



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

## Teenage Terrorists and the Digital Ecosystem of the Islamic State

MOUSTAFA AYAD

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## David Kowalski

COMMANDING OFFICER, COUNTER-  
TERRORISM AND SPECIAL  
OPERATIONS BUREAU, LOS ANGELES  
POLICE DEPARTMENT

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### FROM THE EDITOR

In this month's feature article, Moustafa Ayad examines 93 unofficial Islamic State groups and outlets operating across social media platforms and messaging applications to understand how the Islamic State's digital ecosystem is fostering teenage terrorism. He writes that an "ecosystem of unofficial Islamic State groups and their supporters are continuing to flaunt their ability to use social media platforms for recruitment and propaganda" with youngsters "interacting with and producing Islamic State content in new shapes and forms." He adds that the unofficial Islamic State propagandists are "finding innovative, low budget hacks to the hurdles placed in their way by social media companies and messaging applications. The Islamic State's digital ecosystem is thriving, and the outlets within it are not just flaunting an ability to game platforms, but are similarly expanding their presence onto new emerging applications, allowing them to fight off coordinated efforts and automated approaches intended to stop their spread."

Our interview is with Deputy Chief David Kowalski, the commanding officer of the Counter-Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau at the Los Angeles Police Department. His department is increasingly focused on keeping the upcoming Olympics in the city safe. He says: "We've been preparing for the 2028 Olympics for the past seven years. Each year, our preparation and development becomes more advanced. We work closely with all the agencies throughout the city, which includes our mayor's office, the fire department, our federal agencies, the emergency management department of the city, and it's a whole regional approach to making sure these games are successful." He adds: "We've worked very closely with our partners in Paris this past summer. ... From a counterterrorism point of view, we've had the opportunity to look at what worked in Paris and in lessons learned, and that's been very beneficial to us as we move into 2028." He further notes that "the threats to Los Angeles and the rest of the country continue to become more sophisticated. Over the past six years working in the field, the threat environment has never been so diverse and changing, and we must remain ahead of how these threats can impact our cities."

Munira Mustaffa provides a case study of the May 2024 Ulu Tiram attack in Malaysia. She writes that the attack "illuminates how an isolated familial environment, driven by a fanatical father's extreme religious ideology, systematically groomed the attacker through a distorted theological narrative that reframed violence as a spiritual purification ritual and pathway to salvation." She adds that the case study demonstrates "how self-imposed ideological exiles can create significant challenges for monitoring and intervention, thus underscoring the urgent need for sophisticated approaches that move beyond simplistic categorizations of terrorist sympathizers."

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

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*Cover: The keyboard of a MacBook Air is*

*reflected in the display. (Silas Stein/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images)*

# Teenage Terrorists and the Digital Ecosystem of the Islamic State

By Moustafa Ayad

**As an older generation of Islamic State ideologues, fighters, and propagandists dies out or is arrested, and the center of gravity for the Islamic State as a group shifts to Central Asia and Africa, a younger cadre of supporters is taking up the mantle of support for the group. They are forming the backbone of an unofficial ecosystem of Islamic State support spread across platforms, while evading takedowns and producing unsanctioned content in the name of the group. This article provides an overview of 93 unofficial Islamic State groups and outlets operating across social media platforms and messaging applications, a year after more than 25 minors connected online were in the final stages of preparing simultaneous attacks in several European cities.**

**F**or six months, between December 2023 and June 2024, a 12-year-old boy from Besancon, France, downloaded more than 1,700 jihadi videos on his computer and phone.<sup>1</sup> He created jihadi characters wielding weapons such as knives, machine guns, and the flag of the Islamic State in online video games.<sup>2</sup> He managed six accounts on just as many platforms, posting Islamic State execution videos.<sup>3</sup> He engaged in conversations with supporters of the Islamic State on Telegram and Discord, where he also shared videos from his electronic stash of jihadi content.<sup>4</sup> Then, on June 2, 2024, the Besancon Organized and Specialized Crime Division launched an investigation into the boy that would result in an August conviction

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under the “terrorism apology” laws in France.<sup>5a</sup>

The news of the 12-year-old Islamic State supporter captured headlines across Europe and globally.<sup>6</sup> It also quickly became just another story of a string of 2024 arrests of minors globally under the age of 18 engaged in disseminating content online linked to the Islamic State or plotting attacks across Europe. In 2024, 42 minors in Europe under the age of 18 were arrested for being involved in Islamic State attacks, attack planning or caught in the throes of propaganda operations, according to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Islamic State Select Worldwide Activity Map.<sup>7</sup>

Playing a central part in of all these arrests was the role of the internet, and specifically the Islamic State’s reach across the open web and the vital role its communities of support online play in radicalization and attack planning and preparation. By the author’s far from complete count, the Islamic State’s cadre of unofficial support groups<sup>8b</sup> operating online consists of 93 outlets, some of which are partially defunct and some of which are fully operational at the time of publication.<sup>9c</sup> Understanding this ecosystem at this present day and time requires analysis of the breadth and scope of the Islamic State’s digital ‘caliphate’ across social media platforms and the open web.<sup>10</sup>

Terrorism scholars, academics, and non-governmental organizations have previously conducted Islamic State account censuses of X [formerly Twitter],<sup>11</sup> focused on the online recruitment practices of the Islamic State,<sup>12</sup> analyzed hundreds of channels on Telegram,<sup>13</sup> tracked the Islamic State exploitation of youth-focused platforms such as TikTok and Discord,<sup>14</sup> as well as analyzed the Islamic State’s website presence across the open web.<sup>15</sup> This article, however, examines unofficial outlets of the Islamic State in the wake of the group’s territorial demise in Iraq and Syria in 2019, the rise of the Islamic State’s affiliates in Afghanistan and Africa, and the availability of unofficial Islamic State content across

a The boy was not sentenced to jail time, according to reports. Instead, he was placed under supervision and treated for what appeared to be a series of cognitive health issues. “12-year-old boy found guilty of advocating terrorism,” *Monde*, August 21, 2024.

b Unofficial Islamic State outlets are not linked to the central media apparatus but are still branded outlets supportive of the Islamic State, have a much larger footprint, and are more readily available on platforms and messaging applications than official outlets. Much of the material they rely on comes from official media content, but they have, and do, create original content that gets past moderation at what the author believes to be a higher rate than official outlets.

c The author cataloged 93 unofficial Islamic State groups across platforms between January and February 2025. The list is not complete, but appears to be the largest sample of unofficial Islamic State groups and outlets cataloged to date. The author estimates that number is likely in the hundreds. The author determined that 60 percent of the 93 outlets have produced new content in the past six months, making them active, while 40 percent have not produced new content in the past six months but are still available online, making them partially defunct.



*The Islamic State logo is seen on a mobile device. (Jaap Arriens /Sipa USA/Sipa via AP Images)*

the social media platforms and encrypted messaging applications. The author seeks to highlight just how central this unofficial Islamic State ecosystem is to audiences inspired by the group and how the interplay between this ecosystem and youth requires reframing the challenge rather than doubling down on the same playbooks.

This article will first present the connection between these young peoples' use of social media and their attacks. The author will then seek to create the tie-in between the real-world threats posed by these youth-led plots and the unofficial digital ecosystem of the Islamic State, going beyond and expanding the author's previous work into the ecosystem.<sup>16</sup> This tie-in will be followed by an analysis of the unofficial Islamic State ecosystem, expanding on what the author has already published about it, and will do so by diving into the outlets and tactics central to the ecosystem, and will conclude with recommendations for digital counterterrorism practitioners and researchers. The article will build on a broader report by the author on the Islamic State's online activities that was published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) on February 12, 2025.<sup>17</sup>

### **A Week in March: Young People and the Islamic State Ecosystem**

During a seven-day period in March 2024, 11 teenagers were arrested across France, Belgium, and Switzerland for being a part of a micro-network that both spread Islamic State propaganda online and appeared to be plotting an attack on an iconic music

venue in Brussels.<sup>18 d</sup> The 10 minors and an 18-year-old, charged as an adult, were connected through a "closed chat group" online, and were allegedly sharing Islamic State content across social media platforms.<sup>19 e</sup> The incident highlighted a highly networked group of minors across borders sharing jihadi content online, inhabiting the same spaces online, with some elements of the same network plotting attacks. Reports from Switzerland, Belgium, and France of this teenage network indicated that the youths plotting the attacks in Belgium engaged with each other online, but also actively took part in producing their own content in support of the

d On March 14, investigators in Switzerland would announce three more teens under the age of 18 who were arrested in connection to the minors in Belgium and France. Carmen Schelkens, Guy Van Vlierden, and Faroek Özgünes, "16-year-old from Etterbeek, who may have been involved in a foiled attack on Botanique, arrested: 'He posed with a Kalashnikov in the video,'" HLN, March 14, 2024.

e On March 3, 2024, four teenagers between the ages of 18 and 15 were arrested by counterterrorism police in Belgium for allegedly plotting an attack on Le Botanique, the famed botanical garden turned concert venue. Also on March 3, 2024, three teenagers in France, between the ages of 15 and 17, were arrested for suspected links to the Belgian plotters. Michael Torfs and Joris Truys, "Suspect in terror case from Ninove is barely 15 years old and may have planned an attack with 3 others," NRT News, March 3, 2024.

Islamic State.<sup>20 f</sup> The extent to which they were all involved with the planning of the concert hall attack, however, remains unclear.

The latest United Nations monitoring report noted that European authorities dismantled four terrorist cells consisting of 25 minors “connected online in the same virtual groups, who were in the final stages of preparing to execute simultaneous attacks in several European cities.”<sup>21</sup> Attack plots in Switzerland,<sup>22</sup> Belgium,<sup>23</sup> France,<sup>24</sup> Germany,<sup>25</sup> and Austria<sup>26</sup> appear to have been all hatched by minors working in concert with one another online, and had significant tie-ins to the unofficial Islamic State ecosystem of support on the open web. More recently, on February 10, 2025, a 14-year-old in Austria plotted an attack on the Westbahnhof Station in Vienna.<sup>27</sup> Investigators found two knives, handwritten instructions for producing explosives to be used as a detonator for a bomb, as well as material including aluminum pipes that were intended to be used for bomb-making, and that the boy had numerous profiles on TikTok.<sup>28</sup>

In 2021, this author found that minors were quickly forming the backbone of a new online subculture in support of Islamic State and other jihadi groups.<sup>29 g</sup> The author called this online subculture movement the “Alt-Jihad,” which appropriated the aesthetics from extreme-right groups online and merged them with support for the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida while frequently using TikTok and Instagram and other social media platforms to spread and share that content.<sup>30</sup> Young people that were a part of this subculture at the time were spread across Europe, North America, and the Middle East and North Africa. At the time, the author warned “using law enforcement to curb these communities” would “prove unwieldy, as such a multipronged and multi-platformed challenge would simply exhaust resources.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, one of the first successful teen-led attacks last year, on March 3, 2024, involving a 14-year-old in Zurich, who stabbed an Orthodox Jewish man, was directly tied to this community of “Alt-Jihad.”<sup>32</sup> The author, alongside journalists from Swiss media outlet Tamedia who reviewed and attempted to verify the boy’s social media accounts following the attack, found that he was heavily immersed in these communities and producing his own content.<sup>33</sup> The author traced the content and the language used in boy’s online posts directly to specific “Alt-Jihad” communities in support of the Islamic State. Much of the content was remixed unofficial Islamic State content.

Producing unofficial content such as the video found by investigators in Belgium in support of the Islamic State has become part and parcel of the unofficial ecosystem of support groups and outlets operating across the open web. In Austria, for example, 20 days after the Vienna Taylor Swift concert plot<sup>34</sup>—similarly hatched by minors—was thwarted in August 2024, authorities arrested three teens, aged 16, 17, and 19, who were producing and

disseminating unofficial Islamic State content on TikTok and Instagram.<sup>35</sup> In Spain, authorities arrested an 18-year-old on March 16, 2024, in Barcelona, who had created his own Islamic State-branded channel online, while providing instructional material to four others in Sweden on how to carry out an attack. The 18-year-old was also connected to a teen in Canada, who was later arrested for attempting to facilitate an attack on a pro-Israel rally.<sup>36</sup>

Much like these small networks of teen propagandists and plotters, many of the 93 unofficial groups and outlets identified by the author and operating across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, Element, and RocketChat appear to be produced by small networks of Islamic State supporters dispersed across different locations.<sup>37 h</sup> They produce content that is not only unsanctioned by the central Islamic State media apparatus,<sup>38</sup> but create their own branding, while operating in more than 20 different languages. They are well-versed in the language of the Islamic State and its history, while also steeped in internet cultures, referring to those who engage in similar support of the Islamic State on TikTok as “LARPer.”<sup>39</sup> While much of the animus displayed by these groups within the unofficial ecosystem is toward the Islamic State’s enemies, such as Christians, Shi`a, the global coalition, and Western states, it similarly turns onto itself, attacking each other in the process. Much of this is done in a language that young people understand and not in the official cadence of the group. This is where the danger lies. Using platforms familiar to young people is only a singular, and smaller, part of this issue; creating the content they seek to consume is the larger, more insidious problem.

This dynamic has raised alarms from the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da`esh), Al-Qaida, the Taliban, and associated individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities. The team’s last two reports noted rising concern from member states, particularly in Europe, around “radicalized individuals” who “were often younger, some being minors, with direct or indirect connections with ISIL (Da`esh) through online encrypted messaging platforms,”<sup>39</sup> as well as the “expansion” of “ISIL’s use of digital platforms.”<sup>40</sup>

### ‘Remaining and Expanding’: The Islamic State’s Unofficial Outlet and Group Ecosystem

Contrary to claims of the Islamic State’s defeat, the enduring prevalence of the movement online indicates that the fight against the group, its worldwide affiliates, and its global base of supporters is far from over.<sup>41</sup> In reality, the Islamic State’s ability to “remain and expand” while continuing to adapt to new pressures, indicates resilience to the tactics and strategies designed to restrict its return.<sup>42</sup>

The Islamic State’s online presence is buttressed by low-budget innovative tactics and measures and by meticulous archiving

f According to a report by HLN, one of the teens arrested on March 14 connected to the suspects arrested in Belgium produced a video in support of the Islamic State while holding a weapon. Schelkens, Van Vlierden, and Özgünes.

g The author’s research noted “a generational shift, inspired by other internet subcultures using platforms like Discord, Reddit and 4Chan, has become one of the defining aspects of Gen-Z Salafi aesthetics online. These internet subcultures of 4Chan, Reddit and other alt-right forums are increasingly being appropriated by Gen-Z Salafi members of Islamogram, and the akh-right, as well as younger supporters of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Islamist movements such as the Taliban.” The Akh-right is an online sub-culture of young Islamists who are either aligned with conservative, far right, and extreme-right ideologies or ideologies.

h Based on a review of each of the groups’ channels and accounts, the author determined some of the larger groups have four to six administrators while some are operating more than one outlet with only one. Approximately 47 of the outlets reviewed had one administrator/content producer, while another 21 had two to three administrators/content producers, and 25 had four to five administrators/content producers.

i Merriam-Webster dictionary defines LARPer as “a person who participates in a live-action role-playing game,” or, in this case, is faking their persona online. “LARPer Definition & Meaning,” Merriam-Webster, accessed February 26, 2025.

happening in a decentralized fashion across an increasingly decentralized internet. Consequently, this article focuses on the unofficial Islamic State groups and outlets that make up the ecosystem of support spread across social media platforms and messaging applications. Online, the Islamic State continues to expand the boundaries of its valuable internet ecosystem, connected through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X as well as messaging applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp, RocketChat, and Element.

Ingrained in this ecosystem are more than 93 active or partially defunct unofficial media outlets supporting the Islamic State across platforms, with some a part of alliances as large as 20 groups, and some being launched at the time of this article.<sup>j</sup> Many of these groups are redundant<sup>k</sup> and could be considered third-rate propaganda purveyors, producing recycled content with rather poor graphic design or language, while others command audiences of more than 20,000 on channels solely dedicated to their content.<sup>441</sup>

Thus, the Islamic State's *virtual* presence is highly decentralized—especially in an expansive and fluid operational theater such as the internet—are generally modest and short-lived.<sup>45</sup> Part of this challenge has been the overarching focus on 'official' outlets and their channels, which have been one of the primary concerns of governments for at least the past decade. Meanwhile, *unofficial* channels and groups have festered, much to the chagrin of social media companies, and governments. This unofficial ecosystem of support for the Islamic State, therefore, has existed in tandem with the recent rise in Islamic State-inspired youth attacks and plots across Europe.

The purpose of this article is not to prove whether or not these cases and would-be supporters were influenced by the unofficial and official presence of the Islamic State on the internet, which seems readily apparent, but rather to tell the story of the Islamic State's unofficial ecosystem across platforms and the danger it poses to wider society.

### The Unofficial Islamic State Support Ecosystem Online: Surviving, Sidestepping, and Spreading Content

While, at the macro level, unofficial Islamic State groups are using a range of propaganda and evasion tactics, the individual accounts behind these outlets and groups at the micro level are seemingly expanding their propaganda presence across platforms. For this article, the author tracked, analyzed, and dissected the behaviors of large and small networks of unofficial Islamic State groups and

<sup>j</sup> The author conducted a review of the branded media outlets on the Islamic State's most prominent forum. Defunct outlets were those that had not produced content in a period longer than one year.

<sup>k</sup> The author observed outlets that existed for two months and then were relegated to the dustbins of history. One of those outlets was *Baqia*, a Telegram, Pinterest, and Facebook outlet using artificial intelligence to generate provocative images that used recreated notorious scenes from Islamic State videos in anime format. While the group seemed to have appeal among Islamic State circles, it could not withstand constant takedowns on Telegram and Facebook.

<sup>l</sup> The largest outlet observed for this article was 'Global Events.' 'Global Events' is an unofficial Islamic State alternative news outlet operating multi-platform, multi-lingual disinformation operations under the guise of 'media' and 'media personalities,' contributing to an already fractured and polarized online media landscape and spreading Islamic State news to new audiences. As explained further down, rather than identifying unofficial Islamic State outlets, the author assigned them names to avoid amplifying them.

outlets consisting of:

- **300 accounts and 15 Facebook pages** linked to support outlets and groups, some with audiences as large as 22,000. Individual accounts supportive of Islamic State were using 'professional mode,' giving them access to features to monetize their content.
- **50 accounts on Instagram**, connected to a wider network on Facebook.
- **50 accounts on TikTok**, sharing remixed official content of Islamic State, as well as unofficial group and outlet propaganda.
- **15 channels on WhatsApp being used to share Islamic State content and new channels** that link to the wider ecosystem of support.
- **15 channels on Telegram being used to share Islamic State content and new channels** that link to the wider ecosystem of support.
- **15 channels on Element being used to share Islamic State content and new channels** that link to the wider ecosystem of support.
- **10 accounts on X, which had the fastest takedown rates of Islamic State content. The accounts typically did not last 72 hours.** However, concerningly, two of the accounts seemed to have premium service subscriptions, indicating that X had accepted payments from accounts sharing terrorist content.

The online ecosystem of unofficial Islamic State support is a multidimensional network of writers, editors, and 'artists,' that exist in/on multiple countries and platforms, all using similar tactics and content, in self-organized clusters. Self-organized clusters<sup>46</sup> are networks built around influencers (specifically individual accounts) that are similarly linked to a range of unofficial groups, each with their own bases of support. These distinct clusters are, in and of themselves, networks within networks, built to share new content and then simultaneously spread it out to users.

Using open-source intelligence gathering techniques, the author parsed through the ecosystem of unofficial Islamic State support groups and outlets on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X, as well as the messaging applications WhatsApp, Telegram, and Element. Through this, unofficial Islamic State groups and outlets were engaged in, *inter alia*, the following broadly categorized propaganda activities:

- *Ideological support for the Islamic State and its ideologues*
- *Islamic State news dissemination, under new brands not targeted by governments or technology companies, and mimicking independent news operations online*
- *Translation services and multilingual content creation*
- *Operational security, evasion tactics, and online tool dissemination*
- *Undermining and attacking the narratives of global, regional, and country-specific anti-Islamic State efforts*

Part and parcel of this unofficial Islamic State digital ecosystem are evasion tactics that are, in essence, a central toolbox of survival for these groups and outlets. The evasion tactics used by these groups have become ingrained into the ecosystem, and are routinely shared by individual groups, outlets, and influencers in the ecosystem in order to teach supporters operating across social media platforms. These tactics can be best described as the following:<sup>47</sup>

**Account Hijacking:** Unofficial Islamic State outlets and groups

are hijacking accounts on social media platforms, stealing the accounts from already established users and then repurposing them for use by groups and outlets linked to support for the Islamic State. This tactic is coordinated through groups and outlets that continually return after bans and takedowns, illustrating how recidivism online innovates new tactics.

**Content Masking:** Unofficial Islamic State groups and outlets are altering the existing branding on content, blurring original logos, and in some cases using the branding of existing well-known global news outlets (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Video, France 24, Russia Today, CNN, and BBC).

**Link Sharing:** Links to existing official and unofficial content are shared frequently in the comments and threads linked to unofficial Islamic State outlets and groups across social media platforms. By focusing on seeding this content in comment spaces, the outlets and groups are using the comments as the primary space for sharing new and old content linked to the group.

**Coordinated Raids:** Unofficial Islamic State raid groups on Facebook have organized “raids” on their enemies’ social media assets, including those linked to U.S. news outlets and Syrian news outlets. Groups have similarly “comment-bombed” the official Facebook pages of the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Air Force Academy, the U.S. Army, and even President Donald Trump during his first administration.<sup>48</sup> The author witnessed these “raids” in real time, as followers posted instructions including the “target,” the “objective,” and the content needed to flood comment sections with terrorist material.

**Gaming Text Analysis:** Unofficial support groups and outlets are evading text-based analysis moderation by using ‘broken text’ posting formats that appear to be confusing automated systems identifying terrorist content. Unofficial outlets routinely use ‘broken text’ posting as a means to link to official and unofficial terrorist content. ‘Broken text’ posting has included identifying key words such as ‘jihad’ or ‘kill’ and adding punctuation such as periods, spaces, special characters, or commas between letters in the word. In some cases, ‘broken text’ posting have included the beginning of the word and then an emoji to describe the word used.

## The Groups and Outlets of the Islamic State’s Unofficial Ecosystem Online: Between Disinformation, Recruitment, and Attacks

For this article, the author parsed through 93 unofficial Islamic State support outlets and groups operating across platforms.<sup>49</sup> In order to provide a snapshot of their activities without overwhelming the reader, the author will provide three case studies of the largest outlets.

The outlets in the case studies are focused on the following activities:

- disinformation operations and covert seeding of propaganda;
- building the digital infrastructure to support their continued presence on popular social media platforms, despite moderation; and
- attacking the online presence of governments, politicians, religious authorities, civil society, and media.<sup>50</sup>

### ‘Global Events’:<sup>51</sup> *Daesh Disinformation*

The supporter-led news outlet ‘Global Events’ is just one of many unofficial Islamic State media outlets operating across Facebook and other platforms, evading moderation specifically tasked with rooting out support for terrorist groups. The author identified six profiles linked to the ‘Global Events’ outlet, including one that had 9,700 followers and had classified itself as a “news personality.”<sup>51</sup>

On Facebook, ‘Global Events’ had more than 22,000 followers, and the outlet had a corresponding TikTok, Instagram, and Threads account, as well as a Telegram channel, which boasted more than 30,000 subscribers at the time of publication of this article. ‘Global Events’ is a central locus point for news for supporters and a prime example of how groups and outlets in the unofficial ecosystem have innovated in the wake of takedowns to ensure their survival.

The outlet has shared 80 video reels since its creation in October 2023 on Facebook, which generated more than 1.6 million views. The most watched video, a pair of men driving a car listening to a *nasheed* used by the Islamic State, generated 236,000 views. The second most watched video was stripped from an official Islamic State video created during Ramadan and features children learning religious principles from an Islamic State ideologue, which generated 116,000 views.

‘Global Events’ was one of the first unofficial Islamic State outlets to not only mainstream calls for *hijrah*, or migration, to sub-Saharan Africa, but also use a 43-emoji code system to describe types of attacks, official and unofficial messaging, and enemies of the group. These codes were also used to evade moderation, and function as signals to other Islamic State supporters on platforms. The outlet also developed built-in contingency plans in the event of account takedowns, namely creating back-up accounts, cross-linking, and signposting to their multi-platform presence.

### ‘The Incursions Brigade’: *The Unofficial Facilitator*

‘The Incursions Brigade’ is a group dedicated to providing accounts and other social media assets to Islamic State supporters online and attacking the group’s enemies on popular social media platforms. At one point during observation, the group had seven different Facebook pages, with a collective following of 10,857 users. The group claims to be an officially designated Islamic State facilitator for support content from other support groups such as Fursan al-Tarjama (the Knights of Translation), which is tied to 10 other unofficial propaganda outlets. The 10 propaganda outlets linked to Fursan al-Tarjama include: *Sarh al-Khalifa*, *al-Battar*, *Horizon Electronic Foundation (Afaq)*, *Fursan Upload*, *Hadm al-Aswar*, *at-Taqwa*, *al-Adiya*, *al-Liwa al-Ikhtamahat*, *al-Dira’*, *Tala’ al-Ansar*, and *al-Mourfa*.<sup>n</sup> During the observation period, ‘The Incursions Brigade’ has been actively recruiting across platforms. Through its Telegram recruitment channel, ‘The Incursions Brigade’ provides a detailed breakdown of how to join five “battalions” online, which include:

- The News Battalion, for sharing the Islamic State weekly Al

m To avoid amplification, the author is not identifying the unofficial outlets by their actual names.

n These 10 groups have already been named in public reports and assessments, so their names have not been changed, just transliterated. See, for example, Lucas Webber and Daniele Garofalo, “Fursan al-Tarjama carries the torch of Islamic State’s media jihad,” Global Network on Extremism & Technology, June 5, 2023.

Naba newsletter;

- The Raid Battalion, for sharing official productions of the 10 propaganda Islamic State support outlets referenced in its Facebook posts;
- The Creator Battalion, for sharing official Islamic State content;
- The Intrusion Battalion, for Facebook raids/invasions;
- The Sharp Battalion, for YouTube raids/invasions.

To join the ‘Incursions Brigade,’ a recruit must first pledge allegiance to the current ‘caliph’ of the Islamic State, Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurayashi, or renew a pledge to the ‘caliph.’ Once the pledge is accepted, a recruit must:

- Be present for a designated posting time. If a user anticipates an absence, the user must inform the ‘supervisors.’
- Share only pre-designed and prepared publications. A user is then obligated to forward the links to all the posts of the content to record attendance and document their work for the group.
- Receive a social media account for the work necessary as part of ‘The Incursions Brigade.’ Recruits are prohibited from using personal accounts. Similarly, a user is barred from commenting in public on issues not assigned by the group.

‘The Incursions Brigade’ seems as if it is a rebooted and rebranded Bank al Ansar,<sup>52</sup> based on analysis of the connections between Telegram channels, Facebook pages, and personal accounts affiliated with both groups. However, this could be a case of a support group using an existing brand to build out its own separate brand for recognition within the digital Islamic State ecosystem. Nonetheless, it is clear the group is once again fully operational and building out Islamic State support networks to spread and share propaganda across social media platforms.

#### ***The ‘Scorched Earth Foundation’: The Attack Outlet***

The ‘Scorched Earth Foundation’ is an Islamic State support group using Facebook and attempting to get a foothold on X to conduct ‘raids’<sup>53</sup> of enemy pages and accounts by posting Islamic State support outlet material from a range of groups. The group appears to have been founded in January 2025 and has been organizing raids through central accounts on Facebook and X. As tracked by this author, in January 2025, the ‘Scorched Earth Foundation’ organized raids of Facebook pages linked to the newly installed government of Syria and the U.S.-based news outlet Newsmax and created English translations of official Islamic State content in support of the January 1, 2025, New Orleans attacker.

The group also used a 2019 Islamic State al-Hayat Media Foundation video in a move to incite supporters to start fires in

the wake of the massive fires engulfing the city of Los Angeles. The video is titled “Incite the Believers.” During that time period, the group released an Al Naba-style infographic detailing its ‘raids’ through the month of January 2025, which included 93 targets, of which the top three were Syrian (50), American (8), and Egyptian (7). The raid group claimed to have launched 15 ‘campaigns’ in this period, using 24 different pieces of content, and included Al Naba newsletter, archive, and supporter-led outlet material.

During that time, the ‘Scorched Earth Foundation’ translated Al Naba newsletter articles into English, redesigning content in a blog-like fashion. The article it chose to translate was titled “With A Punishment by Him, or by Our Hands,” which presented the Los Angeles fires as retribution for the death and destruction in Gaza, and which called for arson attacks. The article noted “this chaotic and uncontrolled scene presents an inspiring operational opportunity to launch or prepare attacks. It attempted to spark ideas for lone mujahideen about how to cause a similar blaze. The method is simple: take a ‘camping trip’ to a forest near residential neighborhoods, ignite a fire, and quietly withdraw.” The post featuring the English translated version of the Los Angeles fires was shared 779 times, according to Facebook metrics.

#### **Conclusion**

The unofficial Islamic State outlet and group ecosystem continues to thrive on the internet, innovating new methods and tactics to ‘return and expand.’<sup>54</sup> Platforms and governments have adapted, building the tools and teams to combat this threat, but their inability to keep pace with the digital landscape, amidst myriad of other threats appears to be allowing many of these newer, more resilient groups to thrive.

The development of specialized trust and safety teams,<sup>55</sup> automated tools to locate terrorist material, in tandem with coalitions of companies, governments and law enforcement agencies united in staving off the threat from Islamic State accounts and content online have been instrumental in countering the appeal and spread of these accounts. As experts and industry insiders have previously noted “expect obsolesce,” as threat actors such as the Islamic State are able to quickly, and at low cost, innovate. Similarly, building “cross-functional organizations “without bureaucracy creates the ability to rapidly assess and adjust to new threats as they appear on platforms and beyond.<sup>56</sup> Being nimble and collaborative without the red tape are key lessons for counterterrorism organizations and platforms.

As this article highlights, the ecosystem of unofficial Islamic State groups and their supporters are continuing to flaunt their ability to use social media platforms for recruitment and propaganda, and to exact revenge on their enemies online.<sup>57</sup> The article similarly shows that youngsters are interacting with and producing Islamic State content in new shapes and forms. This digitally astute generation of jihadi fan boys and ‘edgelords’ are forming collectives and infusing new aesthetics and language into unofficial Islamic State propaganda.<sup>58</sup> By building all-encompassing communities online, spread across platforms, and fluent in numerous language and the content preferences of young people, these outlets are, and should be, considered as much the frontline as the fight in Africa, South

o Bank al Ansar is an Islamic State support group doling out social media accounts to Islamic State supporters. The group has claimed in the past to have “seized” up to 7,000 social media accounts and distributed them. The group’s activities and presence are central to the unofficial ecosystem and provides the infrastructure for Islamic State support groups and supporters to continue fanning out across social media platforms.

p The group has been unable to gain a presence on X for longer than 72 hours and has consistently been taken down from that specific platform. However, it has managed to keep its Facebook presence by setting up numerous accounts. The author believes the group is linked to ‘The Intrusions Brigade’ and may be operating in concert with that group.

q The refrain ‘return and expand,’ stripped from Islamic State content, has become the mantra of unofficial outlets and groups online.



Asia, and elsewhere.

The unofficial Islamic State propagandists are similarly finding innovative, low budget hacks to the hurdles placed in their way by social media companies and messaging applications. The Islamic State's digital ecosystem is thriving, and the outlets within it are not just flaunting an ability to game platforms, but are similarly expanding their presence onto new emerging applications, allowing them to fight off coordinated efforts and automated approaches intended to stop their spread. As researchers noted in 2016,<sup>r</sup> the Islamic State ecosystem online is in fact a "network-of-networks" that can be broken apart into sub-communities, making it easier for them to withstand larger shocks to the overall ecosystem, such as targeted takedowns.<sup>s9</sup>

This ecosystem of unofficial support is a long-standing global phenomenon that is operating with a hive mind across social media platforms. What is clear to the author is that there is a series of evergreen recommendations that need to be made in addressing this issue:

- Expert moderation is only one part of the challenge, so creating 'fly team's type of structures for digital counterterrorism is needed. These 'fly teams' of digital counterterrorism would specifically work in markets where there has been less investment in moderation, such as Africa and South Asia. A primary goal of these 'fly teams' would be combating account recidivism and understanding the connections between unofficial and official outlets. By continuously strangling the ability of these outlets to survive through both in-depth investigation and reconnaissance coupled with contextual and linguistical knowledge of how these groups operate and signal to one another, smaller networks at the core of this digital ecosystem would be stymied.
- Digital counterterrorism professionals need to think

beyond cross-platform takedowns and actually red team the responses to these takedowns by the unofficial Islamic State ecosystem. By taking down networks across platforms in one fell swoop, governments and law enforcement have created an environment on some platforms that are hostile to the unofficial Islamic State presence, however this has also bred new tactics and resilience to these countermeasures. Europol in 2019<sup>60</sup> and again in 2024<sup>61</sup> targeted Islamic State channels in a wide ranging, multi-platform takedown effort, which should be repeated on a continual basis. However, the ecosystem, and the sum of its parts, has figured out platforms such as RocketChat, Element, and SimpleX<sup>t</sup> are places in which they can regroup and recalculate before retaking lost territory.

- The toolbox of tactics deployed by the unofficial Islamic State outlets has changed, but the responses to them have not. Tactics like "broken text posting,"<sup>u</sup> a format used by a majority unofficial Islamic State outlets as a means to get controversial words past moderation mechanisms, has been used as means by which they have survived, but so has hiding content in cartoons and other innocuous formats, such as using still images of televisions that actually have embedded video within them.
- There is an additional challenge of unofficial Islamic State support outlets and groups exploiting platform loopholes to verify media sources that needs to be addressed. The ability of the unofficial ecosystem of the Islamic State to stave off takedowns by mimicking the practices of legitimate journalism should be a worry for platforms, governments and law enforcement. By operating media outlets that outwardly operate as legitimate sources, these groups are adapting to an environment where there is no longer a stigma attached to disinformation. Understanding this context, and creating mechanisms to track the news 'brands' of the unofficial ecosystem, will undoubtedly improve the ability of teams tasked with taking down unofficial Islamic State groups operating as outlets online. **CTC**

<sup>r</sup> "The researchers suggest that by concentrating just on these relatively few groups of serious followers—those that discuss operational details like routes for financing and avoiding drone strikes—cyber police and other anti-terrorist watchdogs could monitor their buildup and transitions and thwart the potential onset of a burst of violence." Deserae del Campo and Maya Bell, "Analyzing how ISIS recruits through social media," University of Miami, June 6, 2016. See also N.F. Johnson, R. Leahy, N.J. Restrepo, et al, "Hidden resilience and adaptive dynamics of the global online hate ecology," *Nature* 573 (2019): pp. 261-265.

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<sup>u</sup> 'Broken text posting' refers to a technique to game automated text analysis, which includes using punctuation in certain key words, or leaving spaces between letters, or specialized fonts that are unreadable by machines, to post, for example, about the Islamic State.

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: Deputy Chief David Kowalski, Commanding Officer, Counter-Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau, Los Angeles Police Department

By Paul Cruickshank

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*Deputy Chief David Kowalski currently serves as the Commanding Officer of the LAPD's Counter Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau. He is a graduate of the Senior Management Institute of Policing at Boston University, the Harvard Kennedy School of Government's Leadership in Crisis program, the Anti-Defamation League's Advanced Training School on Extremism, and the FBI's Leadership in Counter Terrorism (LinCT) in 2023. He serves as the Co-Chairperson of the Major Cities Chiefs Association Intelligence Committee, comprised of representatives from 78 police agencies in the United States and Canada. Prior to the LAPD, he honorably served in the United States Marine Corps. He holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminal Justice Administration from San Diego State University and a master's degree in public administration from California State University Fullerton.*

**CTC:** Could you describe the trajectory of your career in counterterrorism and what for you have been the most important lessons learned?

**Kowalski:** I've been with the Los Angeles Police Department for nearly 29 years, but I have worked exclusively in the counterterrorism field for the past six years. Prior to that, I served in the United States Marine Corps, and I deployed in 1990 to Saudi Arabia, where I was part of Operation Desert Storm and the liberation of Kuwait. I mention that because for those that study the rise of foreign terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida, the seeds of that organization under Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri began with the United States' presence in the Middle East back then and their intention to make the United States their primary target.

With the Los Angeles Police Department, my formative years were focused on working street gangs in south Los Angeles and other tactical assignments. As I promoted, I became a Captain responsible for a geographic area of Los Angeles. I worked closely with a variety of community stakeholders and saw first-hand how terrorist attacks across the globe created fear in the different communities of Los Angeles. As incidents happened around the world, I wanted our police officers to be responsive through high-visibility patrols and outreach to schools, synagogues, or mosques immediately after an attack to quell any fear or concerns that they were the next target.

In 2019, I was assigned to our Counterterrorism and Special Operations Bureau as a Commander and primarily assigned to counterterrorism efforts for our department where I worked closely with the FBI Los Angeles office through our Joint Terrorism Task force to detect, mitigate, and disrupt potential terrorist plots and attacks. In 2021, I was promoted to Deputy Chief, and I now serve as the department's Commanding Officer of the Counter-Terrorism

and Special Operations Bureau. I've been exposed to a variety of different investigations with partnering agencies, and I have continued to expand my partnerships not just across the country but with international partners. We are all working together in the global war on terrorism.

The biggest lesson that I've learned is the importance of strong relationships. It's key to timely information sharing. While the relationships we have in law enforcement are vital, developing and maintaining relationships in the community and outside the law enforcement sphere is *pivotal* since they are the first line of identifying persons who might be inclined to become radicalized.

**CTC:** In the wake of the January 1, 2025, New Orleans terrorist attack, what is your assessment of the terrorism threat picture facing Los Angeles specifically and the United States more broadly?

**Kowalski:** One of the takeaways from the January 1st attack is that the radicalization of individuals to foreign terrorist organizations such as ISIS remains a priority for those in the counterterrorism arena. All cities should remain vigilant in their efforts to prevent the next attack. The everlasting threat of homegrown violent extremists becoming radicalized and inspired from propaganda promoted by foreign terrorist organizations cannot be overlooked or underestimated. The emergence of technology enables potential attackers to become more radicalized at an accelerated rate and mobilizing to violence with access to social media platforms, promoting terrorist propaganda. As we have studied with different mass attacks and disrupted plots, the mixing of ideological grievances that appear mutually exclusive and counterintuitive makes identifying the threat today more difficult as individuals often blend ideology from jihadism to racially motivated extremist behaviors. These characteristics often fall outside of the delineation between domestic and international terrorism, and serve as a customized ideology and a driver to potential violence.

We've also observed different flashpoints emerging over the course of the Israel-Palestinian conflict that have potentially inspired new generations of extremists motivated to support foreign terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas and plan their own version of an attack. The emergence of technology with social media platforms encouraging and promoting attacks on selected dates during this past war was another variable that law enforcement officials were challenged with. Even though we are seeing that that war is moving in a more positive direction, with the ceasefire and release of hostages, the grievances from this war remain a concern. As we analyze and assess each of these threats specific to Los Angeles, our primary objective is fortifying our prevention strategies to keep Los Angeles safe.



*David Kowalski*

**CTC:** When you think about the CT needs and efforts, how do those differ for Los Angeles than, for example, New York City? And how do they not differ? What are the similarities across all big cities and what are their divergences for LA specifically?

**Kowalski:** Counterterrorism efforts in Los Angeles share many foundational similarities with those in New York and other major U.S. cities. Both cities house globally significant infrastructure, such as financial institutions, airports, mass transit systems, bridges, utilities, and iconic landmarks. Each city is a tourist destination for people from all over the world, and each city hosts thousands of tourists each day. Keeping everyone safe is a priority we both share. Los Angeles and New York [are] two of the most ethnically diverse communities in the world, and our community outreach with our stakeholders is critical to keeping both of our cities safe. Each city relies on our communities to report suspicious activities and the relationship between the two agencies is outstanding. Information sharing between us occurs almost daily and that has assisted us in the disruption of several sophisticated criminal networks that have impacted both cities.

One of the biggest differences between Los Angeles and New York is the massive size difference in the areas. New York is more densely populated in a smaller geographic area, while Los Angeles' population is spread across a larger area. It can be challenging to proactively identify different threats across a larger region where multiple pockets exist for criminal and extremist activities. Los Angeles' sprawling geography and decentralized layout contrast with New York's dense, vertical urban environment. Los Angeles

is also geographically close to the Mexico border, which serves as a point of origin for possible extremist travel and the exploitation of human smuggling networks. Trafficking illegal narcotics, firearms, illegal chemicals, and humans are all opportunities to fund terrorism.

Los Angeles has other unique challenges. It is heavily tied to the entertainment industry, requiring unique protection strategies for high-profile events such as the Academy Awards. Los Angeles' frequent large-scale entertainment and sports events demand constant vigilance and tailored counterterrorism strategies. As one of the world's busiest ports, the Port of Los Angeles also serves as a potential target for various bad actors. Maritime security is critical to preventing smuggling and illicit cargo into our region. As a city known for its forward-thinking technology, the threat of cyber attacks on our entertainment, financial, and transportation systems is always a concern for us here. With Los Angeles World Airport being one of the busiest airports globally, aviation security is a top priority here for us and the Los Angeles World Airport police. Like New York, we're fortunate to have such great relationships to help us prepare for attacks. Our relationships with security leaders in the private sector is tremendous, and the relationship with the other agencies in Los Angeles serve as a force multiplier for being prepared for any scenario that we are faced with.

**CTC:** Last fall, there was a significant series of arrests in Los Angeles of gang members with ties to white supremacist groups.<sup>1</sup> What is your assessment of the REMVE threat in the Los Angeles area?

**Kowalski:** The threat of racially motivated violent extremists remains a top priority for us here in Los Angeles. A variety of domestic terrorism groups have increased their messaging on different platforms to target minority groups. With Los Angeles being one of the most diverse cities in the United States and home to so many different ethnicities, focusing on domestic terrorism groups to include white supremacists is critical. We are fortunate to work with stakeholders in the community who are committed to our mission of keeping all people in Los Angeles safe. This has served as a force multiplier on many levels for information sharing and reporting of suspicious activities across the region. Organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Federation are focused on combating extremism, and they serve as tremendous partners to law enforcement.

In October, Los Angeles participated in one of the largest take-downs of a domestic terrorism network in history that resulted in nearly 50 arrests of persons living in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. The Peckerwood criminal street gang was responsible for a variety of crimes over many years and are classified as a white supremacist group or a subordinate to the Aryan Brotherhood. This takedown is a testament to the partnerships we have here in Los Angeles between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, and our efforts have directly disrupted one of the most violent white supremacist street gangs here in Los Angeles.

**CTC:** How do you anticipate that your office's focus, scope, and efforts may change with the new administration's intention to designate some drug cartels as terrorists? How could this change the toolkit with regard to the challenges?

**Kowalski:** With the new administration's policy changes still in its infancy, our department is working closely with our federal partners on where the focus will be as it relates to drug cartel enforcement. The current model works very well in Los Angeles. We participate in the High-Intensity Drug Traffic Area program, also known as HIDTA. It was created by Congress in 1988 with the passage of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act. Our detectives work as task force officers, similar to the model used under the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force. Under HIDTA, the functional operation is administered by the Drug Enforcement Administration or DEA. It allows our task force officers the authority to enforce federal drug laws. With Los Angeles being one of the busiest hubs for drug trafficking, maintaining a strong presence in this program is critical for us to be successful in the disruption and interdiction of drug cartels operating in the Los Angeles region.

As transnational organized crime groups become more sophisticated in trafficking narcotics, additional options for prosecution would be beneficial to disrupting these groups. In terms of potentially changing the toolkit for prosecution, as we have seen in filing federal cases with a terrorism nexus, this could mean enhanced sentencing options for the leaders overseeing these drug cartels that could act as a deterrent to many drug cartels in the region.

**CTC: Jihadi groups online have encouraged their supporters to use fire as a weapon. Given the devastating and ongoing fires in Los Angeles County, how are the LAPD and your counterparts in Los Angeles' fire department thinking about this issue?**

**Kowalski:** Since January 7th, the entire Los Angeles region has been impacted by these fires. The Pacific Palisades and the Eaton fires are two of the most devastating wildfires Los Angeles has ever experienced. Thus far, 29 deaths have been reported. The estimated property loss is approximately \$250 billion. While we are investigating each of these fires to determine cause and origin, we are keenly aware that extremists have historically called for the use of arson in an attack. To assist us, we have asked the ATF to join us in investigating these fires. They have been a tremendous partner during this difficult time here in Los Angeles.

While the fires that have occurred in the region sometimes fall within different jurisdictional boundaries, the relationships between the Los Angeles Police Department, Los Angeles Fire Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and the Los Angeles County Fire Department have allowed us to share information as these investigations have progressed to determine if any patterns exist between these fires. We are fortunate that even before these fires occurred, the relationship between the LAPD and the LAFD has afforded us a great working partnership in responding to arson investigations. We have established joint protocols to rapidly respond to potential arson incidents which allow us to make an assessment if there is any type of terrorism nexus. With the evolving threat picture over the last few years of targeting critical infrastructure, fire as a weapon is attractive to these groups due to its simplicity, accessibility, and potential for significant destruction.

**CTC: What type of concerns does the LAPD have about terrorist extremists' interest in emerging technology, especially the operational use of drones, 3D printing, and AI?**

**Kowalski:** Staying ahead of emerging technology is one of the most challenging aspects in counterterrorism today and one of the primary reasons there is such a heightened threat environment. There have been multiple prosecutions nationwide identifying extremists' interest in the use of drones and 3D printing, including one recently in Tennessee where an individual motivated by racially motivated white supremacy ideology attempted to weaponize a drone against an energy facility.<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with the REMVE messaging encouraging the targeting of critical infrastructure and the use of drones as a weapon. This is not just limited to REMVEs, but across the ideological spectrum. The domestic terrorism landscape has also produced increased swatting and hoax bomb call threats to government facilities, houses of worship, and academic institutions over the past two years. Technology has provided bad actors with more ways to conceal their identities and make finding the source of the original calls much more difficult.

Outside of counterterrorism, we are also seeing the general disruptive aspect of drones complicating public safety efforts. In a recent incident, a drone operating in restricted airspace collided with a firefighting aircraft, causing that aircraft to be grounded and disrupting efforts to extinguish fires.<sup>3</sup> The use of artificial intelligence is also growing and having a huge impact on the cybersecurity landscape. While artificial intelligence is being used by companies for legal reasons, it is also being used for nefarious reasons to include producing propaganda and digital content to support terrorist groups such as al-Qa`ida and ISIS. For financial crimes, phishing attempts are much more convincing to potential victims, with the efficiency of artificial intelligence.

**CTC: The LA area and California more broadly is home to many innovative companies. How does the LAPD approach private sector partnerships, and which partnerships are LAPD most proud of?**

**Kowalski:** Doing this type of work and policing today requires all the tools and all the partnerships available to be successful and stay ahead of the evolving threat environment. Law enforcement augments its work through partners in both the public and private sectors. The LAPD considers itself an organization focused on continuous learning and eager to find the newest technology that will enhance and maximize the skills of our workforce. We draw from a variety of companies and partnerships that will allow us to prevent, mitigate, and interdict potential attacks over the horizon. The partnerships allow us to closely monitor and track potential threats with timely reporting of tips and leads and tools that allow our police officers to be more effective in their day-to-day crime fighting duties and stay ahead of a rapidly changing threat picture. Technology has afforded our investigators the ability to streamline investigations in a more efficient manner. The LAPD is proud of the relationships we have built with technology companies, global businesses, and nonprofit organizations who are committed to making our city the safest in the nation.

**CTC: Can you talk about how the LAPD is deploying technology to help it in its counterterrorism mission? One example of such technology is a robotic dog named "Spot," which "recently conducted a successful operation against a barricaded, armed suspect" by identifying and picking up a weapon near the suspect allowing officers to make an arrest.<sup>4</sup> Can you talk us**

## through this capability and how you are deploying technology to help you in your counterterrorism mission?

**Kowalski:** The Los Angeles Police Department strives to be at the forefront of emerging technology that will allow our officers to remain safe and minimize lethal encounters with dangerous suspects. Spot is a robotic dog that is manufactured by Boston Dynamics. We conducted research on this technology for almost two years, which allowed us to evaluate how it worked in other agencies and how our community would feel about us acquiring this technology. Los Angeles has a very detailed review process for acquiring technology that requires us to be transparent and to implement a policy that clearly defined instances where we would deploy Spot and the situations where we would not use it.

Spot is a game changer as it allows us opportunities to use a robot in dangerous situations to retrieve a weapon or assess a potential explosive safely, rather than place an officer in harm's way. Our officers who use this equipment are highly trained and technically savvy in its use. Spot, along with other technology such as drones, allows our incident commanders better situational awareness during a dynamic tactical incident to make the best decisions to apprehend a suspect in the safest manner possible. We are very restrictive in its use, and the approval process in every situation requires my approval before it is deployed at any incident throughout the city.

**CTC:** With the upcoming big sporting events that you're being hosted in Los Angeles, with the city hosting eight matches in next year's FIFA World Cup and of course hosting the 2028 Olympics, from the counterterrorism perspective, how are you and your department working to keep these sporting events safe?

**Kowalski:** We've been preparing for the 2028 Olympics for the past seven years. Each year, our preparation and development becomes more advanced. We work closely with all the agencies throughout the city, which includes our mayor's office, the fire department, our federal agencies, the emergency management department of the city, and it's a whole regional approach to making sure these games are successful.

We realize that the world's eyes will be on us in 2028, but as you mentioned leading up to that, we also have several other events that are going to impact Los Angeles: the World Cup, another Super Bowl, and ultimately the Summer Games in 2028. How we look at that from a counterterrorism perspective is from a variety of different levels. It starts with realizing that for many groups, this is a prime opportunity to conduct an attack to further their own grievances or ideology. We've also seen recent incidents in the past where lone individuals will make a statement, such as in Las Vegas on January 1st outside the Trump Hotel because of their political grievances along with mental health issues.<sup>5</sup> So we realize that our preparation has to be foolproof. The relationships that we've already formed will serve us well. We realize that we're only three and a half years away from this event, and we're fortunate to have good leadership in our city. The foundation is set, and we'll be prepared to address any type of threat that may come forward as these games near.

We hosted the 1932 Olympics here in Los Angeles. We hosted the 1984 Olympic Summer Games, and now 2028. I think for many

of us, it's going to be the pinnacle of our career to be part of such a large event, and we want to ensure that it goes as planned. We've worked very closely with our partners in Paris this past summer. We have a dedicated entity within the department. It's titled the Strategic Planning Group, and it's led by a Commander. He and his team, we work very closely with [them] in preparation for all aspects of these Games and how it will impact the city. But certainly, from a counterterrorism point of view, we've had the opportunity to look at what worked in Paris and in lessons learned, and that's been very beneficial to us as we move into 2028.

**CTC:** And of course, as we approach these games, the threat environment is coming from more directions than ever before. And that's one of the big challenges. You can't just think about one or two or three threat vectors. You have to think about a whole panoply of threat factors.

**Kowalski:** Yes. And I think looking at the World Cup in 2026, I think it's such a large international event, but it's going to serve, for us, to really test our capabilities for 2028. When you look at a city and the impact of multiple events, we look at it as a positive because the sets and repetitions that we're going to receive from hosting these different events will only make us better as we fine-tune our preparation and our efforts for the Olympic Games.

**CTC:** When it comes to the counterterrorism challenge, what keeps you up at night? And when it comes to the response by the counterterrorism community, what makes you most optimistic?

**Kowalski:** You mentioned the series of events that Los Angeles will be hosting in the next several years, and being part of the counterterrorism team here in Los Angeles, we realize the magnitude of our responsibilities to be prepared for that. And we're doing that right now. We know that Los Angeles will be a primary target for both homegrown violent extremists and domestic terrorism threats who are committed to conducting an attack to further their ideology. The threats to Los Angeles and the rest of the country continue to become more sophisticated. Over the past six years working in the field, the threat environment has never been so diverse and changing, and we must remain ahead of how these threats can impact our cities.

Although the 2024 election cycle is behind us, the geopolitical tensions in the United States remain a concern, with a variety of anti-government sentiments serving as background for a person or group motivated to plot the next attack. The threat of weaponized drones as exhibited during the Ukraine-Russia conflict should concern all Americans. Evolving technology allows individuals to communicate undetected on encrypted platforms, and 3D printing allows for the production of weapons and weaponized drones that could cause mass casualties during an attack.

What I'm confident in is our intelligence sharing and strong partnerships between local, state and federal agencies. Our community partnerships will continue to be a force multiplier on investigating tips and leads that could prevent an attack. Both locally and nationally, we are able to gain and share intelligence, deconflict issues and work together at all levels to address any potential threats. The ability to intake suspicious activity reports, work tips and leads, utilize our open-source intelligence collection, and partnering with law enforcement will all prove essential as the

threat picture continues to change.

What we need to build is finding the right people to fill key counterterrorism positions, whether you're working local law enforcement, state, or federal, whether that's professional staff as analysts or frontline first responders, the role and our ability to focus on countering terrorism will continue for the next several years. I would just say we're looking for qualified people to be part of that challenge.

As our department prepares for the upcoming events through 2028, I am confident we will continue to build to meet these concerns, be prepared, and utilize our partner agencies at the federal, state, and local levels to assist in keeping Los Angeles safe, not just while we are on the world stage for major events, but every day as we stay ahead of the next major incident that could impact our communities. **CTC**

## Citations

- 1 Josh Campbell and Cindy Von Quednow, "Dozens of suspected White supremacist gang members arrested in Los Angeles area in domestic terrorism investigation," CNN, October 2, 2024.
- 2 Editor's Note: See "Man Arrested and Charged with Attempting to Use a Weapon of Mass Destruction and to Destroy an Energy Facility in Nashville," U.S. Department of Justice, November 4, 2024.
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# The May 2024 Ulu Tiram Attack: Islamic State Extremism, Family Radicalization, Doomsday Beliefs, and Off-the-Grid Survivalism in Malaysia

By Munira Mustaffa

**The May 17, 2024, Ulu Tiram attack in Malaysia offers a nuanced case study of radicalization, revealing the complex psychological and ideological mechanisms that transform individual belief systems into potential vectors of religious extremism. Initially misattributed to Jemaah Islamiyah but later described as an Islamic State attack, the incident is more accurately classified as a Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)-influenced incident. The tragedy illuminates how an isolated familial environment, driven by a fanatical father's extreme religious ideology, systematically groomed the attacker through a distorted theological narrative that reframed violence as a spiritual purification ritual and pathway to salvation. By examining the attacker's background through a JAD-specific lens, this analysis transcends conventional interpretations of Islamic State support by demonstrating how self-imposed ideological exiles can create significant challenges for monitoring and intervention, thus underscoring the urgent need for sophisticated approaches that move beyond simplistic categorizations of terrorist sympathizers.**

**I**n the early hours of May 17, 2024, at approximately 2:45 A.M., 20-year-old Radin Luqman bin Radin Imran stormed into the Ulu Tiram police station in Johore, the southernmost state of Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> Wearing a dark mask with the Islamic State's black banner draped over his shoulder, Luqman assaulted two on-duty constables, Ahmad Azza Fahmi Azhar and Syafiq Ahmad Said, with a *parang*.<sup>a</sup> During the

a *Parang* is a type of curved blade common in Southeast Asia. Although it shares similarities with the Latin machete, the *parang* features a distinctive design, with a slimmer midsection and a downward-curving hilt, making it uniquely suited to the region's dense vegetation and varied agricultural tasks.

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attack, Luqman managed to disarm one of the officers and used the seized firearm in the assault.<sup>2</sup> Both officers were killed in the encounter. A third constable, returning from patrol, intervened and fatally shot Luqman, though sustaining serious injuries himself in the process.<sup>3</sup> Given the attack's location in Ulu Tiram and Luqman's history as a former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) member, the media and public initially speculated that it was a JI-linked attack, until authorities confirmed it as an Islamic State-inspired attack 28 days after the attacker's family was detained under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA).<sup>4b</sup>

## Like Father, Like Son

Radin Luqman bin Radin Imran's father, Radin Imran, played a pivotal role in his youngest son's radicalization, training, and attack method. From 2014, Imran fully committed himself to Islamic State ideology. He had aspired to travel to Syria, but this endeavor was limited by financial constraints.<sup>5</sup> Instead, he systematically severed all ties with the outside world, plunging his family into seclusion. Simply put, Imran had 'opted out' of society. Neighbors initially attributed this withdrawal to shame over his prior JI involvement.<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, Imran's self-imposed exile, known as *uzlah*, was driven by his rejection of contemporary Malaysian society which he viewed as *taghut* (idolatrous), a pattern of withdrawal that parallels the Japanese phenomenon of *hikikomori*.<sup>c</sup> Imran's fanatical beliefs were heavily influenced by Indonesian extremist preacher Aman Abdurrahman, leader of pro-Islamic State network Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) in Indonesia.<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, the Radin family seemed like a typical nuclear unit in the village. Born in Singapore in 1962, Radin Imran was later naturalized as a Malaysian citizen.<sup>8</sup> Imran's wife, Rosna Jantan, was also born in Singapore and the two of them were reportedly of Indonesian lineage. Together, they had four children, two boys and two girls. Radin Luqman was the second youngest. The exact details of their move to Malaysia and subsequent settlement in Ulu Tiram remain unclear, but sources suggested that they fled there to escape Indonesian authorities due to Imran's past affiliations with JI.<sup>9</sup>

Imran embarked on a significant ideological journey in 1988

b Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) was a militant Islamist organization based primarily in Indonesia. Founded in 1993, the group emerged with the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia, with four major territorial divisions (*mantiq*) that spanned across the region. JI founders, Abu Bakar Bashir and Abdullah Sungkar, had established the Tarbiyah Luqmanul Hakim boarding school in Ulu Tiram in the early 1990s. The school had since closed down following government crackdown.

c This is a Japanese term that describes a severe form of social withdrawal, where individuals isolate themselves from society, often staying confined in their homes for extended periods. For further reading, see Andy Furlong, "The Japanese Hikikomori Phenomenon: Acute Social Withdrawal among Young People," *Sociological Review* 56:2 (2008): pp. 309-325.



when he reportedly joined Darul Islam/Islamic Armed Forces of Indonesia (DI/NII), the very group that later would give rise to the founders and leaders of JI.<sup>10</sup> Following his involvement with DI, Imran aligned himself with JI sometime in the 1990s, forging connections with key figures such as Noordin Mohammad Top, JI's financier, and even underwent six months of militant training in the southern Philippines.<sup>11</sup>

Detachment 88 (Densus88), Indonesia's anti-terror unit, was initially formed in 2003 in response to the 2002 Bali Bombing, primarily to counter the JI threat. Over time, the unit not only expanded in size, but it also expanded its focus to include the emerging threat posed by the Islamic State. As Densus88 strengthened its counterterrorism efforts, JI found itself increasingly alienated from the Indonesian public, as its violent methods no longer resonated with a population weary of extremist violence.<sup>12</sup> Despite undertaking internal restructuring in 2009 to adapt to these challenges, JI's influence continued to wane.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the group's decision to concentrate solely on Indonesia and dismantle its operational structures in Mantiqi 1 (Malaysia and Singapore), 3 (Philippines), and 4 (Australia) further weakened its regional presence.<sup>14</sup> JI eventually announced its dissolution in 2024.<sup>15</sup>

Between 2012 to 2013, Imran grew increasingly disillusioned with JI's shifting strategies, as the group unexpectedly moved away from violent jihad toward more non-violent strategies.<sup>d</sup> This period of transition occurred during a turbulent period for JI, as it struggled to maintain its influence in Indonesia's rapidly evolving security landscape.<sup>16</sup> The group had already endured significant setbacks, including the mass arrests in Tanah Runtuh in 2007 and the splintering of its members, some of whom joined the now-former JI emir Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and the Tanzim Aceh faction in 2011.<sup>17</sup> Imran believed JI had changed drastically since he first joined at its inception, straying from the ideology that had initially drawn him to join the organization.<sup>18</sup> By then, he felt that JI was being swayed by Indonesia's democratic practices, including its electoral system and commitment to *Pancasila*.<sup>e</sup>

Dissatisfied with JI's new direction, Imran redirected his allegiance. The intensifying restrictive security environment that undermined JI's support base likely drove Imran to seek a more militant and aggressive cause. He turned to the Islamic State, which aligned with the violent jihadi ideals he had originally embraced and felt JI had abandoned. It was at this juncture that Imran encountered the pro-Islamic State group Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and fell under the influence of Indonesian radical cleric Aman Abdurrahman.<sup>19</sup> In 2014, Imran pledged *bay`a* to the Islamic State and its caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>20</sup>

### Aman Abdurrahman and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)

Oman Rochman, known by his alias Aman Abdurrahman, is a central figure in Indonesia's terrorism landscape, particularly due



A poster circulated in a pro-Islamic State Telegram group on August 21, 2024, encouraging followers to pursue uzlah by withdrawing from corrupt society through self-imposed exile

to his role as a *hadith* scholar and the recognized ideologue and leader of pro-Islamic State groups.<sup>21</sup> Born in 1972 in West Java, Abdurrahman has been deeply involved in terrorism-related activities in Indonesia since 2004, beginning with his training of students in bomb-making techniques.<sup>22</sup> By 2008, he had emerged as a radical preacher, fiercely opposing democracy, which he condemned as *syirik* (idolatry) and fundamentally incompatible with the teachings of *Tawhid*. Abdurrahman is a devout proponent of *takfir* and *yakfur bit taghut*, a doctrine that breeds intense hostility and legitimizes warfare against perceived oppressors, particularly rulers who eschew 'Islamic' laws in governance.<sup>23</sup> This radical ideology forms the cornerstone of his rallying cry to target the police, whom he vilifies as agents of *taghut* (tyrants or false gods).<sup>f</sup>

In the shadows of Indonesia's extremist landscape, the jihadi group Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) emerged as a formidable force under the ideological and spiritual guidance of Abdurrahman. Founded between late 2014 and early 2015, JAD united nearly two dozen extremist factions under a single banner, all swearing

d JI gained international notoriety after executing several devastating terrorist attacks in the region, most notably the 2002 Bali bombings that killed 202 people. The group eventually disbanded in 2024.

e *Pancasila*, the foundational philosophy of the Indonesian state, consists of five principles: monotheism, a just humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice for all.

f *Tawhid* refers to the Islamic theological concept of monotheism, specifically the absolute oneness of God (Allah). Conversely, *taghut* describes the act of worshipping entities other than the one true God, which is considered a fundamental violation of Islamic monotheism. The concept also applies to political oppression to describe tyrants who abuse power to suppress the vulnerable under the guise of divine authority. See also Shawkat Taha Ali Talafihah, Mohd Fauzi Mohd Amin, and Muhammad Mustaqim Mohd Zarif, "Taghut: A Quranic Perspective," *Ulum Islamiyyah* 22 (2017): pp. 87-95.

allegiance to al-Baghdadi.<sup>24</sup> Abdurrahman's influential teachings, which had previously inspired followers to participate in a jihadi training camp in Aceh, provided the foundation for JAD's adaptation of Islamic State ideology to the Southeast Asian context, specifically Indonesia.<sup>25</sup> As the Islamic State gained prominence in the mid-2010s, JAD aligned with its ideology. The declaration of a caliphate electrified Islamist extremists in the region, providing the group with recruitment opportunities.

JAD's campaign of terror in Indonesia was marked by numerous acts of violence, targeting police stations, public spaces, and religious minorities.<sup>26</sup> The group's notoriety reached new heights with the January 2016 Jakarta attack, a carefully coordinated operation involving bombings and shootings that sent shockwaves through the capital and claimed multiple lives. Following this brutal debut, JAD escalated its tactics with the 2018 Surabaya church bombings.<sup>27</sup> These chilling "*amaliyah*" operations underscored a disturbing evolution in extremist tactics and JAD's willingness to shatter even the most fundamental societal norms, as entire families, including women and children, were deployed as suicide bombers against Christian congregations.<sup>28</sup> JAD's influence soon extended beyond Indonesia's borders. The group facilitated training for other pro-Islamic State individuals from a network that spanned across Indonesia, Malaysia and the Southern Philippines, as evidenced by the 2021 Makassar bombing.<sup>29</sup> This expansion was particularly significant, considering that the Islamic State's regional "representatives" have traditionally been based in the Philippines (Islamic State's East Asia Province, ISEAP).<sup>30</sup> JAD's focus on targeting state authorities was further underscored by the 2020 sword attack on a police station in South Daha, South Hulu Sungai Regency by pro-Islamic State/JAD members.<sup>31</sup> Throughout its existence, JAD attracted individuals like Imran, who sought a more militant path in their extremist journey.

Through his writings and recordings, Abdurrahman cultivated a dangerous ecosystem of radical thoughts. His works served not merely as theoretical treatises but as catalysts for violent action, inspiring a new generation of extremists to wage war against perceived enemies of their twisted interpretation of Islam. His political and religious ideas were conveyed in his 2015 magnum opus, *Seri Materi Tauhid: For Greatest Happiness* ("The Monotheism Series: For Greatest Happiness").<sup>32</sup> This deceptively titled work serves as a manifesto, rigorously outlining his beliefs on identifying *taghut* and unequivocally rejects democracy as a man-made system incompatible with 'Islamic' principles. The influence of Abdurrahman's teachings reverberates throughout the pro-Islamic State faction within JAD in Indonesia. His followers, galvanized by his words, have launched numerous attacks on police stations and outposts, which Abdurrahman designated as the frontline defenders of the despised *taghut* system. *Seri Materi Tauhid* has become essential reading among JAD adherents, including Radin Imran. The book's presence among a trove of radical materials discovered in the Radin family home and within multiple external hard drives underscores its pivotal role in shaping the ideological landscape.<sup>33</sup>

### A Father's Extremist Journey

Imran's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State marked a turning point in his radicalization journey. He came increasingly under the influence of Abdurrahman's interpretation of extremist ideology, a toxic blend of salafi scholarship, original Wahhabi teachings,

and classical works by figures like Ibn Taymiyyah.<sup>34</sup> This potent ideological cocktail reshaped Imran's worldview, driving him to embrace an increasingly militant and isolationist stance. Consumed by an apocalyptic fear of *fitnah akhir zaman*—the strife and tribulations believed to precede Judgement Day—Imran took drastic measures to shield his family from what he perceived as the spiritual decay of the outside world.<sup>35</sup> Determined to preserve his family's ideological purity, Imran assumed the role of educator, home-schooling his children from a young age, resulting in limited formal education.<sup>35</sup> Only his eldest son managed to complete secondary school, while the others attended only up to sixth grade, fourth grade, or had no schooling at all.<sup>h</sup>

Through this carefully controlled environment, he sought to indoctrinate them with his fanatical pro-Islamic State beliefs, heavily influenced by JAD beliefs, creating a closed ecosystem of extremist thought.<sup>36</sup> In this enforced isolation, the eldest son emerged as the family's lifeline to the outside world. As the sole breadwinner, he worked as a driver for Grab, the region's ride-hailing service, shouldering the responsibility of providing for the family's daily needs. Meanwhile, the rest of the family remained cloistered in their secluded existence, entirely dependent on the eldest son's irregular commission-based income. Despite their self-imposed isolation, the family maintained minimal technological connections. Each member owned a cellphone, with the eldest son's device serving as the primary hotspot in the absence of WiFi for the father to scroll through Twitter and Facebook occasionally with the assistance of Luqman, the youngest son.<sup>37</sup> A solitary laptop languished in disrepair, and the conspicuous absence of a television underscored the family's selective disengagement from mainstream media.<sup>38</sup>

The exact sequence of events that culminated in Luqman's deadly attack on the Ulu Tiram police station remains unclear. Luqman's actions were the product of years of careful grooming and incitement by his own father.<sup>39</sup> The attack's precise execution revealed a chilling level of preparation and purpose, therefore contradicted claims that Luqman was "untrained."<sup>40</sup> When allowed to view Luqman's body for the last time, he requested to smell it, expecting the fragrance of musk, a scent traditionally associated with martyrdom in Islamic tradition. The absence of this fragrance

g In Islamic eschatology, *fitnah akhir zaman* refers to a series of omens or conditions of strife that signal the approaching end of times. The term *fitnah* encompasses meanings such as treachery, disloyalty, unrest, and strife. However, in Malay, it is often used more narrowly to refer to libel, slander, or defamation. *Akhir* means "end" in both Malay and Arabic, while *zaman* translates to "age" or "time" in both languages. The trials and tribulations of the end times (*fitnah akhir zaman*) are discussed in the books of *hadith* under *Kitabu al-Fitn* (The Book of Tribulations) and *Kitabu al-'Alamatu as-Sa'ah* (The Book of the Signs of the Hour).

h Accounts of Imran's children's education status conflicted. According to the author's source, the children were home-schooled. However, one article, citing Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Razarudin Husain, stated they did not enroll in school at all, while another referenced the IGP noting witness statements that indicated the children had limited education. See "Family of Ulu Tiram Attacker Held under Sosma," *Free Malaysia Today*, May 23, 2024, and "Operator Kilang Dituduh Sokong Pengganas 'IS', Simpan Bahan Letupan," *BH Online*, June 11, 2024.

i Radin Imran bin Radin Mohd Yassin was eventually charged with three offenses under Malaysia's Penal Code: (a) incitement or encouragement of acts of terrorism, (b) supporting a terrorist group, and (c) possession of terrorism-related materials.

shocked Radin Imran so profoundly that he stumbled backward, his expectations shattered.<sup>41</sup> For years, he had nurtured his youngest son for the path of martyrdom, cultivating a vision of glorious sacrifice.<sup>42</sup> The harsh reality of Luqman's death, devoid of the expected divine signs, forced Radin Imran to confront the grim consequences of his indoctrination.

*Table 1: Summary of weapons and relevant items found at the scene and during police search of the Radin home*

<i>Items</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Source</i>
Parang	x 1	Weapon	Home item. Found at scene of crime.
Survival knife	x 1	Weapon	Purchased online from Shopee. Found at scene of crime.
Walther P99	x 1	Weapon	Taken from a constable during the attack. Recovered at scene of crime.
Heckler & Koch MP5	x 1	Weapon	Standard issue submachine gun. Recovered at scene of crime.
Zinc-plated armor	x 1	Accessory	Home-made. Found at scene of crime.
Islamic State banner	x 1	Accessory	Found at scene of crime.
Backpack	x 1	Accessory	Found at scene of crime.
Air-rifle	x 1	Weapon	Home-made with PVC pips. Discovered at the Radin family home during the police search.
<i>Seri Materi Tauhid: For Greatest Happiness</i> ("The Monotheism Series: For Greatest Happiness")	x 1	Book	Discovered at the Radin family home during the police search.
<i>Hakikat Islam dan Hakikat Syirik</i> ("The Truth About Islam and The Truth About Idolatry")	x 1	Book	Discovered at the Radin family home during the police search.

### JAD's Off-the-Grid Homestead Strategy

While the extreme off-grid nature of the Ulu Tiram episode was likely an isolated case, there is some precedent in the region. In the

1970s, Ashaari Muhammad (alias Abuya) founded Darul al-Arqam (also known as Jamaah Aurad Muhammadiyah), a religious cult deeply entrenched in Islamic eschatology.<sup>43</sup> What began modestly as a small gathering in Kampung Datuk Keramat quickly transformed into a significant movement. By 1975, al-Arqam had established a sprawling commune on a five-hectare plot in Kampung Sungai Penchala, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.<sup>44</sup> The movement continued to expand throughout the early 1990s, establishing a presence in the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia, such as Perak and Penang, and in Sabah on the island of Borneo, where it acquired vast tracts of land.<sup>45</sup> However, the Malaysian government eventually outlawed al-Arqam, arresting its leaders under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for allegedly conspiring to challenge the state and conducting secret weapons training.<sup>46</sup> In hindsight, al-Arqam likely represents Malaysia's earliest known radical commune. Although poorly understood at the time, its practices of intentional communal living bore striking similarities to contemporary survivalist movements in the United States.

The rise of JAD in Indonesia heralded the emergence of extremist communities operating within isolated, self-exiled cell-like structures known as "*uzlah*."<sup>47</sup> JAD's attacks were often executed by a decentralized and compartmentalized network where micro factions operate independently, yet remained loosely connected by a shared ideology or mission, often without direct contact with other cells.<sup>48</sup> The 2018 Surabaya bombings were particularly significant as they marked the first time entire families, including children, were mobilized to execute an attack. The families had isolated and homeschooled their children, bearing striking similarities to the behavior of the Radin family in Ulu Tiram.<sup>49</sup> Just prior to the deadly assault, one of the families strategically increased their engagement with neighbors, which ultimately led the police to discontinue their surveillance.<sup>50</sup> JAD's shift to a decentralized model proved remarkably effective, enabling the group to execute terrorist operations with deadly precision. By favoring multiple, precise attacks over less frequent but larger operations, JAD maximized its effectiveness while minimizing organizational risk. This strategic pivot prioritized operational agility over raw destructive power.

The year 2019 witnessed the evolving tactics of extremist groups in Southeast Asia. Two distinct incidents highlight this transformation: a thwarted plot against Indonesia's General Election Commission (KPU) and a devastating attack on a cathedral in the Philippines. In Indonesia, two independent pro-Islamic State cells from Bekasi and Lampung orchestrated a plot targeting the KPU.<sup>51</sup> Motivated by the call of Islamic State spokesman in Iraq Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir to attack voters, whom he deemed *taghut* (apostates) for participating in democracy, these cells operated autonomously yet shared a common goal.<sup>52</sup> Indonesia's elite counterterrorism unit, Densus88, successfully foiled the plot through persistent, intelligence-driven raids.<sup>53</sup> Later that year, an Indonesian couple, Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfa Handayani Saleh, executed a more successful operation. Traveling from Indonesia to the Philippines via Malaysia, they connected with members of the Sawadjaan-led cell of the Abu Sayyaf Group who facilitated them in the deadly bombings of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral in Jolo, Sulu.<sup>54</sup> While much of the focus was on their status as foreign terrorist fighters, the attack's more critical aspect was its deliberate evasion of law enforcement surveillance.

The Sawadjaan cell's facilitation of JAD members for this attack highlights the effectiveness of decentralized extremist networks. By

leveraging dispersed cells and individuals, these groups can evade detection, plan, and execute attacks with alarming precision. This case illustrates the dichotomous nature of contemporary extremist operations: a carefully crafted veneer of isolation concealing intricate ties to leverage expansive networks or collaborative efforts.

In the case of Radin and his family, they took their commitment a step further. Their embrace of an isolated existence represented a marked departure from the established tactics employed by other pro-Islamic State or JAD adherents in Indonesia to evade surveillance. The origins of the Radin family's seemingly off-grid, survivalist lifestyle remain unclear, yet mounting evidence suggests a curious ideological cross-pollination with the tenets of Western right-wing extremism.

Social media platforms and messaging apps, including TikTok, Telegram, and WhatsApp, have become hubs for numerous channels and content in Malay and Indonesian. There are spaces dedicated to eschatological contemplations, doomsday preparations, and the ominous specter of an impending apocalypse.<sup>55</sup> On Telegram, while these channels may not necessarily align themselves with the Islamic State, the sporadic circulation of outdated issues of al-Naba, Dabiq, and Rumiya serves as a poignant reminder to the faithful of their sacred duty to the path of jihad.

Intriguingly, these channels also showcase information culled from the American doomsday prepper community, replete with infographics that bestow knowledge on homesteading, food security anxieties, and a panoply of survival strategies. Amidst the cornucopia of shared PDF books, one title in particular commands attention: a survival guide authored by James Wesley, Rawles, a prominent figure in the American Redoubt movement.<sup>56 j</sup> The inclusion of material from the American Redoubt movement, with its emphasis on Christian values and conservative political ideals, adds an additional layer of complexity to this ideological melting pot that sharply contrast with the close kinship living norms traditionally found in Nusantara societies.<sup>k</sup> This unexpected fusion of seemingly disparate ideologies hints at a broader exchange of ideas, one that encompasses not only survivalist tactics and off-grid living methods, but also a shared sense of impending doom and the need for self-reliance in the face of an uncertain future.

The resulting worldview potentially aligns with many JAD or pro-Islamic State adherents' "near enemy" strategy, targeting both *kafr* (infidels) and *taghut* (apostates), while anticipating the arrival of the Mahdi, followed by the Prophet Mohammad, and the second coming of Christ. This hybrid ideology mirrors that of fringe extremist communes in the West, particularly those associated with white supremacist and survivalist movements in the United States. These groups often establish intentional, rural,

j These channels are not necessarily pro-Islamic State, but they are created with the aims to provide spiritual guidance and preparedness teachings to help community members navigate end-of-times uncertainties. The chat groups share diverse resources, from selected Hadith or Qur'anic verses to religious text interpretations to survival guides, drawing from both Islamic and non-Islamic sources, including American libertarian materials and wilderness survival texts such as Richard Graves' *Bushcraft*.

k Kinship in this context refers to the social relationships that form the basis of family ties and community structures within Nusantara societies. These relationships are typically characterized by close, interdependent networks of familial and communal support, which often contrast with the more individualistic and self-reliant norms emphasized by movements such as the American Redoubt. For further reading, see Marshall Sahlins, "What Kinship Is (Part One)," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17:1 (2011): pp. 2-19.

and radical communities through homesteading or smallholding, and actively seek self-sufficient, off-grid environments for spiritual purity.<sup>57</sup> One example is Samuel Weaver, a self-proclaimed 'white separatist' who relocated to Ruby Ridge, Idaho, to isolate his family from what he viewed as a declining society.<sup>58</sup> Weaver was part of Christian Identity, a diverse far-right movement in America, known for doomsday preparation and apocalyptic, conspiratorial ideologies along with racist violence.<sup>59</sup> For the Radin family and its Western counterparts, isolation serves as a crucible for preparing for an impending apocalypse. This shared eschatological vision often culminates in a disturbing rationalization of violence as a necessary act of cleansing, paving the way for their envisioned post-apocalyptic world.<sup>60</sup>

The most striking parallels to JAD's *uzlah* approach, as demonstrated by Imran's deep-seated anti-social and anti-government sentiments, can be found in the infamous cases of Charles Manson's Spahn Ranch and David Koresh's Branch Davidian compound in Waco. In today's interconnected world, ideas can transcend geographical boundaries with unprecedented ease. The *uzlah* phenomenon serves a dual purpose: not only as a practical strategy for survival and adaptation amidst government crackdowns on extremist activities, enabling more efficient and covert preparation for attacks, but also as a means to withdraw from society to demonstrate ideological commitment.<sup>61</sup> Southeast Asia's natural terrain, which has long nourished village life, provides a conducive environment for individuals such as Imran and his family to isolate themselves from society and sustain themselves.

### Key Takeaways

Understanding the nature and cause of the Ulu Tiram attack is essential for formulating an effective response and deterrence policy. The Islamic State as an organization aims to reestablish and govern a caliphate, focusing on state-building as a primary goal as a necessary precursor for the apocalypse. While JAD originally aligned with Islamic State ideology and aspired to integrate Indonesia into this caliphate, its goals may have shifted. JAD-leaning proponents now aggressively pursue a more radical societal transformation, distinguishing themselves from other pro-Islamic State factions such as the Abu Sayyaf Group and the East Indonesian Mujahideen.

To be precise, Radin Imran was not driven by a conventional state-building agenda aimed at territorial expansion; rather, his actions were motivated by a belief in an impending apocalypse. His focus was on preserving his family's sacrosanctity and redeeming their sins in preparation for what he saw as an inevitable end.<sup>l</sup> Extremists such as Imran actively work to expedite the collapse of the existing order, driven by a desire to create conditions they believe are necessary to prepare for the end of times and simultaneously absolve themselves.<sup>62</sup> This strategy embodies a broader, more complex trend in extremist ideology that combines elements of the Islamic State's apocalyptic vision—as exemplified by adherents' early fixation on Dabiq as a prophesied battleground—with decentralized, society-wide transformative objectives.<sup>63</sup> Imran's approach represents a significant evolution in Southeast Asian Islamist extremism, blending traditional jihadi ideology with an urgent, apocalyptic worldview that reflects broader Nusantara

l In his confession to the police, Radin Imran admitted that he was motivated by his anxieties over "*fitnah akhir zaman*." This information was obtained by the author from a law enforcement source, August 2024.

Muslim eschatological anxieties. His case demonstrates how local religious and cultural elements shape the manifestation of extremist ideologies, creating a distinct syncretic form that draws from both global jihadi thought and deeply embedded Malay Muslim apocalyptic narratives. This is why it is essential not to characterize the event as merely an Islamic State-inspired attack, as Imran and his son were specifically following the Indonesian attack model.

This blind spot allows radical ideologies to take root and flourish beyond the reach of traditional intervention methods. The cornerstone of many PCVE programs—community engagement and reintegration efforts—proves woefully inadequate against individuals who have deliberately severed ties with mainstream society. In Radin's case, his lack of prior arrests meant he was never obligated to participate in any outreach programs. These self-imposed exiles, viewing the broader community as fundamentally incompatible with their values, present a unique challenge that current strategies are ill-equipped to tackle. Reaching and rehabilitating individuals who live off the grid requires innovative methods that go beyond the current framework. A paradigm shift is urgently needed to tackle evolving radicalization threats and understand believers' end goals. While Malaysia boasted a 97 percent success rate in its deradicalization efforts in 2019, it glossed over recidivism rates.<sup>64 m</sup> In the author's view, Malaysia's current PCVE framework is inadequate in addressing the doomsday prepper mentality. Existing deradicalization approaches focused on correcting misunderstandings of Islam prove ineffective against this mindset.

JAD-inspired attacks, in particular, have some parallels with other doomsday cult attacks driven by spiritual crises stemming from anxieties about an imminent apocalypse. One such example was Aum Shinrikyo that was responsible for the 1995 Tokyo

subway sarin attack.<sup>n</sup> This recognition has significant implications for countering violent extremism strategies. Off-grid extremist communities and extremist homesteaders, operating in physical and digital isolation, present unique challenges for counterterrorism efforts. Conventional surveillance and intelligence methods face significant obstacles when confronting these secluded individuals. Despite awareness of potential threats and watchlisted individuals, authorities have repeatedly failed to adequately monitor or intervene.

This first-of-its-kind attack in Malaysia exposes a troubling vulnerability: Extremist actors can intentionally isolate themselves from society to evade detection and monitoring, all while projecting a benign façade as they plan attacks or travel for operations.<sup>65</sup> Isolation can cultivate highly committed, ideologically driven actors who are elusive and challenging to identify and neutralize.<sup>66</sup> Simultaneously, such extreme isolation may have broader implications, including mental health decline, as exemplified by Imran's daughter, who exhibited symptoms of severe depression presumably from such conditions.<sup>67</sup>

Innovative methods that transcend the current PCVE framework are essential to counter this risk. A more nuanced, informed approach is crucial to address the unique risks posed by off-grid radicalization and develop targeted strategies for reaching and rehabilitating those who have intentionally disconnected from society due to their distrust and rejection of the state. Failure to adapt to these evolving threats may lead to an increased attempts carried out by individuals or groups that have slipped through the cracks of traditional counterterrorism measures or, worse, copycats.<sup>68</sup> **CTC**

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