, pro-IS channels, and group chats in case primary accounts are banned. Following the November 2019 Europol Action Day, keeping backup accounts on Telegram and elsewhere became an essential response to deplatforming efforts. Although IS supporters used this strategy prior to the Action Day, such countermeasures became even more of a necessity. Amidst Telegram bans, supporters elevated connecting and networking to their utmost priorities. To accomplish this goal, users shared ideas on where to “migrate” and provided information for their other accounts on numerous platforms. In hopes of mitigating the risk of a ban on Telegram, channel and group admins also disseminated links in closed groups instructing group members to only share the URL with “trusted brothers.”

On Facebook, maintaining webs of connection is accomplished through slightly different means due Facebook’s features. Facebook moderates IS content stricter than other platforms and has a different suite of features for individual users, such as the ability to friend or follow profiles and pages and the option for users to maintain their own page by creating posts or re-posting content.

Similar to pro-IS Twitter accounts, pro-IS Facebook profiles display a variety of types of activity where certain accounts serve specific functions. Connector node profiles often tag 50+ individuals on their friends list in pro-IS posts to help new and returning pro-IS profiles grow their friend network. This accomplishes two primary objectives: 1) it allows the tagged individuals to identify other pro-IS individuals in the tag list, leading them to a potential network of like-minded supporters and 2) it multiplies the number of spaces that the pro-IS post appears, because if the user does not adjust permission settings, it will automatically appear on the timelines of every tagged profile.

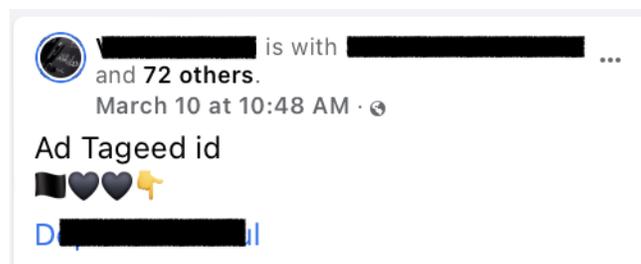


Figure 8. A connector node account tags 73 pro-IS Facebook accounts in its network, asking them to connect with the other profiles by sending them friend requests.

Other accounts act as amplifiers dedicated to mostly uploading official IS announcements on their pages and connecting pro-IS users via the mass tagging method:



Figure 8. A pro-IS Facebook account tags other users in an upload of official IS propaganda to their account.

On a more general level, supporters frequently engage in cross-platform link sharing to connect communities across virtual spaces, and they also guide conversations that might be of a sensitive nature onto apps they believe are more secure.

Deceive: Obscuring Activity and Applying Countermeasures

Deception is a crucial tactic IS supporters use to avoid content moderation and account bans. As previously discussed in the “connect” section, the nature of the platform itself can shape their behavior in this category as well. For mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, IS supporters will often edit images of IS-related content in the hopes of disrupting AI detection and overcoming efforts to limit the sharing of extremist material facilitated by hash-sharing data bases.²⁵ Supporters attempt to obscure pro-IS content through textual deception, visual deception, and account deception.

²⁵ “Broadening the GIFCT Hash-Sharing Database Taxonomy: An Assessment and Recommended Next Steps.” 2021. Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism. <https://gifct.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GIFCT-TaxonomyReport-2021.pdf>.

Textual Deception

Forms of textual deception include altering word spacing or the letters in a text to confuse AI detection algorithms, and using euphemisms, codewords or vague language to refer to pro-IS materials without directly referring to IS. For example, some posts refer to a publication as “the Muslim Newspaper”; the target in-group audience will understand this as an indirect reference to Al Naba, IS’ official newspaper. This method applies to hashtags as well. For instance, some Southeast Asian IS supporters on Facebook use #[word is redacted]NewsOk to mark IS propaganda posts. On Telegram, similar approaches can be observed where pro-IS channels name themselves “National Geographic,” “Link Share” (referring to link aggregator channels dedicated to spreading URLs to other IS Telegram spaces), and other seemingly inconspicuous names.

Supporters also use emojis as part of textual deception, using what Moustafa Ayad described as a “complex codebook of emojis” in place of direct word references to IS.²⁶ In other words, the emojis act as stand-ins allowing supporters to promote IS content without having to type certain phrases that might be picked up by algorithmic detectors. Application of these types of textual deception can become more or less necessary depending on the primary language of the supporter in question. Because algorithms employed by major social media companies are more likely to successfully flag content in English, English-speaking pro-IS accounts must exercise extra caution while Arabic speakers are bolder in their direct IS references.²⁷

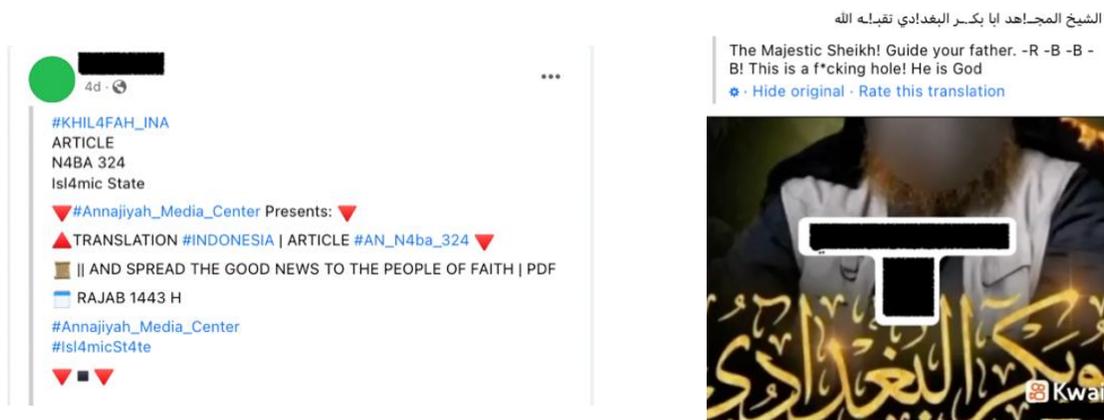


Figure 9. Examples of text-based deception: an IS supporter on Facebook uses the text “KHL4FAH” as a reference for the Caliphate (khilafah), another user uses a coded reference to former IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that results in a mistranslation from Facebook’s automatic Arabic-to-English translator.

²⁶ Scott, Mark. 2022. “Digital Bridge: ISIS Disinformation — Transatlantic AI — Legislative Update,” February 10, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/digital-bridge/isis-disinformation-transatlantic-ai-legislative-update/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

Visual Deception

Visual deception refers to efforts to alter or otherwise visually obscure IS propaganda. Supporters will blur IS flags or well-recognized IS leader's faces in videos and still images, alter the color settings when reposting screenshots of official IS media, and distort the cover pages of IS media to interfere with image hashing detection. The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism describes hashes as “numerical representations of source content” - in other words “digital fingerprints” - which can be used to identify violent extremist content.²⁸

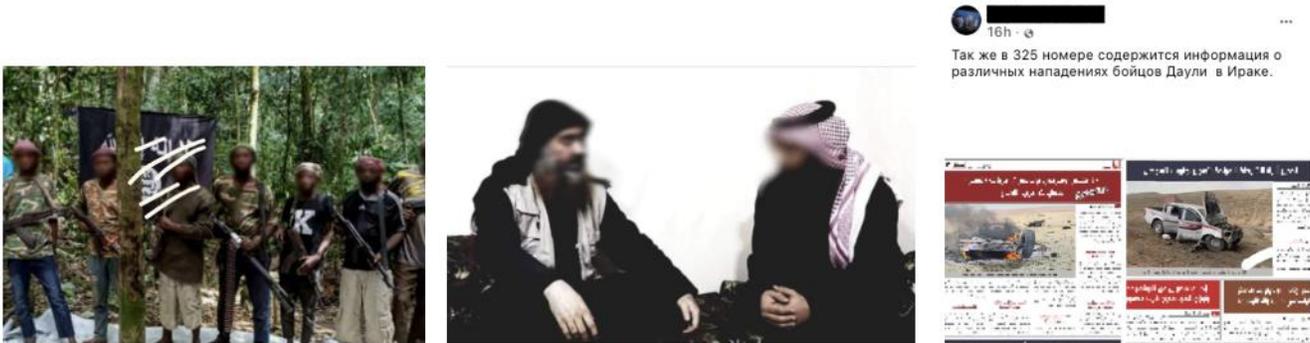


Figure 10. Examples of visual deception: IS supporters blur the images of faces and official IS propaganda to prevent detection in social media image hash databases used for content removal.

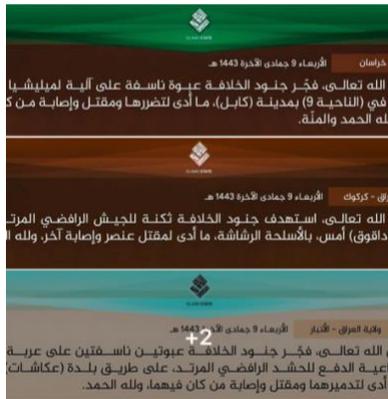


Figure 11. IS supporter changes the color scheme of news updates from the organization's al-Naba magazine to avoid content removal.

²⁸ “Annual Report.” 2021. <https://gifct.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/GIFCT-Annual-Report-2021-PV.pdf>.; “Transparency Report.” 2021. <https://gifct.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GIFCT-Transparency-Report-2021.pdf>.;

Account and Website Deception

Account and website deception refers to efforts by IS supporters to obscure their online profiles or prevent them from external unauthorized access. Supporters attempt to implement strict privacy and access options by setting their profiles to “private mode” or only accepting friend invites from individuals who are also pro-IS supporters. Some accounts hide their friends list on Facebook to prevent network tracing. Sometimes, accounts choose to express their pro-IS stance by adding check-ins from actual places named “Isis”. Interestingly, profiles may decide not to share any IS content on their pages but instead opt to make pro-IS comments on others’ posts and communicate with fellow supporters solely in comment sections. Another approach includes admins on Telegram posting a single URL to a pro-IS channel, deleting the original message after acquiring a high enough view count, and then sharing a new URL once the previous channel encounters moderation bans. These accounts attempt to minimize the risk of being detected by deleting evidence of their redirection efforts and maintaining a “parent” channel solely dedicated to link-sharing.

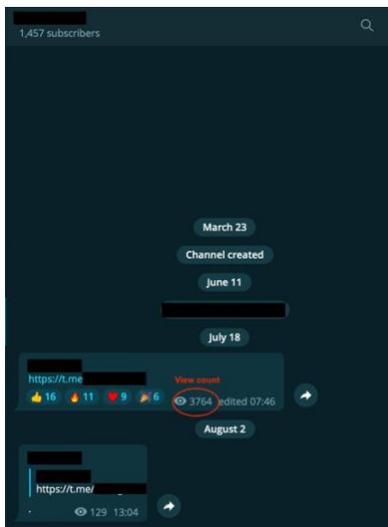


Figure 12: An example of a “parent” channel directing users to a pro-IS URL. Once the channel is banned, the “parent” channel will delete the old URL and share a new link.

Administrators behind surface web pro-IS sites, on the other hand, have the ability to create mirror websites on the dark web where they distribute updated surface web URLs if a current page is removed. Accounts also use targeted in-group language to hide the nature of their account from moderators while signaling to other supporters that they are pro-IS (without having to post IS content themselves to advertise their ideological stance). On TikTok, pro-IS users share IS *anashid* and audio files, but label them with generic names and hashtags such as “Islamic songs.”

Special Circumstance: Gender and Deception

Sometimes supporters engage in deception to deceive *each other*. In pro-IS groups collective expectations of certain gender norms often restrict the participation and inclusion of female accounts to varying degrees. In her research, Chelsea Daymon found that many groups “post rules of engagement, specifying that ‘sisters are not allowed.’”²⁹ This environmental factor has resulted in a noticeable pattern where female accounts are either encouraged to adopt a male or gender-neutral username. Sometimes, women directly discuss using this method amongst themselves in women’s-only chats.

In comparison to life in IS-held physical territory, the virtual ecosystem provides a more accessible environment if women are willing to deceive their fellow IS supporters in exchange for the ability to fully participate in online groups. Interestingly, some apparently male accounts have seemed open to women engaging more directly in pro-IS spaces. One male IS unofficial media producer acknowledged that that “many sisters help with media. We are short many brothers.”³⁰

²⁹ Daymon, Chelsea. 2019. “Women and ISIS.”

³⁰ Criezis, Meili. 2020. “Online Deceptions: Renegotiating Gender Boundaries on ISIS Telegram.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14 (1). <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2020/issue-1/criezis.pdf>.; Criezis, Meili. 2020. “Many Sisters Wish They Were Men’: Gendered Discourse and Themes in pro-ISIS Online Communities.” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. Winter 2020/2021 (December). <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/409/251>.

Conclusion

In summary, the three goals of create, connect, and deceive structure how IS supporters make decisions about online engagement, particularly involving their preferred platforms of choice. “Create” demonstrates the fluid creative nature of the “virtual Caliphate” where grassroots activism and direct participatory involvement on an individual level, as well as collective scale, act as sustaining forces.³¹ “Connect” serves to unite IS supporters with one another across multiple platforms and help them maintain networks despite deplatforming efforts. “Deceive” emphasizes supporters’ resourcefulness and anticipatory nature. By following these goals, IS supporters maintain online resiliency, allowing them to withstand both IS’ real-world losses and numerous anti-IS moderation campaigns online. Therefore, they are essential to the continued survival of the pro-IS online ecosystem.

Although the previous section approached the goal of create, connect, and deceive in a compartmentalized manner, they are not mutually exclusive, and oftentimes supporters undertake activities in furtherance of more than one of the goals. Breaking down these activities and strategies into three overarching groupings isolates each behavior in order to present a more in-depth examination of the methods supporters use to accomplish their diversified set of objectives. The most prominent IS supporter goals center on maintaining and promoting networks, distributing a continuous output of unofficial as well as official IS content and exhibiting a persistent online presence.

This report conceptualized three overarching categories to describe IS supporter online activities, but it is important to emphasize some areas of ambiguity. Depending on the circumstance, supporters may display behaviors that blend the categories such as using deceptive tactics in hopes of keeping supporter-created content online for longer periods of time. Supporters may also find themselves facing dilemmas where they must navigate a set of core goals that are actually in conflict with one another. For example, IS supporters seeking to connect with likeminded individuals online must simultaneously consider the risks (i.e. account bans or infiltration by intelligence) that come with displaying a pro-IS presence too overtly. Although employing deceptive strategies to obscure their ideological stance could act as a solution to this problem, it can also impact their original goal of connecting with others.

Another dilemma for supporters includes balancing public reach on mainstream platforms like Twitter with their desire to nurture “closed” echo chambers on spaces such as Telegram. Reliance on closed echo chambers limits opportunities to widen their influence and distribute propaganda messages to larger audiences beyond supporter networks.³² However, maintaining long-term accounts on

³¹ Winter, Charlie. 2015. “The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy.” Quillium. https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20161003_thevirtualcaliphateunderstandingislamicstatespropagandastrategy1.pdf.

³² Prucha, Nico. 2016. “IS and the Jihadist Information Highway – Projecting Influence and Religious Identity via Telegram.” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10 (6): 48–58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297705>.

mainstream platforms can be rather work-intensive, since supporters may have to create numerous backups and restart their profiles from scratch each time they are banned. Pro-IS accounts on Twitter and Facebook will sometimes air frustrations at having to regenerate their accounts. A document titled “The Mobile Bomb,” released by an unofficial pro-IS organization reprimanded, those unwilling to maintain a presence on mainstream platforms:

“How can your excuse be that you don’t know how to open Twitter and Facebook accounts while other supporters are entering social media sites everyday with different names, going through comments and under tweets defending the honor of the mujahideen while you are hiding in Telegram...the online supporters of IS are part of the media Caliphate. It plays an important and great role supporting the state of tawhid and jihad...Today the battle is in the media field. On the other hand, Allah makes it easier for supporters to invent new ways to bypass obstacles and to adapt to the changes and control this field once again.”

The text scolds supporters who are unwilling to dedicate themselves to staying on mainstream platforms outside of Telegram, and reminds them about the importance of sustaining the “media Caliphate.” Most notably, it identifies adaptation and bypass strategies as being key to IS supporters’ objectives to regain control of online spaces. This is where the create, connect, and deceive framework can provide an overarching structure from which to examine *how* IS supporters respond to varying levels of deplatforming efforts across social media while also maintaining connections with one another.

The Islamic State is neither the first nor only Salafi-jihadist organization to prioritize media strategies, but its supporters have sustained a decentralized presence that has proven to be more flexible than other Salafi-jihadist adherents. Keeping the decentralized “virtual Caliphate” connected requires supporters to transition between platforms and remain adaptable in constantly shifting online environments.³³ Their presence on a wide array of platforms, grassroots decentralized “activism”, and the enormous amounts of official IS propaganda from which they are able to draw collectively cultivate an environment where, as Charlie Winter states, “the caliphate *idea* will exist long beyond its proto-state.”³⁴ By creating, connecting, and deceiving, pro-IS users maintain their foothold and ensure not only their online survival, but find ways to continue thriving despite efforts to deplatform them.

Recognizing how supporters exhibit cross-categorical behaviors that can both potentially enhance or detract from their objectives allows us to better understand the ways in which these virtual pro-IS

³³ Winter, Charlie. 2015. “The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy.” Quillium. https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20161003_thevirtualcaliphateunderstandingislamicstatespropagandastrategy1.pdf.

³⁴ Ibid.

ecosystems function on a more granular level. It also may help in identifying counterstrategies to disrupt IS networks and exploit vulnerabilities; particularly where these individuals are forced to balance conflicting objectives. Exploitation tactics might include heightening internal paranoia among supporters about infiltration of their networks or improving moderation on major platforms to remove not only accounts that are overtly pro-IS but also those who attempt to use deceptive methods to avoid bans. Deplatforming violent extremists on major platforms is far from a catch-all solution, but it limits their wider reach of influence and forces them to restrict themselves to more obscure platforms.³⁵

Approaching extremists' behavior in online spaces from a "connect, create, and deceive" framework allows us to improve how we structure our research approaches when examining pro-IS activities on a more individualized scale. Expanding our understandings in this manner compliments excellent and illuminating studies that have identified wider patterns in pro-IS milieus such as monitoring larger-scale network trends, platform migration, link-sharing habits, and the effect that moderation has on these communities.³⁶

Perhaps the most succinct way to convey pro-IS supporters' approach to social media can be found in their own motto: "remaining and expanding." They dedicate enormous efforts to maintain an online presence across a large variety of platforms and they continue to explore ways to further expand their influence and reach despite setbacks. For long-term objectives, supporters ensuring the continued survival of virtual pro-IS communities serve as a reminder that IS adherents are outliving the territorial so-called Caliphate. In other words, the longevity of these online communities directly links to concepts of what Carol Winkler and Kareem El Damahoury call, "lasting identities."³⁷ These "transhistorical" identities solidify what may have been "short term-collectives expected to fade" into "timeless community formations that could prevail," aided by strategies centered around creating, connecting, and deceiving.³⁸

Further research could focus on areas of weakness in various pro-IS ecosystems and identify opportunities for exploitation that go beyond just content moderation and account bans. Research could

³⁵ Ghaffary, Shirin. 2022. "Does Banning Extremists Online Work? It Depends." Vox. February 3.

<https://www.vox.com/recode/22913046/deplatforming-extremists-ban-qanon-proud-boys-boogaloo-oathkeepers-three-percenters-trump>.

³⁶ Alexander, Audrey. 2017. "Digital Decay? Tracing Change Over Time Among English-Language Islamic State Sympathizers on Twitter," October. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/DigitalDecayFinal_0.pdf; Gomes et al. 2017; Bodine-Baron et al. 2016; Ayad, Amarasingam, and Alexander 2021; Berger and Perez 2016; Amarasingam, Amarnath, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter. 2021. "How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration." Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>.

³⁷ Winkler, Carol, and Kareem El Damahoury. 2022. *Proto-State Media Systems: The Digital Rise of al-Qaeda and ISIS*. New York, NY: oxford University Press. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/proto-state-media-systems-9780197568026?cc=us&lang=en&>, 189.

³⁸ Ibid.

also work towards expanding the number of categories beyond the ones proposed in this report or challenge them. In the upcoming years, it will be important to continue vigorous observation of pro-IS online environments as the circumstances for IS members on the ground and across various *wilayat* continue to evolve.

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