



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

## In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 06/2023

12 January 2023

## ISIS: Efforts to Expand Media Presence

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**Keywords:** ISIS, ISKP, ISIS Media, Media Jihad, Voice of Khorasan (VOK), Wilayah al-Hind, Daesh, Tinder-Terror, Terrorist Propaganda, Trending Hashtags, SOCMINT



Source: The Jerusalem Post



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## ISIS and the Use of Media

In November 2022, a pro-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Telegram account encouraged its followers earlier to carry out terrorist attacks at the 2022 FIFA World Cup, hosted by Qatar. Messages in the account urged the ISIS supporters to take this event as a 'golden opportunity'<sup>1</sup> to carry forward what they call their fight against the *Kafirs*, be it in the form of biological or any other forms of innovative attacks.

It is important to note that similar threats to carry out attacks were made by ISIS and its sympathisers even during the 2018 FIFA World Cup, hosted by Russia, but nothing unfortunate occurred. However, the Wafa Foundation, a media unit of the ISIS, used an image of Lionel Messi<sup>2</sup> to send terror threats during the 2018 FIFA World Cup. ISIS has set up the trend of using the FIFA World Cup platform to propagate their doctrine. The height of the ISIS trend of hijacking occurred during the 2014 World Cup. They made use of the hashtag "#WorldCup2014". Instead of football, all tweets under this hashtag became synonymous with ISIS.<sup>3</sup> This indicated that the trend was hijacked by ISIS supporters and their bot accounts. ISIS, also known by its Arabic acronym Daesh, is an offshoot of Al-Qaeda. Although it began in West Asia, it has now extended its tentacles to most parts of the world through its offshoots like the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) active in Afghanistan. This group is a radical militant organisation whose focus has always been on building a proto-state (new caliphate). The organisation employs social media as a strategic tool for promoting its message and recruiting globally. In addition, this group is well-known for uploading various Jihadi propaganda content on the internet.

According to the South African Banking Risk Information Centre (SABRIC), ISIS is growing its influence in Africa. The Times has recently reported that an African version of the Tinder dating app is now being used by ISIS to gather funds for their terror outfit.<sup>4</sup> ISIS operatives use the app by making fake profiles and using pictures of less-known personalities. Single men and women are lured and contacted by ISIS operatives. Intimate conversations, pictures and videos are exchanged, and when the tone of the conversation turns sour and tense, the person is blackmailed and money is demanded. This technique is banded as 'Tinder Terror'.<sup>5</sup> It is important to trace the patterns that ISIS over the years have focused and succeeded in their propaganda game, along with their various techniques of courtship- what we know of as honey trapping.

## ISIS Media Footprint in India and the Neighbourhood

Earlier this year, the ISKP reached out to its followers through the Voice of Khorasan (VOK), an Afghanistan-based digital English magazine. In its April 2022 issue, it emphasised that, 'fighting with the tongue is equally as important as fighting physically'. This digital magazine covers a wide range of subjects related to politics and theology and is published by ISKP's official al-Azaim Foundation for Media Production.

The above statement showcases their desperation to mark their presence in the region, be it physically or by asserting their dominance in the cyber domain in the name of 'Media Jihad'. After ISIS lost its stronghold of its significant territories in Iraq and Syria back in 2017, the terrorist outfit's propaganda narratives have shifted towards encouraging lone wolf attacks, and since then, social media warfare has been their main focus. This is done in order to infest their radical ideologies among the Muslim population worldwide.

The return of the Taliban in August 2021 has reinvigorated the terror threats in the South Asian neighbourhood. ISIS has taken advantage of the instability in Afghanistan and asserted itself on Afghan soil. ISKP is using Afghanistan as a launchpad for Jihad and is penetrating itself into the Indian soil. Threats of ISIS have been very prevalent in the recent months, particularly in Kashmir and Kerala. For example- Wilayah al-Hind, the ISIS division in Kashmir, reportedly pledged their allegiance to the new Caliph, and videos and pictures of the same are published in official ISIS media outlets.<sup>6</sup> In December 2022, ISIS operatives from all over the world pledged their allegiance to the new ISIS Caliph, *Abu al-Husseini al-Qureshi*.<sup>7</sup> In the same month, a missing family from Kasaragod, Kerala, has been suspected of joining ISIS in Yemen.<sup>8</sup> This is yet another example of Kerala's Islamic State connection. Over the years, India has witnessed one of the highest recruitment of individuals to ISIS from Kerala.

The state institutions are deeply concerned about the use of the internet for terrorist financing, terrorist recruiting, and radicalisation to violence, as well as for inflaming interreligious conflicts. Several reports in the media and from the National Investigation Agency (NIA)<sup>9</sup> indicated probable cases of internet terrorist radicalisation, recruitment, and financing, most recently showcasing links to ISIS in various parts of India. Moreover, the coming back of the Taliban has certainly increased ISIS's threats to India's national security.

## Preferred Tools for Propaganda

According to a statement issued by the propaganda network of ISIS,<sup>10</sup> three propaganda foundations associated with the group will be merged with the group's Sarkh al-Khilafah Foundation. Al-Khayr Information Foundation (Mu'asasat al-Khayr al-l'amiya), Al Gholam al Dawlawi Foundation, and Khadamat al Ansar Foundation (the supporters' services foundation) will be merged under the banner of Sarkh al-Khilafah Foundation. According to the release, the reason for the merger is to unite forces and ease the flow of information materials. Does this action show the fragility of the ISIS media network and the desire to enhance their propaganda machinery? It is likely that ISIS appears incapable of functioning on its own. Probably this may be the reason for working towards enhancing their institutional capacities by merging with a number of independent organisations.

*Al Jihad fi Sabil Allah*<sup>11</sup> meaning 'Jihad for the sake of Allah,' is an Android application that was recently launched by ISIS for the people of Al Hawl camp. This camp largely consists of ISIS families, and this application is useful for them because it contains news, information on what is going on in the camp along with ISIS propaganda. Terrorist organisations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda attempted to capitalise on communal tensions and released a 10 minutes long video titled 'The Polytheists are The Brothers of The Polytheists,' which was focused on India.<sup>12</sup> Thereby, with the fusion of political, social, and technological factors, gathering information using SOCMINT (Social Media Intelligence) and disseminating terror propaganda has become a much easier task for terrorist organisations.

Recent media propaganda about ISIS is aimed at agitating and radicalising the Muslim population based on domestic conflicts and encouraging communal violence globally. Seeking more recruiters is also an objective for ISIS, along with propagating and gathering support for their ideology. Albeit with limited success, ISIS has been able to create its own 'brand' of terrorism, along with a carefully developed network, that has been able to hijack and generate trends, and giving the group an appearance of being a global existential threat. To spread their propaganda, ISIS has utilised various anonymous user identities, trending hashtags of various social media platforms, online chatting rooms, and their media houses. All these activities are done by crafting their messages to gain attention from various targeted audiences. India needs to be watchful of these activities and take steps to check the propaganda impacting young minds.

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<sup>4</sup> “ISIS funds terror with ‘Tinder’ love scams”, *The Times*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/isis-funds-terror-with-tinder-love-scams-nv08xnbcz#:~:text=At%20face%20value%20it%20looks,once%20the%20conversation%20turns%20sour>. Accessed on November 18, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> “ISIS funding terrorism with Tinder scams”, *The OZ*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/the-oz/news/isis-funding-terrorism-with-tinder-scams/news-story/ad2cdd9df8005c1a06e6a1f2b561680e>. Accessed on November 18, 2022.

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<sup>8</sup> “Kerala: Six member family from Kasaragod on radar of security agencies after they illegally enter war-torn Yemen, suspected of joining ISIS”, *OpIndia*, December 25, 2022, <https://www.opindia.com/2022/12/kerala-security-forces-family-six-kasaragod-yemen/>. Accessed on December 30, 2022.

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<sup>10</sup> “Merging three ISIS propaganda foundations”, *Spotlight on Global Jihad*, November 10-16, 2022, [https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2022/11/E\\_181\\_22.pdf](https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2022/11/E_181_22.pdf). Accessed on November 26, 2022.

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