EUROPEAN ACADEMIC RESEARCH
Vol. XIII, Issue 6/ September 2025

Impact Factor: 3.4546 (UIF)
DRJI Value: 5.9 (B+)

ISSN 2286-4822
www.euacademic.org

Social Movement Theory and Jihadist Mobilization

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of jihadist movements in the aftermath of the Islamic State's territorial collapse, focusing on the decentralized and digitized nature of contemporary extremist networks. The study analyzes how jihadist propaganda spreads across digital platforms, fosters radicalization, and enables operational coordination without centralized leadership. The literature review synthesizes key debates on ideological contagion, the strategic use of social media and encrypted platforms, and the emergence of "digital caliphates." Case studies and empirical findings demonstrate the adaptability of jihadist actors, from meme warfare and TikTok videos to the use of AI-powered drones and cyberattacks. The paper also examines the regulatory and ethical challenges liberal democracies face in countering digital extremism while preserving civil liberties. By proposing a multidimensional framework that integrates legal reform, digital innovation, financial intelligence, and community-based resilience, this research argues that future counterterrorism efforts must prioritize network disruption, algorithmic intervention, and global cooperation. As the ideological insurgency shifts from physical territory to cyberspace, strategic foresight and interdisciplinary approaches become essential to confronting the evolving jihadist threat.

Keywords: Jihadist Movements; Digital Extremism; Radicalization; Counterterrorism; Cybersecurity

INTRODUCTION

The global jihadist threat has undergone a profound metamorphosis since the fall of ISIS's territorial caliphate in 2019. While the loss of its physical strongholds in Iraq and Syria marked a decisive kinetic defeat, it did not extinguish the ideological potency of jihadism. Instead, jihadist terrorism has resurged in new forms, which are less hierarchical and territorial. These are increasingly networked, decentralized, and embedded within digital ecosystems, making it easier for jihadist movements to transition from traditional insurgent structures into adaptive ideological insurgencies that transcend national borders, languages, and cultural boundaries.

Modern jihadist groups no longer require control of territory to operate effectively. Rather, they thrive by exploiting the affordances of digital infrastructure to maintain relevance, recruit adherents, fundraise, and incite lone-actor attacks. These include social media, encrypted messaging applications, visual culture, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic amplification. This shift marks a paradigmatic evolution in jihadist terrorism and demands a fundamental rethinking of counterterrorism approaches.

The collapse of the Islamic State's caliphate did not signify the death of jihadism, but its digital rebirth. The jihadist movement has strategically recalibrated, transforming cyberspace into its new ideological and operational stronghold. Today's jihadists weaponize memes, short-form videos, gamified propaganda, and livestreamed

content to captivate and radicalize vulnerable audiences. Their messaging has shifted from triumphalist declarations to emotionally manipulative, apocalyptic, and grievance-based narratives that appeal to feelings of humiliation, injustice, and identity loss.

This paper investigates the dynamic interplay between jihadist propaganda, radicalization processes, and the digital landscape. It explains how jihadist propaganda exploits identity grievances and socio-political discontent, spreads virally through decentralized online communities, and is sustained by evolving technological affordances. It is argued that understanding this evolution requires moving beyond conventional state-centric and militarized counterterrorism paradigms. Traditional doctrines that focused on dismantling leadership hierarchies or reclaiming territory are inadequate when the battlefield is now algorithmically curated feeds, encrypted Telegram channels, and crowdsourced video content. Instead, effective responses must account for the psychological, sociological, technological, and legal dimensions of radicalization in the digital age. Addressing digital jihadism necessitates an interdisciplinary strategy that includes AI-enhanced surveillance, culturally resonant counter-narratives, adaptive legal frameworks, and robust community resilience programming.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper examines the drivers of civilian resistance to jihadist insurgencies and the conditions under which extremist ideology escalates into violent action. While political and sectarian grievances remain significant, excessive violence against civilians often ignites cycles of blood revenge in societies governed by customary law, creating powerful local incentives to oppose insurgents. Drawing on social movement theory, the study highlights the enduring appeal of jihadist movements through their ideological rigidity and the emotionally charged construction of collective identity. However, it argues that the decisive factor in predicting the transition from extremist beliefs to violence is the perception of existential threat to the group. By integrating insights from political violence research and ethnographic accounts of customary justice, the paper underscores the need to recognize both local revenge dynamics and threat perceptions as central to understanding the mobilization patterns in insurgent-held areas.

The paper further examines the trajectory of jihadist terrorism. It connects contemporary trends in digital propaganda with long-standing socio-political grievances and geopolitical realities, proposing a revised conceptual framework for understanding and countering jihadist threats in an era marked by ideological fluidity, digital warfare, and decentralized violence.

The fall of ISIS's territorial caliphate in 2019 marked not the defeat, but the transformation of jihadist influence. The movement has become more ideological, transnational, and digitally embedded, with groups like ISIS-K and AQAP demonstrating operational vitality despite the absence of centralized leadership or state-like governance (Clarke & Mir, 2024). Jihadist actors continue to execute and inspire high-profile attacks, exploiting technological platforms to mobilize support, coordinate violence, and reinforce ideological narratives (Drevon & Haenni, 2025).

Social Movement Theory (SMT) offers a powerful analytical framework to understand the ideological appeal, mobilization strategies, and legitimacy-building tactics of jihadist organizations in this digital era. Originally developed to explain civil resistance, political protest, and collective action, SMT has been effectively adapted to study violent non-state actors, particularly those operating at the intersection of identity, grievance, and political exclusion.

SMT contends that movements emerge when structural grievances converge with political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). These elements are deeply embedded in jihadist mobilization. Groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates draw on global and local grievances, such as foreign intervention, systemic discrimination, autocratic governance, and religious persecution. Their goal is to generate moral urgency and narrative legitimacy. These grievances are emotionally charged and framed in terms of existential threat to the global Muslim community, constructing a binary worldview in which violence is portrayed as both necessary and sacred (Snow & Benford, 1988).

The theory, which originally developed to understand activism in open, democratic, and technologically advanced societies, can help us better understand Islamist movements. It helps illustrate how solidarity and activism can exist and persist in closed societies like those in much of the contemporary Muslim Middle East, where conventional forms of political activism are difficult or dangerous (Bayat, 2005).

Social Movement Theory, when applied to digital jihadism, reveals the adaptive capacity of jihadist movements to leverage grievances, identity crises, and political disaffection through emotionally resonant, culturally attuned, and technologically sophisticated propaganda. It explains how jihadist groups construct legitimacy, mobilize supporters, and circumvent traditional constraints through narrative framing, decentralized organizing, and the strategic exploitation of digital affordances. Jihadist propaganda fosters in-group solidarity around a puritanical, rigid interpretation of Islam while demonizing out-groups, including Western governments, secular Muslims, religious minorities, and non-jihadist Islamist parties. These identity boundaries are reinforced through emotionally evocative storytelling, martyrdom narratives, and visual media that glorify sacrifice and resistance (Mehran & Lemieux, 2021).

This messaging appeals especially to alienated Muslim youth, both in Western diasporas and fragile states, who often experience marginalization, cultural dislocation, or economic precarity. Wiktorowicz (2005) shows that such individuals are drawn not only by ideology but by the sense of belonging, purpose, and moral clarity that jihadist groups promise. The emergence of social media, encrypted messaging apps, and user-generated content platforms has lowered the barriers to entry for participation in extremist movements.

This digital affordance enables jihadist groups to mobilize sympathizers without requiring physical infrastructure or organizational hierarchy. Laksana & Abduh (2023) explain that networked digital technologies empower modern movements by decoupling activism from traditional logistical constraints. They argue that in an age where information flows rapidly across global networks, social movements have harnessed the power of digital connectivity for advocating change, justice, and equality. This is precisely what makes jihadist movements resilient and adaptable: they function as transnational insurgencies sustained by peer-to-peer networks, visual storytelling, and real-time digital interaction. Sageman (2017) calls it “leaderless jihad,” and Larsson & Willander (2024) define it as blending jihadist narratives with Western subcultures to resonate with disaffected youth.

CONTEMPORARY JIHADISM

Transnational jihadi movements are militant Islamist groups characterized by their appeal and goals that cross national borders. They reject foreign intervention in Muslim lands and call for autonomy and unity among Muslims worldwide. These groups view

jihad, specifically armed struggle, as a religious duty for all Muslims, regardless of where they live.

There are two main organizational forms of this global jihadi movement: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS). Al-Qaeda emerged in the 1990s during the Cold War as a recruitment network for fighters (mujahideen) in Afghanistan. The Islamic State started in the 2000s as a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq amid political chaos but later broke away and expanded aggressively, controlling large territories in Syria and Iraq before losing them in 2018 (Welch, 2018). However, despite losing territory, both groups remain active in various regions through local branches. Sometimes these branches follow orders from a central leadership, but more often they operate locally while pledging loyalty to al-Qaeda or ISIS's broader goals. Although ISIS promotes a sectarian agenda primarily against Shia Muslims, both groups believe that the sovereignty of God is under threat. They see the United States, the West, and so-called apostate Muslim governments as enemies of Islam and seek to "purify" the religion from unbelief (Sheikh & El-Jaichi, 2022).

Extremist groups have been increasingly forming online coalitions by taking advantage of Telegram's lenient policies toward terrorist and extremist content. This has led to the rise of a new online environment on Telegram called Terrorgram, which consists of channels, group chats, and individual accounts promoting extremist ideologies such as neo-Nazism, militant accelerationism (a belief in accelerating societal collapse to rebuild), racism, and neo-fascism. This far-right ecosystem has started to adopt language, narratives, and calls for violence commonly associated with jihadist groups - a phenomenon referred to as "White Jihad" (Weimann et al. (2025).

Although political and religious conflicts play a major role, the extreme violence that jihadist groups inflict on civilians triggers blood feuds and cycles of revenge in societies that follow traditional customs and honour codes. Aliyev & Souleimanov (2022) argue that this brutal violence, which sparks these revenge cycles, is a major reason why local people decide to resist and fight back against jihadist rebels, since the desire for revenge and protection of their community motivates people to mobilize against the insurgents.

This historical context informs their interpretation of ISIS's rise and the perceived shortcomings of Western interventions. Baroudi (2025) argues that Western policies played a major role in creating the political and social conditions that allowed ISIS to emerge and expand. He highlights that Arab intellectuals' perspectives are shaped by a long history of Western involvement in the Arab and Muslim worlds, as well as more recent Western actions and policies in the Middle East.

Contemporary jihadist movements mobilize primarily digital resources - Bot networks to amplify messages, AI-generated content to sustain engagement, social media influencers and sympathizers who spread content organically, and virtual safe spaces where ideological grooming occurs. Encrypted platforms such as Telegram and Rocket. Chat act as "movement hubs" (Kfir, 2021), enabling ideological indoctrination, tactical advice, and operational planning. These platforms not only protect anonymity but also facilitate the emergence of micro-movements and "lone-wolf" actors who remain ideologically linked but structurally independent - a phenomenon that challenges traditional counterterrorism strategies based on chain-of-command disruption.

Contemporary jihadism has evolved beyond the paradigms that once defined it. No longer characterized by rigid hierarchies or centralized command structures, jihadist terrorism today operates as a decentralized, ideologically coherent, and digitally embedded insurgency. As Sageman (2017) argues, modern jihadist mobilization is driven more by horizontal networks, online echo chambers, and peer-to-

peer socialization than by top-down leadership. This networked structure enables individual actors to radicalize independently while remaining ideologically aligned with global jihadist narratives.

"Media jihad" refers to ISIS's deliberate effort to engage supporters in spreading its messages, mirroring the emotional, ideological, and strategic functions of battlefield jihad, but in cyberspace. Islamic State sympathisers engage in digital activism - what the group terms "media jihad" - to support and amplify its propaganda online. This form of activism is rooted in the cultural and ideological traditions of physical jihad, transferring those values into digital spaces. As explained by Maarouf (2023), this online participation involves cultural and symbolic elements such as honour, martyrdom, loyalty, and combat metaphors, which are transferred into the digital realm.

The study reveals how ISIS has strategically adapted jihadist ideology for the social media age, mobilizing sympathisers into a networked propaganda machine that is both culturally resonant and digitally agile. Supporters see themselves as part of the fight, using memes, videos, and other media as their weapons. They develop a stronger identification with ISIS's cause, internalizing its ideology and cultural norms. It gives them a sense of agency, belonging, and purpose, despite being geographically distant from the actual conflict (Lakomy, 2017). Baugut & Neumann (2019) explain that propaganda during cognitive radicalization is characterized by religious frames, which strictly advocate Islam as the 'right' way, while propaganda used during the behavioral radicalization phase is characterized by suggestions that violence is effective, urgent, and the only way to help Muslims. They add to this perspective by emphasizing non-linear radicalization pathways, where psychological, political, and existential grievances intersect in dynamic, unpredictable ways. These are not always the result of formal indoctrination but rather of immersive online engagement and personalized ideological journeys. This paradigm shift is exemplified by groups like ISIS-Khorasan, which has conducted high-profile attacks such as the March 2024 Crocus City Hall massacre in Moscow, despite lacking traditional command-and-control hierarchies. The attack illustrates how encrypted communications, global recruitment, and ideologically motivated lone actors can sustain jihadist violence post-caliphate.

The 2024 Crocus City Hall massacre in Moscow, claimed by ISIS-K, is emblematic of this digital insurgency's potency. The attack demonstrated that even in the absence of a caliphate, jihadist groups remain capable of inspiring and enabling deadly violence (Clarke & Mir, 2024). It also reveals the strategic use of the internet not only for communication and recruitment, but for operational planning and post-attack messaging that seeks to amplify psychological and political impact.

GLOBAL DECENTRALIZATION AND DIGITAL PROLIFERATION

This paper goes on to investigate how jihadist movements have evolved in the post–ISIS territorial era, focusing on their migration to cyberspace, adaptation to emerging technologies, and exploitation of socio-political grievances. It examines how these decentralized extremist networks operate across digital platforms, leveraging propaganda, encrypted communication, and alternative financing to radicalize individuals and sustain operations globally. It identifies the mechanisms through which jihadist actors maintain ideological resilience and operational reach despite territorial losses.

The resurgence of ISIS affiliates in Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia signals a broader trend: jihadist ideology persists and thrives in regions

marked by weak governance, chronic instability, and unregulated digital space. According to Drevon and Haenni (2025), jihadist groups have strategically migrated to cyberspace, exploiting socio-political disillusionment and conflict to radicalize new audiences through curated digital content, transnational discourse, and viral media strategies.

In Western societies, the rise of homegrown radicalization presents a critical challenge. The European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TESAT, 2023) and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UNCTED, 2024) identify lone actors, often radicalized online, as the most persistent and lethal domestic terrorist threat in the West. These actors operate autonomously but are inspired by transnational jihadist ideology, demonstrating the inadequacy of counterterrorism strategies focused solely on organizational disruption.

Jihadist propaganda now functions like a digital virus, spreading across platforms, languages, and cultures. Berger and Morgan (2015) describe this using a viral diffusion model, whereby extremist content rapidly spreads through algorithmically optimized channels. Klausen (2015) and Awan (2017) highlight how jihadist propaganda transcends borders via multilingual outreach, cultural mimicry, and identity-based content. Thus, the persistent appeal of jihadist movements lies in their ideological rigidity and their emotional and symbolic construction of collective identity. Kavrakis (2022) found that Al Qaeda and ISIS's aim is to identify elements that make the two groups' mobilization effective. But while Al Qaeda frames its identity as the protector of Muslims from the evil West, ISIS is presented as the sole legitimate religious authority guiding Muslims to true Islam. Al Qaeda mobilization tends to rely more on political frames, whereas ISIS framing is almost exclusively religious.

While Kavrakis claims that both groups political and religious frames already extant in the minds of Muslim audiences in order to mobilize potential adherents, Enbar et al. (2022) argue that the willingness to commit violent acts when the group is perceived to be under threat, and thus, identifying these patterns might better predict whether someone is likely to move from extremist thinking to violent action. Arnoso-Martínez et al. (2024) add to this conception that monitoring these threat perceptions could be more useful in predicting who will escalate from extremist beliefs to actual violent acts. They argue that media are a key social agent shaping society's responses to measures implemented in the fight against terrorism.

But this goal has become difficult in the digital age. Facebook, Google (YouTube), and Twitter have evolved into key players in counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism - areas usually dominated by governments. Borelli (2021) emphasizes that these companies became involved largely because groups like ISIS were using their platforms for propaganda, recruitment, and coordination. He blames that instead of merely following legal obligations, these tech giants took proactive measures, showing creativity and initiative in shaping rules and norms for online counterterrorism. He further complains that they are now co-creators of a global governance regime for terrorist communications.

ISIS has refined its media strategy to include short-form TikTok-style videos, gamified content, and meme warfare designed to appeal to digitally native youth. Hassan and Azman (2020) demonstrate how jihadist content uses Qur'anic allusions mixed with modern aesthetics and editing techniques to construct compelling visual narratives. Apps like Telegram, Element, and Rocket. Chat serves as a virtual command center, described by Kfir (2021) as the "digital dawlah," offering tactical guidance, ideological indoctrination, and community reinforcement.

These platforms host DIY bomb-making guides, martyrdom videos, and virtual sermons, making operational planning accessible even to isolated individuals. Badawy and Ferrara (2017), analyzing over two million ISIS-linked Arabic tweets, found strong correlations between spikes in online activity and real-world events, revealing jihadist media's strategic alignment with political crises. Al-Rawi and Groshek (2018) documented rapid account regeneration and hashtag hijacking to evade takedowns. Carthy and Sarma (2021) call for precision disruption, warning that indiscriminate content removal often enhances jihadist narratives of persecution.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents both a force multiplier for jihadist networks and a tool for counterterrorism. Terrorist actors now use AI for targeted recruitment and profiling through sentiment analysis, autonomous drone attacks, and digital surveillance evasion, and deepfakes and synthetic media for propaganda personalization. Marsoof (2023) advocates for ethical AI regulation that prioritizes transparency and explainability. However, Alkiviadou (2024) warns that overregulation can be misused to suppress dissent, conflating political opposition with extremism.

Financial networks underpin jihadist resilience. Shapiro and Durner (2017) document the use of hawala systems, cryptocurrencies, and shell charities to bypass Anti-Money Laundering (AML) frameworks. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) provides global compliance guidelines, but enforcement is weak in fragile or failed states. Digital finance further complicates efforts to disrupt funding, especially with the rise of anonymous cryptocurrency exchanges and decentralized finance (DeFi) platforms.

Jihadist groups gain legitimacy in ungoverned zones by offering crude but functional governance structures. Drevon and Haenni (2025) show how groups enforce strict Sharia law while providing rudimentary services, filling voids left by corrupt or collapsed states. In the West, jihadist propaganda increasingly targets diasporic Muslims, leveraging Islamophobia, state surveillance, and racism to portray jihad as a moral defense of identity and dignity. Thus, the jihadist threat has moved from the battlefield to the infosphere, from structured insurgency to memetic warfare, and from hierarchical command to leaderless radicalization. This new phase of jihadist terrorism demands an equally agile, multi-disciplinary, and rights-conscious response. This is explained by Roose & Cook (2022) in that terrorist violence shares a hidden but important thread: the desire to enforce a strict, patriarchal social order that is hostile to women's rights and gender equality.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of jihadist terrorism in the post-caliphate era marks a paradigmatic shift from centralized, territorially bound insurgencies to digitally networked, ideologically fluid ecosystems. This paper has argued that jihadist movements have successfully adapted to the structural logic of the digital world, transforming into agile, decentralized entities that exploit social grievances, algorithmic systems, encrypted platforms, and youth-oriented aesthetics to sustain their relevance and operational capability.

Drawing on Social Movement Theory, the study highlighted how jihadist groups mobilize support by leveraging identity crises, political exclusion, and real or perceived injustices. These grievances are framed into compelling narratives that resonate deeply with marginalized individuals, particularly youth in both the Global North and South. Thus, the fight against jihadist terrorism today is as much informational and technological as it is ideological and kinetic. The digital battlefield is

an ideological insurgency, and failure to address the digital ecosystem's structural enablers will ensure the continued adaptation and survival of jihadist movements well into the future.

The success of global institutions to adapt to the evolving nature of ideological extremism could be key to understanding motivations and preventing future attacks. Effective counterterrorism in the digital age requires a strategic recalibration that merges technological precision with socio-cultural insight. AI-driven content moderation should be transparent, accountable, and proportionate, ensuring extremist content is flagged, de-amplified, and removed without eroding civil liberties.

This approach must extend to coordinated, cross-border actions against encrypted communications, radicalized influencers, and illicit financial flows, implemented in ways that are legally harmonized and regionally sensitive. Beyond suppression, counter-narratives must resonate emotionally and culturally with target audiences, addressing deep-seated grievances, reframing religious identity, and offering alternative pathways to belonging. AI can enhance these efforts by detecting propaganda patterns, predicting dissemination trends, and flagging high-risk content, but such tools must operate within governance frameworks that prioritize human rights, transparency, and public trust. By combining digital intelligence with a nuanced understanding of local dynamics, counterterrorism strategies can more effectively dismantle both the virtual and societal foundations of jihadist mobilization.

The study suggests that the future of jihadist terrorism is networked, adaptive, and ideologically persistent. Military defeat of jihadist organizations is insufficient; these movements now thrive in the realm of narrative, grievance, and connectivity. The resilience of jihadist movements in the digital era stems not only from their adaptive use of technology but also from their ability to exploit entrenched socio-political divisions, cultural narratives, and unresolved historical grievances. The convergence of encrypted communications, decentralized financing, and algorithm-driven propaganda demands an equally adaptive counterterrorism response that integrates AI-enhanced detection, transnational legal coordination, and culturally grounded engagement with vulnerable communities.

The study emphasizes that policymakers must recognize that dismantling extremist networks requires more than removing digital content; it requires undermining the ideological, social, and financial scaffolding that sustains them. By aligning technological innovation with human-centered governance and context-specific interventions, the international community can move beyond reactive containment toward the long-term prevention of radicalization, effectively challenging jihadist groups in both the digital and conventional means.

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