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The Use of Digital Technologies in Caucasian Jihadist Propaganda: From Websites to Digital Jihadist Jamaats

Abstract

This article examines the evolving role of digital technologies in the activities of Caucasian jihadist movements from the early 2000s to the present. Drawing on digital ethnography, qualitative content analysis, and secondary sources, the study identifies how jihadist groups in the North and South Caucasus have used online platforms for propaganda, recruitment, mobilization, and operational coordination. The analysis emphasizes both the regional specificity of these networks and their integration into wider transnational jihadist ecosystems.

The findings show that the earliest phase of online jihadist activity in the Caucasus relied on static websites that disseminated multilingual propaganda, including sermons, battlefield footage, and ideological manifestos. These resources served to legitimize violence and foster community among sympathizers. With the rise of social media across the post-Soviet space, jihadist actors shifted to interactive environments. After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, they began constructing *Digital Jihadist Jamaats* - virtual communities that became arenas of ideological socialization and pathways from passive sympathy to active participation.

Recruitment strategies typically involved a two-stage process. Initial exposure occurred on open platforms such as VKontakte, Facebook, or YouTube, followed by redirection into privacy-focused messaging applications like Telegram or Signal. These secure spaces minimized surveillance, enabled trust-building, and supported logistical coordination. Such practices proved effective, contributing to the departure of thousands of fighters from the Caucasus to Syria and Iraq.

Online platforms also facilitated instructional propaganda. Jihadist actors circulated manuals on improvised explosives, operational security, and small-scale attacks, often translated into Russian. In parallel, networks engaged in intelligence gathering and surveillance of security forces. Documented cases in Georgia revealed attempts to collect personal data on law-enforcement officers and to plan attacks on symbolic sites.

Jihadist groups also adopted financial and technological innovations. Cryptocurrency enabled fundraising, while bots, automated accounts, and pseudo-news portals amplified propaganda. More recently, artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies have been used to enhance the

credibility and reach of jihadist messaging. These developments highlight the adaptability of jihadist actors in exploiting emerging technologies.

The study situates these findings within a framework that combines digital ethnography, framing theory, and transnationalism. The article's key contribution is the introduction of the concept of the *Digital Jihadist Jamaat*. To the best of the author's knowledge, this represents the first scholarly application of the term. It captures the hybrid nature of jihadist online formations, which function both as arenas of ideological interaction and as mechanisms that bridge digital engagement with offline mobilization. By advancing this concept, the study contributes to the analysis of Caucasian jihadist activism and to broader debates on political Islam and digital extremism.

Keywords: Caucasus, jihadism, digital ethnography, propaganda, recruitment.

Introduction

Relevance of the Study

In the contemporary era, digital technologies have become central instruments for radical political, ideological, and religious movements. Islamist and jihadist organizations across the globe actively employ online platforms to disseminate propaganda, mobilize supporters, and consolidate transnational networks. The Caucasus region offers a particularly significant case for examining these dynamics.

The relevance of this research lies in the increasing role of digital technologies in shaping the strategies, communication, and mobilization practices of jihadist movements in and beyond the Caucasus. The Caucasus region have long served as zones of geopolitical tension and ideological contestation. Yet, while global scholarship has extensively analyzed the online ecosystems of Middle Eastern and Western jihadist groups, the specific ways in which Caucasian jihadists employ digital media remain underexplored. Understanding these dynamics is crucial not only for academic discourse on radicalization and transnational movements but also for contemporary policy debates concerning security, information warfare, and digital governance in the post-Soviet space.

Research Aim

The study aims to analyze how jihadist movements originating in the Caucasus have used digital technologies to construct, sustain, and transform their ideological and organizational practices, culminating in the conceptualization of the *Digital Jihadist Jamaat* - a framework that captures the adaptation of traditional communal structures of jihadist movements to the digital sphere.

Research Objectives

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To trace the evolution of Caucasian jihadist communication strategies - from early web-based propaganda to the use of contemporary social media and encrypted platforms.

2. To conceptualize and define the notion of the *Digital Jihadist Jamaat*, demonstrating how online jihadist communities reproduce and reconfigure the traditional jamaat's functions of socialization, mobilization, and ideological cohesion.

3. To analyze how jihadist actors in the Caucasus localize and reinterpret global jihadist narratives within regional socio-political contexts.

4. To apply digital ethnography, framing theory, and transnationalism as complementary theoretical lenses for understanding the cultural, communicative, and transnational dimensions of digital jihadism in the Caucasus.

5. To assess how digital technologies enable non-central jihadist movements to act as active producers of transnational propaganda, innovation, and mobilization strategies rather than passive recipients of global trends.

Research Question

How have jihadist movements in the Caucasus used digital technologies to transform their ideological, organizational, and communicative practices, and to what extent can these processes be understood through the concept of the *Digital Jihadist Jamaat*?

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the integration of digital technologies has fundamentally reconfigured the structure and dynamics of jihadist movements in the Caucasus, leading to the emergence of the *Digital Jihadist Jamaat* - an online form of jihadist community that reproduces the traditional functions of the jamaat (ideological socialization, collective identity, and mobilization) in a transnational digital environment. This transformation blurs the boundary between symbolic and operational activities, enabling peripheral jihadist actors to act as active producers of global jihadist narratives and strategies.

Historical Background of Digital Jihadism in the Caucasus

The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in profound political, economic, and social transformations that created fertile ground for the spread of Islamist ideologies and the rise of jihadist movements within the Caucasus. For the study of jihadist propaganda in the Caucasus, it is crucial to examine the period of the Russian-Chechen wars, when the use of modern technologies in information warfare became increasingly prominent. During the First Chechen War (1994-1996), propaganda and psychological operations were closely tied to the activities of Arab volunteers - many of the veterans of the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989) - who fought in Chechnya and directly participated in the hostilities. They introduced the practice of recording and disseminating successful operations, some of which were even broadcast by independent Russian media.

In 1999, shortly before the outbreak of the Second Russian-Chechen War, the Center for Strategic Studies and Political Technologies under the Ministry of

Information and Press of the separatist Chechen Republic of Ichkeria launched the website www.kavkazcenter.com. As of 2025, the platform continues to operate in Russian, Turkish, Arabic, and English. From its inception, the site has presented itself, and continues to do so, as an independent international Islamic analytical internet agency. The use of internet resources by Caucasian jihadist organizations gained particular significance after the outbreak of the Second Chechen War, when segments of the Chechen separatist forces began to transform into a broader jihadist movement. *KavkazCenter* became a key platform for North Caucasian radical Islamists, promoting the establishment of Sharia rule in the region and advocating for the creation of a unified Caucasian Islamic State.

In the early 2000s, alongside the emergence of so-called "combat jamaats" in various North Caucasian republics, the website played a central role in popularizing jihadist fighters online and conducting ideological propaganda. This was achieved through the dissemination of articles, polemical texts, audio lectures, and video statements by leading figures of the Caucasian radical Islamist milieu. At the same time, the formation of new identity constructs was actively pursued: events were interpreted through a jihadist religious-ideological lens that rejected nationalism and instead called for consolidation around a shared Islamic identity as the basis for liberation from Russian colonial domination. In this framework, jihadist propaganda identified as enemies not only Russian military and law-enforcement agencies, but also civil servants, members of the judiciary in the North Caucasus republics, and representatives of traditional Islamic institutions - groups that were depicted as collaborators with the Russian state.

The primary objective of KavkazCenter was to attract young Caucasian Muslims - at a time when the internet was particularly popular among younger audiences - and to promote a virtual vision of a unified Caucasus Islamic State, a goal it largely succeeded in advancing. From its establishment until 2007, the outlet played a pivotal role in shaping the ideological foundations for the creation of the jihadist terrorist organization known as the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz), which maintained affiliation with al-Qaeda. From this period onward, jihadist actors increasingly turned to emerging social networks, which began to be actively exploited for jihadist propaganda and mobilization. In parallel with KavkazCenter, a number of local websites also emerged, documenting the armed activities of jihadist groups operating in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Among the most notable were ImamTV, Hunafa, Vdagestan, and others. These websites not only documented militant activity but also laid the groundwork for interactive online jihadist communities in the region. At the same time, internet forums became increasingly active, serving as dedicated spaces for religious indoctrination and the recruitment of young people into jihadist networks.

Caucasian jihadists began to disseminate their narratives more effectively during the mid-2000s and early 2010s, as social platforms such as Facebook, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki gained widespread popularity. With the outbreak of hostilities in Syria in 2011, North Caucasian jihadist groups increasingly integrated their propaganda efforts into the massive campaigns of global jihadist organizations operating through social networks. A turning point came with the split of the so-called Islamic State from al-Qaeda in Syria, its

subsequent consolidation, and the proclamation of the caliphate in 2014. At this stage, the Islamic State (IS) issued a universal call for Muslims worldwide to join its ranks, presenting itself as the only legitimate center of authority for the global Ummah. These developments fundamentally transformed the landscape of global jihadist movements and had direct repercussions for the strategies and narratives of Caucasian militants.

Some fighters and supporters of the Caucasus Emirate aligned themselves with the Islamic State from the very beginning. As the influence of Caucasian jihadist groups expanded within Syria, the number of individuals seeking to leave the North Caucasus for the Syrian conflict also grew. This process also contributed to the weakening of the jihadist movement inside the Caucasus itself: the large-scale departure of fighters and supporters to Syria and Iraq drained local networks, and in the following years the entire structure of the Caucasus Emirate was effectively absorbed into the Islamic State. This development culminated in the proclamation of the so-called Islamic State's Caucasus Province *(*Wilayat Qawqaz*)*. Unlike the conditions in the North Caucasus - where militants were forced to operate in mountainous and forested terrain and newcomers had to adapt to harsh guerrilla environments - the Syrian context offered a different prospect. There, recruits were encouraged to bring their families and settle in urban areas under jihadist control, which made participation appear more accessible and sustainable. This process was not confined to local dynamics but was embedded in a broader transnational mobilization, as jihadist organizations systematically employed online platforms to channel fighters from the Caucasus and beyond into the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields.

Representatives of jihadist groups sought to mobilize supporters through social networks across the world, including from the countries of the Caucasus region, and facilitated their transfer to conflict zones. As a result of this online propaganda, tens of thousands of jihadists eventually converged in Syria and Iraq, among them several thousand fighters from Russia's North Caucasian republics, as well as from Georgia and Azerbaijan. This unprecedented mobilization demonstrated the transnational scope of jihadist networks, as for the first time large numbers of Caucasian militants became integrated into the structures of the global jihadist movement.

The tendency to exploit online platforms has persisted within Caucasian jihadist movements, which continue to adapt to technological change and integrate new digital tools into their activities. From early digital platforms and forums to contemporary use of social networks, encrypted messengers, and multimedia content, these groups have consistently sought to expand their reach, refine their propaganda, and maintain transnational connections. This ongoing digital engagement underscores the need for a closer scholarly examination of how jihadist actors in the Caucasus employ online resources, a topic that will be contextualized through the following review of the relevant literature.

Literature Review: Digital Technologies in Jihadism

The transformation of the Caucasus Emirate into the Islamic State's Caucasus Province illustrates how global and regional dynamics intersected through digital propaganda and mobilization. To situate this regional trajectory within

extensive academic debates, it is necessary to review the scholarship on jihadist use of digital technologies. Research on jihadist movements' use of digital technologies has expanded rapidly since the mid-2010s, tracing a shift from centralized web portals to decentralized, multi-platform ecosystems. Foundational overviews emphasize that the Islamic State's media operations accelerated long-standing trends toward professionalized production, rapid content diffusion, and platform hopping to evade moderation (Conway, 2017; Fisher, 2015). These works show how jihadist actors leveraged affordances across mainstream and fringe platforms - public broadcast channels for reach and encrypted/closed spaces for coordination - creating a resilient "swarm" that adapts to takedowns. This global scholarship establishes the conceptual and methodological toolkit for studying regional cases, including the Caucasus.

Methodologically, three strands dominate. First, hyperlink and network-analytic approaches map the structures that sustain circulation (Campana & Ducol, 2015). Second, content and framing analyses trace how narratives are tailored to specific audiences (e.g., victimhood/defense frames, religious duty, honor/revenge), identifying repertoire shifts across conflicts and platforms (Conway, 2017). Third, mixed and ethnographic "in-the-wild" approaches follow user practices across platform ecologies, often combining scraping, qualitative coding, and limited participatory observation (Pink et al., 2015; Boellstorff et al., 2012). Together, these approaches make visible both the macro-level network logics and the micro-processes of meaning-making that sustain mobilization online.

A second wave of studies focuses on migration to encrypted or smaller platforms as moderation tightened on major social media. Program on Extremism reports document Telegram-centered ecosystems, "fallback" to lesser-known services, and hybrid dissemination combining public teasers with gated distribution (Clifford & Powell, 2019; Clifford, 2021). These analyses argue that takedown pressure does not eliminate propaganda; it reconfigures it, producing more fragmented but persistent infrastructures. Policy-oriented reviews (e.g., Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2017) similarly underscore adiffusion toward niche platforms, mirrored by an evolution from broadcast to community-building and service provision (instructional content, fundraising, logistics).

Within this broader field, the Caucasus has a distinctive trajectory. Early on, the jihadist insurgency's online presence revolved around a small set of ideologically aligned portals that aggregated claims, fatwas, and communiqués. Campana and Ducol's (2015) mixed-methods mapping of Caucasus Emirate - affiliated websites remains a landmark: it links hyperlink structures to narrative frames, showing how a relatively lean web infrastructure amplified coherence across dispersed jamaats. Their analysis demonstrates that routing, cross-linking, and selective translation embedded the North Caucasus struggle within transnational jihadist storylines while preserving local registers tied to Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria. This combination of network topology and frame analysis continues to offer a model for studying later platform migrations.

Scholarship on the Caucasus emphasizes that jihadist online practices are embedded in transnational networks and cross-border mobilities. Moore (2015) traces "foreign bodies" and activist circuits connecting the North Caucasus with

theaters "beyond," highlighting how digital media lowers brokerage costs for diasporas, intermediaries, and sympathizers. Ratelle reads the insurgency's diffusion through a political-sociology lens, tying narrative resonance and opportunity structures to the movement of fighters and ideas; the resulting picture links on-the-ground dynamics to online articulation and dissemination (Campana & Ratelle, 2014; Ratelle, 2017). An International Crisis Group report (2016) adds that the Syria war rechanneled North Caucasian networks outward, with digital ecosystems repurposed for recruitment, logistics, and identity work aligned to the "caliphate" project - an outward turn that redefined the region's digital footprints.

After 2014-2016, platform transitions intensified. Comparative work on the Islamic State influence operations helps explain Caucasus-linked dynamics: Klausen (2015) shows that social-network structures among foreign fighters enable rapid diffusion; Fisher (2015) describes "swarmcasting," where redundancy and small-platform pivots frustrate takedowns. Applied to the Caucasus, this suggests that once central nodes (e.g., marquee portals) faced suppression, diaspora-linked channels and Telegram clusters assumed key roles, mixing regional languages with Russian and Arabic to sustain reach. Subsequent policy and academic reports chronicle how moderation and law-enforcement pressure scattered communities across encrypted apps and cloud hosts, where operational content coexists with commemorative and identity-affirming media (Clifford, 2021; Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2017).

A newer literature connects the Russia - Ukraine war to extremist online ecosystems. Although not Caucasus-exclusive, analyses from 2022-2023 note that the war catalyzed narrative competition and realignment across violent extremist milieus, with messaging that blends nationalist and jihadist idioms and repurposes older frames (revenge, defensive jihad, anti-imperial liberation) for a new theater (Program on Extremism, 2022; Souleimanov & Laryš, 2024). For Caucasus-linked actors, this environment appears to have reopened pathways for coalition-building and brand repositioning, with digital media used to bridge ideological divides, fundraise, and mobilize volunteers. While systematic, peer-reviewed studies specific to North Caucasian online mobilization in the Ukraine context remain limited, early scholarship underscores the need to revisit platform ecologies, multilingual messaging, and cross-movement brokerage since 2022.

Across methods, digital ethnography is increasingly prominent for studying jihadist media "in motion." Pink et al. (2015) and Boellstorff et al. (2012) supply practical and ethical guidance for following content and communities across platforms, which is crucial when formal APIs or archives are partial. These approaches complement network and content analysis by capturing micro-practices - how moderators gatekeep Telegram channels, how diaspora admins translate or contextualize claims, or how users coordinate mirror sharing to evade link rot. For the Caucasus, combining a) historical baselines from the website-centric period (Campana & Ducol, 2015), b) present-day tracing of encrypted and small-platform practices, and c) frame analysis keyed to regional languages offers the best path to cumulative knowledge.

Finally, there is a policy-facing stream on moderation and governance. Clifford (2021) documents U.S. platform policy evolution and enforcement gaps;

complementary practitioner briefs outline the migration to smaller platforms and the "de-web" (e.g., link shorteners, paste sites, distributed file hosting). For scholars of the Caucasus, these insights matter empirically (they shape what is observable) and normatively (they raise ethics issues around data retention, researcher safety, and inadvertent amplification). A careful protocol-minimizing redistribution of live extremist content, using vetted archives where possible, and documenting chain-of-custody for datasets - aligns the field's ethical standards with the region's sensitivities.

In sum, the literature indicates that: jihadist communication infrastructures are adaptive, modular, and transnational; in the North Caucasus, early website-centric ecosystems knitted local insurgent narratives into broader jihadist frames; after 2014-2016, moderation pressures pushed activity toward encrypted and niche platforms sustained by diasporic intermediaries; and since 2022, the Ukraine war has created new narrative opportunities and alliances that warrant renewed, region-specific inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of jihadist movements in the Caucasus requires a theoretical framework that situates online practices within scholarly debates about mobilization, identity, and transnational connectivity. In this study, three interrelated perspectives guide the interpretation of the empirical material: digital ethnography as an epistemological lens, framing theory from social movement studies, and the concept of transnationalism. Together, they provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing how jihadist actors employ digital technologies to construct meaning, build communities, and link local struggles with global jihadist narratives.

First, digital ethnography is understood not merely as a methodological tool but also as a theoretical stance (Pink et al., 2015; Boellstorff et al., 2012). It emphasizes that online environments are not secondary or artificial extensions of "real" life but integral social spaces where identities are performed, alliances are forged, and political discourses evolve. From this perspective, Telegram channels, YouTube videos, Facebook pages, and VKontakte groups are treated as ethnographic "fields" in which insurgent cultures and practices emerge. This aligns with constructivist views of identity formation, where digital interaction is a constitutive element of social and political realities.

Second, framing theory (Snow & Benford, 1988; Tarrow, 2011) provides a lens for interpreting the discursive strategies of jihadist actors. Frames function as interpretive packages that highlight grievances, justify violence, and mobilize support. Online jihadist communities adapt global jihadist frames - such as defensive jihad, martyrdom, and anti-imperial resistance - to local contexts in the Caucasus. Through translation, selective appropriation, and narrative innovation, these frames resonate with local audiences while maintaining transnational relevance. Digital platforms enhance this process by enabling the rapid circulation and modification of frames across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Third, the concept of transnationalism (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Faist, 2000) highlights how jihadist insurgencies transcend territorial

boundaries through digital communication. Caucasus-linked actors use online media to connect with diasporic communities, foreign fighters, and ideological allies in the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. Transnationalism elucidates the simultaneity of local and global orientations: although the discourse remains anchored in grievances specific to Russia's North Caucasus republics - Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria - as well as in the wider South Caucasian context of Georgia and Azerbaijan, it is simultaneously situated within a global jihadist framework that legitimizes and amplifies these narratives. In this sense, digital platforms act as infrastructures of transnational jihadist solidarity, lowering the costs of coordination and expanding the reach of insurgent identities.

By integrating digital ethnography, framing theory, and transnationalism, this framework makes it possible to analyze jihadist online activities in the Caucasus not only as propaganda or communication tactics, but as cultural and political practices embedded in global networks of meaning. Digital ethnography grounds the analysis in everyday online practices; framing theory illuminates the narrative strategies through which movements mobilize; and transnationalism situates these dynamics within broader flows of people, ideas, and resources. This multi-dimensional approach strengthens the explanatory power of the study and ensures that the empirical findings contribute to ongoing theoretical debates in the fields of terrorism studies, social movement research, and digital culture.

Methodology

This research employs digital ethnography as the central methodological framework for examining the online activities of jihadist movements in the Caucasus. Digital ethnography extends the principles of classical ethnography into digital environments, treating online platforms as field sites where communities interact, exchange meanings, and construct identities (Pink et al., 2015; Boellstorff et al., 2012). Unlike purely quantitative or content-based approaches, it emphasizes immersion, contextual interpretation, and sensitivity to the cultural logics that shape digital practices.

In this study, the digital fieldwork focuses on four main platforms where Caucasus-related jihadist content has circulated: Telegram - currently the dominant platform for communication, propaganda dissemination, and community-building, including both open channels and closed groups (Bloom, Tiflati, & Horgan, 2019); YouTube - used historically for video propaganda, commemorative materials, and multilingual outreach (Conway & McInerney, 2008); Facebook - relevant for diasporic networks, where sympathizers and intermediaries reframe or share content; VKontakte (VK) - important in the Russian-language digital sphere, particularly in earlier phases of jihadist mobilization (Müller, Harrendorf, & Mischler, 2022).

The methodology involves systematic observation of these spaces over a defined research period, documenting the modes of content circulation, the use of language (Russian, local Caucasian languages, Arabic, English), and the interaction patterns between users. In line with ethnographic principles, the

focus is not only on what content is shared but also on how it is contextualized, translated, and reinterpreted across communities.

To ensure analytical rigor, the digital ethnographic approach is combined with elements of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and frame analysis (Snow & Benford, 1988). Thematic analysis allows the identification of recurring motifs and narratives across digital platforms, while frame analysis situates these narratives within far-reaching political and religious discourses. Together, these complementary tools strengthen the interpretive depth of the ethnographic fieldwork.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, ethical considerations are paramount. The research is observational and archival, avoiding direct interaction with jihadist actors and minimizing risks of amplification. All data are handled in compliance with ethical research standards, ensuring anonymity of non-public participants and avoiding redistribution of extremist materials.

Findings and Discussion

The empirical evidence from digital ethnography demonstrates that Caucasian jihadist movements have strategically employed online platforms for propaganda, recruitment, and mobilization since the early 2000s. Initially, these groups relied heavily on websites as the primary medium for disseminating ideological materials. Such content was multilingual and multi-format, comprising religious sermons, battlefield footage, manifestos, and even memes. These early digital strategies combined theological justification with political grievance, framing jihad simultaneously as an act of faith and resistance against Russian state authority (Kimmage, 2010; Moore & Tumelty, 2008).

With the rise of social media across the post-Soviet sphere, jihadist actors expanded their presence and began to establish what may be described as Digital Jihadist Jamaats - virtual communities facilitating interaction, radicalization, and recruitment. Especially after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Facebook, VKontakte, and later Telegram became central hubs for jihadist communication. These communities encouraged transitions from passive support to active engagement and served as spaces for circulating highly visual propaganda, including martyrdom videos and stylized images designed to resonate with younger audiences (Corman, Trethewey, & Goodall, 2008; Weimann, 2015; Winter, 2015). Localized content in Russian and Caucasian languages further strengthened accessibility and resonance.

A significant component of jihadist digital activity relevant to the Caucasus was the production and dissemination of Russian-language content by the Islamic State's official media structures, in which Caucasian jihadists played a leading role. Beginning in 2015, the Furat Media Center emerged as the primary IS outlet targeting audiences across the post-Soviet space. Operating as part of the global Islamic State media network, Furat produced video statements, interviews, and battlefield reports in Russian and occasionally in North Caucasian languages. The center functioned both as a translation hub for materials originating from Arabic and as a platform for original content generated by Russian-speaking fighters from Russia and other states of the former USSR. Its messaging framed the conflict in Syria and Iraq as a

continuation of the Caucasian jihad and invoked narratives of revenge, martyrdom, and resistance against "apostate" governments within Russia and the post-Soviet space.

Notably, Furat Media also released video materials in Georgian with Russian subtitles, directly addressing Georgian Muslims. In one of these videos, Georgian nationals who had joined the Islamic State called upon their compatriots to join them in Syria, threatened "unbelievers," and proclaimed that the Islamic State would eventually come to Georgia (DFWatch, 2015). This production marked a significant attempt to expand jihadist propaganda beyond the North Caucasus into the South Caucasian context, illustrating IS's effort to adapt its outreach linguistically and culturally to new target audiences. The inclusion of Georgian-language content alongside Russian underscores the media center's strategic intent to construct a trans-Caucasian jihadist narrative within the broader ideological and territorial project of the so-called caliphate.

Complementing Furat was the Islamic State's Al-Hayat Media Center, which published Russian-language online magazines such as *Istok* and *Rumiyah*. These periodicals provided ideological commentary, operational instructions, and calls for recruitment explicitly directed at Russian-speaking Muslims. *Istok*, first released in 2015, focused on the moral and religious justification of jihad and included testimonies from North Caucasian fighters. Later issues of *Rumiyah* continued this trend, featuring articles and visual materials tailored to a post-Soviet readership. Both publications propagated a transnational vision of jihad that united fighters from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds under a shared digital identity.

The distribution of this propaganda was amplified by a wide ecosystem of unofficial channels and sympathizer networks. Dozens of Telegram groups and channels, WhatsApp groups, Facebook and VKontakte pages and even Instagram and Twitter accounts systematically reposted, mirrored, or adapted Furat and Al-Hayat materials for local audiences. These accounts often localized the content further - adding subtitles, commentary, or symbolic imagery referencing the Caucasus or Central Asia. This dissemination demonstrates how jihadist media adapted across multiple platforms and audiences, maintaining cohesion through shared narratives and imagery.

Between 2015 and 2019, Georgian-language jihadist media activity intensified, reflecting a localized adaptation of the Islamic State's global digital strategy. During this period, several propaganda websites were created on the WordPress platform, accompanied by parallel dissemination of materials through Telegram channels, Facebook and VKontakte pages and groups, and WhatsApp groups. The most active among these was the Georgian Digital Jihadist group known as *Bushra*, which specialized in translating official Islamic State propaganda - including online magazines, fatwas, and media and analytical articles - into Georgian. The group's publications repeatedly called on Georgian Muslims to join jihad, portraying participation as a religious duty and condemning local moderate Muslim leaders as "traitors of Islam."Beyond translation, *Bushra* engaged in the creation of original Georgian-language ideological materials. It produced digital text files presented as the first Georgian online jihadist book, titled *"The Honor of Jihad and the Mujahideen."* The group also attempted to circulate audio lessons delivered by a Georgian national and prominent Islamic

State figure in Syria, whose recordings combined doctrinal justification with personal appeals for mobilization. These activities demonstrated a clear attempt to construct a distinct Georgian jihadist media sphere aligned with the ideological and operational framework of the Islamic State. These findings exemplify how framing processes, digital ethnographic interactions, and transnational linkages converge within localized online milieus.

The 2015–2019 Georgian-language propaganda ecosystem thus represents a peripheral yet revealing case of the Digital Jihadist Jamaat in action: a decentralized online community that replicated the communicative and ideological functions of jihadist networks through local linguistic and cultural forms. By embedding global jihadist narratives within the Georgian language and digital context, these actors sought to cultivate a sense of belonging and religious legitimacy among potential sympathizers in the South Caucasus.

The analysis of these Russian and Caucasian-language media outlets demonstrates how the Islamic State successfully operationalized digital affordances to sustain propaganda circulation across multiple layers of the online ecosystem - from official production hubs to user-driven retransmission networks. This process not only reinforced transnational linkages among jihadist actors but also entrenched the integration of Caucasian fighters and sympathizers within the broader global jihadist movement.

Caucasian jihadist recruiters deliberately blurred the line between propaganda and mobilization. Public platforms acted as entry points, after which trusted individuals were migrated into secure messaging applications such as Telegram, Signal, and WhatsApp. These private spaces minimized surveillance risks and enabled planning for offline activities, including travel to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq (Farwell, 2014; Klausen, 2015). Recruits were often encouraged to bring family members, reflecting the communal dimension of jihadist participation (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2020).

The sophistication of jihadist digital adaptation extended beyond messaging to encompass security infrastructure. The effectiveness of these strategies was reinforced by global jihadist resources. In 2015, the Islamic State circulated a 34-page operational security (OPSEC) guide that instructed followers on how to evade surveillance and evaluated communication tools by their relative security. According to this manual, RedPhone and Signal were classified as the most secure applications, Telegram, Wickr, Threema, and Surespot as less secure, and platforms such as WeChat, WhatsApp, Hike, Viber, and Imo.im as “unsecure” (Brantly, Collins, & Hoffman, 2017; Greenberg, 2015; Pagliery, 2015; Security Affairs, 2015). This classification illustrates the extent to which Caucasian militants, like their global counterparts, adapted their digital practices in line with international jihadist expertise, thereby ensuring continuity of communication even under heightened security pressures.

The effectiveness of these recruitment strategies is underscored by the substantial flow of foreign fighters from the Russia’s North Caucasus Republics, Georgia and Azerbaijan to Middle Eastern conflict zones during the Syrian civil war. Between June 2014 and December 2015, approximately 30,000 foreign fighters from 100 different countries joined the terrorist organization Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (Schmid & Tinnes, 2015, p. 3). During the entire period from 2012 to 2017, an estimated 3,000-5,000 North

Caucasians (Ratelle, 2018), 900 citizens of Azerbaijan (MeydanTV, 2017), and more than 100 citizens of Georgia (Coffey, 2015) became members of jihadist ranks in Syria and Iraq. Fighters who traveled to Syria became active producers of propaganda and, in many cases, immediate agents of remote mobilization. Once embedded in the conflict zone, foreign fighters routinely used social media to broadcast "example" narratives, to publicize travel routes from the Caucasus region and Europe, and to coordinate logistical matters (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2020; Weimann, 2015). Online jihadist propaganda had a notable impact on Georgian citizens, targeting both ethnic Georgian Muslims and minority groups such as Kists (Chechens) and Azerbaijanis, and thereby drawing recruits from diverse communities into transnational networks of fighters. Open-source estimates indicate that approximately 45 Georgian nationals were killed in combat, while the family members of several fighters were subsequently detained in camps in Syria and in detention facilities and prisons in Iraq; moreover, some Georgian fighters themselves may currently be held in prisons in Syria.

Caucasus jihadist formations used online platforms for a broader set of operational tasks than mere identification of sympathizers. Alongside exhortatory videos and threatening statements, these networks established affiliate channels, exchanged tactical and ideological content across borders, harvested publicly available information (including personnel data), monitored opponents and security forces (Kviris Palitra, 2016), and encouraged supporters to carry out attacks in home countries (Klausen, 2015; Winter, 2015). In several documented instances involving Georgian nationals, IS members reportedly gathered demographic and professional information about law-enforcement and military personnel within closed groups and communicated instructions aimed at facilitating assassinations and attacks on symbolic targets, such as churches (TV Imedi, 2020). These patterns underscore how the virtual expansion of jihadist networks translated directly into concrete local security threats, closing the loop from online propaganda to targeted offline violence. The empirical evidence also reveals that jihadist actors sought to gather intelligence for potential terrorist attacks, including cases documented in Georgia where individuals associated with the Islamic State were reportedly instructed to collect information on prospective targets (Palitra News, 2018). Such intelligence-gathering activities demonstrate how digital channels were not merely tools of ideological dissemination but also of operational planning.

Online platforms further functioned as spaces of instructional propaganda. Beyond distributing ideological education, jihadist groups circulated "how-to" materials that provided step-by-step guidance on tactics, including the construction of improvised explosive devices, methods for operational security, and instructions for small-scale attacks. Importantly, much of this material was translated into Russian and other local languages, broadening accessibility to audiences across the Caucasus (Weimann, 2015; Milton, 2016). This trend underscores the pedagogical role of digital media in transforming sympathizers into potential operatives.

Another critical function of jihadist virtual ecosystems was fundraising and resource mobilization. Terrorist organizations have increasingly turned to modern financial technologies, particularly the use of cryptocurrencies, to obscure funding streams and sustain their activities (Farrell & Schneier, 2018;

Gold, 2019). Reports suggest that pro-IS networks experimented with Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies to collect donations, circumvent international sanctions, and finance logistical operations. These methods reflect an ongoing effort to exploit innovations in financial technology to maintain organizational resilience.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, North Caucasian Islamist and jihadist groups have intensified their online activities, relying predominantly on Telegram channels to host discussions, disseminate analytical materials and video content, and mobilize financial resources through cryptocurrencies. Supported by Caucasian media activists, these initiatives reflect a trend of convergence between Islamist and nationalist agendas. At the same time, the Caucasus Emirate - which had been weakened and lost much of its influence in the North Caucasus in earlier years - has shown renewed visibility in the wake of the war, adapting to new regional dynamics. New groups of media activists, often led by figures with formal Islamic education, have also emerged to advocate both independence from the Russian Federation and the establishment of Sharia-based governance. Among them, the Chechen opposition Islamist group NIYSO has been particularly active, using social networks to disseminate information from the region, organize lectures, and foster debate on de-occupation and Islamic political visions (OC Media, 2025; Besacenter, 2025).

Finally, jihadist groups in the Caucasus as well as globally have demonstrated growing sophistication in the exploitation of emerging digital tools. This includes the deployment of bots, automated accounts, and pseudo-news websites to amplify propaganda and manufacture perceptions of widespread support (Conway, 2017). More recently, such practices have expanded into the use of artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies to generate or manipulate content, increasing the persuasive power of propaganda and complicating efforts at verification (Buchanan et al., 2021). These technological adaptations illustrate the ability of jihadist networks to rapidly adjust to changing platform environments, leveraging innovation to sustain visibility and influence despite intensified countermeasures.

Conclusion

The experience of the Caucasus illustrates how jihadist movements have systematically exploited digital technologies to mobilize supporters, disseminate propaganda, and sustain transnational networks. From early websites in the 2000s to the use of social media and protected messaging applications, these groups adapted to shifting technological infrastructures and developed online ecosystems where ideological messaging increasingly intersected with logistical coordination and operational planning.

Addressing the central research question - how digital technologies transform Caucasian jihadist movements into transnational ideological communities - the study confirms that digital platforms serve not merely as communication tools, but as constitutive environments where collective identities, ideological narratives, and mobilizing structures are produced and maintained.

To conceptualize this transformation, the study introduced the notion of the Digital Jihadist Jamaat**.** Unlike generic descriptions of online radical milieus,

this concept highlights the continuity between the traditional idea of the jamaat and its digital manifestation. These online communities function simultaneously as spaces of ideological socialization and transitional arenas that enable movement from virtual engagement to offline participation. The Digital Jihadist Jamaat thus captures the specifically jihadist adaptation of communal structures to the digital sphere , demonstrating how digital spaces reproduce the social and religious logic of physical communities.

The findings support the hypothesis that digital technologies fundamentally reshape the organization, ideology, and communication of Caucasian jihadist movements. They enable peripheral actors to integrate into global jihadist networks, acting as producers - not merely consumers - of transnational propaganda, strategy, and ideological innovation.

The analysis also underscores the value of integrating digital ethnography**,** framing theory**,** and transnationalism**.** Digital ethnography situates online platforms as lived environments of identity and practice; framing theory explains how global jihadist narratives are localized and made resonant in the Caucasus; and transnationalism reveals how regional grievances are embedded in global currents of jihadist discourse. Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional account of how digital technologies sustain insurgent resilience and connectivity.

By foregrounding the Caucasus as both a regional and transnational arena of digital jihadism, this study contributes to existing debates in terrorism studies and social movement research. It demonstrates that peripheral regions are not passive recipients of global jihadist trends but active producers of digital innovation and mobilization strategies. The concept of the Digital Jihadist Jamaat offers a new analytical tool for future research, enabling more precise examination of how militant groups adapt radical concepts, social structures, and mobilization strategies to the technological affordances of the digital age.

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