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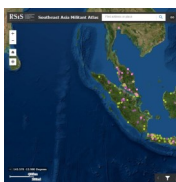
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Perpetrating Militant Jihadist Ideological Narratives

In 2022, the competition between the two leading transglobal Islamist jihadist groups, Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), intensified, especially after the AQ-linked Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. However, while they confronted each other on the Afghan battlefield, their propaganda narratives took cues from the same ideological playbook. This was evident in their continued radical interpretations of the Islamic concepts of jihad, hijrah and bai'ah, with the aim to imprint their global and local presence and to recruit followers and sympathisers. IS, in particular, has leveraged organisational and global developments to continually put forward its interpretations of the three concepts in pursuit of its militant agenda. These developments were the deaths of its last two leaders in February and October, and the increased tempo of IS militancy in Africa as the next jihadist frontier. On its part, AQ's ideological propaganda has not deviated from its past iterations, but appears somewhat muted and localised in comparison to IS' transnational nature. In another development relevant to jihadist ideology, the Russian war against Ukraine in February evoked early concerns of a jihadist-far right axis. While such concerns proved unwarranted, the war nevertheless raised two arguments by Islamists on whether it a jihad to be imposed on Muslims. These arguments have been instructive in the study of religious justifications for a militant jihad.

IS and AQ – Sustained by Ideological Narratives

In 2022, the rivalry between the two leading transglobal Islamist jihadist groups, Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), intensified, especially after the AQ-linked Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.¹ IS and AQ have competed against each other in pursuing global expansion with an eye to becoming the most dominant terrorist organisation by capitalising on Muslim communities' political, religious and economic grievances worldwide. IS and AQ have also sought to exploit local grievances in order to gain the allegiance of aggrieved communities, with their affiliates engaging in violence and terrorism.² They operate in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and the Sahel, fighting for resources and recruits and often clashing militarily.

Only IS had managed to establish an erstwhile proto-state in Iraq and Syria with a powerful military and a civil administration, although that collapsed in 2019. At its peak, IS' online propaganda also proved more effective in terms of recruitment than that of AQ.³ Still, moving beyond Iraq and Syria into Southeast Asia, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa has not been easy for IS, despite the potency of its radical narratives among segments of Western Muslims at its peak between 2014-18.

As for AQ, its efforts to lead a unified global movement, which it had arguably previously achieved (in the immediate post-9/11 years until the emergence of IS), have been restrained in recent years. AQ can no longer be regarded as the vanguard of global jihadism. The end of the Soviet-Afghan War marked the redundancy of *dakwah wal jihad* (preaching and jihad), an AQ slogan coined during the aforesaid war that was a clarion call for jihad. Currently, AQ leaders inspire the group's affiliates with their strategic vision while avoiding direct tactical supervision – allowing them to focus on local issues in their respective areas of operation.⁴

Although leadership decapitations in 2022 have significantly reduced both groups' organisational coherence and effectiveness, IS, AQ and their affiliates have survived and still persist in various parts of the world, posing varying degrees of threat. This article focuses on how IS and AQ perpetuate their respective propaganda narratives in response to certain developments affecting their organisations.

Separately, the article also looks at Islamist arguments in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a jihad or otherwise, as well as militant jihadist groups' reactions to the war.

IS and AQ Jihadist Ideologies, Narratives and Propaganda

IS and AQ have presented their ideology as a system of critical religious beliefs interpreted from religious texts which contain opinions of people and situations. The ideology consists of interconnected and interdependent ideas, presented to the audience as if it were what God wants.⁵ When adopted, it justifies their violent actions.

The narrated ideology is disseminated through propaganda on social media to self-radicalise others into believing that establishing a rightful caliphate through militant jihad is a religious duty. The ideological narratives centre mainly on issues such as *tawhid* (Oneness of Allah), *manhaj* (methodology), *hijrah* (emigration), jihad and *jama'ah* (unity of the Islamic community under the rule of a caliph). The ideology reinforces one consistent message – that Muslims must live under the authority of a caliph who implements *shariah* (Islamic law) in order to succeed in this world and the Hereafter. The combination of ideology, narratives, and propaganda forms the lifeblood of IS and AQ, enabling them to remain resilient and adaptable.⁶

Other than telling stories, the narratives also serve as conduits to instil violent radical ideas in the target audience. Communicating with vulnerable individuals in a narrative format allows them to be radicalised without meeting face-to-face and helps scattered sympathetic groups to establish a shared understanding of their past, present and future.

***Baqiya wa Tatamadad* – Mission of IS' Ideological Narratives**

To stem the threat to IS' relevance and dominance within the global jihadist movement, the group uses the oft-repeated slogan of *baqiya wa tatamadad*. It presents narratives of determination, resilience and supremacy to compensate for the collapse of its territorial caliphate in 2019. The slogan helps IS persist in reinforcing its presence and ensuring its survival. It demonstrates IS' resilience in reviving and rebuilding its capabilities. At the same time, it emphasises IS' unity and resolve to remain in business (*baqiya*). By answering the call, IS affiliates in Syria, Iraq, Africa, Afghanistan and East Asia carry out operations to portray IS' expansion efforts and continued activity.⁷

To some extent, the territorial defeat and demise of the self-styled caliphate in the Levant affected IS' credibility. Nevertheless, IS' rhetorical influence and its affiliates in other regions, such as Afghanistan (ISK), West Africa (ISWAP), and East and Southeast Asia, make up for the loss. The slogan appeals to those in localities where rebellion and militancy persist because the central government is weak and unable to resolve local grievances.⁸

IS Call for Hijrah to Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is now home to several branches of IS, where the group marches on to establish a strong base of operations in the theatre.⁹ In a series of propaganda messages over the past year, IS highlighted its 'success' in the region by publishing videos, images and articles about its activities in Africa. IS has referred to Africa as a new land of *hijrah* and jihad through its propaganda messaging. Images of IS activities such as preaching and distributing the *zakat* (almsgiving) represent an attempt to portray the group as having successfully established a legitimate 'Islamic state' and rule by *shariah*, reigniting the categorisation of the world into *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (abode of war).¹⁰

For example, in June 2022, ISWAP released a 39-minute video in a local language (possibly Swahili), detailing IS activities in north-eastern Nigeria.¹¹ The video, titled "A Book that Guides and a Sword that

Grants Victory”, documented attacks against the Nigerian army, sermons to locals and distributions of *zakat* (almsgiving). This propaganda messaging put forth the narrative that IS has successfully established a legitimate ‘Islamic state’ as well as *shariah* law in Africa. It was also an attempt by IS to ‘recreate’ its dichotomy of *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *dar al-Harb* (abode of war), where ‘true’ Muslims are described as those who live in the former and infidels those who live in the latter, thus allowing IS to conduct acts of terror against Muslims and non-Muslims alike, depending on where they live.

In the same month, IS’ weekly *al-Naba* newsletter (Issue 343, 16 June 2022) published an op-ed titled “Africa: Land of Hijra (migration) and Jihad”.¹² The article praised IS for its growing success in battlefield gains against the ‘infidel’ forces and its implementation of *shariah* over its controlled territories. The article also mentioned that Africa is “what al-Sham (the Levant) used to be yesterday”, before concluding with a call for Muslims to perform *hijrah* to the region.

Promotion of Bai’ah to IS’ So-Called Caliphs

IS has continued to suffer leadership decapitation over the years, but the remnant of IS’ leadership has persevered in projecting the group’s undeterred presence and following through on online propaganda such as public *bai’ah* (swearing of allegiance) to each new caliph.

The release of an official IS audio message confirming the death of IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi on March 10, 2022, also contained the announcement that the group’s Shura Council had appointed a successor and new caliph, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, in an attempt to validate that IS’ organisational structure was still intact. The audio used verse 23 of the Surah *Al-Ahzāb* (the Parties) as the title of its audio message to promote the appointment of the new caliph:

*“Among the believers are men who have proven true to what they pledged to Allah. Some of them have fulfilled their pledge with their lives, others are waiting their turn. They have never changed their commitment in the least.” (Quran, 33:23)*¹³

The verse drove home the point that the preceding caliph had stayed the course until death, and the swearing of allegiance (*bai’ah*) to the new caliph after the release of the audio message showed nothing was amiss.¹⁴

Following the message, from March 11-12, 2022, IS affiliates began sharing photos of their fighters giving *bai’ah* to Abu Hasan al-Qurayshi. These affiliates or *wilayat* (provinces) included Iraq, Syria, Sinai (Egypt), Libya, West Africa, Central Africa, Somalia, East Asia (Philippines), Yemen, Khorasan (Afghanistan), Pakistan and India. Some also released a series of videos titled “The Jihad of the Believers Goes On”. In March, a total of nine episodes were produced by IS Sham (Syria), West Africa, Iraq, Somalia, Khorasan, Pakistan, India, Libya and Sinai, reaffirming their allegiance to the new caliph and avowing that they would avenge the deaths of the former leader and spokesman.

Similarly, when Abu Hasan al-Qurayshi died in October, IS made a belated acknowledgement of his death on November 30, 2022,¹⁵ but photos of *bai’ah* ceremonies to the new caliph, Abu al-Hussein al-Hussein al-Qurayshi, quickly began circulating publicly. In glorifying the new leader, IS spokesman al-Muhajir said, “He is one of the veteran warriors and one of the loyal sons of the Islamic State”.¹⁶

Unchanging AQ Narrative

Following the success of AQ’s ally, the Taliban, in returning to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, there were some expectations that AQ’s ideological narratives would be further boosted in 2022 in terms of imagination and scale. However, this did not appear to be the case, as AQ’s propaganda machine did not crank up much beyond revelling in the Taliban’s success as a victorious jihad against

Islam's perceived enemies and highlighting it as something worthy of emulation by other followers. On February 19, 2022, AQ's official media arm, Al-Sahab Foundation, released the sixth issue of its *One Ummah* magazine, titled "Verily God has Promised Us with Victory, and Bush with Destruction. We Shall See Which of the Promise Is True!". This title was taken from a quote by the Taliban's co-founder and first leader, Mullah Omar (aka Muhammad Omar Mujahid), whom the magazine called *Amirul Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful). In its editorial, the *One Ummah* magazine congratulated the leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Afghan people, the Mujahideen and the Muslim *ummah* in general, for "the expulsion of the Crusader soldiers from the land of Afghanistan, and the complete cleansing of the Afghan Muslim soil from the filth of the Crusaders". The victory in Afghanistan, according to the magazine, was the fulfilment of God's divine promise of victory for the jihad waged by the *ummah*.

It is possible that AQ's lack of ideological dynamism can be attributed to its rudderless situation in 2022, with the death of its long-time leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July, notwithstanding criticism of his less-than-charismatic leadership.

The War in Ukraine – Arguments For and Against Jihad

In the past, Islamist terrorist groups used historical narratives to reframe world events as divine manifestations by building a social construction of the present. Other than crafting narratives and propaganda to support the ideology they embrace, they usually associate the events with Islamic eschatology while using apocalyptic language. However, their recent narratives have been more pragmatic, as is evident in discussions on the Ukraine war.

There are two contrasting views as to whether the Ukraine war constitutes a jihad in which Muslims are encouraged to partake, as was the case made by AQ when the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The first considers the Russian invasion of Ukraine illegal and unlawful in Islam because the Russian government had, in the past, invaded and occupied Muslim-majority Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan during the Russian Empire, also known as Imperial Russia (1721-1917), and the Soviet Union era. According to this argument, Ukraine has the right to defend its territory, even if it means sacrificing lives.

The second supports Russia and equates the Putin government with the non-Muslim Najashi government of historical Habshah, which defended Prophet Muhammad's companions who migrated there during the Prophet's time. According to this view, Muslims must support the Russian government in the war because the Putin government is fair and Muslim-friendly. Those in the Russian armed forces are hence discharging a praiseworthy duty and a legitimate jihad. Not surprisingly, this view is expressed by scholars affiliated with religious institutions under the Russian government, such as Talgat Tadzhuiddin, Head of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia and Grand Mufti of Russia; Salakh Mezhiev, Mufti of Chechnya; and Kamil Samigullin, Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan and Mufti of Tatarstan.¹⁷

There were three observable reactions from militant groups regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. The first supported Russia's war against Ukraine and permitted Muslims to fight under the Russian army. Ramzan Kadyrov, currently the President of the Republic of Chechnya, belongs to this group.¹⁸ His militia, known as the Kadyrovites, was established by his father Akhmad Kadyrov during the two Chechen wars against Russia. However, under Ramzan's rule, the militia was absorbed into Russia's security and armed forces to help maintain security in the Chechen region.¹⁹

The second emerged from Muslim militant groups in Ukraine and the surrounding areas, with ethnic Chechens, Tatars and others taking the side of the Ukrainian army. They perceive Russia as an oppressive power and its military operations as an invasion. However, they have refused to accuse

Kadyrov and his militia or members of Islamic bodies who issued a *fatwa* justifying Muslims' support of and participation in the Russian military action against Ukraine, as apostates.²⁰

The third arose from the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group, which is close to AQ and Jund al-Sham, and includes many Chechen fighters hostile to Ramzan's militia. While not involved in the war, they have accused Muslims who support Russia of being traitors and apostates. To them, based on past experience, Russia is a power that is hostile to Islam. However, their stance on fighting alongside the Ukrainian army is as yet unknown.²¹

Thus far, the two main jihadist groups – AQ and IS – have been united against Russia. When the war began, both groups opportunistically encouraged their members and sympathisers to take advantage of the conflict, such as gaining access to weapons to use against their traditional enemies, that is, Western countries.²² Since then, reports have recently emerged that fighters affiliated with AQ in Syria have started to travel to Ukraine to join the fight against the Russian army. These are primarily composed of battle-hardened Chechens and other Central Asian ethnic groups in Syria.²³

Conclusion

While reports of AQ fighters emigrating to Ukraine are of concern, the projection of the Russia-Ukraine war as a jihad incumbent on Islamist militants remains limited as of now. With the protraction of the war into 2023, the situation bears close monitoring, particularly among the Islamist terrorist following in the former Soviet republics and Central Asian countries, who may be looking for their next jihad battleground.

Notwithstanding leadership decapitations affecting both IS and AQ, their respective core ideological narratives have been sustained at the centre and the periphery. Hence, we can expect the competition between IS and AQ to continue in the foreseeable future. The threat they pose to the regional and global security landscape will endure as long as they can narrate and disseminate their ideology unchallenged through social media and other offline means. For counter-narratives to be effective and robust, greater resources must be made available, both online and offline. Since counter-narratives are time- and resource-intensive, they require dedicated commitment from all stakeholders, in the government and in society, to be successful.

About the Authors

Muhammad Haniff Hassan and **Mahfuh Bin Haji Halimi** are Research Fellows, while **Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman** and **Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan** are Associate Research Fellows at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. They can be reached at ismhaniff@ntu.edu.sg or www.haniff.sg/en, ismahfuh@ntu.edu.sg, issaifulalam@ntu.edu.sg and isahmad@ntu.edu.sg, respectively.

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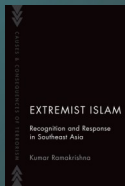
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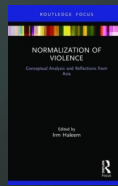


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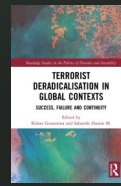
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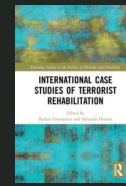
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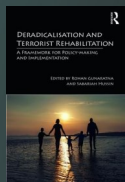
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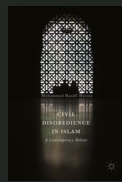
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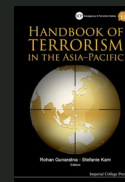
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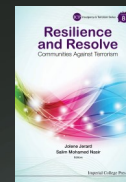
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Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Tel: + 65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg