



## **Brethren in Terror: Mapping ISIS and Boko Haram Digital Campaigns**

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### **Abstract**

Scholars have increasingly sought commonalities among Islamist radical groups, such as ISIS and Boko Haram, despite their ideological differences. The purpose of this qualitative study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of both ISIS and Boko Haram's digital campaigns to identify similarities and differences in the content of their digital messaging. Adopting reflexive thematic analysis to explore and interpret dataset which eventually allows to uncover patterns, themes, and meanings within the data, this study, utilized the "propaganda by deed" theory to examines and analyse 20 ISIS Arabic Twitter campaigns and 20 Boko Haram video messages. Data was collected and employed to NVivo software for coding and analysis. The analysis reveals four prominent themes for each group: ISIS emphasizes recruitment, direct calls to jihad, religious discourse, and commemoration of deceased members to attract or mobilize followers. In contrast, Boko Haram's themes include ideological declarations, religious narratives, affiliations with other groups, and recruitment with calls to jihad. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of both groups, with improved quality for digital campaign in the side of Boko Haram as a result of its allegiance with ISIS, informing more effective and appropriate countermeasures against them and further prevent possible future direct relationship between the two groups.

**Keywords:** Boko Haram, Digital Campaign, Propaganda, ISIS, Radical, Twitter Campaigns

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## Introduction

Scholars from diverse disciplines have embarked on a quest to discern recurring patterns within the realm of religious violence, with a particular focus on global jihadism (Voll, 2015). Amidst the myriad of extremist ideologies, two entities frequently emerge: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and *Jama'at ahl Al Sunnah lil Da'awah wa al Jihad*, commonly known as Boko Haram. Notably, Boko Haram's declaration of allegiance to ISIS in March 2015 (BBC, 2015) has raised questions about the extent of commonality in their ideologies, objectives, and methodologies (Raineri & Martini, 2017; Voll, 2015). These assumptions persist despite the distinct historical trajectories, evolutionary paths, operational activities, and Modi Operandi of these two groups. While both profess a fervent commitment to establishing a caliphate and maintain an unwavering stance against any perceived impediments to their objectives, their intricate differences merit examination.

Following Boko Haram's public alignment with ISIS, a handful of researchers have endeavoured to dissect this unsettling alliance, which has implications for global security. Previous studies have delved into the magnitude of the threat posed by this partnership (Blanchard & Cavigelli, 2018; Hentz, 2018; Ogbogu, 2015) the dynamics of their relationship (Johnson, 2019; Oriola & Akinola, 2018; Raineri & Martini, 2017; Siegle & Williams, 2017; Weeraratne, 2017) and Boko Haram's symbiotic relationship with ISIS, where it assumes the role of both protege and guardian (Chiluwa, 2019; Cook, 2014; Ogbogu, 2015; Tochukwu Omenma et al., 2020; Voll, 2015). In an era characterized by the omnipresence of electronic media and its profound impact on communication, it is intriguing that a comparative study on the digital media campaigns of these two groups is notably absent from the scholarly discourse surrounding their affiliation. Consequently, the primary objective of this paper is to undertake a comprehensive analysis of both ISIS and Boko Haram's digital media campaigns, with the aim of identifying commonalities and disparities in the thematic content of their digital messaging.

This article is structured into several sections for clarity and organization. After the introduction, the first section provides a conceptual framework. The second section offers a concise overview of the BH-ISIS relationship within a contextual framework. In the third section, we delineate the research methodologies employed in this study. Moving forward, the fourth section presents an in-depth analysis of ISIS's digital Twitter campaigns. Subsequently, the fifth section delves into the thematic findings derived from BH's video messages. In the



sixth section, we engage in a concise discussion of the findings. Finally, the seventh section draws our overall conclusions.

### **Propaganda by Deed**

"Propaganda by Deed" originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century within the anarchist movement, was championed by figures like Michael Bakunin. It aimed to incite insurrections and advocate for revolution (Hunter, 1914; Linse, 1982). Over time, it evolved into political violence by artisan anarchists responding to the rise of capitalism and the decline of traditional craftsmanship (Law, 2016). Rapoport (2013) identifies four waves of propaganda by deed:

1. Anarchist Wave (Late 19<sup>th</sup>): Aimed to overthrow existing structures, using violence and assassinations.
2. Anti-Colonial Wave (Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century): Used terrorism for colonial independence.
3. New Left-wing Wave (Late 20<sup>th</sup> century): Embraced leftist ideologies, targeting capitalist and imperialist institutions.
4. Religious Wave (late 20<sup>th</sup> century to present): Led by religiously motivated terrorist groups (Rapoport, 2013).

The common thread was seeking publicity for their causes, exemplified by the 9/11 attacks (Eric Louw, 2003; Law, 2009).

Modern terrorists use digital strategies to disseminate messages, leveraging social media and the internet (Archetti, 2015). They create captivating content with high-definition cameras and editing software, recruiting through mobile messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram (Zeiger & Gyte, 2021). The internet played a significant role in the learning, dissemination of extremist media, and attack preparation (Gill et al., 2017). It's a critical tool for propagating extremist views and enabling self-radicalization (Macdonald, 2019). Terrorist groups orchestrate high-profile attacks for media coverage, aiming to shock and sensationalize, spreading their ideology and instilling fear (Eric Louw, 2003). Media amplification serves as a recruitment tool, attracting individuals inspired by the perceived impact of these actions (Binder & Kenyon, 2022).

### **Understanding ISIS-Boko Haram Relationship**

The relationship between ISIS and Boko Haram has been notable since 2014. Despite Boko Haram's seniority, ISIS quickly gained prominence, becoming a model for similar groups like Boko Haram. In March 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIS (Muir, 2015), sparking widespread interest. Blanchard and Cavigelli's report (2018) for the US Congressional



Research Service anticipated that Boko Haram's alignment with ISIS would boost recruitment and fundraising. Ogbogu (2015) suggested that those unable to join ISIS in Syria might find it easier to join Boko Haram in Nigeria. However, no substantial evidence has emerged of ISIS providing strategic direction, control, funding, assets, or personnel support to Boko Haram (Siegle & Williams, 2017). Antwi-Boateng (2017) compared ISIS and Boko Haram, noting their shared use of Islam for mobilization but differences in goals, structures, memberships, finances, and capabilities. Boko Haram mainly focuses on Nigeria, while ISIS has global ambitions. Still, Boko Haram's association with ISIS had notable effects (Antwi-Boateng, 2017). For instance, in 2014, Boko Haram mirrored ISIS by abducting the Chibok Girls and declaring its caliphate in Gwoza, Borno state, echoing ISIS's actions. ISIS influenced Boko Haram's video messages, adopting a format with improved graphics and production quality (Cook, 2014; Ogbogu, 2015).

### **Methodology**

This study utilized a dataset comprising 23 video messages from Boko Haram (BH) and 20 Arabic Twitter video campaigns from ISIS. The collected datasets were transcribed and translated into English. Subsequently, NVivo 12 Pro software was employed for coding and analysis. To gather ISIS Twitter video campaigns, a process involving trending hashtags, locating tweets by ISIS members (some containing campaign links), tracing these links, and downloading campaigns before account removal was executed. BH's video messages were predominantly obtained from online sources, often posted by the group itself or online news outlets.

Following data collection and transcription, a systematic thematic analysis was conducted individually on each dataset using NVivo software. Subsequently, a comparative analysis was carried out. The study adhered to the approach outlined by (Braun et al., 2019), specifically, reflexive thematic analysis. This analysis involved six major steps as recommended by the authors: data familiarization, code generation, theme construction, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production.

### **Analysing ISIS Arabic Twitter Video Campaigns**

The analysis revealed four major themes within the ISIS Arabic Twitter video campaigns: religion, recruitment and calls to jihad, honouring deceased members, and specific messages to Muslims. These themes encompass various subthemes, as illustrated in Figure 1.

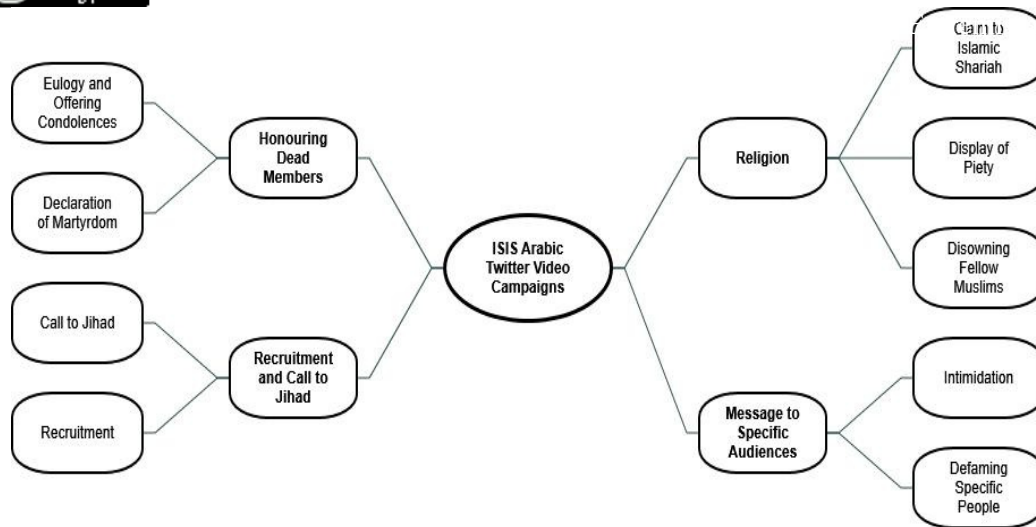


Figure 1 outlines four distinct themes identified in the analysis.

The first theme, "Religion," encompasses three subthemes: the claim to Islamic Shariah, displays of piety, and disownment of fellow Muslims. The second theme, "Honouring Deceased Members," comprises two subthemes: eulogies and offering condolences, as well as declarations of martyrdom. The third theme, "Recruitment and Call to Jihad," also includes two subthemes, both sharing the same title as the theme. Lastly, the fourth theme, "Message to Specific Audiences," gives rise to four subthemes: intimidation, emotional appeals, the utilization of the enemy's arguments, and the defamation of specific individuals.

### Religious Themes in ISIS Arabic Twitter Campaigns

Religion, a central concept frequently exploited by extremist groups, emerged as a prominent theme in the analysis of ISIS Arabic Twitter video campaigns. Within this theme, three distinct subthemes were recurrently identified: the assertion of Islamic Shariah, displays of piety, and the disavowal of fellow Muslims.

#### Claiming Islamic Shariah

ISIS consistently asserts its commitment to establishing an Islamic caliphate governed by Shariah law, portraying itself as the true adherent of Allah's law compared to others whom it brands as insincere. This claim is recurrent throughout the analysed campaigns and is often accompanied by Quranic verses and hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). For instance, in the campaign 'Abundant Provision,' ISIS included a statement that incorporated religious references:

“In the words of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) from the Prophet PBUH: 'A boundary (set by Allah) established is better for people than to receive rain for 30 or 40 mornings.'”



Additionally, Quranic verses were quoted to emphasize the significance of gratitude and adherence to Allah's law”.

Here, it is highlighted how ISIS repeatedly emphasizes its dedication to establishing an Islamic caliphate based on Shariah law. This commitment is often supported by references to religious texts, such as Quranic verses and hadiths, to validate its claims. Another campaign, 'Al Azeem in the State of Dayali,' underscored ISIS's reliance on Shariah for its success, stating:

“The Muslim's triumph over forces of infidelity and polytheism, their control over their homes and lands, and their governance based on Allah's law all stem from their unwavering commitment to the teachings derived from the Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah (PBUH)”.

In this passage, it is explained how ISIS links its success and dominance to the strict adherence to Shariah law, asserting that their achievements are a result of following the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet's Sunnah. In an attempt to garner support from a specific region, ISIS invoked Shariah as a means to win people's allegiance. In the campaign 'Verily, with the Hardship there is Relief,' ISIS urged the Land of Kinanah's residents to embrace Allah's Shariah:

“We call upon the people of the Land of Kinanah, who have endured injustice and tyranny under the authorities, to consider embracing Allah's Shariah as a path to justice and righteousness." Here, ISIS attempts to persuade a specific region to support its cause by suggesting that adopting Allah's Shariah will lead to justice and righteousness, potentially swaying locals to join their ranks”.

In this extract, ISIS is making a call to the people of the Land of Kinanah, a specific region. They are addressing those who have experienced what they perceive as "injustice and tyranny" under the existing authorities. ISIS is suggesting that if these people embrace and follow "Allah's Shariah" (Islamic law), it will lead to "justice and righteousness." Essentially, they are presenting Shariah as a solution to the perceived problems and as a means to establish a more just and righteous society.

### **Displaying Piety**

ISIS frequently employs the strategy of displaying piety, portraying itself as upholding a high moral standard that sets it apart from its adversaries. This recurring subtheme is evident throughout the data. ISIS often attempts to showcase its adherence to Islamic values and principles, emphasizing its commitment to issues of great significance within Islam. For



instance, the campaign titled 'Care for Orphans within the Confines of the Islamic State' presents an aura of nobility, piety, and kindness. One of the most conspicuous examples can be seen in the campaign titled 'My Grandfather Admonished Me on the Eid Day.' This campaign featured an elderly man addressing a group of children about the significance of Eid in Islam. Consider the following excerpt:

“In Islamic tradition, our revered patriarch Abraham (peace be upon Him) received a divine command from Allah to sacrifice his son, Ismael, on the day of Eid. Abraham, inquired of his son, saying, "O my son! I saw in my dream that I am slaughtering you, what is your view?" Ismael responded to his father, Abraham, with unwavering faith, "O my father! Do what you are ordered, insha' Allah (God willing), you will find me among the patient." As Abraham prepared his son for sacrifice, Allah sent a ram from the heavens as a substitute for Ismael, preventing the sacrificial act. This event laid the foundation for the ritual of animal sacrifice on Eid”.

Numerous such examples permeate the analysed campaigns, with ISIS strategically addressing topics such as zakat (charitable giving), orphan care, Eid celebrations, modesty, and more. It becomes evident why zakat holds a prominent position in these campaigns; ISIS needed a reliable source of income to sustain its costly military endeavours on multiple fronts. Encouraging people to pay zakat in the areas under its control represented a guaranteed means of generating income. Moreover, the theme of caring for orphans serves a dual purpose for ISIS. On one hand, it aims to convince its fighters that their families will be looked after if they sacrifice their lives for the organization, serving as a recruitment strategy. On the other hand, these campaigns target potential recruits, assuring them that their families will be cared for in their absence.

### **Honouring Deceased Members**

This analysis of ISIS Arabic Twitter video messages reveals another significant theme centered around the honouring of deceased members. Within this theme, two distinct subthemes have emerged: eulogies and condolences, as well as the declaration of martyrdom.

#### **a) Eulogies and Condolences**

ISIS employs eulogies and condolences in its propaganda to praise members, living or deceased, for their contributions to the organization. This strategy enhances member loyalty by recognizing their sacrifices for the group's cause. In the 'Fight the Mushrikun' campaign, an eulogy praised Abdullah Al Misry, the suicide bomber behind the Beatrice Church attack, celebrating his actions and the harm inflicted on Christians. The excerpt read as:



“Due to the actions of Christians, Abdullah Al Misry carried out a suicide bombing at Cairo's Beatrice Church, located in the Abbasiyya neighbourhood. He detonated his belt bomb in the midst of Christians, resulting in 80 casualties. This act was intended to convey that ISIS's battle against polytheism persists, preventing discord, and emphasizing the worship of Allah. All praise is directed to Allah, the Lord of all”.

Pride and jubilation were evident in the celebration of Abdullah Al Misry's successful suicide bombing, as seen in the previous excerpt. This pattern of celebrating such actions was also observed in another campaign, 'Their Alliance, Our Terrorism,' where a man named Muhammad was eulogized and prayed for his involvement in a suicide bombing mission. The excerpt reads as follows:

“O brother Muhammad! I ask Allah to accept you in the highest rooms of the Paradise. The sky of the Muslim countries is filled with smoke, so may your work, O you Muslim, be the reason for them to invoke the anger of Allah”.

In another campaign titled 'My Son Preceded Me', a 14-year-old teenager called Abu Imarata was prepared to commit suicide bombing. Abu Imarata's eulogy was the boldest of all which is because ISIS major target is teenagers and youths who are likely to make uncalculated sacrifices of the lives, as is the case with Abu Imarata. The entire campaign was dedicated to eulogizing him and declaring him a martyr, as to be discussed later in the next section.

#### **b) Declaration of Martyrdom**

Declaration of martyrdom in ISIS campaigns occurs in two distinct forms: first, posthumous declarations for members who have already lost their lives in service to the organization; and second, calls to living members to willingly embrace martyrdom. This dual approach was identified in two of the campaigns analysed. In the campaign 'The Purification of the Soul,' the organization commemorates fallen members by expressing their aspiration to reunite with them in Paradise. They evoke revered early Muslim figures like Abu Bakr, Umar, and Khalid, strategically linking their militant activities to Khalid bin Waled, a renowned military commander from early Islamic history. This subtly reinforces the idea that their actions align with the traditions of these respected figures:

“We long to meet the Prophet (PBUH) and His companions, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Khalid in the earliest time possible Insha'Allah. Some of our chosen brothers have long left us and they are currently in the company of the great. Abu Imarata is still fresh in our minds and we long to meet him soon in the highest paradise”.





ISIS often declares its fallen members as martyrs, insinuating that they have joined great early Muslim figures, particularly the Prophet's companions, in Paradise. Notably, Khalid is deliberately mentioned alongside Abu Bakr and Umar, a calculated effort to associate its militant activities with Khalid, a renowned military commander from the time of the Prophet to Umar's era. In another campaign, 'Recovery House,' a man named Abu Hamzah Al Idlibi, destined for a suicide bombing mission, urged fervently, "O my brothers! Hurry in this race. The gateway to Paradise stands wide open, adorned. Where are the Paradise seekers?" This campaign also echoed a strong call to embrace martyrdom:

“In the context of battles and invasions, injuries inevitably mount, often leading to permanent disability. This makes the prospect of death in the name of Allah more favourable for the Mujahid and their family than enduring injuries. The sufferings endured by the Prophet's companions during battles and invasions were regarded as more valuable than all worldly possessions. It's as though I stand beside the Prophet PBUH, praying for Allah's mercy, forgiveness, and salvation from hellfire for anyone wounded in Allah's cause”.

The excerpt above is an attempt to call members and entice them into committing themselves to martyrdom. This was done by managing the expectation of members telling them that they should expect to be injured, condemned to disability and in many cases killed which was claimed to be better than sustaining injuries. To comfort and convince the members, the excerpt claimed that Prophet Muhammad PBUH and His companions suffered worse injuries in their battles.

### **Recruitment and Call to Jihad**

Recruitment and call to jihad is a central agenda of extremist groups like ISIS. It was found to be one of the major themes in the analysis of the Arabic Twitter video campaigns analysed. Two subthemes were identified under this theme namely recruitment and call to jihad as the title of the theme itself.

#### **a) Recruitment**

Recruitment necessitates systematic indoctrination to persuade individuals to join ISIS and engage in combat, often against their own compatriots. This was identified in seven out of the 20 analysed campaigns. In the campaign titled 'If they fight you, they will show their backs,' a message conveyed as follows:

“Do not heed the media's narrative. I solemnly swear by Allah, our battle is waged for the cause of [La ilaha Illa Allah]. We strive to elevate the word of Allah above all else, diminishing the disbelievers' influence. All praises are due to Allah. I vow by



Allah, we will not cease until we establish Allah's Shariah, with Allah as the sole object of worship”.

In this passage, ISIS seeks to convince its audience that its mission is rooted in advancing Islam, relentlessly striving to establish Shariah and a caliphate. The group follows a specific pattern in crafting recruitment messages, often targeting vulnerable young individuals, primarily teenagers who may lack a full understanding of right and wrong. An example from the 'My son precedes me' campaign illustrates this approach:

“I saw a group of Mujahideen when they came Raqqah and I ran to my mother to inform her that I will be joining to fight for the cause of Allah. When I informed her she was happy and asked to have a good intention. My prayers are to have victory against the enemy. I want also to become a martyr. I am also calling on every mother to send her child to Jihad the way my mother sent me. The enemy come to us with all kinds of weapons, but we face them with only faith and the belief in our doctrine, and men who do not desire the life here”.

ISIS deliberately focuses its recruitment efforts on young people and teenagers, recognizing that adults tend to think more rationally and have more to lose.

#### **b) Call to Jihad**

The call to jihad stands out as a pivotal strategy employed by groups like ISIS for recruiting and perpetuating violence against perceived adversaries. In our analysis of the 20 campaigns, we discovered numerous instances of this theme, with 12 of the campaigns featuring repeated calls to jihad. In a campaign titled 'Al Azeem in the State of Dayali,' a Qur'anic verse was cited to motivate members to combat anyone identified as an enemy:

“Indeed, the certainty is in the promise of Almighty Allah for victory and empowerment [and fight them until there is no Fitnah and worship is for Allah]" (Q 8:39).

This reinforces the unwavering faith in the hearts of mujahideen, regardless of the overwhelming might of infidels and their alliances. Their pride in their weapons and military capabilities will not hinder the divine destiny. In some cases, the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are invoked to emphasize this objective. For example, in the campaign 'Purification of the Souls,' two hadiths were quoted to convey that engaging in battle is secondary only to embracing Islam. The message becomes even more direct, with the goal made abundantly clear, as illustrated in another excerpt from the same campaign:

“O my brothers and sisters! Fight and kill the enemy in America, Russia, China, and everywhere else. Engage in combat through any



means available. Kill them! Slaughter them! Seek vengeance for your religion. Almighty Allah will question you on the Day of Judgment: 'Why did you remain idle?'".

The call to jihad was perhaps the most recurrent subtheme throughout our analysis of the campaigns, surpassing the prevalence of other identified subthemes. The aforementioned excerpts serve as mere examples of these calls, given the space limitations for a comprehensive discussion. This frequency is unsurprising, as combat remains a fundamental tenet of the ISIS organization.

### **Message to Specific Audiences**

The final theme derived from the analysis of ISIS Arabic video Twitter campaigns is "Targeted Messaging." This theme encompasses two subthemes: Intimidation, and Defamation of Enemies. Let's explore each subtheme in more detail.

#### **a) Intimidation**

Intimidation is a recurring subtheme in ISIS messaging, aimed at instilling fear in specific target audiences. For instance, in addressing the Western world, the following message was conveyed in the campaign 'A story of slaughter':

“We unequivocally inform you, crusaders, that we are coming for you. And to those brothers among the crusaders living among Muslims, know that our knives thirst for your blood. No spying eye on Muslims will remain intact, and no head will go unsevered in our mission to aid Allah's religion. (All five men were simultaneously beheaded, and their heads were displayed on small posts)”.

In some instances, the Christian populations in certain Arab countries were targeted with menacing statements. In the campaign 'Fight the Mushrikoon,' Egypt's Christians faced a threatening message:

“O Egypt's Christians, understand that the attack on your place of worship (referring to the Beatrice Church bombing) is just the beginning, and, God willing, there will be more operations to follow. Our purpose and target extend far beyond what you have witnessed or heard”.

#### **b) Defamation of Enemies**

The recurring theme of defaming enemies permeated several campaigns in the analysed data. In a campaign titled 'Only fire in their bellies,' ISIS targeted Islamic scholars whom they deemed adversarial to the group's objectives. Here is an example:



“They (the religious figures) eagerly proclaimed the rise to power of certain influential individuals in Saudi Arabia. They sought refuge in him from various regions, publicly endorsing his apostasy and blasphemy through educational gatherings, media programs, personal social media profiles, and discussion forums”.

In some instances, even the authorities of Muslim countries became targets of vilification. In the 'Verily, with hardship there is relief' campaign, the following statement addressed authorities in Middle Eastern Muslim countries:

“The Arab governments obediently serve the interests of Jews and their security. These governments hastily supported President Sisi after receiving orders from their masters (the US and Israel) to combat the Mujahideen in Sinai”.

While numerous subthemes emerged during the analysis, the aforementioned themes represent the most prevalent ideas across the 20 analysed campaigns. Space limitations prevent a comprehensive discussion of all subthemes.

### Mapping Boko Haram’s Digital Video Messages

This article's second section delves into BH, a group notorious much like ISIS. Over the past decade, BH has effectively utilized digital video messages to further its objectives. The analysis of these video messages was conducted thematically using the NVivo software application. The 23 video messages were numbered from 1 to 23 due to the absence of formal titles. When quoting from a specific video, references such as Video 1, 2, 23, and so forth are provided. This analysis has yielded four primary themes and several associated subthemes.

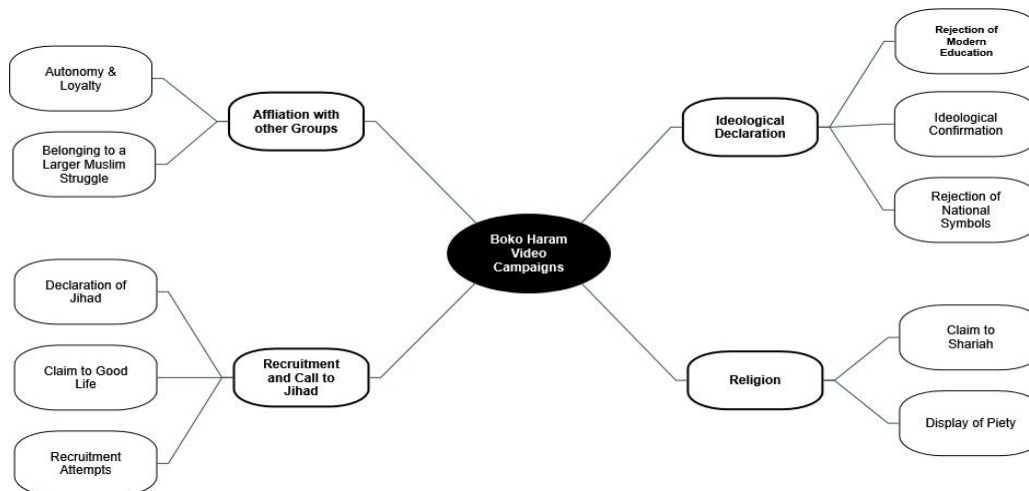


Figure 2 illustrates these main themes and their respective subthemes.



## Religion

Religious discourse takes centre stage in BH's video messages, mirroring a strategy employed by groups like ISIS. This emphasis on religion serves as a primary source of legitimacy for BH, given that both groups align themselves with Islam. BH's target audience primarily consists of the Nigerian Muslim community and, to some extent, neighbouring nations, making video messages a key tool for promoting its specific interpretation of Islamic teachings and its ideological framework. This theme encompasses three key subthemes: the assertion of Islamic Shariah, the public display of religious devotion, and the juxtaposition of their members' experiences with those of early Muslims.

### Claim to Islamic Shariah

BH consistently emphasizes its commitment to establishing Islamic Shariah and cites Quranic verses to validate its stance. In Video 2, the group's leader utilized two Quranic verses to justify the necessity of fighting for Shariah:

1. "Allah said: "And whosoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed, such are the [Kafirun] (i.e., disbelievers – of a lesser degree as they do not act on Allah's Laws)" (Quran 5:44).
2. "The command is for none but Allah. He commanded that you worship none but Him (i.e., His monotheism)" (Quran 12:40).

These verses, according to BH, provide ample grounds for them to combat anyone or anything obstructing the establishment of Shariah. BH claims to have already implemented Shariah in the territories it seized from the Nigerian armed forces, as highlighted in Video 7. Shekau proudly enumerated the group's actions in these areas, including severing the hands of thieves, executing adulterers, and lashing liars, all in adherence to their interpretation of the Quran.

### Display of Piety

Another recurring theme in BH's video messages is the demonstration of piety, which can be seen as a strategic move to gain legitimacy and position the group as exceptionally devout, especially among its followers. This theme is evident throughout the analysis of the 23 video messages. BH often expresses its piety by attributing all its achievements and actions to Allah, emphasizing that their victories are divinely sanctioned. For example, in Video 1, Shekau stated that the group's success does not rely on their weaponry but on Allah's support. This sentiment is reinforced in Video 10, where Shekau cites Allah's promises in the Quran to support and aid His religion, using these promises to explain their combat victories. Here is an excerpt from the video:



“He promised in His Book that He will support and help His religion. This is beyond you because we are not the ones doing all that you see. It is all Allah’s doings which is a punishment for your disobedience of Him. You refuse to worship Him, you disrespect Him, and you humiliate His religion. Allah is sufficient for us... As for us, it is Allah we believe in, we follow in His path, we don’t fight anybody except those who fought us. What we are doing is for the sake of Allah. We are doing what we are doing because we found evidence from the Book of Allah and the hadiths of His Prophet pbuh”.

Most BH video messages follow a similar pattern of opening, emphasizing the group's piety and devotion. They typically begin with recitations of Quranic verses and hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad to underscore the group's commitment to its ideology.

### **Comparing to Early Muslims**

Another religious subtheme within BH's messages involves drawing parallels between its members' experiences and those of Prophet Muhammad's companions. This serves to create a sacred image and legitimize the group's actions. In Video 13, Shekau made the following statement:

“If you do not aid the Prophet - Allah has already aided him when those who disbelieved had driven him out [of Makkah] as one of two, when they were in the cave and he said to his companion, 'Do not grieve; indeed, Allah is with us.' And Allah sent down his tranquillity upon him. There is consensus among Muslims that the companion mentioned in the verse was Abubakar As Siddiq, may Allah be pleased with Him and make others be pleased with him too”.

In this excerpt, Shekau compares BH's situation to that of Prophet Muhammad and His companion, Abubakar. This analogy is used to inspire the group's members and supporters, implying that they play a role similar to that of Prophet Muhammad when he was aided by His companion.

### **Recruitment and Jihad**

Membership lies at the core of any organization's survival, and BH recognizes the pivotal role of recruitment in sustaining its operations. Within this theme, three key concepts emerge: recruitment, declaration of jihad, and claims of a prosperous life.

#### **a) Claim to Good Life**



Statements claiming a good life serves as an initial step in attracting followers and demoralizing enemies. Two illustrative instances from the analysed data are examined below. In Video 2, BH asserts their prosperity, health, and abundant food in their Islamic empire within the Sambisa Forest, refuting government claims of their dire condition. Similarly, in Video 4, BH conveys a message of well-being and prosperity to their brethren, emphasizing their good condition and expressing gratitude for what Allah has provided.

### **b) Recruitments Attempts**

Recruitment is vital for the survival of movements like BH. They leverage video messages to reach the world and their members across Nigeria and neighbouring regions. In Video 13, Shekau likened BH's relationship with potential members to Prophet Muhammad's experience with His companions in the Battle of Hunayn. BH often uses Quranic verses to legitimize recruitment efforts. They aim to convey that even those who previously hesitated to join are welcome. This is supported by Quranic verses like, "Allah will accept repentance after that for whom He wills; and Allah is Forgiving and Merciful" (Qur'an 9:27).

### **c) Declaration of Jihad**

The declaration of jihad complements BH's recruitment objectives, aiming to enrol members for what the group considers a holy war. Throughout the analysed data, BH frequently employed Quranic verses and hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to legitimize its activities and attract new recruits. After individuals join the group, the next step is to engage them in violent actions. Declarations of jihad were prevalent in the analysed content, as illustrated by the following example. In Video 1, BH directly declares jihad against its enemies, emphasizing the significance of fighting as a form of worship:

“In the name of Allah, the most magnificent and merciful. All praise to Allah, who has elevated jihad to a sacred act of worship, one of the greatest. He has promised His servants either victory or martyrdom as a reward. May Allah's blessings be upon His Messenger, peace be upon him, and upon his family and companions. To our esteemed brethren, a joyful message: with Allah's will, the time for combat has arrived, the time to fight, the time to engage in battle”.

These excerpts demonstrate BH's direct declarations of jihad against its adversaries, emphasizing the profound religious significance it assigns to combat as a form of worship. In one instance, found in the same video, Shekau fervently expresses their dedication to fighting disbelievers until the word of Allah prevails, invoking divine guidance for accurate aim in their actions. Another declaration of jihad, from Video 16, features Shekau citing Quranic



verses to rationalize the group's readiness for aggressive action. These verses are presented without context, aligning them with BH's agenda.

The Quranic verses cited were presented devoid of context, solely to align with BH's agenda. BH implied that these verses were divinely revealed to endorse their cause. As mentioned earlier, such messages were pervasive throughout their video content.

### **Declaration of Ideology**

The video messages reveal a significant theme concerning BH's declaration of ideology, a fundamental aspect of the group's operations. This theme encompasses three key subthemes: ideological confirmation, rejection of national symbols, and opposition to modern education. Each of these subthemes will be explored further with illustrative examples.

#### **a) Confirmation of Ideology**

Confirmation of ideology is a central theme within BH's video messages, where the group reiterates its objectives and core beliefs. In Video 1, BH articulates its goal of establishing Islamic Shariah, emphasizing the worship of Allah and the implementation of Islamic laws. Another key ideological tenet is the dismantling of the Nigerian state and replacing it with their vision of a Qur'an-based rule. They assert that their mission is guided by Allah's commandments and seek to clarify that they do not aim to compel others to adopt their ideology, citing Qur'an 2:256. This persuasive tone is an occasional departure from their typically aggressive rhetoric, such as in Video 21, where Shekau states that their actions aim to call and convert people to Islam rather than simply provoke.

#### **b) Rejection of National Symbols**

BH's ideology fundamentally rejects national symbols, including the nation-state system, constitution, and democracy, which they perceive as incompatible with their beliefs. This rejection is consistently evident throughout the analyzed data. In Video 1, BH pledges to burn the Nigerian flag, labelling it a symbol of disbelief, and replaces it with their own black flag featuring Islamic declarations. Video 6 condemns democracy in Nigeria, branding its adherents as transgressors and emphasizing the incompatibility of democracy with their beliefs. Video 2 criticizes Nigeria's constitution, attributing its origins to Western Europeans and Jews, while denouncing the national flag as offensive to Islamic values. This unwavering stance against national symbols underscores BH's unwavering commitment to its ideological principles.





### c) **Rejection of Modern Education**

Within the broader theme of ideological declaration, BH's staunch rejection of modern education emerges as a pivotal subtheme. This rejection, which is foundational to the movement's identity (as reflected in its name "Boko Haram"), is deeply rooted in historical context. The term 'boko,' derived from the Hausa language, refers to the modern education introduced during British colonial rule, while 'haram,' an Arabic term, signifies prohibition. Several instances within the analysed video messages underscore BH's repudiation of modern education.

Prior to gaining notoriety for its subsequent activities, BH's rejection of modern education propelled it to infamy, particularly within the Muslim-majority northern regions of Nigeria. Likewise, in Video 10, the movement vehemently criticizes and outrightly rejects certain subjects taught in schools. Some of these criticisms are supported by Qur'anic verses or hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Here's an excerpt from the video:

“One facet of the doctrines taught in schools, particularly in geology, posits that the universe was not created by Allah and that the Earth is unstable, constantly shaking, despite Allah's assertion that it is firmly established. As Allah states: 'Is He [not best] who made the earth a stable ground and placed within it rivers and made for it firmly set mountains and placed between the two seas a barrier? Is there a deity with Allah? [No], but most of them do not know.' (Qur'an 27:61)”.

Another example, also found in Video 10, condemns modern education for allegedly teaching children that rainwater does not originate from the heavens but rather circulates from the ground, evaporating back into the sky to form clouds that eventually yield rain. These subthemes collectively form the ideological bedrock upon which BH's convictions are built: the rejection of national symbols and systems of governance, the rejection of modern education, and the establishment of a caliphate based on Shariah law.

### **Affiliation with other Movements**

One of the key themes derived from BH's video messages is its association with likeminded movements, encompassing two primary subthemes: autonomy and loyalty, and alignment with a broader Muslim struggle.



### **a) Loyalty and Autonomy**

In 2014, Boko Haram (BH) publicly pledged allegiance to ISIS through a video announcement. However, this affiliation appeared unequal in terms of communication. The video revealed that BH had sent multiple messages to ISIS but received only one reply, which raised questions amid rumours of internal factionalism within BH. It seemed that a faction led by Shekau, responsible for the video release, still maintained loyalty to him. The speaker in the video stated:

“We learned of the news (referring to leadership appointment) through media channels and your message, without prior notice. Therefore, we wish to clarify that we remain steadfast in our allegiance to our leader, Imam Abu Muhammad Abubakar Ibn Muhammad Ash Shekawi, may Allah protect him. Certain confidential matters prevent us from discussing them in this context. However, we emphasize that our loyalty to the Caliph (Al Baghdadi) remains, but we also assert our autonomy in selecting our own leaders”.

The video further explained that Shekau's faction upheld loyalty to ISIS while asserting its autonomy in leadership selection, highlighting that they wouldn't blindly follow Al Baghdadi's directives solely based on their loyalty.

### **b) Affiliation with a Broader Muslim Struggle**

Another noteworthy aspect observed within the theme of affiliations with other groups was BH's endeavour to portray its struggle as part of a broader Muslim movement across the world. Paradoxically, this stance seems contradictory, as BH's inclusion criteria do not encompass many Muslims. An illustrative instance of this can be gleaned from Video 4, where it is articulated:

“Consider the enduring conflicts in Chechnya, the persistent struggle of Chechen Mujahideen, the protracted battles in Somalia, the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Our brethren have been fighting for extended periods in these regions. Look at Libya. Despite these examples, you claim to eliminate us swiftly. Ponder upon this”.

Here, in this Video, the speaker is highlighting the longevity and resilience of various Muslim struggles in different parts of the world, such as Chechnya, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. They are questioning the assertion that BH can be easily defeated, given the enduring nature of these conflicts and the determination of Muslim fighters involved. This statement emphasizes BH's attempt to position its struggle as part of a broader global movement of Islamic resistance, despite the contradictions in its approach and ideology.



## Discussion

Analyzing the video messages of both ISIS and BH reveals four key themes for each group: religion, recruitment and calls to jihad, honoring deceased members, and specific audience targeting. While religion and recruitment efforts are shared themes, the two groups diverge in their emphasis on honoring members and their messages' specific audience targeting. The theme of religion is prevalent in both groups' communication, aligning with findings from previous studies (O'Shaughnessy & Baines, 2009; Pellerin, 2016). Religion consistently plays a central role in extremist communication, as noted in the case of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and AQIM (Pellerin, 2016).

Recruitment attempts and calls to jihad are highlighted in the digital campaigns of both ISIS and BH, corroborating findings from various studies (Berger, 2014; Zhou et al., 2005). These groups leverage media content to recruit new members and motivate existing ones to commit to their cause, including women (Bennhold, 2015; Kneip, 2016). In contrast, BH emphasizes its ideology and affiliation with movements beyond West Africa rather than consistently honouring its members or targeting specific audiences. This emphasis reflects BH's quest for legitimacy from the Middle East, the heart of Islamic faith, given that West Africa is a periphery in Islamic terms (Pham, 2016). The data analyzed did not definitively confirm BH's earlier affiliation attempts with AQIM.

## Conclusion

Digital messages serve as vital tools for extremist groups like ISIS and BH, offering insights into their commonalities and disparities. Recognizing these nuances is crucial for developing effective counter-narratives. This study identified four major themes in the digital media campaigns of both groups, highlighting their shared elements and distinctions. Notably, ISIS displayed a higher level of technological sophistication, producing high-quality video campaigns shared widely on platforms like Twitter. In contrast, BH relied on less advanced technology, distributing lower-quality video messages to select press organizations. BH also struggled to establish a successful social media presence compared to ISIS. However, it's important to note that BH's digital campaigns improved in quality following its allegiance with ISIS in 2014, warranting further research into their direct relationship.

In summary, this paper introduced a framework for analyzing the digital campaigns of contemporary extremist groups like ISIS and BH. Understanding the intricacies of their



digital strategies can inform more effective countermeasures and contribute to global efforts to promote peace and stability.

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