



## Pseudolegal Interpretations and Religious Violence: A Case Study of ISIS and Boko Haram's Extremist Justifications

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### Abstract

Religious extremism presents a major challenge to contemporary legal, political, and religious institutions, particularly when violent groups invoke religious law to legitimize violence and political authority. Although previous studies have examined radicalization, terrorism, and religious extremism, limited research has comparatively explored how extremist organizations construct legal legitimacy through pseudolegal interpretations of Islamic law. This study aims to analyze how ISIS and Boko Haram employ pseudolegal reasoning to justify violence, establish alternative governance systems, and claim religious authority. Using a comparative doctrinal-normative legal approach, the study examines extremist legal narratives through the lenses of Legal Pluralism Theory and Radicalization Theory. The analysis is based on organizational publications, ideological statements, and relevant scholarly literature on Islamic law and extremism. The findings reveal that both ISIS and Boko Haram selectively reinterpret Islamic legal concepts, particularly *takfir*, to legitimize excommunication, violence, and coercive governance. *Takfir* functions as a central pseudolegal mechanism through which political opposition is transformed into a religious offense, enabling violence against perceived opponents. The study further demonstrates that these interpretations substantially diverge from mainstream Islamic jurisprudence by disregarding contextual interpretation, scholarly consensus, proportionality, public welfare (*maslahah*), and the protection of human dignity. The novelty of this study lies in introducing pseudolegal interpretation as a comparative framework linking legal pluralism, radicalization, and extremist governance. However, the study is limited to documentary and textual sources and does not incorporate field-based empirical evidence.

### Keywords:

Pseudolegal Interpretation; Islamic Jurisprudence; Legal Pluralism; Takfir

### 1. Introduction

Religious extremism remains one of the most significant challenges confronting contemporary global society because it intersects with issues of security, law, religion, governance, and human rights (Haghani et al., 2022; Abbas & Xu, 2024). In recent years, extremist movements have increasingly employed religious narratives not only to justify violence but also to construct alternative systems of authority that challenge state institutions and established legal orders.



Contemporary studies demonstrate that radical organizations often exploit religious doctrines and legal concepts to legitimize political objectives, recruit followers, and maintain social control over affected populations (Sawalha, 2017; Obamamoye, 2018; Abdullah et al., 2025; Abduljabbar et al., 2025). Within this context, the manipulation of Islamic legal discourse has become a major concern among scholars of law, religion, and security studies. Rather than engaging with Islamic jurisprudence through established methodological principles, extremist groups frequently reinterpret legal doctrines selectively to produce ideological narratives that support violence and exclusion. This phenomenon raises important questions regarding the relationship between Islamic law, legal authority, and violent extremism in contemporary Muslim societies.

Among the most prominent examples of such movements are the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Boko Haram. Although emerging from different geographical and political contexts, both organizations have utilized religious legal rhetoric to justify armed violence, delegitimize political opponents, and establish parallel governance structures. ISIS attempted to institutionalize a self-declared Caliphate through the establishment of courts, taxation systems, religious police, and administrative institutions, while Boko Haram developed localized systems of authority based on rigid interpretations of religious doctrine. Recent studies indicate that these groups rely heavily on selective interpretations of Islamic legal concepts, particularly *takfīr*, jihad, and the implementation of *hudūd* punishments, to construct narratives of legitimacy and religious obligation (Vicente & Vilela, 2022; Jalili et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2025). Such interpretations have contributed to widespread violence against civilians, religious minorities, and even fellow Muslims who reject extremist ideologies (Adelaja & George, 2019; Hunt et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding how these groups manipulate Islamic legal discourse remains crucial for both academic scholarship and counter-extremism efforts.

Recent scholarship has increasingly explored legal pluralism and its relevance to contemporary Islamic governance and authority. Studies by Azizah and Shalihah (2025), Zuhdi et al. (2025), and Irawan et al. (2025) demonstrate that multiple legal systems frequently coexist within Muslim societies, creating complex interactions between state law, religious norms, and customary practices. However, existing studies largely focus on legal pluralism in contexts of governance, multiculturalism, financial regulation, or social conflict resolution. Limited attention has been devoted to examining how violent extremist organizations construct pseudolegal systems that imitate Islamic legal institutions while fundamentally departing from recognized jurisprudential principles. Similarly, research on radicalization has primarily concentrated on socio-economic conditions, psychological factors, digital propaganda, and political grievances (Bélanger et al., 2023; Abdullah et al., 2025). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook the specific legal mechanisms through which extremist groups manufacture religious legitimacy. Therefore, a significant research gap remains regarding the relationship between pseudolegal reasoning, Islamic legal discourse, and the legitimization of extremist violence.

This study seeks to address that gap by critically examining how ISIS and Boko Haram employ pseudolegal interpretations of Islamic law to justify violence and establish alternative systems of governance. Specifically, this research investigates the legal concepts, theological



arguments, and jurisprudential claims used by these groups to construct authority and legitimize coercive practices. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) How do ISIS and Boko Haram utilize pseudolegal interpretations of Islamic law to justify violence and political domination? and (2) To what extent do these interpretations diverge from mainstream Islamic jurisprudence and established legal methodologies? Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of legal pluralism and radicalization studies, the research analyses extremist legal narratives through a doctrinal and qualitative approach. The study utilizes primary materials, including propaganda publications, ideological statements, and legal declarations, alongside contemporary scholarly literature concerning Islamic law, extremism, and governance.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of legal pluralism theory with the analysis of extremist legal narratives, enabling a deeper understanding of how violent organizations construct alternative legal orders under the guise of religious legitimacy. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on security threats or ideological radicalization, this research emphasizes the legal dimension of extremist discourse and examines how Islamic legal terminology is transformed into a tool of political violence. By comparing ISIS and Boko Haram, the study highlights both similarities and differences in their approaches to pseudolegal governance and religious authority. The findings contribute to contemporary debates on terrorism, Islamic jurisprudence, and legal legitimacy by demonstrating that extremist legal claims are not grounded in authentic Islamic legal traditions but rather represent ideological distortions designed to justify coercion and domination. Accordingly, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to ongoing efforts aimed at developing effective counter-narratives, strengthening religious literacy, and promoting credible interpretations of Islamic law in the face of contemporary extremism.

## 2. Literature Review

The growing influence of violent extremist movements has encouraged scholars to examine not only the security dimensions of terrorism but also the legal and ideological mechanisms used to justify violence. Recent studies indicate that contemporary extremist organizations increasingly rely on religious narratives framed through legal language to construct legitimacy, mobilize supporters, and challenge existing state authority. Rather than presenting violence solely as a political strategy, groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram portray their actions as religious obligations supported by purported interpretations of Islamic law. This phenomenon has attracted significant attention within contemporary Islamic legal studies because it demonstrates how legal concepts can be manipulated to create alternative systems of authority that compete with both state law and mainstream religious institutions (Fahmy, 2020; Abdullah et al., 2025; Abduljabbar et al., 2025). Scholars have consequently shifted their focus from purely security-oriented explanations toward examining the interaction between legal discourse, religious authority, and radicalization processes.

Recent literature further suggests that extremist groups operate within environments characterized by legal pluralism, where multiple normative systems coexist and compete for legitimacy. Legal pluralism refers to the existence of different legal orders operating simultaneously within a society, including state law, customary law, and religious law. Contemporary research demonstrates that legal pluralism can provide opportunities for non-



state actors to construct alternative legal frameworks, particularly in regions affected by weak governance, social fragmentation, and political instability (Hunt et al., 2024; Azizah & Shalihah, 2025; Berebon, 2025; Zuhdi et al., 2025). In such contexts, extremist organizations frequently establish informal courts, enforcement mechanisms, and governance structures that mimic legitimate legal institutions. Although these systems employ religious terminology and symbols, their primary objective is often political domination rather than the realization of Islamic legal principles. Consequently, understanding how extremist actors exploit legal pluralism is essential for explaining the emergence and persistence of pseudolegal narratives within contemporary jihadist movements.

Another significant development in recent scholarship concerns the relationship between radicalization and ideological persuasion. Studies conducted in various Muslim-majority societies reveal that radicalization cannot be adequately explained through economic deprivation alone. Instead, ideological narratives, identity construction, and religious framing play crucial roles in influencing individuals' attitudes toward violence and extremism (Bélanger et al., 2023; Saada, 2023; Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020). Extremist organizations frequently simplify complex theological debates and present highly selective interpretations of religious texts as unquestionable truths. Through digital platforms, propaganda publications, and religious messaging, these groups create persuasive narratives that transform political grievances into religious obligations (Ladd & Goodwin, 2022). Research on counter-narratives similarly demonstrates that the effectiveness of extremist recruitment often depends on the ability to monopolize religious authority and suppress alternative interpretations of Islamic teachings (Bélanger et al., 2023; Muhdi et al., 2024; Bharati et al., 2024). These findings highlight the importance of examining the legal and theological dimensions of extremist discourse rather than focusing exclusively on socioeconomic factors.

This study adopts two complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is Legal Pluralism Theory, which explains how competing legal orders emerge and interact within the same social environment. According to contemporary legal pluralism scholarship, non-state actors may establish alternative normative systems when formal institutions are perceived as ineffective or illegitimate (Azizah & Shalihah, 2025; Berebon, 2025; Zuhdi et al., 2025). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how ISIS and Boko Haram constructed courts, enforcement mechanisms, and governance structures that claimed religious legitimacy while operating outside recognized legal institutions. The second framework is Radicalization Theory, which examines how ideological narratives facilitate the progression from religious identity formation to violent extremism. Recent studies emphasize that radicalization often occurs through the interaction of political grievances, social exclusion, and persuasive ideological messaging that legitimizes violence as a moral obligation (Bélanger et al., 2023; Gáspár et al., 2025). By combining these two frameworks, this study analyzes not only how extremist groups create pseudolegal systems but also why such systems can attract followers and sustain organizational authority.

Despite substantial scholarly attention to ISIS, Boko Haram, Islamic legal discourse, and radicalization, an important gap remains in the literature. Existing studies generally examine extremist ideology, terrorism, religious violence, or governance structures separately. Limited



research specifically investigates how pseudolegal reasoning functions as a mechanism connecting religious interpretation, legal legitimacy, and political violence within extremist organizations. Furthermore, recent scholarship on legal pluralism has rarely been integrated with contemporary radicalization studies to explain how alternative legal systems contribute to the normalization of violence. Therefore, this study offers an original contribution by combining Legal Pluralism Theory and Radicalization Theory to analyze the pseudolegal strategies employed by ISIS and Boko Haram. By examining how these groups selectively reinterpret Islamic legal concepts such as *takfir*, *jihad*, and *hudud* to justify violence and construct alternative authority structures, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between law, religion, and extremism. This theoretical integration contributes to contemporary debates on counter-extremism, Islamic legal studies, and the broader challenge of protecting religious discourse from ideological manipulation.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative doctrinal-normative legal research design combined with a comparative case study approach to examine how ISIS and Boko Haram utilize pseudolegal interpretations of Islamic law to justify violence and establish alternative systems of authority. A doctrinal legal approach is appropriate because the research focuses on the interpretation and application of legal concepts, rather than measuring social phenomena quantitatively. The comparative case study design allows for a systematic analysis of similarities and differences in the legal narratives, governance structures, and claims of religious legitimacy advanced by both organizations. The study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, Legal Pluralism Theory explains how alternative legal orders emerge and compete with state legal systems in contexts characterized by weak governance and contested authority (Azizah & Shalihah, 2025; Berebon, 2025; Zuhdi et al., 2025). Second, Radicalization Theory provides an analytical framework for understanding how ideological narratives and religious claims are used to legitimize violence, recruit supporters, and sustain extremist movements (Abdullah et al., 2025; Bélanger et al., 2023). The integration of these theories enables a comprehensive examination of the relationship between legal discourse, religious authority, and extremist violence.

The primary data consist of documentary sources produced by ISIS and Boko Haram, including official publications, ideological statements, speeches, sermons, and organizational declarations. Particular attention is given to ISIS publications such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, which contain detailed legal and theological arguments concerning governance, jihad, punishment, and religious authority. Secondary data were obtained from recent academic literature on Islamic jurisprudence, legal pluralism, radicalization, religious extremism, and counter-extremism studies published between 2023 and 2025. Data collection was conducted through document review and literature analysis. The selected materials were examined to identify recurring references to key Islamic legal concepts, including *takfir*, *jihad*, *hudud*, and claims of Islamic governance. These concepts were subsequently compared with contemporary scholarly interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence to evaluate the extent to which extremist groups reinterpret or distort established legal principles (Jalili et al., 2024; Abdullah et al., 2025).

Data analysis was conducted using doctrinal analysis and thematic analysis. The doctrinal analysis focused on evaluating the legal validity of the arguments advanced by ISIS and Boko Haram by comparing their interpretations with recognized principles of Islamic jurisprudence and contemporary legal scholarship. The thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns of pseudolegal reasoning, ideological justification, and alternative legal authority within the documentary sources (Ahmed et al., 2025). To enhance analytical reliability, findings were triangulated through cross-referencing organizational documents with peer-reviewed academic studies and contemporary research on extremism and Islamic law. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on documentary and textual sources and does not incorporate field-based empirical evidence or interviews with affected communities. Despite this limitation, the methodological approach provides a rigorous framework for understanding how extremist organizations weaponize legal discourse to construct legitimacy and justify violence.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Pseudolegal Construction of Religious Legitimacy by ISIS and Boko Haram

The analysis demonstrates that both ISIS and Boko Haram systematically employed pseudolegal interpretations of Islamic law to construct religious legitimacy for violence, political domination, and the establishment of alternative systems of authority. Although both organizations claimed to represent authentic Islamic governance, their legal arguments were largely based on selective readings of religious texts detached from the broader methodological traditions of Islamic jurisprudence. Rather than engaging with established principles of *usul al-fiqh* (Islamic legal methodology), scholarly consensus (*ijma'*), or contextual interpretation (*ijtihad*), these groups extracted specific scriptural passages and reinterpreted them to support predetermined ideological objectives. ISIS disseminated these narratives extensively through official publications such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, while Boko Haram relied more heavily on sermons, recorded speeches, local religious networks, and public declarations to communicate its ideological positions. In both cases, legal terminology was strategically employed to transform political violence into an apparently legitimate religious obligation. This process enabled the groups to portray their actions not as criminal or insurgent behavior but as the implementation of divine law. Such findings support contemporary scholarship suggesting that extremist organizations often construct alternative narratives of legitimacy by manipulating religious doctrines and legal concepts to challenge state authority and attract followers (Abdullah et al., 2025; Abduljabbar et al., 2025). Through this process, religious law ceased to function as a framework for justice and social order and instead became a political instrument designed to legitimize coercion, violence, and ideological control.

A central component of this pseudolegal framework was the extensive use of *takfir*, namely the practice of declaring other Muslims apostates. Within mainstream Islamic jurisprudence, accusations of apostasy are subject to strict evidentiary requirements and are generally treated with caution due to their severe legal and social consequences. However, ISIS and Boko Haram significantly expanded the scope of *takfir* by applying it not only to individuals who explicitly rejected Islamic beliefs but also to Muslims who disagreed with their ideological positions, participated in democratic institutions, cooperated with state authorities, or failed to support their movements. Through broad and often arbitrary accusations of unbelief, both organizations enlarged the category of legitimate targets beyond non-Muslims to include Muslim



governments, religious scholars, security personnel, traditional leaders, and ordinary civilians. This strategy effectively eliminated the distinction between theological disagreement and religious deviance, allowing extremist leaders to portray violence against fellow Muslims as legally and morally justified. The findings are consistent with recent studies showing that extremist movements frequently employ exclusionary interpretations of religious identity to establish rigid ideological boundaries and justify coercive action against perceived opponents (Abdullah et al., 2025; Bélanger et al., 2023). Furthermore, the use of *takfir* enabled both groups to monopolize religious authority by delegitimizing competing interpretations of Islam. Scholars, religious institutions, and community leaders who challenged extremist narratives were often labelled apostates or collaborators, thereby removing alternative sources of religious legitimacy. Consequently, theological disagreement was transformed into a legal basis for persecution, punishment, and violence, reinforcing the authority of extremist organizations over their followers and territories.

From the perspective of Radicalization Theory, the construction of pseudolegal legitimacy functioned as a powerful ideological mechanism that facilitated recruitment, organizational cohesion, and the normalization of violence. By reducing complex theological and jurisprudential debates into simplified binary categories of belief versus disbelief, righteousness versus corruption, and divine law versus human law, ISIS and Boko Haram created narratives that were easily understood and emotionally persuasive. Such narratives offered followers a clear sense of identity, purpose, and moral certainty while simultaneously delegitimizing alternative viewpoints. The legal language employed by these groups provided an appearance of objectivity and religious authenticity, making extremist doctrines appear grounded in sacred authority rather than political ideology. This process contributed significantly to radicalization by reframing acts of violence as expressions of religious devotion and moral responsibility. Recent research on extremist mobilization suggests that ideological narratives become particularly effective when they provide simple explanations for social grievances while presenting violence as a legitimate solution to perceived injustice (Bélanger et al., 2023; Saada, 2023). In the cases of ISIS and Boko Haram, pseudolegal interpretations fulfilled precisely this function. By presenting armed struggle, coercive governance, and the punishment of opponents as obligations mandated by Islamic law, both groups transformed legal discourse into a tool of ideological persuasion. Therefore, the findings indicate that pseudolegal reasoning was not merely a supplementary aspect of extremist ideology but a central mechanism through which violence was legitimized, authority was consolidated, and followers were mobilized. Rather than promoting the fundamental objectives of Islamic law—such as justice, human dignity, social welfare, and the protection of life—these interpretations served primarily to manufacture religious legitimacy for political domination and organized violence.

#### **4.2. Alternative Legal Orders and Political Domination**

The findings further reveal that pseudolegal interpretations employed by ISIS and Boko Haram were not confined to theological discourse or ideological propaganda but were institutionalized through the construction of alternative legal and governance systems. This finding is particularly significant because it demonstrates that extremist organizations seek not only to justify violence but also to establish competing sources of authority capable of challenging existing state institutions. Consistent with Legal Pluralism Theory, both organizations



attempted to create parallel normative orders that operated outside recognized legal frameworks while simultaneously claiming superior religious legitimacy (Azizah & Shalihah, 2025; Berebon, 2025; Zuhdi et al., 2025). Legal pluralism scholarship suggests that alternative legal systems often emerge when state institutions are perceived as ineffective, corrupt, or disconnected from local social realities. ISIS and Boko Haram exploited such conditions by presenting themselves as authentic enforcers of Islamic law capable of delivering justice, security, and moral order. However, the analysis indicates that these alternative legal systems were not primarily designed to achieve the objectives of Islamic jurisprudence, such as justice, welfare, and social harmony. Instead, they functioned as mechanisms through which extremist leaders consolidated authority, regulated social behavior, and justified coercive control over populations living under their influence. By appropriating the language of Islamic law and governance, both groups created the appearance of legal legitimacy while simultaneously undermining established legal institutions and replacing them with ideologically driven structures of domination.

Among the two organizations, ISIS developed the most sophisticated and institutionalized legal-administrative apparatus. Following the declaration of the so-called Caliphate in 2014, ISIS established a complex governance structure consisting of religious courts, taxation agencies, police units (*hisbah*), administrative departments, and judicial bodies that claimed to operate according to Islamic law. Publications such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* consistently portrayed these institutions as evidence of statehood and religious authenticity, emphasizing the organization's claim to represent a legitimate Islamic political order. The analysis of these materials indicates that legal institutions played a central role in ISIS's broader strategy of governance and territorial control. Judicial decisions, punishments, taxation policies, and public regulations were presented as manifestations of divine law rather than political authority. Nevertheless, a closer examination reveals significant departures from established principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Judicial procedures often lacked transparency, opportunities for legal defense, evidentiary safeguards, and independent review mechanisms traditionally recognized within Islamic legal traditions. Punishments were frequently implemented without adherence to procedural requirements or contextual considerations emphasized by mainstream scholars. Consequently, legal institutions functioned less as instruments of justice and more as mechanisms for enforcing obedience and suppressing dissent. Through the monopolization of legal authority, ISIS transformed governance into a system where ideological conformity became a prerequisite for legal protection and political participation. This finding supports contemporary studies suggesting that extremist movements frequently instrumentalize legal discourse to legitimize authoritarian governance while masking coercion behind claims of religious obligation (Abdullah et al., 2025; Abduljabbar et al., 2025). Thus, the legal structures established by ISIS should be understood not as genuine applications of Islamic law but as pseudolegal institutions designed to facilitate political domination and organizational survival.

Boko Haram adopted a less formalized yet similarly coercive approach to governance and legal authority. Unlike ISIS, which invested heavily in bureaucratic structures and state-building narratives, Boko Haram relied more extensively on local commanders, informal religious authorities, and decentralized mechanisms of social control. Despite these organizational differences, the group's use of Islamic legal rhetoric served comparable political purposes. Boko



Haram invoked concepts such as *sharia*, *jihad*, and *takfir* to justify punishments, compel obedience, and delegitimize both state institutions and alternative religious authorities. In territories under its influence, the organization exercised authority through fear, coercion, and selective enforcement of religious norms, often presenting such actions as the implementation of Islamic law. The findings indicate that legal terminology was strategically employed to transform acts of violence and repression into apparently lawful activities sanctioned by religion. Similar to ISIS, Boko Haram framed opposition to its authority as opposition to Islam itself, thereby narrowing the space for religious disagreement and political resistance. Recent comparative studies on radicalization and extremism suggest that despite variations in organizational structure, extremist groups commonly seek to replace legitimate legal authority with ideologically controlled governance systems that centralize power and suppress competing interpretations of religion (Abdullah et al., 2025; Bélanger et al., 2023). Viewed through the lens of Legal Pluralism Theory, the governance models developed by ISIS and Boko Haram illustrate how alternative legal orders can emerge as instruments of political contestation and ideological domination rather than mechanisms of justice.

The findings therefore demonstrate that pseudolegal governance performs two interconnected functions. First, it creates an appearance of legality and religious legitimacy that enhances organizational credibility among supporters. Second, it facilitates political domination by transforming coercive practices, violence, and social control into ostensibly lawful actions grounded in a distorted interpretation of Islamic law. Consequently, the construction of alternative legal orders represents one of the most important mechanisms through which extremist organizations maintain authority and sustain their broader ideological projects.

### 4.3. Distortion of Islamic Jurisprudence and Legal Methodology

The comparative analysis reveals that the legal narratives advanced by ISIS and Boko Haram substantially diverge from mainstream Islamic jurisprudence, both in terms of substantive legal principles and methodological approaches to interpretation. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) has historically developed through a rigorous process involving textual interpretation, contextual analysis, juristic reasoning (*ijtihad*), scholarly consensus (*ijma'*), and the pursuit of public welfare (*maslahah*). These methodological safeguards are designed to ensure that legal rulings remain consistent with the broader objectives of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*), including the protection of life, religion, intellect, property, and human dignity. However, the documentary evidence examined in this study demonstrates that both ISIS and Boko Haram selectively extracted scriptural passages while disregarding the broader interpretive traditions that govern Islamic legal reasoning. Rather than approaching religious texts through established jurisprudential methods, both groups employed a literalist and decontextualized reading strategy aimed at validating predetermined ideological objectives. This finding supports recent scholarship arguing that extremist movements frequently transform religious texts into political instruments by removing them from their historical, social, and legal contexts (Abduljabbar et al., 2025; Jalili et al., 2024). Consequently, the legal claims advanced by ISIS and Boko Haram cannot be understood as alternative schools of Islamic jurisprudence but rather as pseudolegal constructions that imitate legal reasoning while lacking methodological legitimacy. Their use of legal terminology creates an appearance of religious authenticity, yet closer examination



reveals a significant departure from the interpretive standards recognized by mainstream Islamic scholarship.

One of the clearest examples of this distortion concerns the application of takfir, which became the central mechanism through which both organizations legitimized violence against fellow Muslims. Classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship generally regards accusations of apostasy as an extremely serious matter requiring strict evidentiary standards, procedural safeguards, and judicial scrutiny. The principle reflects a broader concern within Islamic law to prevent wrongful accusations and preserve social cohesion within the Muslim community. In contrast, ISIS and Boko Haram expanded the scope of takfir far beyond traditional jurisprudential limits by declaring governments, religious scholars, security personnel, community leaders, and ordinary Muslims who disagreed with their ideology to be apostates. Through this expansive interpretation, theological disagreement was transformed into a legal justification for excommunication, punishment, and ultimately violence. The findings indicate that this practice served not merely as a theological argument but as a strategic tool for constructing ideological boundaries between supporters and opponents. From the perspective of Radicalization Theory, such binary categorizations simplify complex religious realities into rigid distinctions between believers and unbelievers, thereby facilitating recruitment, group cohesion, and moral justification for violence (Bandyopadhyay & Sandler, 2023; Abdullah et al., 2025). Furthermore, the groups' interpretations conflict with contemporary Islamic legal scholarship emphasizing moderation, justice, proportionality, and the preservation of human dignity as fundamental principles of legal reasoning (Jalili et al., 2024; Saada, 2023). By lowering the threshold for accusations of unbelief, ISIS and Boko Haram effectively removed many of the legal and ethical barriers that traditionally restrict the use of force within Islamic jurisprudence.

The distortion extends beyond takfir to the interpretation of jihad, hudud punishments, and broader questions of governance and legal authority. Mainstream Islamic legal traditions recognize that the implementation of criminal punishments and the authorization of armed conflict are subject to strict procedural, ethical, and institutional requirements. Jurists have historically emphasized considerations such as proportionality, due process, public interest, competent authority, and the avoidance of harm. However, the evidence analyzed in this study indicates that ISIS and Boko Haram largely ignored these requirements and instead reframed legal concepts as instruments for enforcing ideological conformity and consolidating political power. References to jihad were frequently detached from their broader jurisprudential context and presented as unconditional obligations to support organizational objectives, while hudud punishments were implemented without the procedural safeguards recognized in Islamic legal traditions. This pattern reflects what recent scholarship describes as the politicization of religious law, whereby legal discourse is weaponized to legitimize coercive governance and violence rather than promote justice and social welfare (Abduljabbar et al., 2025; Abdullah et al., 2025). From the perspective of Legal Pluralism Theory, these findings further demonstrate that the alternative legal orders established by ISIS and Boko Haram were not merely competing legal systems but ideologically constructed frameworks designed to monopolize authority and suppress dissent. Therefore, the study concludes that the legal narratives employed by both organizations represent profound distortions of Islamic jurisprudence. Their primary function



was not the implementation of Islamic law as understood within mainstream scholarship but the manufacture of religious legitimacy for political domination, coercive governance, and systematic violence. Such findings reinforce the argument that effective counter-extremism strategies must address not only security concerns but also the pseudolegal narratives through which extremist organizations seek to justify their actions and maintain authority.

#### **4.4. Comparative Analysis of ISIS and Boko Haram**

The comparative analysis reveals that although ISIS and Boko Haram emerged in different geopolitical, historical, and socio-cultural contexts, both organizations relied upon remarkably similar pseudolegal foundations to legitimize violence and establish claims of religious authority. The findings indicate that each group constructed its legitimacy through the selective appropriation of Islamic legal concepts, particularly takfir, jihad, and the implementation of Islamic governance. These concepts were detached from their broader jurisprudential context and reframed as instruments for political domination and ideological mobilization. Nevertheless, important differences can be observed in the organizational structures through which these legal narratives were institutionalized. ISIS pursued a highly centralized and bureaucratic model of governance, particularly following the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014. Through formal institutions, administrative agencies, courts, religious police (*hisbah*), taxation systems, and extensive propaganda networks, ISIS sought to portray itself as a functioning Islamic state governed by religious law. Publications such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* played a crucial role in disseminating legal arguments designed to legitimize the organization's authority and attract supporters across national boundaries. Boko Haram, in contrast, operated through a more decentralized and localized structure. Although the group also invoked Islamic legal terminology to justify violence and reject state authority, it relied more heavily on local commanders, informal religious authority, and regional socio-political grievances. Recent comparative studies of radical movements suggest that organizational differences often reflect local political conditions rather than fundamental ideological distinctions (Abdullah et al., 2025; Abduljabbar et al., 2025). Consequently, while ISIS emphasized institutional state-building and transnational expansion, Boko Haram focused primarily on localized insurgency and territorial control within the Nigerian context.

Despite these structural differences, the findings demonstrate significant convergence in the legal and ideological mechanisms employed by both organizations. First, both groups systematically expanded the doctrine of takfir to include a broad range of perceived opponents, including state officials, religious scholars, security personnel, and ordinary Muslims who rejected extremist interpretations. This strategy enabled them to transform political opposition into a religious offense, thereby creating a legal rationale for violence against fellow Muslims. Second, both organizations claimed exclusive authority to define authentic Islam while delegitimizing alternative interpretations offered by established religious institutions. Through this monopolization of religious authority, theological disagreement became synonymous with unbelief, rebellion, or apostasy. Third, both ISIS and Boko Haram sought to create alternative normative orders that competed directly with state legal systems. Although the institutional sophistication of these systems differed, their underlying objective remained consistent: replacing existing sources of legal authority with ideologically controlled governance structures. These findings align with contemporary research indicating that extremist



organizations frequently utilize legal discourse not merely as a religious expression but as a strategic mechanism for social control and political legitimacy (Azizah & Shalihah, 2025; Berebon, 2025; Zuhdi et al., 2025). Moreover, both organizations employed propaganda to portray their legal systems as authentic implementations of Islamic law while obscuring the coercive nature of their governance practices. This pattern suggests that pseudolegal reasoning functions as a central component of extremist governance rather than a secondary ideological feature. Legal language, therefore, becomes a powerful instrument through which violence is transformed into an ostensibly lawful and religiously sanctioned activity.

Viewed through the combined perspectives of Legal Pluralism Theory and Radicalization Theory, the comparative findings provide a deeper understanding of why pseudolegal systems remain effective within extremist movements. Legal Pluralism Theory explains how ISIS and Boko Haram established competing legal orders in environments characterized by contested authority, weak governance, and social fragmentation. By presenting themselves as providers of justice, order, and religious authenticity, these groups sought to challenge the legitimacy of state institutions and create alternative sources of legal obligation (Kasa et al., 2024; Azizah & Shalihah, 2025; Zuhdi et al., 2025). At the same time, Radicalization Theory helps explain how these legal narratives contributed to recruitment, ideological commitment, and organizational cohesion. By framing violence as a religious duty and presenting obedience as a legal obligation, extremist organizations transformed legal discourse into a mechanism of radicalization and identity formation (Abdullah et al., 2025; Bélanger et al., 2023). The interaction between these two processes demonstrates that pseudolegal systems perform both legal and ideological functions simultaneously. They provide a framework for governance while also generating moral justifications for coercion, exclusion, and violence. Therefore, the comparative evidence suggests that the resilience of extremist movements cannot be understood solely through military, political, or socioeconomic explanations. Rather, their durability is closely linked to the ability to construct persuasive legal narratives that manufacture legitimacy and authority. This finding directly answers the research questions of this study by demonstrating that ISIS and Boko Haram employ pseudolegal interpretations of Islamic law as instruments of political domination and that these interpretations fundamentally diverge from mainstream Islamic jurisprudence in both methodology and substance. Consequently, effective counter-extremism strategies must address not only security threats but also the legal and theological narratives that enable extremist organizations to sustain their claims of legitimacy.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined how ISIS and Boko Haram employ pseudolegal interpretations of Islamic law to legitimize violence, establish alternative systems of authority, and justify political domination. Addressing the first research question, the findings demonstrate that both organizations systematically utilize selective interpretations of Islamic legal concepts, particularly *takfir*, *jihad*, and *hudud*, to construct narratives of religious legitimacy. Through these interpretations, theological disagreement is transformed into a legal justification for excommunication, coercion, and violence. The analysis further reveals that pseudolegal reasoning functions not merely as religious rhetoric but as a strategic mechanism for consolidating authority, recruiting supporters, and sustaining extremist governance.



Regarding the second research question, the study finds that the legal narratives advanced by ISIS and Boko Haram substantially diverge from mainstream Islamic jurisprudence and established methodologies of legal interpretation. Both groups selectively employ scriptural sources while disregarding fundamental jurisprudential principles such as contextual interpretation, scholarly consensus, procedural safeguards, proportionality, public welfare (*maslahah*), and the preservation of human dignity. Consequently, their legal claims cannot be regarded as legitimate applications of Islamic law but rather as ideological distortions designed to manufacture religious legitimacy for political violence and coercive control.

The comparative analysis further demonstrates important differences between the two organizations. ISIS developed a highly institutionalized and bureaucratic legal-administrative structure through its self-declared Caliphate, whereas Boko Haram relied on more localized and informal systems of religious authority. Despite these organizational differences, both movements shared a common reliance on pseudolegal reasoning, monopolization of religious authority, and the construction of alternative legal orders. These findings support the argument that pseudolegal interpretation represents a broader characteristic of contemporary extremist movements rather than an isolated feature of a single organization. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by integrating Legal Pluralism Theory and Radicalization Theory to explain how extremist organizations construct alternative normative systems and employ legal discourse as a tool of ideological mobilization. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating theological engagement, religious literacy, and credible religious scholarship into counter-extremism and deradicalization strategies. Efforts to challenge extremist violence should therefore address not only security concerns but also the legal and religious narratives through which extremist organizations seek legitimacy.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The analysis is based exclusively on documentary and textual sources, including organizational publications, declarations, and secondary academic literature. As a result, it does not capture the perspectives of affected communities, former members, or religious practitioners directly exposed to extremist governance. Future research may strengthen the findings by incorporating field-based empirical methods, interviews, and comparative investigations involving other extremist movements operating in different socio-political contexts. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between law, religion, legitimacy, and political violence in contemporary extremist environments.

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