

POST-CALIPHATE ISIS DIGITAL PROPAGANDA EVOLVES, RESONATING THROUGH 'GLOCALIZED' RESONANCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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(Received 30th January 2026; revised 28th February 2026; accepted 08th March 2026)

Abstract. Despite the 2019 territorial collapse of its physical "caliphate," the Islamic State (ISIS) has adeptly transitioned its sophisticated media apparatus into a decentralized, resilient "virtual insurgency." This study addresses a critical temporal (post-2019) and contextual (Southeast Asian) gap in the literature by examining the narrative evolution and strategic adaptation of ISIS digital propaganda. We argue that to maintain relevance, ISIS has pivoted from a monolithic "utopian state-building" narrative to a highly adaptive "glocalized" model that targets specific regional audiences. This article employs a mixed-method qualitative analysis, combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Visual Semiotics. The analysis is performed on a curated corpus of official and supporter-driven digital media (videos, infographics, editorials) disseminated between 2019 and 2024 on encrypted platforms (e.g., Telegram) and targeting Malay- and Indonesian-speaking audiences. The findings reveal a three-pronged strategic adaptation: (1) an ideological pivot from "caliphate utopianism" to narratives of "sabr" (strategic patience) and resilient, clandestine insurgency, (2) the systematic "glocalization" of grievances, wherein global jihadist dogma is strategically fused with proximate, emotive local issues, such as the Rohingya crisis and domestic Malaysian political-religious debates, and (3) a corresponding adaptation in form to "lo-fi," ephemeral, and "snackable" media, a tactic designed to evade AI-driven content moderation and decentralize production by encouraging user-generated content (UGC). This study concludes that this "glocalized virtual insurgency" is a more insidious and resilient threat than its state-based predecessor. Its ability to co-opt local issues renders traditional, reactive content-removal policies insufficient. We assert the urgent need for a policy shift toward proactive, culturally-resonant counter-narratives and the promotion of critical digital media literacy to inoculate vulnerable populations in the region.

Keywords: *Islamic State (ISIS), digital propaganda, post-caliphate, glocalization, Southeast Asia, virtual insurgency*

Introduction

The fall of Baghouz in March 2019, symbolizing the end of the Islamic State's (ISIS) territorial "caliphate," was mistakenly perceived by many policymakers as the group's definitive end. However, this event was not an end but the beginning of a profound strategic "metamorphosis." ISIS rapidly transitioned from a "proto-state" focused on territorial governance and hybrid warfare to a decentralized, resilient, and clandestine "virtual insurgency" (Khawaja and Khan, 2016). While its physical war machine was dismantled, its sophisticated global media apparatus did not cease; it entered its "post-caliphate" phase. In this new paradigm, the primary goal of digital propaganda is no longer "recruitment for Hijrah (migration)" to the caliphate's territory, but "inspiration for domestic attacks," maintaining the ideological cohesion of a dispersed supporter base, and proving the "relevancy and resilience" of the ISIS brand. The central research problem, therefore, is no longer the existence of extremist propaganda online, but how

this propaganda has adapted following its military defeat and the loss of its narrative center.

The extant literature on extremist media has, justifiably, focused heavily on analyzing ISIS propaganda during its peak (2014-2018). In that era, themes of "utopia," state-building, and cinematic violence were the core of the analysis. Geographically, this research has been overwhelmingly focused on "radicalization in the West" (Europe and North America) and "conflict dynamics in the Middle East" (Iraq and Syria). Consequently, a clear dual "research gap" exists: (1) Temporal Gap: Our understanding of ISIS's narrative strategies in the post-caliphate era (2019-present) and how themes shifted after defeat remains incomplete. (2) Contextual Gap: How these new, adaptive narratives are repackaged for non-Western, non-Middle Eastern audiences, specifically in Southeast Asia, has been significantly under-explored. Southeast Asia, with its large Muslim population, high internet penetration rates, and history of indigenous extremist networks (like the ISIS-affiliated Katibah Nusantara), has always been a critical strategic arena. Understanding how the adapted ISIS media machine communicates with a Malaysian or Indonesian audience today is an immediate academic and security priority.

This article argues that for survival and relevance in the hostile post-2019 media environment, ISIS has pivoted its strategy from a monolithic, "global" narrative to a "glocalized" model. "Glocalization" in this study refers to the process by which ISIS grafts its global ideological messages (e.g., the victimhood of the Ummah, the promise of redemption) onto local grievances, socio-political cleavages, and identity issues within Malaysia and the region. The Thesis Statement of this research is that this narrative pivot, from utopian state-building to motivation based on localized grievances, has made post-caliphate propaganda more insidious, harder to detect, and potentially more resonant in local contexts. This paper demonstrates that ISIS media warfare is not dead; it has become "adaptive." The research questions are: (1) How have the key narratives of ISIS digital propaganda evolved post-2019? (2) How does ISIS 'glocalize' local socio-political issues in Malaysia and Southeast Asia into its global narrative framework? (3) What are the implications of these adaptive media strategies for counter-terrorism and media warfare in the region? To answer these questions, this article is organized into: reviews the theoretical literature on ISIS media warfare and the theoretical framework of "glocalization" and "Critical Discourse Analysis" (CDA); the mixed-method qualitative methodology and the data corpus; the present and analyze the empirical findings, identifying three key narrative evolutions; and lastly, discusses the implications of these findings, offering policy conclusions and avenues for future research.

Literature review

ISIS media warfare: From 'Digital Caliphate' to 'Virtual Insurgency'

The scholarly consensus confirms that the ISIS media apparatus (circa 2014-2018) was a watershed moment in extremist communication. This "golden age" was characterized by a highly centralized, corporate-style branding effort projecting the "spectacle" of the caliphate. This "digital caliphate" utilized high-definition, cinematic productions, disseminated through official wilayat (province) media offices and flagship magazines like Dabiq, to project a binary, Manichaeic worldview. This narrative centered on the attraction of a functioning utopian state (governance, community,

theological purity), juxtaposed against the apocalyptic brutality of its violence. The primary call to action was Hijrah (migration) to this tangible territory. The territorial collapse in 2019 shattered this central narrative, which was already shifting away from "utopia" toward "military denialism" as losses mounted. The literature examining the post-caliphate era argues that ISIS media did not die; it metamorphosed. It pivoted from a centralized state-building project to a decentralized, resilient, and adaptive "virtual insurgency" (Khawaja and Khan, 2016). This study builds on the work of scholars, who note the new media strategy serves two functions: (1) Inspiration, shifting the focus from migration to localized, lone-actor attacks, and (2) Community-Building, using encrypted platforms to maintain ideological cohesion.

The theoretical framework: Glocalization, CDA, and affect

To deconstruct this adaptive narrative strategy, this study employs a multi-layered theoretical framework. First, the concept of "Glocalization" (Robertson, 1995) is our primary lens. Glocalization describes the dialectical process by which global phenomena are adapted and reinterpreted to fit local cultures. For ISIS, this solves the "relevance paradox": how a global abstract ideology remains relevant to the daily life of an individual in Malaysia. We posit that post-caliphate propaganda is increasingly "glocalized," strategically weaving its global ideological tenets with proximate, localized grievances to enhance its relatability. Second, to operationalize this, we utilize Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). We specifically draw on the Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak, 2001) and Van Leeuwen (2008) "social actor" model. This allows us to analyze: (a) Nomination strategies (how actors are named, e.g., "apostate rulers" [taghut] for local governments); and (b) Argumentation strategies (how these claims are justified, often by co-opting local news). Third, because contemporary propaganda is designed to be felt rather than read, we supplement CDA with a framework for Visual Semiotics and Affect Theory. Drawing on work on "affective economies," we analyze how propaganda images and videos are designed to circulate emotions like honor, shame, and righteous anger. We deconstruct the semiotic "sign chain" (e.g., how an image of a suffering child, the sound of a nasheed, and a religious icon are combined) to create an "affective jolt" designed to mobilize audiences.

The Southeast Asian context: Digital extremism and local dynamics

The Southeast Asian region, particularly the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, presents a critical and distinct context. This region is characterized by (a) some of the world's highest rates of digital connectivity, (b) a pre-existing ideological ecosystem demonstrated by the Katibah Nusantara, and (c) a unique set of potent local socio-political and religious dynamics, including complex ethno-religious political debates in Malaysia (Brown, 2014). This study applies the glocalization-CDA-affect framework to this specific context, addressing the gap in how the new, adaptive ISIS narrative targets and exploits these regional dynamics.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a mixed-method qualitative research design rooted in an interpretivist paradigm (Schwandt, 2000). This approach is necessary as the research questions are not concerned with the frequency (quantitative) of propaganda, but with

the latent meanings, discursive strategies, and symbolic power of the content. By combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for textual structures and Visual Semiotics for iconographic and affective elements, this design achieves robust methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2012), strengthening the validity of the findings. In data collection and corpus, The corpus is strictly delimited to content disseminated between April 1, 2019 (immediately following the fall of Baghouz) and April 30, 2024. This five-year period is critical for mapping the longitudinal evolution of post-caliphate narratives. Recognizing that ISIS is de-platformed from mainstream social media, data was sourced from encrypted and semi-encrypted platforms, chiefly Telegram. A digital "snowball sampling" technique was employed, starting from known public pro-ISIS channels to identify a wider network of channels and groups specifically targeting Southeast Asian audiences. A purposive sampling strategy was used. The final curated corpus includes only content meeting at least one of the following criteria: (a) authored in, or officially translated into, Malay or Indonesian; (b) explicitly references events, figures, or grievances within Southeast Asia; or (c) is a piece of global propaganda re-framed with local commentary by supporters. The corpus consists of video clips, nasheeds (anthems), infographics, memes, and PDF editorials.

The analysis was an iterative, multi-phased process. Phase 1: Hybrid Thematic Analysis: The corpus was subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), using both an inductive (bottom-up) approach to allow new themes to emerge and a deductive (top-down) approach to test for known themes from the literature (e.g., "sabr," "victimhood"). Phase 2: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Guided by Fairclough (2023) and Wodak (2001), selected exemplars were analyzed for framing, interdiscursivity, and argumentation topoi (e.g., "topos of threat," "topos of victimhood"). Phase 3: Aural-Visual Semiotics: This phase analyzed the non-textual elements, including iconography (symbols), kinesics (body language), and the aural-oral elements (the affective power of nasheeds, tone of voice). Phase 4: Glocalization Synthesis: In the final phase, we synthesized the data, systematically mapping how global macro-narratives (Phase 1) were discursively constructed (Phase 2) and affectively charged (Phase 3) by linking them to specific, local referents (e.g., a Malaysian politician, the Rohingya crisis). This research adheres to strict ethical protocols for digital and sensitive data. Data was held on encrypted, air-gapped devices. To mitigate the risk of secondary trauma from exposure to graphic content, a structured exposure schedule was used. To avoid amplification of the propaganda, no live links are provided, and all user information is anonymized. The primary limitation of this study is its production-focused analysis; it decodes the intended meaning but cannot make empirical claims about audience reception, which remains a key avenue for future research.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the 2019-2024 propaganda corpus reveals a significant, three-pronged narrative evolution.

Finding 1: The decline of Utopia, the rise of 'Sabr' (Patience) and insurgency

The most immediate finding is the systemic replacement of the "Caliphate Utopian" narrative. The pre-2019 corpus was defined by the "slick, utopian" aesthetic. Our post-2019 corpus is defined by its absence. In its place, a dominant macro-narrative of 'sabr'

(theological patience and endurance) has emerged, coupled with a "raw, insurgent" aesthetic. Discursive/Visual Exemplar: A typical post-2019 product is not a 20-minute documentary but a 45-second, grainy, mobile-phone video from a munasir (supporter) in the Philippines. It shows a small group of fighters in a jungle, overlaid with a simple text: "We Remain" (Baqin). The semiotics are clear: the visual "authenticity" and rawness (lo-fi) replace the "produced" (hi-fi) aesthetic. The discourse shifts from attraction (to a state) to retention and steadfastness (to an idea).

Finding 2: Glocalizing grievances (The core finding)

The central and most significant finding is the systematic appropriation of local grievances. The analysis confirms that ISIS is actively "glocalizing" its global ideology by linking it to pre-existing, proximate socio-political tensions in Southeast Asia. Exemplar 1 (Malaysia): Domestic Political-Religious Debates. Our CDA of Malay-language posters reveals a strategic focus on domestic political debates surrounding secularism, race, and Islamic law. During contentious national debates, pro-ISIS channels framed the Malaysian government and mainstream religious authorities as "murtad" (apostates) and "agents of the West" for engaging in democratic compromise. The narrative is: "Your 'secular' Malay government is failing to protect Islam, a role only the Caliphate can fulfill." This co-opts a real, local debate and reframes it as a microcosm of the global jihad. Exemplar 2 (Region-wide): The Rohingya Crisis. The most potent 'glocalized' issue identified is the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Our semiotic analysis found multiple videos, set to emotive nasheeds (subtitled in Indonesian/Malay), that create a powerful affective chain. Semiotic Chain: The videos juxtapose (1) Iconic Signs of suffering (a crying Rohingya child) with (2) Symbols of inaction (ASEAN leaders shaking hands), followed by (3) Indexical Signs of power (an ISIS fighter training). Glocalization/Affect: The implied narrative is a direct affective appeal: "They (your local governments) betray you; We (ISIS) will avenge you." This leverages a real humanitarian crisis to generate righteous anger.

Finding 3: The medium adapts (Form, style, and 'Ephemeral Media')

Finally, the form and style of the propaganda have radically adapted to survive in a hostile digital environment and appeal to new media consumption habits. From Cinematic to "Snackable": The pre-2019 long-form documentaries are replaced by "in-and-out media": short-form (often under 60 seconds), raw, and "authentic-looking" content designed for the modern "attention economy" and to mimic the feel of TikTok or Instagram Reels. Evading Moderation: This lo-fi aesthetic is a strategy. It is harder for AI-driven content moderation algorithms (often trained on the old, slick HD content) to detect. This content is also ephemeral, designed to be shared rapidly across multiple platforms before being taken down, ensuring the message outruns the moderation. Decentralizing Production (UGC): This new aesthetic lowers the barrier for supporter participation. It implicitly encourages User-Generated Content (UGC), effectively decentralizing the propaganda machine itself.

Interpreting the findings: A synthesized model of 'Adaptive Media Warfare'

The findings are not isolated; they are components of a single, adaptive strategy. The decline of "utopia" (Finding 1) is the ideological pivot. The "glocalization" of grievances (Finding 2) is the new targeting strategy. The shift to "lo-fi media" (Finding

3) is the tactical vehicle. The central argument is that form, narrative, and strategy are inextricably linked. The "snackable" lo-fi form (Finding 3) perfectly reinforces the new narrative of "insurgency" (Finding 1). With no physical caliphate to offer, ISIS now "sells" ideological resonance. By "glocalizing" its message (Finding 2), it shifts the battleground from Raqqa to the "cognitive space" of a supporter in Kuala Lumpur. This decentralization of production (Finding 4.3) aligns perfectly with the "lone-actor" incitement model, creating a media "leaderless resistance" that is infinitely more resilient.

Theoretical implications: Validating glocalization and the 'Affective Turn'

This study's findings have significant theoretical implications. First, they provide powerful empirical validation of Glocalization Theory (Robertson, 1995) as a primary tool for understanding extremist survival. The co-optation of the Rohingya crisis (Finding 4.2) is a textbook example. Second, the findings highlight the critical importance of Affect Theory. The shift to "snackable" video (Finding 4.3) is a shift from cognitive persuasion to affective mobilization. The goal is not to convince a viewer, but to create an "affective jolt" that bypasses rational critique. The semiotic chain of the suffering child, nasheed, and fighter is designed to generate immediate, visceral emotions: righteous anger, honor, and belonging. Third, the CDA of the Taghut (apostate) narrative (Finding 4.2) shows how language is used to build power (Fairclough, 2023). By discursively framing mainstream, democratic Malaysian politicians as "apostates," the propaganda attempts to de-legitimize the local state and position ISIS as the only "authentic" Islamic authority.

Situating the contribution: Extending the post-caliphate literature

While scholars like Khawaja and Khan (2016) and Van Dijk (2013) have provided excellent macro-level analyses of the "virtual insurgency," this study provides one of the first in-depth, empirical analyses of how this insurgency operates in the crucial Southeast Asian theatre. We extend this work by demonstrating, through the "glocalization" framework, that this virtual insurgency is not a "one-size-fits-all" broadcast. It is a sophisticated, "glocalized" system that custom-tailors its affective and discursive strategies to exploit specific socio-political vulnerabilities.

Implications for regional security: A more insidious threat

This new, adaptive, "glocalized" media strategy is, in many ways, more dangerous and insidious than the centralized "broadcast" model of the caliphate era. The previous strategy was visible and "loud"; the new strategy is decentralized, "quiet," and ephemeral. This creates an intractable problem for regional security services in Malaysia. Counter-terrorism efforts focused on simple content removal are reactive and insufficient. They target the symptom (the post), not the strategy (the decentralized, glocalized narrative). This new strategy, which blends extremist narratives with legitimate local grievances (like the Rohingya crisis), makes it incredibly difficult to distinguish "extremist propaganda" from "legitimate political dissent" online, allowing it to hide in plain sight.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Islamic State's media apparatus has successfully metamorphosed from a centralized, state-building "broadcast" model into a decentralized, adaptive, and highly effective "glocalized virtual insurgency." In response to our research questions, we found: (1) A definitive ideological pivot from "utopia" to "resilient insurgency" and *sabr* (patience) (Finding 4.1), (2) A new targeting strategy based on "glocalization," which co-opts local grievances (like the Rohingya crisis and Malaysian political debates) to make the global ideology resonant (Finding 4.2), (3) An adaptation in form to lo-fi, "ephemeral," and "snackable" media to evade moderation and decentralize production (Finding 4.3). This research fills a critical temporal gap (focusing on the under-researched post-2019 era) and contextual gap (shifting the lens from the West to Southeast Asia). In doing so, it empirically validates the "glocalization" framework as an essential, updated analytical tool for understanding contemporary extremist resonance. The key policy takeaway is that reactive content removal ("de-platforming") is strategically insufficient. (1) The "glocalization" challenge blurs the line between extremist propaganda and legitimate political dissent, making simple moderation ineffective and potentially counter-productive. (2) This research argues for a paradigm shift toward proactive, "glocalized" counter-narratives. These must be culturally-resonant, credible, and community-led, addressing the same local grievances that ISIS exploits, but from a non-extremist perspective. (3) A long-term investment in critical digital media literacy is essential to "inoculate" populations against the affective and discursive tactics of manipulation.

The primary limitation of this study is its production-focused analysis; it cannot make empirical claims about audience reception. This provides two clear avenues for future research: (1) Qualitative Reception Studies: In-depth focus groups and digital ethnography are needed to understand how these messages are actually interpreted, negotiated, or resisted by audiences in Malaysia and Indonesia. (2) Network Analysis: Computational methods (SNA) are needed to map the dissemination pathways of this ephemeral content across the fragmented, cross-platform ecosystem. In conclusion, the Islamic State's physical caliphate is gone, but its "virtual caliphate" has proven dangerously adaptive. By "glocalizing" its message, it has ensured its continued resonance, posing a persistent and evolving threat that demands an equally adaptive and sophisticated response.

Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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