

TikTok and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Propaganda

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Abstract

ISIS emphasizes the importance of winning the hearts and minds of individuals in their operational strategy. Their objective is to draw sympathizers, propagate their objectives and ideology, and allocate substantial resources. They have utilized TikTok as a platform to garner attention and disseminate propaganda, with the aim of promoting their organization and recruiting new terrorists. This study employed qualitative research methods, with data gathered through interviews and documentation. The findings indicate that ISIS's propaganda on TikTok poses a significant threat to Indonesia's national security. It has the potential to sway the younger generation towards supporting extremist and terrorist ideologies. ISIS employs a variety of techniques to propagate their message. These include the use of the keyword "dawlah", displaying the ISIS flag with stickers, using nasheed or song lyrics, creating sarcastic memes, and advocating for jihad, death, and suicide. They also leverage TikTok's features, such as filters and hearts, to promote their organization. ISIS produces video content that glorifies its militants, accompanied by ISIS songs that are rhythmic, lyrical, and delivered in a catchy manner. They also display videos showing corpses being paraded on the streets, ISIS militants armed with weapons, and videos themed "Jihad Lover" targeting young women. The aim of these contents is to incite hatred, division, and social mistrust towards the state, government, and legitimate leaders. This is an academic English paraphrase of the original text.

Keywords: *ISIS, Propaganda, and TikTok*

INTRODUCTION

The most brutal terrorist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS, after the death of its leader, Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi, and the defeat of ISIS in the open war in Syria and Iraq. Long before the defeat occurred, ISIS had declared a new transformation, namely the Islamic State (IS). Syria and Iraq were no longer their areas of power, but ISIS went global through social media. Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi was appointed as the caliph to replace the previous caliph. ISIS chose a new tactic by consolidating all the international networks that had been formed and conducting ideological propaganda through social media. (Misrawi, 2020)

Propaganda is an effort to manipulate or influence the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of a person or the public opinion through the dissemination of information in the form of facts, arguments, and rumors of half-truths or lies, as well as through symbols such as words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, badges, hairstyles, and so on (Smith, 2023). Each propaganda has a specific purpose and target. Currently, the purpose of propaganda is mass communication where the masses are formed to have similar beliefs, behaviors, and habits. The purpose of propaganda is currently utilized by terrorist organizations, one of which is ISIS (Rozika, 2017).

According to ISIS, the battle for the hearts and minds of the people is very important in the implementation of operations. The aim is to attract sympathizers to join their organization, promote their goals and ideology, and invest extensive resources. In its heyday, ISIS took advantage of all possible platforms such as video file sharing websites, social media, blogs, internet forums, and various other websites to carry out operations. The form of ISIS operations used Hollywood-style videos with the aim of getting international exposure. The videos

contained ISIS propaganda messages in various languages that were disseminated and targeted people around the world. ISIS propaganda messages have proven to have significant results by expanding the reach of ISIS targets, encouraging operators to join the ISIS organization, and making the existence and activities of ISIS known to the international community. (terrorism-info.org.il, 2021)

The internet provides incentives for narratives that are quickly composed and make them the latest trend in social media. The Daily Dot said that in 2013 the first major conflict presented to the world by YouTube and LiveLeak was the Syrian civil war. Time announced in 2016 the first Facebook war. Iraqi and Kurdish forces fought to expel ISIS from Mosul, Northern Iraq by providing live streaming. The Atlantic said that ISIS was the first terrorist group to control physical and digital territories by using social media applications Instagram and Twitter (Tiffany, 2022). ISIS propaganda was also found on Twitter or X. In 2020, their propaganda became a trending topic. ISIS used Twitter or X to signal that ISIS still exists and is looking for the right moment to reincarnate (Misrawi, 2020).

TikTok, a social media application that is currently popular among the international community, attracted a demographic outside its target in 2019, namely terrorist organizations. TikTok was found to have been infiltrated by ISIS. ISIS used TikTok to attract attention and spread propaganda. Storyful, a social media intelligence agency, found 24 TikTok accounts that spread ISIS propaganda. Their target was to promote their organization and recruit new terrorists (Oktarianisa & CNBC Indonesia, 2019). One of the accounts had 1,000 followers and 1 terror video with 68 likes. (Berlianto, 2019)

TikTok is an application that allows users to create short videos with unique and interesting special effects. The application is popular because of its ability to enable users to create various types of content such as dance, freestyle, and unique videos. TikTok has also created a community of creators known as “TikTokers”, who make creative and inspiring videos. TikTok has a wide music support feature, allowing users to create more attractive and connected videos with various music trends. TikTok creators have the potential to become famous and gain many followers because of the quality of creativity and inspiration they present in their videos. (Malimbe et al., 2021)

Various efforts made by the Indonesian government still make various ISIS content on TikTok keep popping up. In connection with the exposure of the problem above, the researcher wants to examine how to identify ISIS propaganda on TikTok?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study aims to examine the phenomenon of ISIS propaganda through social media TikTok by using qualitative research methods. The researcher chose a case study design as a research strategy because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the context and meaning contained in ISIS propaganda. The researcher used an inductive approach and a constructivist paradigm to understand the perspectives and experiences of the research subjects. The research data were collected by interview and documentation. The collected data were then analyzed using the Interactive Analysis Model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview guide with several informants:

- a. Mr. Brigjen Pol R. Achmad Nurwakhid, S.E., M.M as the main informant from BNPT
- b. Mr. Yudha Rahman Setiadi S.Kom as a supporting informant from Kominfo

- c. Mr. Colonel Sus Merjames Pakpahan, S.Si., M.Han., M.Si as a supporting informant from Kominfo
- d. Mr. Colonel Arm Suprayitno, S.I.P., M.M as a supporting informant from Kominfo
- e. Mr. Muhammad Rizki as a supporting informant from a former prisoner of ISIS terrorism propaganda on social media.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

ISIS Propaganda Threat

Since the emergence of ISIS, this terrorist group has used religion as a cover to spread radicalism and terrorism. Their propaganda is dubbed as a “dangerous virus” that can infect any individual, regardless of ethnicity, race, nation, or profession. Although radicalism and terrorism have nothing to do with religious teachings, ISIS uses religious people who are wrong and deviant in understanding and practicing their religion. ISIS has an organized strategy in spreading their ideological virus. They manipulate, distort, and politicize religion, erase the nation’s history, destroy the local culture, and build hatred towards the legitimate state and government. Their ultimate goal is to use terrorism as a tool to achieve political objectives, such as establishing a religious state according to their interpretation.

After their defeat in the Middle East, ISIS intensively sought new places to grow, and Southeast Asia became one of their main targets. They continued their operations in Southern Philippines and used recruitment patterns that relied on information technology. In this case, they took advantage of social media, especially TikTok, which is popular among the younger generation. ISIS understands that TikTok can be an effective tool to attract the attention of the younger generation. By creating visually appealing content, they designed short videos that caught the users’ attention. After successfully gaining interaction, ISIS directed their enthusiasts to other media platforms such as YouTube and Telegram, where they disseminated more information. ISIS propaganda on social media, including TikTok, poses a great threat especially to the younger generation. This generation is very active on the platform, and when exposed to propaganda, the impact can range from intolerance to support for terror acts. This threat becomes serious because it can lead to division within the Indonesian society.

The threat of ISIS propaganda through TikTok can be categorized as a complex threat. ISIS propaganda through social media, especially TikTok, has a negative impact on the social and cultural aspects, especially for the younger generation. The use of advanced technology to spread radical views has the potential to damage social and cultural values and trigger division in society. The spread of extremist views by ISIS through social media can threaten the stability and security of society. ISIS propaganda on social media shows the misuse of digital technology. Although not a cyberattack like DDoS or illegal access, the use of social media to spread propaganda is a form of internet abuse. ISIS uses the internet to spread radicalism and terrorism, which directly threatens the ideology of Pancasila and the national integrity of Indonesia. ISIS propaganda is often politically charged, such as exploiting religious and ethnic issues or spreading information that opposes the government. This is a serious political threat, especially in terms of national stability. The long-term effects of ISIS propaganda can create instability that affects the economy.

According to Petrus Renhard Golose, there are three stages of propaganda carried out by terrorists:

- a. Propaganda by the deed before the attack In the context of ISIS, this stage can be seen in the way they use social media to disseminate messages that justify extreme actions. This includes

the use of radical and extreme narratives on TikTok accounts, where they manipulate information to provide ideological justification for their actions and invite others to follow a similar path.

- b. Propaganda by the deed after the attack After a terrorist act, ISIS uses propaganda to strengthen the organization's image and seek support. They use provocative messages that demean the government or other groups. This includes content found on TikTok, where after a particular attack, they may post content praising the attack or criticizing parties they consider opponents.
- c. Propaganda by the deed during the action This stage involves the dissemination of propaganda during a terrorist act, which may not be directly relevant to this research data. However, in a broader context, ISIS is known to use mass media to spread terror, such as by releasing videos or messages after an attack occurs to cause fear and influence public opinion.

Identifying ISIS Propaganda Content

To minimize the threat of ISIS propaganda, we need to identify the ISIS propaganda content that is spread through TikTok. The parameters for identifying ISIS propaganda content on TikTok include the use of the black ISIS flag with the words "Allah and Muhammad," an extreme narrative, a lack of loyalty to the nation, regarding Indonesia as an apostate state, and using the narrative of "takfirin," which labels those who live in an apostate state as apostates. The content also asserts that Pancasila is a taghut, supports intolerance, violence, discord, and heresy of the Indonesian culture and local wisdom. This propaganda aims to create hatred, division, and social mistrust towards the state, government, and legitimate leaders by using slander, hoaxes, discord, and hate speech.

Another way to identify ISIS propaganda content on TikTok is through the keyword "dawlah," which is the vision of ISIS to establish an Islamic state according to their version. ISIS propaganda content on TikTok often shows the ISIS flag covered with stickers to avoid breaking platform rules. The use of nasheed or song lyrics is a common technique because it easily draws attention and gets user interaction. Moreover, memes that are sarcastic are also prevalent in spreading propaganda content. Content that openly calls for jihad, death, and suicide is also part of the ISIS propaganda content.

These methods are supported by the findings from the researcher's observation. The researcher found ISIS propaganda content from the account @muslim_soldier_of_Allah, which posted nasheed with lyrics that encouraged sacrifice for Islam and identified themselves as soldiers of Allah. Additionally, there was content in the form of humorous meme videos that illustrated the cycle of spreading ISIS propaganda on TikTok. The account @padliiikyv3, with the username Abu Neko Al-Indunisy, disseminated ISIS propaganda content with the narrative of "takfirin," declaring apostates those who did not conform to the ISIS ideology. The content included the rule of mocking certain physical appearances as a basis for declaring someone an apostate.

ISIS also uses the features available on TikTok, such as filters and hearts, to promote their organization. ISIS video content consists of glorifying ISIS militants with ISIS marching songs with rhymes, rhythms, lyrics, and punchy delivery. These ISIS songs are packaged attractively to spread ideology quickly and stick in the collective memory. According to Elisabeth Kendall, an Oxford University expert on extremism, this method is very effective compared to preaching, debating, or theological treatises (Berlianto, 2019).

ISIS video content shows corpses being paraded on the streets. The video also shows ISIS militants equipped with weapons. In addition, there are also videos with the theme of "Jihad Lover" that target young women and videos of young women who write to themselves "Jihad and Proud" (Liputan6.com, 2019). According to Street Wall, ISIS uploaded videos of torture and

murder juxtaposed with filters, colorful confetti, heart stickers, and emojis that have a pleasant impression. The video shows ISIS militants torturing prisoners using balaclavas (face coverings). Then ISIS militants pushed the prisoners to the ground and beheaded them with machetes. There are videos of ISIS militants shooting enemies at close range. (Amirullah, 2019)

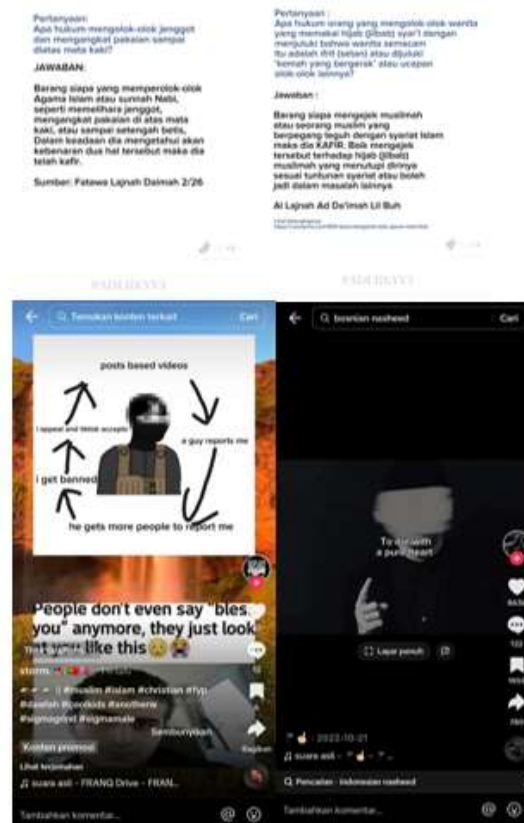


Figure1. ISIS Propaganda Content on TikTok

Source: (Rakhma, 2024)

To identify ISIS propaganda content, we can also discern it through the strategy of spreading ideological viruses carried out by ISIS, which includes:

- Utilizing Religion for Political Purposes
- Altering Historical Narratives
- Damaging Local Culture and Wisdom
- Creating Hatred and Distrust Towards the Government
- Provoking Social Division

Here, summarized the identification of content into a table of parameters to facilitate the identification of ISIS propaganda content on TikTok.

Tabel 1 ISIS Propaganda Content Parameter.

No	Parameter	Description
1	Use of Symbolism	The use of the black ISIS flag with the words "Allah and Muhammad."
2	Extreme Narrative	Content with an immoderate narrative, considering Indonesia as an infidel state, and supporting Islamic law in an extreme way.
3	Verse 44 of Surah Al-Maidah	The use of verse 44 of Surah Al-Maidah to spread the narrative of "takfirin," declaring infidels those who live in non-Islamic states.
4	Declaring Infidels	Narrative that contains declaring infidels others, especially those who do not align with their ideology.
5	Opposing Pancasila	Narrative that states Pancasila as taghut.
6	Intolerance and Violence	Content that shows intolerance and leads to violence.
7	Heresy of Local Culture	Narrative that heresies the culture and local wisdom of Indonesia.
8	Building Hatred Content	Content that builds hatred, division, and social distrust towards the state, government, and leaders.
9	Keywords on TikTok	Use of specific keywords such as support for the caliphate, unique codes such as 1515, and a narrative of dissatisfaction with the government.
10	Anonymity of Users	Accounts that upload content are usually anonymous and do not use their real identity.
11	Radical Narrative	Content with a narrative that leads to radical attitudes and behaviors, including calls for jihad or suicide bombing.
12	Keyword "Dawlah"	Use of this keyword that refers to the vision of ISIS to establish an Islamic state according to their version.
13	Visual Content	Use of photos or videos with the ISIS flag, often disguised with stickers to avoid violations on TikTok.
14	Nasheed	Use of song lyrics or music that are easy to remember and get a lot of interaction.

15	Meme	Use of memes that are related to the current culture or phenomenon, or that openly invite jihad, death, and suicide.
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Source: (Rakhma, 2024)

From the data and analysis presented, it can be understood that ISIS propaganda through TikTok is a serious threat to Indonesia's national security. ISIS, as a terrorist group, exploits this platform to spread their ideology of extremism and terrorism, especially to the younger generation. They use various techniques, such as manipulating historical narratives, destroying local culture, creating hatred towards the government, and causing social division, to attract sympathy and support. This strategy includes the use of symbolism, extreme narratives, nasheed, memes, and visual content that are designed to influence thoughts and behaviors, as well as increase the risk of intolerance and support for extremism and terrorism. The use of social media by ISIS is very effective because platforms like TikTok allow the dissemination of content that is fast and gets a lot of interaction, especially from the younger generation who are vulnerable to the influence of extremist ideology.

Overall, this data shows that radical groups like ISIS take advantage of popular social media platforms like TikTok to spread their messages, while trying to disguise their true affiliation. This underscores the challenge faced in identifying and addressing radical content on social media, given the clever ways that these groups use to avoid detection.

The conducted research has unveiled numerous critical issues related to the dissemination of extremism and terrorism by ISIS, particularly in the context of social media usage. ISIS, which purports to act in the name of religion, in reality, misuses these teachings to propagate extremism and terrorism. It underscores the primary problem of ISIS focusing its attention on Southeast Asia, utilizing social media platforms like TikTok to recruit and disseminate their propaganda, targeting the younger generation susceptible to extreme influences. ISIS's adaptive strategy in using social media is perilous as it can alter the values and mindset of the younger generation. Moreover, the propaganda disseminated by ISIS has the potential to incite intolerance, acts of terrorism, and societal divisions.

This comprehensive research elucidates how ISIS, as a terrorist group, adapts to technology and social media to disseminate their ideologies and propaganda. By understanding their modus operandi and strategies, it is hoped to provide insights for preventive measures and education for the younger generation to shield them from the influences of radicalism and extremism.

CONCLUSION

ISIS propaganda through TikTok is a serious threat to Indonesia's national security, as it can influence the younger generation to support the ideology of extremism and terrorism. ISIS uses various techniques to spread their propaganda, such as using the keyword "dawlah", displaying the ISIS flag with stickers, using nasheed or song lyrics, creating sarcastic memes, and calling for jihad, death, and suicide. ISIS also takes advantage of the features available on TikTok, such as filters and hearts, to promote their organization. ISIS creates video content that glorifies ISIS militants with ISIS songs that have rhyme, rhythm, lyrics, and catchy delivery.

ISIS also shows video content that displays corpses being paraded on the streets, ISIS militants equipped with weapons, and videos with the theme of “Jihad Lover” that target young women. These contents aim to create hatred, division, and social mistrust towards the state, government, and legitimate leaders.

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