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The manuscript entitled, “**Virtual Jihadism: Netnographic Analysis on Trend of Terrorism Threat in The Future (S2020.80)**” which you submitted to *The Journal of Media and Communication Research* has been reviewed. The comments of the reviewer(s) are included for your immediate attention.

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6	Last para in page 6 -7: Which part is from which reference? (pg 6-7)	
7	The virtual Caliphate: The ideas were there but the authors need to send to proofreaders to help clarity and ease of reading. The flow in between paragraphs somehow can be arrange better for a biter flow. (pg 8-10)	
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9	Page numbers are missing (pg13 onwards)	
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# Virtual jihadism: Netnographic analysis on trends of terrorism threats

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been using terrorism to rebel in order to establish their own superstate, leading to the outbreak of a civil war in Iraq and Syria. To this end, ISIS has intensified the use of the internet and Telegram in the global arena massively and intensively. In this context, by using netnography—a method for analysing all human activities and cultures related to qualitative internet use—we can observe the cruelty of the transnational jihadism in spreading a model of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria through harassment and hostility, virtually. This movement has tried to mobilise civil war and terrorism through cyberspace, involving businessmen, foreign adventurers, transnational and domestic terrorists. The main objective of this article is to show the shift from the real battleground toward virtual hostilities where the internet and applications like Telegram have created major changes, both theoretically and practically, in the world of communication. People live in cyberspace (online) just like in real life (offline). Internet users chat and exchange ideas with each other, virtually in various parts of the world—as if they live in a global village. However, the use and abuse of the internet and other virtual applications by ISIS supporters and sympathisers has eventually pushed international communities and governments to work together to fight against this global terrorism.

Keywords: *netnography, cyberterrorism, ISIS, internet, Telegram*

## INTRODUCTION

The internet has created major changes, both theoretically and practically, in the world of communication. People live in cyberspace (online) like in real life (offline). Internet users chat with each other and exchange ideas with other users virtually in various parts of the world, akin to a global village (Kozinets, 2012, p. 87).

When the jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) used terrorism to rebel and establish their own country, the ensuing civil war proved to be harder and much more widespread due to the use of internet. Jihadism in the model of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a form of cruel transnational activism, continues to mobilise businessmen, foreign adventurers, transnational and domestic terrorists for the civil war through cyberspace (Kozinets 2010, p. 25).

Hillary Clinton noted that ISIS emerged from the region of Iraq and Syria after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq (Ismail, 2014). The fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq has provided an opportunity for the emergence of a Shia regime that would have given no place to the Sunnis as leaders in the country. The failure of Iraqi leaders, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in building an inclusive political system, paved the way for militant groups to grow across Iraq, including the Sunnis, which in turn, gave birth to ISIS (Clinton, 2014, p. 2).

To provide some context, Sunni militants have and continue to protest against the economic and political marginalisation by the ruling Shi'ite. Material assistances given by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to these hardline opposition groups in Syria, also contributed to the birth of ISIS (Ismail, 2014). Naturally, the emergence of ISIS, which originated from the Sunni, has shocked the Muslim world, including Indonesia. Some call it the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The term Levant refers to the Sham or Levant region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River including Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel. Meanwhile, the term Syria is confined to the state of modern Syria that is currently in conflict. The genealogy of this radical religious organisation can be traced back to the Salafi Jihadist movement which has been fighting in Iraq and Syria on a mission to create the formation of *Daulah Islamiyah* (Islamic State). ISIS, according to Zana Khasraw Gul-Mohamad, senior lecturer and analyst of Middle East at the University of Sheffield, stems from the birth of *Al-Qaeda* in Iraq (AQI) in 2003. The initial declaration of the *Daulah Islamiyah* organisation that conducted the insurgency in the Iraq group was established by al-Zarqawi in 2004 who eventually revealed himself as a member of *Al-Qaeda* (Glenn, 2019).

After al-Zarqawi was killed in battle with the US army in mid-2006, his leadership at AQI was continued by Abu Mus'ab from Jordan, who was then killed by the US army at the closing of 2006. He was replaced by Abu Ayyoub al-Masri, an Egyptian, who supported the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) or *Daulah Islamiyah fil Iraq*.

Then, *Daulah Islamiyah fil Iraq* was led by Abu Hamza al-Mohajir until April 19, 2010, when he was killed in an attack by American troops in Iraq. The leadership then fell into the hands of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi or Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, who had set his eyes on becoming the single leader of the organisation (Aulassyahied, 2018).

On 8 April 2003, he made a decree, stating that AQI and *Jabhah al-Nusra* will be combined into ISIS/ISIL. Unfortunately, *Jabhah al-Nusra* rejected the idea and the dispute between ISIS and *Jabhah al-Nusra* prolonged and failed to be mediated by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Ultimately, he claimed that *Al-Qaeda* cut off ties with ISIS because ISIS' conception and position was not in line with that of *Al-Qaeda* and Ayman Center anymore ("Nusra leader", 2015).



In the hands of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS moved more progressively and aggressively. After the establishment of ISI, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, who is also known as Abu Hameed Dawood Mohammed II, or Khalil al-Zawri (Awwar Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai and Abu Bakr al-Husayni al-Qureshi al-Baghdadi), made Baquba as his headquarters. Under his control, the *Daulah Islamiyah fil Iraq* organisation expanded its influence (“Profile: Abu Bakr”, 2015).

In 2012, al-Baghdadi sent his men to form a branch of *Al-Qaeda* Syria, named *Jabhat al-Nusra*. The group aimed to get rid of President Bashar al-Assad and to establish a Sunni Islamic state led by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, a Salafist-oriented leader. It received funding and support from AQI and ISI. However, it was under the control of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of *Al-Qaeda* (Lister, 2016).

On 9 April 2013, a voice recording of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was sent to the media outlets of Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In the tape, it was stated that *Jabhat Nushra* (Victory Front) in Syria was actually a continuation of *Daulah Islamiyah of Iraq*. The tape also described that the names *Jabhat Nushrah* and *Daulah Islamiyah fil Iraq* had been disbanded, and is now known as *Daulah Islamiyah fil Iraq wa ash-Sham*. This was written by the mass media as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Remnick, 2015).

ISIS took money from the Central Bank of Mosul, some 500 billion Iraqi dinars, or about 429 million dollars plus a certain amount of gold. “With that much money, they used to pay 60,000 fighters,” commented Eliot Higgins, a resident scholar of the UK. Currently, ISIS has an estimated 10,000 armed members from different parts of the world: Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and Southeast Asia, including Indonesia (Sahasrad, 2018).

In this regard, Director of Center for Research on the Arab World at the University of Mainz, Germany, Gunter Meyer added, “The most important financial source of ISIS is the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates, especially from the rich people in the country” (Lubis, 2016, p. 110).

The motivation for the initial assistance provided, according to Meyer, is to support ISIS face the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This support encourages “hatred” sectarian: three-quarters of the Syrian population is Sunni Muslim, but most of the ruling elite is the Alawite minority, also known as Shia Muslims.

BBC stated that ISIS received financial support from donors in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan. This took place when they were still called *Al-Qaeda* in Iraq (AQI). However, after the breakup of AQI with its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, ISIS proclaimed that they rely on the financial resources of criminal acts such as kidnapping, extortion, and robbery (“*Kejahatan ISIS*”, 2020).

The Syrian conflict was initially localised, but the demonstrations to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad then evolved into an international conflict, involving thousands of combatants from dozens of countries: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen, Chechnya, Turkey, America, England, France, Germany, Sweden, Japan, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Most of the Afghan alumni in Indonesia are *tawaquf* (silent) or very careful in giving support to ISIS openly because of their loyalty to *Al-Qaeda*. In 2013, al-Zawahiri issued a *fatwa* decrying that ISIS is not part of *Al-Qaeda* because ISIS has acted very brutally; thus, damaging not only the image of *Al-Qaeda* in Syria but also Islam as a religion. *Al-Qaeda*’s army, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, was the first to come forward and help the people of Syria long before the ISIS did.

The splitting of the partnership between ISIS and *Jabhat al-Nusra* extended to Indonesia as well. In fact, in some places, for example prisons that housed terrorist inmates, fierce hostility broke out between the supporters of ISIS and *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

In Indonesia and Southern Philippines, one of the local factors that encouraged people to join the ISIS and even die for this cause, is the weak law enforcement in both countries, especially in prison management. The massive dissemination of ISIS message in Arabic translated by Aman Abdurrahman was read by terrorist inmates in Indonesia and Abu Sayyaf terrorists in Mindanao, Southern Philippines; all within the prisons. The visitors of the inmates also disseminated this translated text via the internet.

In Indonesia, Aman Abdurrahman has a criminal record as a terrorist who has been jailed twice since 2004. He was involved in the Cimanggis, Jabotabek bombing and military training in Aceh in 2010. He had refused to cooperate with prison officials, consistent with the *takfiri* ideology (infidelising people outside the group), and a main feature among Islamic activists who thirst for leadership (Ismail, 2014).

Although there is no evidence for an official order from Aman Abdurrahman for his protégés to flee to Syria and join the ISIS, there were translations, writings, and sermons, which were then recycled and widely disseminated by his followers and the media, through open discussions, marches, demonstrations, and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube — giving ‘*jihad*’ a form beyond the nation-state concept to recipients, which then provoked them to act (Mutawakkil, 2014).

The majority of the Afghan alumni in Indonesia has responded in *tawaquf* (silent, quiet) or very careful in giving support to the ISIS openly because of their loyalty to *Al-Qaeda* (Kuncahyono, 2014). In the Philippines, the Abu Sayyaf terrorist network and cell, also works hard in spreading the understanding and ideology of ISIS to Muslims in the Southern Philippines to fight against the Philippine and Western governments.

### *Method of netnography*

The netnography method was used for this study for it enables the researcher to trace and analyse sources of metaphors used by Islamists and jihadists to spread their ideas, views, doctrines and plans in carrying out acts of terror in various places in Indonesia. It was also more practical to use the netnography method as approaching and gaining access to Islamists and jihadists for physical interviews was not possible. Further, observation of WhatsApp and Facebook groups as well as groups on Telegram was only likely after the researchers have met (physical encounters) with subjects in the field. Netnography is a method for examining all human activities and cultures related to qualitative internet use. Cultural distribution in this domain extends from personal to public; starting from the formation of a personal identity to the collective meaning of all aspects of the internet cyberspace, until ownership of the built culture can be related to culture and humans in the virtual realm of the internet (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011).

This can be observed from internet users who exchange ideas which then result in works, creativity, and initiatives on the internet and the real world. Through interactions in this realm, humans also exchange and build their values (Laluzza, Crespo, & Bria, 2008).

Netnography (also known as internet ethnography) is an adaptation of ethnographic research methods in the virtual domain. Culture and humans are inseparable things. Mosko quoted Malinowski in his work entitled *Man's Culture and Man's Behaviour*: “culture is the fullest context of all human activities” (Mosko, 2014, p. 76). Every human action must be culturally charged and every culture is the result of human action. In this regard, internet culture is the result of the production and reproduction of human meaning in its activities through global internet networks (Bell, 2006).

The ethnographic method of cyberspace is an extension of the ethnography of the world of reality that we encounter every day. The world of hyper-reality (cyberspace) grows along with the use and development of language, values, technology and the structure of human society that uses the internet.



A thorough and comprehensive method is needed to understand the culture in this realm. Netnography not only attempts to describe things that happen, but also presents a cultural vision of the owners. Only those who are struggling with their culture truly understand the culture as a whole. Thus, there is a need for a method that can help parties outside cultural owners to understand this. The choice to adopt ethnographic research fits with this goal (Kozinets, 2012).

To understand the global movement of radicals and terrorists who use increasingly sophisticated and encrypted information and communication technology, researchers are likely to adopt this method.

### *The Virtual Caliphate and cyberterrorism*

What has happened to ISIS' shift in methods of warfare is a major aspect that deserves special attention from researchers. The big transition is the emergence of Virtual Caliphates after the physical defeat suffered by ISIS where they eventually lost the areas they had controlled for six years (2014–2020). The Virtual Caliphates of ISIS show no signs of disappearing from circulation. With the loss of regional groups and with social media platforms being increasingly watched and monitored by state apparatus and intelligence, Telegram and other messaging applications remain the key ISIS platforms for spreading propaganda and recruiting new members.

Telegram's security features with its 512-bit encryption, cross-platform technology construction, and secret chat options offer a safe environment for interaction between ISIS drivers and their supporters. Through Telegram, ISIS manipulates environments that are rich in addictive traits, creating online spaces that encourage group identity, sharing opinions, and dominant ideologies, while exploiting the individual's need to be part of a group.

Bloom and Daymon's research (2018) investigated how the Telegram app is used by ISIS and its supporters and also assessed the types of threats Telegram would pose in the future. These activities are an integral part of the jihadist trend, including ISIS, which mutually overlap with other terrorist powers, or a combination of the same ideological currents, which in turn reflect the division of internal labour and dissatisfaction in the Arab and Islamic world. Elite ISIS leaders realise that the relationship between jihadist terrorism and civil war is far from uniform, and jihadism is not unitary or monolithic, but competitive with ideological differences. Nevertheless, ISIS could consolidate and capitalise it using the internet and cybermedia.

ISIS leaders acknowledge that the internet is very useful for spreading its ideology and interests because of the current world population's 7.75 billion people, 4.54 billion people or 60% has access to the internet. In comparison to 2019, 2020 saw an increase of 298 million new internet users. The number of radical websites could top millions as in Indonesia alone, around 814,594 radical websites were found. ISIS leaders know that as a vital necessity, the internet is made available and used widely across the globe. In 2005, about 3.36 billion or 46% of the world population used internet and 1.6 billion or 48% of them lived in the Asian continent (Last & Kandel, 2005).

However, for the same year, the overall internet penetration in Indonesia was found to be lower (23%) compared to other Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia (67.5%), Brunei (72%), Singapore (82%), Philippines (43%) and Thailand (56%). (Last & Kandel, 2005). Nevertheless, based on recent media reports, the number of Indonesian internet users has now exceeded that of their neighbours.

The use of the internet by terrorists has made it easy for this group to disseminate their agendas, actions, and networks to various parts of the world. By doing a netnographic study, we can observe and identify several radical sites in and outside of Indonesia (Figure 1).

In this regard, as a comparison, in Europe, there are at least 28 terrorist networks with different characteristics, which use the internet and cybermedia to develop their movement and carry out their actions; hundreds of their members have joined ISIS (Figure 2). They have also built communication and terrorist networks in various regions of the world, from Europe, US, Middle East and North Africa to Southeast Asia (Bakker, 2006; Nurdin, 2016).

**Table 1.** Some identified radical sites within and outside Indonesia

Site Names	Country	Description
Keabsahan khilafah.blogspot	Indonesia	The site displayed ISIS Flag, promoted Islamic laws to be implemented, promoted the caliphate state by arguing that Muslims cannot live without a <i>khilafat</i> state principle, defended negative news against ISIS.
tauhidjihad.blogspot	Indonesia	The site defended Abu Bakar Bashir by arguing institutions and people who arrest Abu Bakar are <i>thoghut</i> , arguing that all laws created by human are rubbish and that people are <i>thogut</i> . The site also encouraged people to fight those who do not agree with the Syariah law
bushro2.blogspot	Indonesia	The site mostly used Qur'an verses to justify violence. For example, the site quoted Al-Anfal:17 to justify killing non-Muslims as legal.
Mahabbatiloveislam.blogspot	Indonesia	The site mostly used Qur'an verses to justify violence. For example, the site quoted Al-Anfal:17 to justify killing non-Muslims as legal.
Mahabbatiloveislam.blogspot	Indonesia	The site mostly talked about Islamic Syariah from radical perspectives and static views.
www.azzam.inal-Faloja	Indonesia	The site posted violent images such as ISIS beheading non-Muslims. The site also promoted radical figures of the world.
-Faloja	Indonesia	Highly respected among radicals and terrorist groups. The site focused on the Iraq War and the Salafi-jihadi struggle.
al-Medad	Afghanistan	The site was associated with Abu Jihad al-Masri, the <i>Al-Qaeda</i> propaganda chief killed in a US missile strike in Pakistan on 30 October 2008. The site also disseminated its ideology.
Ana al-Muslim	Afghanistan	The site was very active and was used by <i>Al-Qaeda</i> to communicate with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Osama bin Laden's deputy in Iraq) until he was killed by US forces in 2006.
al-Mujahideen	Palestine	The site attracted a strong contingent of Hamas supporters, with an overall global jihad perspective, focusing on electronic jihad.
al-Hanein	Iraq	The sites have a significant amount of jihadist content tinged with Iraqi, Egyptian and Moroccan nationalism
Al-Tahaddi		The site belongs to Sunni jihadist. They recruit from Somali, Taliban, and other terrorist groups.

**Table 1.** (con't)

Site Names	Country	Description
TrueIslam1.com	Unknown	The site hosted an impressive archive of jihadist texts, with audios and videos organised using the online publishing tool Blogger. The website connects to Pimentel's YouTube channel, which was similarly thorough; it had collected more than 600 videos relating to radical and violent interpretations of Islam, 60 of which he had uploaded himself. This channel had more than 1,500 subscribers.
The ek-Is.org (the site is associated with <i>Al-Qaeda</i> )	Indonesia	The site provided six training sessions for aspiring terrorists: The site posted "Do you want to form a terror cell?" Using the name Shamil al-Baghdadi, the instructor described in great detail how to choose a leader, recruit members, and select initial assassination targets. The second lesson looked at techniques.

(Source: Bakker, 2006; Nurdin, 2016)

The majority of websites created by ISIS jihadists are a continuation of sites that have been created by *Al-Qaeda*. These sites provide a lot of information about the doctrine of *qital jihad*, the ideology of jihadism, how to create new terror cells and how ISIS then verifies and recognises these cells as a part of its organisation. These websites also try to recruit new jihadists from various circles and regions. The sites mostly use Qur'an verses to justify violence. For example, some sites quote the holy book of Al-Quran, Al-Anfal:17 to justify killing non-Muslims as legal. The sites also mostly talked about Islamic Syariah from radical perspectives and static views. The sites posted violent images such as ISIS beheading non-Muslims, while promoting radical figures in the world. Some sites also displayed the ISIS Flag, promoted Islamic law to be implemented, promoted the caliphate state by arguing that Muslims cannot live without a caliphate state principle and some sites denounced and attacked negative news against ISIS. A website provided training sessions for aspiring terrorists with questions like, "*Do you want to form a terror cell?*". Using the name Shamil al-Baghdadi, the instructor described how to choose a leader, recruit members, and select initial assassination targets. The second lesson covered techniques.

Many jihadist terror cells have attempted to spread the fear of terror all over the world as listed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Past actual or plotted attacks of jihadist terror cells

A network including Djamel Beghal, Kamel Daoudi, and Nizar Trabelsi: Failed attack on the US embassy in Paris and failed attack on Belgian air base, Kleine Brogel.
Network linked to the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armé: Failed Attack on the Stade de France.
Richard Reid and Saajid Badat: Failed "shoe bomber attack"
The Al-Zarqawi cell in Germany: Plot to attack Jewish targets in Germany.
Three Saudis and their wives: Plot to attack British and American warships in the Strait of Gibraltar.

**Table 2.** (con't)

The Chechen Network: Plot to attack targets in Paris.
A network including Kamel Bourgass: cyanide & ricin plot.
Abbas Boutrab: plot to make bombs.
Andrew Rowe: plot to attack an unknown target in the United Kingdom.
A Moroccan and a Tunisian: Plot to attack targets in northern Italy and to recruit terrorists.
An unnamed network of more than twenty people: Madrid bombings.
An unnamed network of four: Plot to attack with homemade napalm.
An unnamed network of nine: London Fertilizer plot.
Sheikh Abu Hamza Al-Masri: Plot to incite hatred and possession of a terrorist manual.
An unnamed network of nine: The Asparagus Case.
An unnamed network of eight: Plot to attack financial institutions in the US and possible targets in the UK.
Yehya Kadouri: Plot to threaten Dutch politicians and to make an explosive device.
Martyrs of Morocco: Plot to establish a terrorist network
Martyrs of Morocco—Mohamed Bouyeri (Hofstad Group): The killing of the Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh and plot to attack existing structures and terrorise the Dutch society.
A network of four suicide bombers including Mohammed Sidique Khan: The first London bombings.
A network of four suicide bombers and their helpers: Failed attack on the London metro.
Said Mansour: Inciting local Muslims to carry out acts of terrorism.
Network around Safé Bourada: Failed attack on public transport in France.
Network around Samir Azzouz (Piranha Group): Plot to attack politicians and government buildings.
An unnamed network of various nationalities including Mirsad Bektasevic: Plot to commit terrorist acts in Europe.
An unnamed network of three: Plot to attack targets in Italy.
An unnamed network of Lebanese: Failed attack on German trains.
An unnamed network of British and Pakistani citizens: Failed transatlantic aircraft attack.

Many radical Muslims groups in Europe, Southeast Asia and the Middle East joined ISIS with the dream of building the Islamic caliphate, but apparently, some were disappointed because ISIS is not the true Islamic State, but a terrorist force under the guise of religion that manipulates and claims Islam as an ideology to fight the US/West and its allies. At the same time, these groups continued to face attacks and air strikes by Saudi, Syria, Iran, and Iraq government troops with the support of the US, Russia, or China resulting in conflicts of interest and complicated ramifications. In terms of domicile, nationality and family origin, the terrorists (including pro-ISIS) have different backgrounds which imply that they are brought together by shared interests and ideology (Figure 3). There are at least 10 main geographical backgrounds for those involved in terrorism cases in Europe and who use the internet and social media for their operations.

**Table 3.** Top 10 geographical background of terror perpetrators in terms of place of residence, nationality, and country of family of origin

Country of residence (N =219)	Nationality (N = 282*)	Country of family of origin (N =215**)
UK (62)	Morocco (59)	Algeria (64)
Spain (58)	Algeria (55)	Morocco (64)
France (36)	UK (46)	Pakistan (24)
Netherlands (15)	France (15)	Lebanon(7)
Belgium (13)	Pakistan (15)	Ethiopia (5)
Germany (8)	Netherlands (10)	France (5)
Italy (8)	Belgium (8)	'Palestine' (6)
Denmark (6)	Spain (8)	Tunisia (5)
Afghanistan (3)	Lebanon (6)	Syria (4)
Lebanon (3)	Denmark (5)	UK (4)

\*Includes 'double counts' as some have more than one nationality (56)

\*\* Includes 'double counts' as some are of a mixed marriage (4)

(Source: Bakker, 2006)

Here, we can see how the jihadist ISIS exports interstate violence in the name of the jihadist ideology intermingled with civil conflicts in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Jihadists are transnational civil war and terrorist actors. James Fearon's 1990 study showed only 5% of civil conflicts featured jihadist revolt and rebel, but in 2014, the proportion increased to 40%. And since the 1980s, jihadists have been incorporating rebels and terrorists into civil wars, comprising entrepreneurs, coaches, funders and foreign legion recruiters, as organisers of transnational and domestic terrorism (Fearon, 1995).

In this regard, the transnational jihadist ISIS coalition also links distant local conflicts with dissatisfaction in the Arab world, whereby jihadist ISIS seeks power in predominantly Muslim countries or regions, and terrorism against the West and neighbouring countries is the main focus of these political-ideological conflicts.

ISIS elites and leaders understand that Telegram cannot be traced after an attack. In this case, the use of peer-to-peer encrypted messages by ISIS shows no signs of declining despite early estimates that the ISIS group is in its final upheaval. In terms of social media, ISIS understands that platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are progressively monitored and aggressive accounts are deleted. Therefore, Telegram remains the main communication method for ISIS to spread propaganda and recruit new members. Terrorists usually use one phone number for activation, but then use another number when using Telegram. According to Ahmet S. Yayla from George Mason University, US, "The SIM card you use to open a Telegram account doesn't have to be the same as the SIM card you use on the phone to access it" (Yusuf, 2017).

In October 2015, the number of followers on Telegram channels operated by ISIS was recorded to have doubled to 9,000 users. This chat service is repeatedly used as a medium of communication and coordination for terrorists in carrying out their actions in various parts of the world. For instance, Telegram among other communication methods, was used by perpetrators to coordinate and carry out attacks on Paris in 2015, on Turkey on 2017 New Year eve and St. Petersburg in April 2017.

As jihadists are more used to Telegram and find it more familiar, they find it difficult to switch to Whatsapp even though it is much easier and commonly used by people today. Further, it is easy to delete their account, should the authorities detect or become suspicious of their channels. Channels in Telegram are open to the public and free to be followed by other users/followers. As such, channels in Telegram are often used by terrorists to spread propaganda, by means of broadcast content. In Indonesia, a number



of terrorism suspects arrested in December 2016 admitted to learning how to make bombs by following directions via Telegram channels.

### *The Virtual Caliphate and Telegram*

We have discussed how Telegram, a cloud-based, multi-platform instant messaging service application that is a free and non-profit app is used by ISIS and its supporters. Since 2015, the Middle East and Europe has seen increasing numbers of terrorists migrating to Telegram because they are tempted by the high level of privacy it offers.

Analysts assess the type of potential threat from the use of Telegram and cyber media in the future, after ISIS lost its regional bases in Iraq and Syria, which has made ISIS transform itself into a Virtual Caliphate. Thus far, ISIS activities are still ongoing. The loss of physical territories did not make ISIS disappear but instead, it has been pushed into various other countries through the internet and cybermedia (Yayla & Spechart, 2017). In Indonesia, the development of the virtual caliphate was very glaring. There were concerns raised that Indonesia is losing its grip in anticipating the development of this ISIS group after they collapsed but fortunately, that did not happen.

Many countries and governments seemingly do not understand how ISIS managed to recruit many members from the families of police, army, and even bureaucrats. When the jihadists of ISIS used terrorism to rebel in order to establish their own state, the resulting civil wars proved to be more violent and widespread.

As an illustration, in the Philippines, the strong influence of ISIS mobilisation can be seen in the terrorist networks in Marawi City, Mindanao. Through social media and apps such as Telegram, ISIS can mobilise and encourage terror groups in the Southeast Asia region to act as protectors of ISIS militants who have fled Iraq and Syria. The terror groups in question include the Abu Sayyaf (ASG), Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), and Mujahidin groups.

Regional groups such as ASG, JI and Mujahideen have openly declared their oath of loyalty to *Daulah Islamiyah* (another name for ISIS). According to Malaysia's Defense Minister, Hishammuddin Hussein (2017), these terrorist groups found themselves a '*home away from home*' for those who fled Mosul, Aleppo and Raqqa — and they even declared loyalty to the *Daulah Islamiyah* caliphate called 'East Asian Region'.

The term '*home away from home*' refers to a distant place that can be a comfortable and familiar place like one's place of origin. The 'East Asian Region' caliphate includes Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Southern Thailand and Myanmar. This development took place when ISIS found itself being attacked and thrown out of Iraq and Syria (Allard, 2017).

ISIS called on Muslims in the Philippines and throughout the world to support the war against the military in Mindanao, the southern Philippines. This appeal came less than two months after the Philippine military succeeded in recapturing Marawi of pro-ISIS militants who occupied it for the last few months (Hodal, 2014).

The expansion of the ISIS network prompted Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Prince Mohammed bin Salman (2015), to vow to hunt down terrorists until they are destroyed. In this regard, an intergovernmental anti-terrorist alliance with the participation of 41 Muslim countries was formed to combat & eradicate terrorism. The alliance also oversees military interventions against ISIS and other counter-terrorist activities ("Saudi Arabia unveils", 2015).

One of the pro-ISIS militant leaders, Isnilon Hapilon, was killed by the Philippine military during a battle in the town of Marawi. Hapilon, who was also the leader of ASG, is said to have been appointed as Emir or leader of ISIS for Southeast Asia. In addition



to Hapilon, two other senior pro-ISIS militant leaders, Omarkhayam Maute — militant leader and Mahmud Ahmad — a professor from Malaysia, also died at the hands of the Philippine military. More than 1,100 people, mostly militants, were killed in fierce fightings between pro-ISIS militants and the Philippine military for several months in Marawi. At least 44 Filipino police were also killed in the fighting.

The Philippine Defense Minister, Delfin Lorenzana is reportedly still hunting for Amin Baco, another prominent pro-ISIS ASG member (Morales & Mogato, 2017). Amin Baco, a terrorist from Malaysia and an expert in bomb assembly, is likely to be the “successor” /leader of ISIS in Southeast Asia. Observers say Baco was trained under another Malaysian militant, Zulkifli bin Hir. Amin Baco, who has been living in the Philippines for a long time, has connections with extremist JI groups. Baco is said to have married a daughter of a local militant leader there. In 2011, Baco was called to facilitate the flow of funds, weapons, and fighters from Indonesia and Malaysia to the Philippines. Baco is in a position to take over ISIS Southeast Asia because of ASG’s closeness to extremist groups in Mindanao (Amadar & Tuttle, 2018).

Information about the appointment of Baco as the next Emir of ISIS Southeast Asia came from an Indonesian who was arrested in Marawi city, Philippines. He was arrested in connection with pro-ISIS militants a day after a pro-ISIS militant was paralysed and nine days after the Philippines ended military operations in Marawi. In his bag, a cellphone, a 45 calibre pistol, a grenade fragment and cash in pesos, rupiah and riyals were found. According to the Lanao del Sur Provincial Police Chief, John Gugyuyon, the Indonesian called himself Muhammad Ilham Shaputra (23) and hailed from Medan, North Sumatra (Christiastuti, 2017). Ilham was arrested while trying to escape to a local lake. The Philippine military pressed charges on him because he was part of the initial siege in Marawi city. In addition, it was preparing an investigation report so that he could be indicted for rebellion, terrorism, and other crimes (Amadar & Tuttle, 2018).

Muhammad admitted that several armed men were still in hiding in the main battle zone in downtown Marawi, southern Philippines. This Indonesian had arrived in the Philippines in November 2016, at the invitation of Hapilon (“Indonesian national”, 2017).

### *ISIS jihadist and transnational terrorism*

Extreme jihadism in the style of ISIS is a violent, radical, and exclusive form of Sunni Islamism. The main principle of this ideology and the narrative that supports it is the urgent need to defend Muslim communities throughout the world, the *ummah*, from foreign invaders as well as domestic and non-Muslim infidels. As highlighted by political scientist Thomas Hegghammer (2010), jihadism is about national and community identities imagined as state religion and belief. That is part of our challenges and problems. Therefore, the public and the state must work together to confront, prevent and overcome extreme jihadism with constant vigilance so that Indonesia is not looted and destroyed by ISIS jihadism and other pro-caliphate (*Khilafah*) extremism bearing the black flag, which has yet to disappear even though it has diminished to a certain extent (Hegghammer, 2010).

After almost losing the physical space of the Caliphate (*Khilafah*) in Syria and Iraq, the Caliphate now appears in cyberspace. After eighteen months of monitoring and archiving jihadist propaganda, Chelsea Daymon and Mia Bloom, both terrorism researchers at Georgia State University, found that the media outlets of ISIS produced an average of 40 propaganda pieces per day, and that around 1/3 of them are positive messages. This finding differs from the perception that all of ISIS propaganda is full of violence, vile, and terrible. This is a very common inaccurate perception.

However, Daymon and Bloom (2018) cautioned the domestic and international communities that much of this positive propaganda is intended to attract highly educated professionals living in Western countries to join ISIS, while other types of ISIS messages were meant to attract audiences from a variety of different backgrounds towards the new virtual village, the virtual caliphate.

So, ISIS not only propagates a single and integrated message but modifies messages for each segment of the society wherever possible so that anyone interested in finding ISIS materials can and will find something, which may be of interest to them. The ISIS propaganda in Telegram can be classified into five general categories: (1) long country development and country age, (2) imaging, (3) social ties, (4) sacrificial readiness, and (5) retaliation, in forms that can attract as many people as possible (Bloom & Daymon, 2018).

Initially, most of ISIS propaganda focused on the “development” of the Islamic state, physically and figuratively, by offering followers a supra-national state “*Khilafah*” (caliphate) as well as legitimacy and moral reasons for its actions and existence. ISIS creates attractive options for prospective immigrants who are ready to join ISIS, and this strategy can be seen also as one of its efforts to transition from a rebel movement, towards a unique Islamic state. ISIS’ state development propaganda is carried out by showing the target audience everything from dam construction, well digging, infrastructure development, electrification of villages under ISIS control, to inoculation of children in ISIS hospitals. It is truly extraordinary.

Although ISIS has recently lost enormous territories and 80% of its revenue base, the approximate 30 official and semi-official ISIS channels and chatrooms, still proclaim the longevity and strength of ISIS, going forward. Rather than focusing on losses in battlefields, the ISIS propaganda emphasises on the group’s resilience and troop strength, while the ISIS branding is broadcast using icons such as flag gifts, stickers, and memes.

Their imagery provides an icon that can be introduced to various interested groups and potential targets while promoting their shared identity and social ties. Social ties are a key element of the ISIS platform that is relatively attractive to the international community. Through groups and networks, ISIS takes steps to exploit, polarise and apply dominant ideologies, where sympathetic groups and their supporters cultivate shared values and promote them to vulnerable individuals so that there is a sense of belonging to the Caliphate they want to build and protect.

ISIS elites realise that the use of social media, the internet, and new technologies including their risks should not be taken for granted, especially given that encrypted platforms have become the main means of radicalisation, recruitment, and planning.

## CONCLUSION

As Lucas Kello from Oxford University (2014) highlighted, in the virtual domain, vital strategic operations can be “shrouded in secrecy,” hindering scientific research, security forces, defence operators, and policymakers from tracking them down (Kello, 2014, p. 62).

Analysts warn that uneven access to data, research problems, and challenges as well as the ability to navigate the terrain of unfriendly encrypted applications, limits researchers’ understanding of how social media is used by terrorist groups such as ISIS to build bonds as well as radicalise and recruit members.

Further, elite ISIS leaders also understand that individuals shape their perceptions of themselves based on their identification with groups, the groups’ core values and their associated emotions. As a result, the ISIS presence in the online environment can encourage

extreme political and religious views, excessive violence, and competition outside the group. Even ISIS creates a spatial echo for radicalisation.

Among social media apps and websites, Telegram is the more popular platform for the clandestine activities of terrorist groups such as ISIS and its supporters. The uniqueness of Telegram in terms of privacy and security resulted in the app garnering up to 100 million users in 2016.

It is high time now for all countries and governments concerned to understand how ISIS grew and expanded with the help of the internet. In this respect, the netnography method can help achieve this. The online propagation of terrorism has to be combatted adequately and comprehensively by a strong network of cooperation among international communities and sovereign countries.

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