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Islamic State Online: A Look at the Group's South Asian Presence on Alternate Platforms

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Executive Summary

In 2019, Telegram took extensive action to remove Islamic State (IS) channels and supporters of the group from its platform. Telegram's crackdown led to the attempted migration of IS supporters to apps like Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat and TamTam, with Hoop Messenger being the most popular encrypted social media platform for IS supporters. However, IS lost a significant number of supporters in the migration from Telegram to these lesser-known platforms. These platforms are also less than a tenth as popular as Telegram and do not offer the convenience of Telegram. Subsequently, IS has voiced frustration at its lack of followers in many of the groups analysed by the authors. At the time of writing, there are no in-depth analyses on the number of IS's supporters on these new platforms and the narratives they propagate.

This report provides an analysis of the migration of IS supporters in South Asia to Hoop Messenger. The authors collated data from more than 25 South Asia-centric channels from 2019 until Hoop Messenger was shut down in October 2022. This report further identifies distinct variation among IS narratives across channels dedicated to individual states in South Asia. For example, in channels dedicated to Afghanistan, narratives criticised the Taliban for not being Islamic enough. In channels dedicated to Pakistan, narratives focused on criticism of the state for allying with the United States. Indian IS channels focused on the mistreatment of and violence towards Muslims. In Bangladesh IS channels, the narrative focused on reconnecting Bangladesh and its citizens with their Muslim roots.

While the South Asian IS supporter channels posted links on Hoop Messenger to groups and channels on other platforms like Rocket.Chat and TamTam, these apps did not draw many South Asian members. As further analyses in this report show, this lapse in platform migration is reflected in the fact that there were very little to no South Asian dedicated groups in Rocket.Chat and TamTam.

With sustained deplatforming efforts, it is highly likely that South Asian followers of IS will continue to encounter problems migrating to lesser-known apps and struggle to garner as much support as they did on such platforms as Telegram and Twitter. Technology companies should maintain pressure on radical groups to prevent them from finding or establishing any safe territory online.

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1 Introduction

In response to the increase in propaganda online from Islamic State (IS) across the last decade, technology companies have clamped down on extremist content with considerable success. Currently, IS accounts on public platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been forced to adapt constantly to sustained deplatforming efforts. More recently, encrypted apps like Telegram have largely refused refuge to jihadist groups. This report studies propaganda efforts of jihadist groups on alternate encrypted platforms, such as Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat and TamTam. It provides a brief history of IS's usage of the digital space and its migration from Twitter and Facebook to Telegram and then later to these three encrypted social media platforms. The report then delves into the main propaganda offered on the different apps regarding India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. In doing so, it offers a commentary on IS supporter channels' narratives on South Asia and the impact of deplatforming on these groups.

This report sits at the intersection of two streams of scholarship: studying IS supporters online and on IS propaganda regarding South Asia. IS's online behaviour has generated a wealth of literature on the group's presence on encrypted platforms. For example, Amarnath Amarasingam et al.'s report on the impact of Telegram's crackdown on terrorist groups documented the reduction in the presence of such groups online.¹ GNET's previous report by Bennett Clifford looks at several alternate platforms such as Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat, TamTam and others to highlight terrorist groups' adaptation to crackdowns on Telegram.²

Charlie Winter's report on right wing groups shifting to TamTam and other encrypted platforms also covers the issue by focusing on non-jihadist groups.³ Works by Kabir Taneja have looked at IS propaganda through its magazines, including the South Asia-focused *Sawt al-Hind (Voice of India)*, while works by Basit,⁴ Siyech and Suraj have looked at IS propaganda regarding rival jihadist groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda, as well as IS narratives on nations like Bangladesh and Myanmar, among others.⁵

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- 1 Amarnath Amarasingam, Shiraz Maher and Charlie Winter, "How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration", CREST report, 2021, https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/65377645/21_002_01e-libre.pdf?1610177967=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DHow_Telegram_Disruption_Impacts_Jihadist.pdf&Expires=1675424426&Signature=VwD5eEXLjYzPYNIT-OTL39S8yL81mi142fElkCZWCCED1BgA-rlJkLzg-7OzCDMfq4rRR7-lLqKCDXcfPOTICvw25rdSCaoKso3Fylf97vtJnSfvXQsBckFQ4ZSta7riDcf66iKFG73GQbOYrfoEEI7SrmCqe4Wth8BzYRjcAPa-OUTgJJIRqywX5MQWu-SP8-jsyYbv7j6UCIsjBm2ZFOMzVhIllrb0vKBZU95xTWIRIMby5BN26hJ15YUxley~2TldDlnDtAflLesBclG3~6JmbogOWpBwDXPTXAgIVBQBndcokuVYtdNkKn3KqUz28u1JKNqp0LXsW2nFpG4zw__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA.
 - 2 Bennett Clifford, "Migration Moments: Extremist Adoption of Text-Based Instant Messaging Applications" Global Network on Extremism and Technology, November 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/11/09/migration-moments-extremist-adoption-of-text-based-instant-messaging-applications/>.
 - 3 Winter, C. *The 'Great Migration': Recent Accelerationist Efforts To Switch Social Media Platforms*. Vox Pol. 18 January 2023, <https://www.voxpol.eu/the-great-migration-recent-accelerationist-efforts-to-switch-social-media-platforms/>.
 - 4 Abdul Basit, "ISKAP Flexes Its Propaganda Muscles on Social Media", *The Diplomat*, 2 January 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/iskp-flexes-its-propaganda-muscles-on-social-media/>.
 - 5 Taneja, K. Reviewing the evolution of pro-Islamic State propaganda in South Asia. *Observer Research Foundation*, 6 January 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/reviewing-the-evolution-of-pro-islamic-state-propaganda-in-south-asia/>. See also Mohammed, S. S., & Ganesan, S. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State's rivalry in South Asia, *Observer Research Foundation*. 11 January 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-states-rivalry-in-south-asia/>.

Some have also looked at the propaganda by IS's Khorasan Province, given how significant the group is with more than 4000 estimated fighters and over 700 civilian casualties in 2022 alone.⁶ While many authors have studied various extremist and terrorist groups on encrypted platforms, few have focused on the South Asia-centric supporter channels of terrorist groups on these platforms. As such, this report provides much needed scholarship on how the supporter channels of IS have tried – and, in several cases, failed – to adapt to the impact of deplatforming.

In terms of platforms chosen for consideration, the authors selected Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat and TamTam for two reasons. First, Hoop Messenger was the platform of choice for many IS supporters. Second, many IS supporters and propagandists on Hoop Messenger cross-posted onto Rocket.Chat and TamTam, and vice-versa.

This report focuses on the online activities of IS in South Asia for several reasons. Namely, South Asia has experienced a high incidence of terrorist violence by IS and is considered a hotbed for extremism as seen in the January 2023 mosque bombing in Peshawar that killed over 60 people. IS is also considered a challenger to the Afghanistan government run by the Taliban and has produced a strong propaganda campaign through the publication of several media channels such as Al-Millat Media, Khalid Media and many others.

This report highlights three major trends. First, it demonstrates that IS selected certain applications due to specific features and ease of use. Second, it argues that South Asia is an important area for IS propaganda; IS efforts to maintain its presence in the region continue to this day. Third, this report demonstrates the extent and impact of deplatforming terrorists by conceptualising waves of digital migration in which terrorist groups engage. As such, the report makes significant contributions to policymakers and tech companies studying extremists on the internet as well as expanding our understanding of jihadist propaganda in South Asia.

6 "Over 700 Hazaras Killed And Injured in 2022 by ISKP Attacks, Reports HRW", *Afghanistan International*, 1 December 2022, <https://www.afintl.com/en/202301120334> See also report: "Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)", *European Union Agency for Asylum*, April 2022, <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-afghanistan-2022/14-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>.

1.1 Methodology

The authors surveyed 82 different channels on Hoop Messenger propagating Islamic State narratives and its associated worldview. About half of the channels were Arabic-only channels often focused on IS militants' activities in Iraq, Syria, and several African countries, including Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso. These channels regularly shared official IS messages. The content on these channels also addressed Islamic jurisprudence, world affairs and criticisms aimed at rival jihadist groups. One of the authors is proficient in Arabic, enabling analysis of these channels.

Of the remaining channels, 28 disseminated content primarily in English. Four of these were backup channels, duplicates of bigger parent channels to be relied on by supporters when the parent channels were taken down. As such, backup channels operated under different names (sometimes named simply 'Backup' or 'Beakup' [sic]) to further avoid detection. The channels propagated much of the same content as the parent channels along with links to several other channels. Seven channels did not have any content at all, including a channel description, and hence were not classified under any language. However, these empty channels had followers ranging from 20-100 followers, with one channel having over 250 followers. Table 1 displays the number of channels in different languages surveyed in Hoop Messenger.

For Rocket.Chat, the report surveyed 28 IS supporter channels, the linguistic details of which are also provided in the comparative table. Most of the channels were either in English or Arabic and the authors found next to no channels that were in any South Asian language.

Lastly, 34 IS supporter channels were surveyed on TamTam. Due to deplatforming efforts, 22 of the 34 surveyed were blocked between February and December 2022. Moreover, ten channels have since become inactive, with a third of them not containing any form of communication since October 2022. Of these 34 TamTam channels, 28 disseminated content primarily in Arabic, while the rest consisted of Indonesian and Filipino channels and a single Uzbek channel. Channels communicating primarily in English were hard to find; those that were, either had no content or messages, or disseminated content once every three or four days. Among the surveyed channels, communication in English was more generally limited to messages shared from other channels or platforms, or comments to content posted on the channels. These comments were from supporters asking for English-language channels on TamTam and elsewhere (for example, Telegram). Most of these requests received no replies and those that received replies were given suggestions for English channels that were either already blocked by TamTam or did not have any content. Ten out of the 34 surveyed supporter channels were created in 2022.

Table 1: Primary language and the number of channels speaking those languages across the three platforms

Primary language of the channel	Number of Channels		
	Hoop Messenger	Rocket.Chat	TamTam
Arabic	41	13	28
English	28	8	0
No language	7	0	0
Russian	2	0	0
Chinese	1	0	0
Indonesian	1	1	3
Malayalam	0	1	0
Rohingya	0	1	0
Pashto	0	1	0
French	0	1	0
Filipino	0	1	2
Urdu	1	1	0
Hindi	1	0	0
Uzbek	0	0	1
Total	82	28	34

Among IS supporter channels on the three platforms, the number of supporters differed widely. Arabic channels garnered the greatest number of followers. However, on Rocket.Chat, a channel disseminating content in French (among other languages) garnered the most followers. The highest number of followers in a supporter channel on Hoop Messenger was 3,000; on Rocket.Chat the figure reached 6,000. Meanwhile, the highest number of followers among the surveyed channels on TamTam did not exceed 500. However, according to the authors' observations, the number of followers in a channel seldom translated to its activity. The channels on Rocket.Chat with over 5,000 followers witnessed fewer than ten messages a day, while the channels on Hoop Messenger saw anywhere between 25 and 50 messages a day on average, despite having only half the number of followers. Table 2 lists the number of channels against the range of the number of followers surveyed by the authors.

Table 2: A comparative look at supporters/followers on Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat and TamTam

Number of followers	Number of Channels		
	Hoop Messenger	Rocket.Chat	TamTam
0–20	5	0	6
21–50	25	0	5
51–100	17	7	12
101–200	16	4	10
201–500	27	3	1
501–1,500	6	2	0
1,501–3,000	1	1	0
3,001–5,000	0	1	0
5,001–10,000	0	8	0
Total	82	28	34

1.2 Observations on Reach and Usage

Some observations on the three apps can be made: first, according to literature on the topic, due to a combination of encryption (especially the 'Vault' feature, which is explored in section 4.1 below), ease of usage, and monitoring, Hoop Messenger was the most favoured among the three by extremist groups specifically.⁷ This was confirmed by our survey of the groups as well. Second, in terms of users, all three of these platforms are not and were not used as often as Telegram. Telegram is used by more than 1 billion people worldwide, according to Google Play Store data. In contrast, the most used of these three apps boasts just over 10 million people, with TamTam having only about 500,000 users.

With Hoop Messenger no longer in existence, IS supporters have been forced to rely on the remaining two apps or search for other homes, which once again requires the effort of setting up channels and attract a user base from scratch. This is important given that terrorist groups rely on reach and usage to maximise the effectiveness of their messages.

⁷ Clifford, "Migration Moments".

2 A Tottering Digital Caliphate

The rise of Islamic State's physical dominance in Iraq and Syria in 2014 coincided with a huge increase in its internet penetration globally. IS used websites and social media platforms to increase its scope and propagate its ideology online to recruit from a larger pool of supporters. As research has pointed out, the IS propaganda machine was bigger and better than law enforcement's counter-narrative mechanisms.⁸

Since IS's territorial defeat in 2019, the group has placed much focus on its digital caliphate to recruit and propagate its ideology. In the absence of a physical space to govern, IS and its followers and supporters around the world have heavily relied on the virtual caliphate to peddle narratives through decentralised web platforms, as well as mainstream (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and so on) and encrypted (Telegram, Rocket.Chat, Hoop Messenger and so on) social media platforms.⁹

For a brief period from 2014 to 2019, IS and its supporters were able to operate on several platforms largely unfettered, exploiting the decentralised nature of the virtual caliphate. The key advantages of the virtual caliphate included supporters' ability to combine IS's ideology with the local context in their region, constantly providing their sympathisers with a lens championed by IS through which to view their surroundings. The unofficial supporter channels were also able to reach a wider audience by propagating IS narratives coupled with the local context in local languages. The end-to-end encryption, anonymity and privacy features on encrypted social media platforms like Telegram meant that IS and its supporters used it as a staging ground for a "multiplatform zeitgeist", wherein media content is rebroadcast onto other messaging platforms and public-facing websites.¹⁰

Since late 2018, platforms have ramped up their campaigns to deplatform propaganda networks of militant Islamist groups, especially IS. Telegram, for instance, has started working with Europol and individual European Union law enforcement agencies to identify, observe and remove IS propaganda channels from the platform.¹¹ Through a "Referral Action Day", part of a deplatforming campaign in November 2019, Telegram collaborated with Europol and industry partners Google, Twitter and Instagram to remove a total of 26,000 items of IS propaganda, including accounts, channels, groups, videos and other publications, from its sites.¹² Following this action, jihadist activity reduced significantly on Telegram and moved to other applications.

8 Alberto M. Fernandez, Here to stay and growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks. *Brookings Institution Report*. October 2015. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/IS-Propaganda_Web_English.pdf.

9 Criezis, M. (2022). *Create, Connect, and Deceive: Islamic State Supporters' Maintenance of the Virtual Caliphate Through Adaptation and Innovation*. Program on Extremism: The George Washington University.

10 Clifford, "Migration Moments".

11 *Referral Action Day with six EU Member states and Telegram* (5 October 2018). Retrieved from Europol: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/referral-action-day-six-eu-member-states-and-telegram>.

12 Clifford, "Migration Moments".

Among the three platforms under consideration, Hoop Messenger was the most prominent, featuring the most diverse set of supporter channels. These included region-specific supporter channels, such as channels focused on South Asia, and country-specific channels focused specifically on Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, etc. as well as theme-specific channels, such as channels disseminating content aimed at criticising feminism and women's rights. The channels also disseminated content criticising rival militant Islamist groups, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda affiliates, such as al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. While Rocket.Chat and TamTam also contained several IS supporter channels, the number of these channels was fewer and their volume of output lower than that of Hoop Messenger.

Unlike Hoop Messenger, non-English-speaking channels on Rocket.Chat did not appear to primarily focus on any specific region or country. Rather, channels surveyed disseminated content that contained a wide variety of topics and news associated with IS across the globe. These included but were not limited to sharing IS developments in battle, attacks carried out by IS militants, official IS magazines, *nasheeds*, Islamic jurisprudence and so on. The channels also shared some region-specific content that was very similar to narratives disseminated on Hoop Messenger IS supporter channels. This explains the high number of followers for English-language channels, numbers that are comparable to Arabic-language channels. With the lack of region-specific or country-specific channels, IS supporters on Rocket.Chat are concentrated in channels disseminated in languages they are comfortable reading. As such, they might receive developments related to IS around the world and view region- or country-specific narratives all in one place.

Yet another possible reason for the lack of separation of channels based on region- or country-specific narratives could be to avoid splitting followers into different channels, and to create the feeling of a larger community in a single channel. While this could pose a challenge in getting the followers back together when the channel is taken down, those with 3,000-6,000 followers could help foster better connectivity among followers and also at times generate more traffic than a channel with followers in the few hundreds. Subsequently, followers in several Rocket.Chat channels were still observed to be asking for links to Telegram channels, further highlighting the popularity of Telegram as the choice of app among IS supporters. After the announcement of the new IS leader, Abu al-Hassan al-Hashemi al-Quraishi, in November 2022, several supporter channels on Rocket.Chat pledged *bayah* (the oath of allegiance) to the leader.

IS supporters' messaging on TamTam was generic (including claims made by IS and the dissemination of IS video, audio, images and so on) with little initiative to disseminate content involving a local context. Like Rocket.Chat, channels surveyed on TamTam did not focus on specific countries and mostly disseminated content on a variety of topics and events associated with IS. The effects of TamTam's deplatforming efforts were visible in the messages disseminated. Messages stressing the importance of studying the interface and policies of other encrypted social media platforms that could provide a haven were prominent. The groups also often shared archival IS videos.

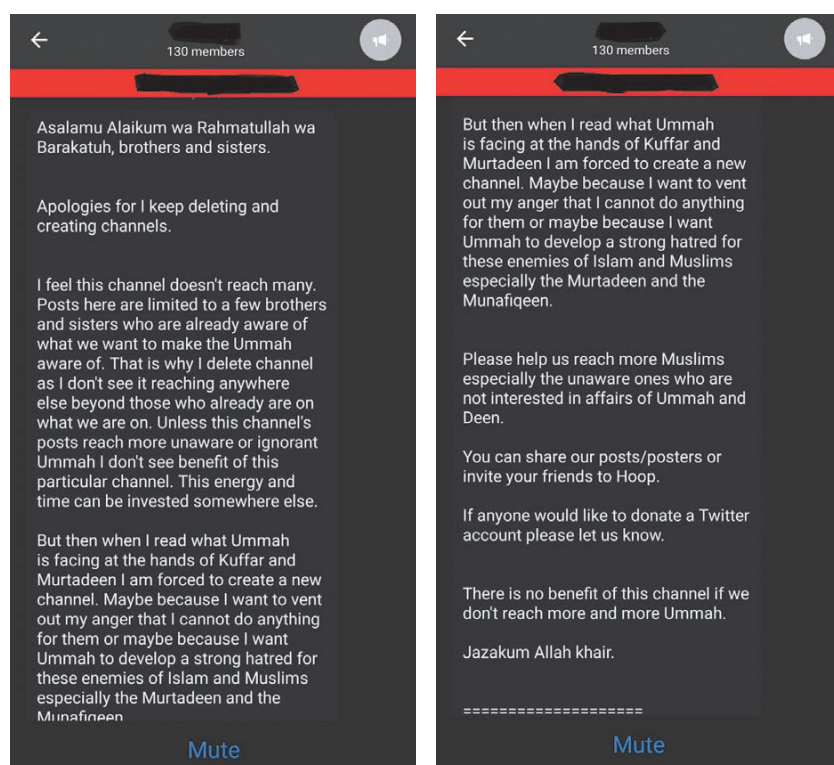
3 Consequences of De-platforming and Impact on Supporter Channels

In our study, the consequences of deplatforming and subsequent platform migration caused a visible strain to IS supporter channels and their objectives of propagating IS narratives and the IS worldview. With the inability to operate on a centralised encrypted social media platform, such as Telegram, supporters were forced to venture onto lesser-known apps with varying (and often reduced) functionalities, thereby affecting the operational capabilities of the supporter channels. Only a fraction of IS's supporters migrated to these lesser-known platforms.

The low migration to these platforms could be due to two reasons. First, once a channel is taken down, the administrator(s) of the channel tend to re-create it under a different name to avoid being detected or reported. It would therefore require the administrator(s) to share the link to the new channel among several other existing/operational channels to regain the followers lost. Hence, when multiple channels are taken down at once, it takes time and effort for the administrators of the channels to regain the followers lost (sometimes numbering in 100s or 1000s). Second, supporters who are new to IS' digital space might be wary of migrating between platforms to avoid several associated risks, including their information being leaked to the authorities. For example, across all three platforms, the authors observed several messages on the supporter channels accusing the platforms of constantly sharing user information to the law enforcement. Hoop Messenger was accused of sharing user information to the Canadian law enforcement while TamTam was accused of sharing user information to the Russian authorities.

Moreover, the reduction in the audience following supporter channels onto platforms, including Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat and TamTam also highlights a significant challenge facing the administrators of these channels that is often revealed through de-platforming efforts. Supporter channels are often effective as buttresses, complimenting and further aiding in the creation of echo chambers for the content disseminated by 'official' channels on a given platform. When forced to migrate platforms, it is not often the case that official channels also follow suit. This would suggest that supporter channels lose their legitimacy when forced to migrate onto other platforms that do not include official channels, thereby becoming the sole provider of a militant group's narratives and worldview. This disconnect from official IS channels and the subsequent pressure to disseminate legitimate content makes it hard for IS supporter channels to retain followers, let alone incite violence, which is the channels' and their administrators' ultimate goal.

The loss of followers during platform migration, disconnect from official IS channels and the associated pressure on supporter channels and their administrators is evident and have been observed by the authors. In at least a third of channels with one hundred or more followers, the authors witnessed administrator(s) voicing frustrations with the lack of action among followers in sharing disseminated content and reaching out to more supporters to follow the channels. Such messages were shared often on the channels, along with repeated messages calling for volunteers to translate IS editorials and magazines, indicating a lack of motivation among the followers to participate and propagate the channel's narratives actively.



Figures 1 and 2: Islamic State moderator voicing frustration regarding the low reach of his posts.

With various safety measures implemented by moderators of official channels, supporter channels have become the easier alternative to access IS propaganda. Hence, despite the challenges faced due to deplatforming and platform migration, supporter channels could inadvertently act as an intermediary link between new supporters and their access to channels with moderator(s) that have a connection to IS. Moreover, the moderator(s) of supporter channels disseminate the IS worldview in combination with the local context, making it easier for followers to relate to the grievances emanating from socio-political and cultural developments from their environment. While the moderator(s) of supporter channels presumably lack the experience of an IS propagandist to incite violence, it is likely that they can appeal to the emotions of followers who are on the precipice of exploring militant Islamist propaganda as an answer for their grievances and uncertainty.

3.1 Long Term Impact of Deplatforming – Waves of Digital Migration

Given these factors, we note that the presence of jihadist groups (especially IS) on social media can be classified into two major waves of migration.

From their inception, most IS accounts existed on Twitter and Facebook, with close to 50,000 accounts with an average of 1,000 supporters each. Some 20% of the accounts were in English, with 75% in Arabic. While Twitter was heavily involved in suspending many of these accounts, the numbers seem to have risen over time with the company declaring that by 2018, it had suspended over a million accounts, most of which were IS related.¹³ According to Charlie Winter, the July 2015 period was the peak of IS's online presence on these public facing social media companies.¹⁴ As demonstrated in another study, between the start of 2015 and the end of 2016, the tweet frequency of IS-related supporters dropped by more than 75%.¹⁵ This decrease prompted the first wave of migration to Telegram. While IS already had a presence on Telegram in 2015 as a backup platform to spread its propaganda, many of Telegram's users had already cautioned IS sympathisers about the limitations of the platform, given it was encrypted as opposed to the openness enjoyed by users on Facebook and Twitter.¹⁶

Yet, by 2018–2019 Telegram was the social media platform of choice for IS supporters. For example, researchers have already pinpointed close to eight million posts on Telegram and about 2,000 channels in the 2018–2019 era.¹⁷ Not only this, but several major attacks were also coordinated on Telegram, including the 2015 Paris attack that killed several French citizens, demonstrating the deadly impact of IS activities on the platform beyond just propaganda.¹⁸ With the 2019 action against these groups by Telegram, content creation dropped by about 65% for IS supporters.¹⁹ This led to the second wave of migration to the platforms studied in this paper.

In essence, then, from a total of over a million accounts on Twitter, the number of accounts on Telegram dropped to the thousands (although the number of followers was still high). After the second wave, the total number of accounts dropped to less than a hundred in our survey. In this scenario, the total number of accounts has dropped significantly in each wave. Of course, these developments online were also complemented by real world changes. For instance, in the first period when IS was mainly on Twitter and Facebook, the death of several major IS central propaganda specialists in Syria and Iraq at the hands of Western forces led to a reduction of propaganda online.

13 Don Reisinger, "Twitter Has Suspended 1.2 Million Terrorist Accounts Since 2015", *Fortune*, 5 April 2018, <https://fortune.com/2018/04/05/twitter-terrorist-account-suspensions/>.

14 Charlie Winter, "Fishing and Ultraviolence", 2017, BBC News. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-88492697-b674-4c69-8426-3eddd17b7daed>.

15 J. M. Berger and Heather Perez, "The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How suspensions are limiting the social networks of English-speaking ISIS supporters", *George Washington Program on Extremism Occasional Paper*, January 2016, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/JMB%20Diminishing%20Returns.pdf>.

16 Clifford, "Migration Moments".

17 Amarasingam, Maher and Winter, "How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration".

18 "Terrorists on Telegram", *Counter Extremism Project Report*, May 2017 https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-07/Terrorists%20on%20Telegram_072122.pdf.

19 Amarasingam, Maher and Winter, "How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration".

At the same time as the digital migration to encrypted platforms, IS's physical control of territory also shrank significantly with almost no lands controlled by the group by the end of 2019 in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, by late October 2022, Hoop Messenger had shut down due to various technical issues, depriving these jihadist groups of some of their 'online territories' as well.

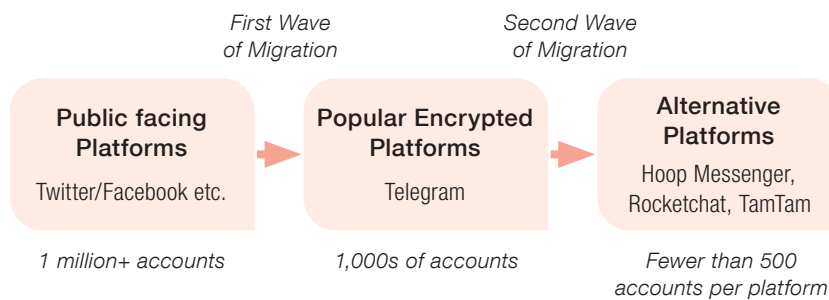


Figure 3: Illustration of migration waves by IS

In terms of presenting our analysis, we have broken down our findings into two parts: first, a consideration of the supporter channels on each of the three platforms and second, an examination of the narratives offered on the various channels, with a focus on South Asia-specific narratives, particularly those on Hoop Messenger.

4 Jihadist Activities on Alternative Platforms

4.1 Hoop Messenger

Hoop Messenger is an online messaging service founded in 2014. Users are able to message people one-to-one, one-to-many and in chat rooms. One-to-many users can either be public or private, as discussed below. IS users began migrating to Hoop Messenger after Telegram took down content in 2019; IS supporters recommended the service as a secure alternative. A chatroom in Telegram hosted a message in 2020 that said that IS would be using Hoop Messenger as a primary base of operations leading to a mass migration of many channels from Telegram to Hoop Messenger. One of the most attractive features of Hoop Messenger for IS users (and anyone else conducting illegal operations) is the 'Vault'. The Vault is a feature whereby users can send messages and media to one another by storing it in a secure digital vault. The Vault also has an option to add a fake password that, when keyed in, will delete the stored data.²⁰ This feature is especially useful for anyone whose phone is confiscated or is asked to open the Vault. Despite this feature, the terms and conditions for the app state that any terrorist content will be removed by the company. The total number of users for this app was, at its peak, about three million, based on download numbers.²¹ The app was shut down in October 2022 and is no longer available. Although the company has not made an official statement regarding the closure of the app, one could offer some possible reasons: the impact of the pandemic, the takeover of the platform by extremist groups and a lack of funding.

Breakdown

Audience: Our research revealed 82 IS supporter channels on Hoop Messenger. Of the total 82 channels, 30 channels (28 in English, one Hindi and one Urdu channel) exclusively catered to South Asian audiences. Furthermore, 24 of the 30 channels focused exclusively on Indian supporters. The remaining six channels focused on Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

Means of Communication: English and Arabic were the preferred languages of communication. English was the common choice among 98% of the India-centric IS supporter channels, with the remaining channels disseminating propaganda in Hindi. Magazines, editorials and specific texts in English-speaking India-centric channels were also occasionally translated to local languages, such as Bengali,

²⁰ "Hoop Messenger Poses a Threat Due to Its High Level of Encryption", *Benzinga*, 19 September 2018, <https://www.benzinga.com/pressreleases/18/09/r12326370/hoop-messenger-poses-a-threat-due-to-its-high-level-of-encryption>.

²¹ Jasmine Lafita, "Exposing Hoop: The Dangers of Tinder for Teens", *Drops of Ink*, <https://www.lhsdoi.com/23106/features/exposing-hoop-the-dangers-of-tinder-for-teens/>.

Tamil, Malayalam and Urdu. Bengali was the primary language used in channels addressing Bangladeshi audiences, while Hindi and Pashto messages featured in channels focused on Pakistani and Afghan audiences, respectively. The English-language supporter channels, however, refrained from sharing content in Arabic and other languages not commonly spoken in India.

Creation: All channels surveyed by the authors on Hoop Messenger were created after October 2019, coinciding with the coordinated campaign by European Union law enforcement agencies, Telegram and Twitter to identify and remove IS propaganda channels from their platform. Out of the 82 channels surveyed, at least 40 were created after March 2020.

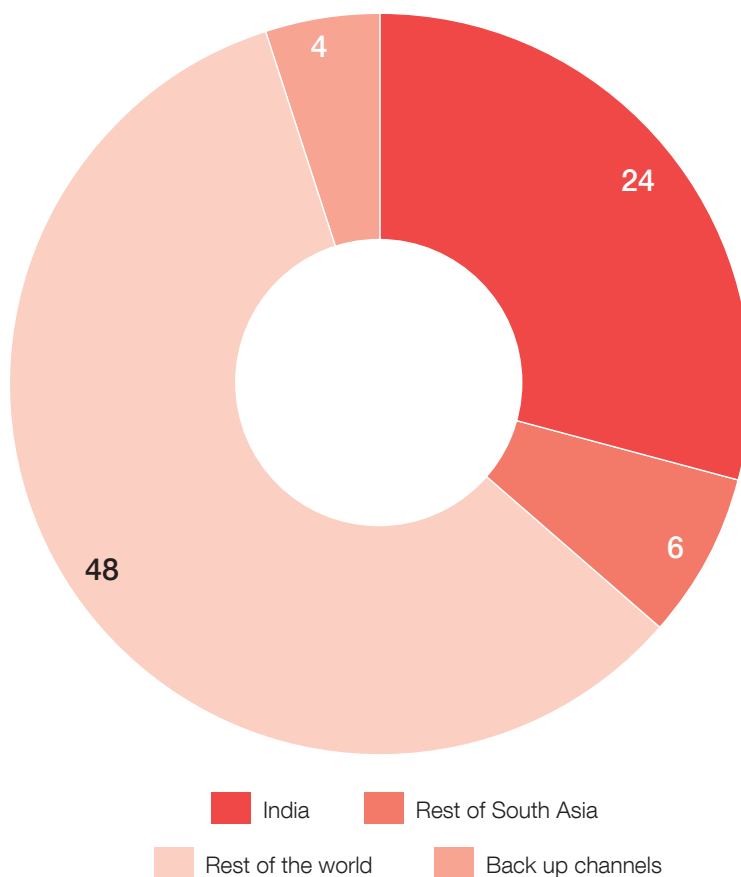


Figure 4: Distribution of channels under consideration based on region

Dissecting IS supporter channels on Hoop Messenger:

Hoop Messenger featured the most diverse set of supporter channels among the three platforms explored in this paper. While the number of supporters in each channel varied over time, among the channels surveyed, Arabic-language channels garnered the most followers, with one channel having 1,802 followers. The highest following garnered by South Asia-centric channels was 260 followers. Of the 30 South Asia-centric channels, at least 15 channels had more than 100 followers while five channels had more than 200 at the peak of their content dissemination cycles. These numbers represent a fraction of the number of followers on prominent IS associated Telegram

channels, which sometimes had thousands of followers. This difference in the number of followers depicts the popularity of Telegram as the preferred encrypted social media platform by IS members and supporters alike. One other difference between Hoop Messenger and Telegram is that most channels propagating IS content on the former were supporter channels as opposed to IS members maintaining official channels, as was the case on the latter.

Activity: English and Arabic channels were the most active among all channels surveyed by the authors. Furthermore, among channels disseminating content in English, India-centric channels were the most active, posting anywhere between 20 and 40 messages a day on average, sometimes even up to 50 messages. Channels disseminating content in Bengali, Hindi and other regional languages averaged around only five messages a day at the peak of a content dissemination cycle. Consequently, follower interaction in English-language channels were also greater than those in other regional language channels.

Activity and content dissemination frequency in the surveyed channels ebbed and flowed depending on several factors, including deplatforming efforts by Hoop Messenger and the effects of platform migration. Overall, India-centric channels were most active from August 2020 to July 2021. Channels propagating content pertaining to Afghanistan and Bangladesh were most active between October 2020 and January 2021, with new channels emerging sporadically and disappearing within a few days or not garnering enough supporters to justify continuing to post content. Content dissemination among South Asia-centric channels surveyed by the authors was at an all-time low since February 2022, which will be discussed later in this report.

Content type: Official IS editorials and magazines such as *al-Naba* (translated into English) and *Sawt al-Hind* were disseminated by administrator(s) promptly. Official IS videos were not shared/ disseminated unless translations/subtitles in English were available.

Video and image files shared in the India-centric supporter channels primarily featured violence and discrimination against Indian Muslims. This included but was not limited to videos of right-wing Hindu groups inciting violence against Muslims, comments by far-right politicians against religious minorities, including Muslims, videos of the 2020 Delhi riots and images of the demolition of Babri Masjid and other sites of religious and cultural importance to Muslims in the country. A few video and image files also featured IS militants in Kashmir celebrating Eid al-Fitr. This contrasted with the audio and video files shared on Arabic and other foreign language supporter channels, which primarily consisted of IS militants carrying out attacks (in Iraq, Syria and various African countries depending on the channel), executing civilians, seizing weapons and vehicles, and so on.

Such differences in the content can be explained by the lack of coordinated IS cells/militant groups in India. Consequently, India-centric channels were forced primarily to share content focused on increasing the perception that crises in general emanate from the out-group, in the hopes of inciting violence against the out-group. This is as opposed to sharing what IS claimed as advances on the battlefield by its militants, which were shared more regularly on Arabic-language channels.

4.2 Rocket.Chat

Designed as an open source and customisable platform with strong privacy options, Rocket.Chat is currently used by around twelve million people across the world. Rocket.Chat is more popularly used for its team and work chat options, as well as its customer service and file-sharing offerings. Users can either host content and communication on their own servers or store material on the public Rocket.Chat server.²²

In 2018, IS experimented with using the platform to host its own channels and servers, after which other groups, including al-Qaeda, followed suit.²³ One of the features that seems to be quite useful for members of terrorist organisations is the automatic translation of posts into different languages. For terrorists, a few challenges arise on this platform, particularly related to the hosting of channels on private servers. If content is hosted on the company's server, it can be taken down or the data can be provided to law enforcement agencies. However, if content is to be hosted on a private user's own server (which is theoretically secure), that requires technical knowledge. Such servers are also prone to being hacked, as happened to one of IS's channels in 2018.²⁴ Despite these risks, IS supporters preferred to create and host private servers, one of the most popular of which is the Tech Haven server.

In a similar fashion to Hoop Messenger, channels with Arabic as the primary language garnered more supporters than channels with other primary languages. However, unlike Hoop Messenger, a few English-language channels garnered followers in the thousands. One English-language channel contained 6,316 followers, 25 times the size of the largest Hoop Messenger English-language channel. However, the channel with the highest number of followers was a French channel with 6,408 subscribers.

4.3 TamTam

TamTam is an online instant messenger managed by the Russian mail.ru group, which holds the largest share of the Russian-speaking internet. The app is intentionally similar to Telegram as it was created as a Telegram alternative during 2018 when Russia was conducting raids on different Russian-owned Telegram groups.²⁵ The managers of TamTam are quite close to the Russian government and are open to providing information to the Russian government.²⁶ For this reason, IS users have cautioned other supporters from using the platform, claiming that all information on the app was available to the Russian authorities. TamTam's policies explicitly forbid the propagation of any extremist content on its platform.²⁷

²² *Rocket.Chat*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.rocket.chat/enterprise/open-source>.

²³ Clifford, "Migration Moments".

²⁴ Clifford, "Migration Moments".

²⁵ Schechner, S. (21 March 2022), *Telegram Thrives Amid Russia's Media Crackdown*. Retrieved from Bangkok Post: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/2282335/telegram-thrives-amid-russias-media-crackdown>.

²⁶ David Gilbert, "The Russian Social Network Letting ISIS Back Online", *Vice News*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/d3ane7/islamic-state-cant-find-an-online-home-so-they-might-build-their-own-app>.

²⁷ Clifford, "Migration Moments".

5 IS Propaganda regarding South Asian Nations

The South Asia-centric IS supporter channels on Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat and TamTam promulgated an abundance of narratives by combining local contexts with the worldview championed by IS. The narratives explored below are primarily drawn from Hoop Messenger, which featured the most messages on the four countries under consideration. Interestingly, narratives pertaining to Sri Lanka and Maldives were missing in the English language channels. This was significant given that Maldives was the country with the highest per capita number globally of foreign fighters who have travelled to take up arms and fight in Syria.²⁸ While IS supporter channels focussing on Maldives have been observed on Facebook and Telegram, the authors did not come across such channels on platforms such as Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat, and TamTam. This was also due to the authors' inability to read Thaana or Dhivehi (spoken language in Maldives). The only messages pertaining to the two countries observed by the authors on these platforms were those of supporters asking for links to channels focussing on Sri Lanka or Maldives. Some messages in Sri Lanka were also seeking supporters who could translate IS content into Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala.

5.1 India

Hoop Messenger channels largely focused on narratives pertaining to Kashmir. Out of the twenty-four India-centric channels surveyed by the authors; the issue of Kashmir featured in at least a quarter of all messages posted on the groups by the moderator(s). Among the narratives featuring Kashmir, messages emphasised the alleged human rights violations committed by the Indian government and the army against the local Muslim population. The narratives also commonly criticised the inaction of the Kashmiri youth, who had not taken up jihad and resisted the Indian government. Such themes also extended to the rest of India, with messages often criticising the Indian Muslim youth for the lack of jihad against the Indian government, the army and other religious groups, such as Hindus and Christians.

Messages featuring Indian states and areas other than Kashmir tended to focus on Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, Bihar and Maharashtra. Not surprisingly, all these areas are former or current strongholds of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which has controlled the national government since its rise in 2014. Narratives pertaining to these states revolved around highlighting the discrimination and violence meted out by Hindus against Muslims thus demonstrating how IS propaganda has fed off existing political and religious polarisation. The messages also centred on highlighting the plight of women, especially Hindu women in these states. The narratives seek to

28 Gough, A. (22 March 2021). *The Maldives – An Unlikely ISIS Haven*. Retrieved from Global Risk Insights: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/03/the-maldives-an-unlikely-isis-haven/>.

spotlight the lack of safety experienced by Hindu women at the hands of Hindu men, thereby further highlighting the crises faced by Muslim women in the country.

Along these lines, a notable aspect of the India-centric narratives disseminated by IS supporter channels on the platform was the discourse on women and feminism. Among those surveyed were at least two channels dedicated solely to the discussion of the apparent crises faced by the 'women of Islam' in India. A wide array of South Asian narratives about women were disseminated on the channels, with the primary narratives revolving around the exploitation of communal tensions prevalent in India to portray an accelerating crisis faced by Muslims in the country. Messages falling under this theme focused on: Hindu nationalists raping Muslim women, the erosion of Islamic values due to feminist propaganda and the promotion of secular values, declarations by non-Muslims regarding how Muslim women should dress, and critiques of abortion as well as other pro-choice stances. The channel administrator(s) additionally provided followers with a framework informed by rigid interpretations of sharia law for issues relating to marriage and the freedoms that women are allowed when it comes to working and providing for the family. Ultimately, the deviation of Indian Muslims from said frameworks, in conjunction with feminism and secular values, is touted as the primary reason for the decline of Islamic values and the crises faced by the Indian Muslim population.

The themes central to India-centric IS supporter channels on Hoop Messenger represented a notable difference from supporter channels focused on the Middle East or Africa. While the latter primarily disseminated news and information (including videos, images and statistics) on the attacks perpetrated by IS militants and IS's battlefield progress, the India-centric supporter channels tended to focus more on the alleged violations committed by the Indian government and Hindus against Indian Muslims, the deterioration of Islam in India, silence among moderate Indian Muslims and the malevolence of rival Islamist militant groups. Such differences were also visible in other South Asia-centric channels pertaining to Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

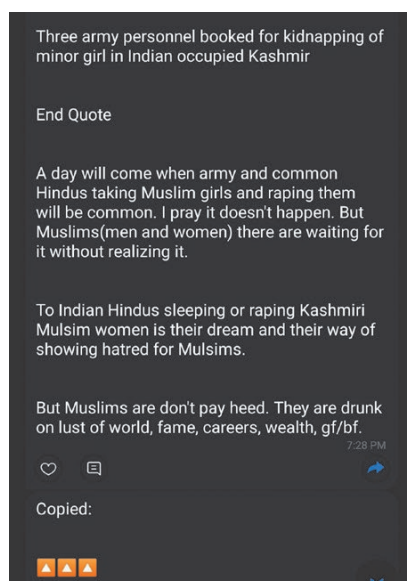


Figure 5: IS supporters criticising Indian Muslims for not opposing the Indian government (among other issues).

5.2 Pakistan

In the Pakistan-focused channels, most of the discussions were held in English with a few messages providing English transliterations of Urdu. Most of the criticisms of Pakistan were centred around the following themes: domestic problems, international politics, nationalism and anti-Islamic sentiments in Pakistan.

Among the domestic problems, there were frequent messages highlighting Pakistan's problems with corruption, often referring to the nation as 'Corruptionistan'. This was especially the case regarding relatives of the retired army chief General Bajwa, who had purchased property outside Pakistan. Another aspect of domestic issues was the abuse and molestation of women, including those from Balochistan at the hands of high-level Pakistani officials. The Balochistan issue featured frequently in conversations where disappearances of intellectuals were brought up. In fact, one supporter even claimed that the Pakistani army was worse than the Indian army since the former actively bombed and killed its citizens in Balochistan, a claim that is not verified. There was a heavy level of criticism aimed at Pakistan on this topic. The narratives also criticised Pakistani Muslims of indulging in un-Islamic or anti-Islamic activities. This included, for example, criticism leveled at an actress for doing a photoshoot inside a mosque with her husband, thereby 'desecrating' the holy space.

Regarding nationalism, members often criticised anyone who supported Pakistan for any reason. Specifically, members criticised the idea that Pakistan was formed as an Islamic nation, stating that it was based on British laws and systems and thus anyone who was supportive of the nation was being nationalistic – a problem for IS supporters given that according to them there was no concept of nation states in Islam.

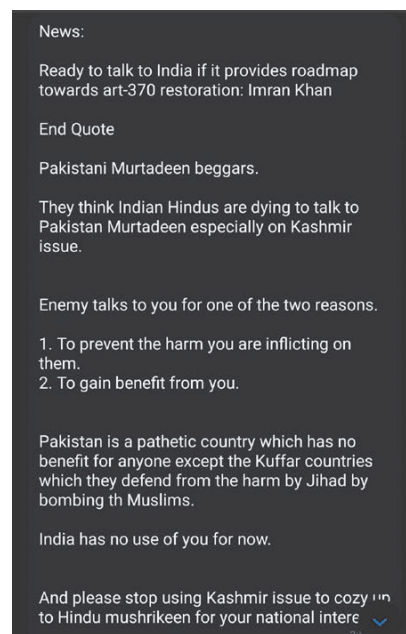


Figure 6: IS supporters criticising Pakistan for opening discussions with India.

Lastly, IS supporters also criticised Pakistan for its stances on international politics. One of the biggest problems they pointed out was Pakistan's alliances with China, which, they claimed, was exploiting Balochistan and stealing Muslim resources. This linked with the criticism they levelled against Pakistan for not criticising China for its oppression of Uighurs due to the economic benefits the country received from China. Furthermore, they also pointed out the military aid that Pakistan received from the United States in the last few decades due to the War on Terror and how this made Pakistan the 'actual American agent', a slur used to delegitimise any Muslim nation.

5.3 Afghanistan

The narratives of IS supporter channels pertaining to Afghanistan heavily centred around criticising the Taliban and al-Qaeda. IS supporters were vociferous in drawing major distinctions between IS and the Taliban and al-Qaeda and portraying the latter's shortcomings. These included emphasising the Taliban and al-Qaeda's supposed sloppy implementation of sharia law while simultaneously embracing populism and inclusivity, pointing, for instance, to the Taliban's policy of affiliating and negotiating with secular governments. The supporters often referred to the Taliban as 'Taliban2.0', owing to the policies embraced by the group, which IS supporters alleged contrasted with the original Taliban under Mullah Omar. The criticisms directed towards the Taliban can be broadly categorised into the following two themes.

First, IS supporters criticised the Taliban's malleable relations with Iran. The Iranian regime has in the past provided funding to the Taliban's Rahbari Shura (the group's leadership council),²⁹ along with weapons and ammunition.³⁰ Moreover, the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which specialises in foreign missions and the training and funding of extremist groups, also helped the Taliban establish a *shura* in Mashhad, Iran, to oversee operations in western Afghanistan, as well as offices in the Iranian cities Zahidan and Sistan.³¹ Despite the border clashes between the Taliban and Iranian regime in 2022, Iran continues to send Afghanistan humanitarian aid. Such relations have influenced the Taliban's current sectarian policies and its soft stance towards the Hazara Shi'a community in Afghanistan. Such a stance contrasts with IS's excommunication of Iran and the Shi'a community, a central tenet of its extremist worldview and a frequent theme of its sectarian-tinged discourse.³²

29 Seth G. Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan", *CTC Sentinel*, December 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CTC-SENTINEL-112020.pdf>.

30 Theo Farrel and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban after a Decade of War", *RUSI Report*, January 2017 https://static.rusi.org/201701_bp_ready_for_peace.pdf.

31 Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate?"

32 Chris Zambelis, "Terror in Tehran: The Islamic State Goes to War with the Islamic Republic", *CTC Sentinel*, July 2017, https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CTC-Sentinel_Vol10Iss6.pdf

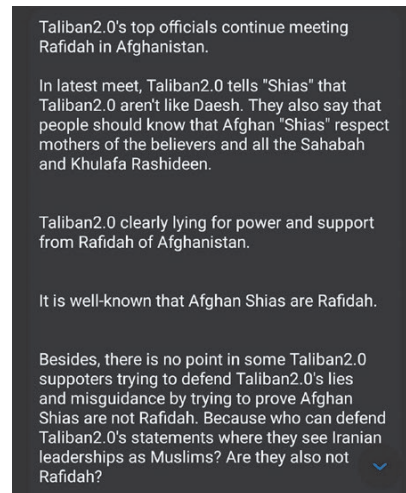


Figure 7: IS supporters criticising the Taliban for accommodating Shi'as.

Second, criticisms were directed towards the Taliban's foreign policy, stemming primarily from its leadership's advocacy for an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, rather than a broader pan-Islamic caliphate.³³ Such policies reflect the Taliban's adherence to national borders, something that IS staunchly opposes, as evidenced by the group demolishing the Iraq–Syria border in 2014. IS supporters also draw attention to the Taliban's silence over the alleged repression of Kashmiri Muslims and the atrocities against the Uighur Muslims in China's Xinjiang province.

5.4 Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, IS operates through its affiliate, the Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB). The group has claimed several attacks in the country, including the July 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery terrorist attack in Dhaka. Arrests of Neo-JMB members revealed well-organised pro-IS media networks on such platforms as Facebook, Threema and WhatsApp.³⁴

On Hoop Messenger, only a couple of channels surveyed by the authors were specific to Bangladesh. Even among the broader South Asia-centric channels, messages pertaining to Bangladesh were very few. The narratives mainly focused on a few themes. These included the call for the implementation of sharia law. This was further connected to the narratives aimed at the ruling Awami League party's secular and democratic values. Furthermore, the narratives also criticised the government's pro-India stance, a criticism that has often been levelled at Bangladesh, even by groups like al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.

³³ Suraj Ganesan, "The Islamic State's (IS) Critique of the US-Taliban Deal: A Case Study of IS' Telegram Channels" *Counter Terrorism Trends and Analysis*, September 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48618780>.

³⁴ Animesh Roul, "Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh's Female Members Further Islamic State's Recruitment and Propaganda", *Jamestown Foundation Report*, 12 February 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/neo-jamaatul-mujahideen-bangladeshs-female-members-further-islamic-states-recruitment-and-propaganda/>.

Similar to the narratives pertaining to India, the messages generally criticised the youth in Bangladesh for their lack of action and their indulging in worldly pleasures (a criticism ubiquitously used by IS and several militant Islamist groups). Groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates, including Ansar al-Islam, were also the focal point of criticisms for allegedly misleading Bangladeshi Muslims by not seeking the immediate implementation of sharia law.

The government's secular and democratic policies and its relations with India were often criticised for the degradation of Islam and the dignity of Muslims in the country. The relations between Bangladesh and India have improved in the last decade, especially in the area of defence cooperation. This includes collaboration through military training programmes and joint exercises.³⁵ This relationship is often touted as India's strategy to further repress Islam and Muslims outside its borders.

Interestingly, the messages did not mention anything about the IS-affiliated Neo-JMB, nor did it try and exploit sentiments related to the Rohingya Muslims following their exodus from Myanmar into Bangladesh.³⁶ The narratives pertaining to the latter are especially common in the official propaganda of both IS and al-Qaeda. One possible explanation for the lack of such narratives could be that the administrator(s) of the Bangladesh-centric channels on Hoop Messenger were new to the dissemination of content and hence not as experienced at exploiting the full gamut of grievances and socio-political developments in the country. It also stands to reason that, given space and time, administrator(s) of these groups might have tuned their messaging better to attract followers and supporters for IS.

While Hoop Messenger eventually shut down, the lack of prominent Bangladesh-centric supporter channels on Rocket.Chat and TamTam highlights the importance of sustained deplatforming efforts to destabilise the propaganda efforts of IS and its followers and supporters.

³⁵ J. Bhattacharjee, "India-Bangladesh defence cooperation: Coming of age, at last?", *Observer Research Foundation*, 26 July 2018, https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-bangladeshdefence-cooperation-coming-of-age-at-last/#_ednref15.

³⁶ Bashar, I. (2022). *SOUTH ASIA: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis.

6 Conclusion: Keeping the Momentum – Countering Extremism(s) Online

In our survey of Islamic State accounts on the now closed Hoop Messenger, as well as TamTam and Rocket.Chat, a few factors stand out. First, it is quite clear that activities online continue to have an impact on recruitment and attacks on the ground, as seen in the case study of South Asia. Second, as can be seen through the last decade, waves of migration have taken place with open social media being among the first spaces adopted by terrorist groups, who then shifted to Telegram and later to smaller apps, including those explored in this report. With each wave of migration, the number of users and followers reduced and clear expressions of frustration by moderators denouncing the lack of engagement by Muslims across the world could be found. Third, these reductions in numbers from the first wave of migration also coincided with real-time events, such as the killings of various propagandists in Syria and Iraq during the mid-2010s and, later, the loss of territory for IS. Fourth, academics and researchers have played a role in monitoring trends and providing evidence to help reduce the menace of these groups online, even if it is not clear yet how significant a role that has been.

Sustained deplatforming efforts have forced moderator(s)/propagandists of official IS channels to adapt to stay active on social media platforms. For example, on Telegram, several IS official channels and supporter channels have slipped into privacy mode, a feature that allows entry into the channel only by invitation. These invites are obtained by messaging members of the private channels personally, allowing for the member to vet a new user before providing the link. This ensures that the channels are not reported to Telegram and subsequently taken down. Such features mean Telegram is still one of the most popular destinations for IS officials and supporter channels to propagate their narratives. Moreover, many people have moved to supporter channels as an easy way to consume propaganda.

It is hence important for researchers and practitioners to study and understand the effects of supporter channels and their contribution to the propaganda machine of terrorist groups such as IS. Moreover, country/region-specific channels also offer a unique insight into IS narratives seeking to exploit the socio-political and cultural developments in that country/region. However, despite these groups' potential contribution to our understanding of propaganda disseminated by terrorist groups and their followers, technology platforms must maintain, if not increase, their targeting of supporter channels during deplatforming campaigns to limit their capability in propagating extremism and narratives of hate, and their potential to incite violence. The effects of platform migration studied in this report have shown that denying the space for the existence and operation of militant groups online limits their capability significantly, just like in the physical world.

Policy Section

This policy section has been authored by Nicola Mathieson, Research Director, at the Global Network for Extremism and Technology (GNET) at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. This section provides policy recommendations and is produced independently from the authors of this report. Recommendations do not necessarily represent the views of the authors.

The key findings of this report carry corresponding policy implications for technology companies and policymakers. This report has provided an in-depth analysis of the impacts of deplatforming Islamic State (IS) in South Asia. The report identifies the three most popular applications used by IS after the group's widescale removal from Telegram: Hoop Messenger, Rocket.Chat and TamTam. The report demonstrates the within-region variation of content and narratives on the platforms until October 2022.

This policy section ensures that GNET reports provide actionable research outcomes that can inform and support technology companies and policymakers to identify and prevent extremist and terrorist exploitation of digital platforms. The policy section fulfils GIFCT's core pillar of learning to improve prevention and responses to terrorist and violent extremist attacks.

1. Technology Companies

This report has identified three core areas for action for tech companies:

- Despite the widescale deplatforming of Islamic State from major social media channels, IS and other jihadist groups are continually innovating techniques to avoid content moderation. Deplatforming, while an important tool for tech companies, needs to be supported by an investment in robust content moderation tools and teams. At a time when some tech companies are experiencing a depletion of staff numbers and others are shifting content moderation policies, including those directly relating to replatforming previously removed accounts, there is a risk of tech companies losing the expertise and authority necessary to prevent and remove online terrorist content.
- Building on this first recommendation of continued investment in content moderation, smaller tech companies and platforms have proven to be the receivers of migrating extremist groups, including IS. While deplatforming IS from major platforms was essential, it inevitably drove supporters to companies less able to remove these actors and the content they shared. Greater responsibility should be taken by major tech companies to share their expertise with those smaller companies that are likely to be impacted by deplatforming. Recent initiatives such as Meta's open-source tool, Hasher-Matcher-Actioner, are an important step and demonstrate the capacity for tech companies to share their expertise and contribute to the shared goal of the removal of online terrorist

content. Tech companies should work to ensure that deplatforming does not export the challenges to other companies by, for instance, working to empower smaller tech companies and sharing their expertise.

- As highlighted in this report, there is distinct within-region variation in the types of content and narratives shared on dedicated IS South Asia channels. Across channels in India, the main concern was threats towards Muslims. In Pakistan channels, concerns centred on domestic corruption and the government's relationship with China. In Afghanistan channels, IS supporters criticised the Taliban and its relationship with al-Qaeda. In Bangladesh channels, IS supporters focus on the failure of Muslim youth to adhere to Sharia Law. The variation demonstrates the need not only for local language skills but also for local contextual knowledge. Tech companies need to ensure that they have sufficient staff dedicated to content moderation with the relevant linguistic and cultural expertise to remove online terrorist content effectively.

2. Policymakers

In addition to the report findings and their implications for technology companies, this report has also identified two core areas for action by policymakers:

- As demonstrated in this report, deplatforming from major platforms has led to extremist and terrorist actors moving to smaller and less regulated tech platforms.³⁷ This report highlights the need for policymakers to take two parallel but distinct actions. First, governments and policymakers should continue to support initiatives that provide tech companies with the logistical support to counter online terrorist content. Public-private partnerships such as Tech Against Terrorism play an essential role in helping tech companies implement best practice in tackling online terrorist content while respecting human rights. Second, policymakers should consider what actions can be taken against tech companies that refuse to tackle terrorist content on their platforms. National and regional policy is being implemented that increases the responsibility of tech companies for online safety, including large fines and imprisonment for failure to comply. States should ensure that these measures are also effective in dealing with smaller platforms where the incentive is not necessarily monetary.
- Lessons from countering IS online content should be expanded to countering other terrorist and extremist organisations. Tech companies were able to take such coordinated and decisive action against IS in part due the consensus of IS being a terrorist group and pressure by governments for tech companies to act to remove IS content. For example, one of the core missions

³⁷ See also a previous GNET report that examined the migration of extremists to text-based platforms, identified as the first wave of deplatforming in this report: Bennett Clifford, "Migration Moments: Extremist Adoption of Text-Based Instant Messaging Applications" (London: Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), November 2020), <https://gnet-research.org/2020/11/09/migration-moments-extremist-adoption-of-text-based-instant-messaging-applications/>.

of the Global Coalition against Daesh established by 85 states in 2014 was to counter IS propaganda through working with tech companies to prevent the uploading, sharing and consumption of IS propaganda online.³⁸ Coordination and sustained pressure from states is required to successfully counter other forms of extremist and terrorist online content. Governments have the capacity to define new terrorist threats and groups, empowering tech companies to take action to remove such groups' content.

38 The Global Coalition Against Daesh, "Mission," 16 May 2018, <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/mission/>; see also ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, "Sanctions List Materials: ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List," United Nations Security Council, accessed 4 January 2022, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list.



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