Hedayah
Countering Extremism
& Violent Extremism

Exploring trends and research in countering and preventing extremism & violent extremism

Editors
Denis Suljić, Emma Allen

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The views expressed in the essays collected in this volume are the opinions and work of the authors of each essay, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of Hedayah or any of the organizers, strategic partners, or sponsors of the International CVE Research Conference 2022.

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ABOUT HEDAYAH

Hedayah was created in response to a growing desire from the international community and members of the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF) representing 29 countries and the European Union to establish an independent, multilateral 'think and do' tank devoted to countering extremism and violent extremism. Since its inception, Hedayah has evolved into a passionate, driven, and international organization that brings together a vast network of unparalleled experts and practitioners to counter and prevent extremism and violent extremism. Twelve members of the GCTF are representatives of our diverse Steering Board, which provides strategic oversight. As the International Center of Excellence for Countering Extremism and Violent Extremism, we are committed to innovation, neutrality, integrity, diversity, and technical excellence by delivering groundbreaking research, innovative methodologies, and programs. Our approach is to deliver real and sustainable impact to governments, civil society and people impacted by extremism and violent extremism through local ownership and collaboration.

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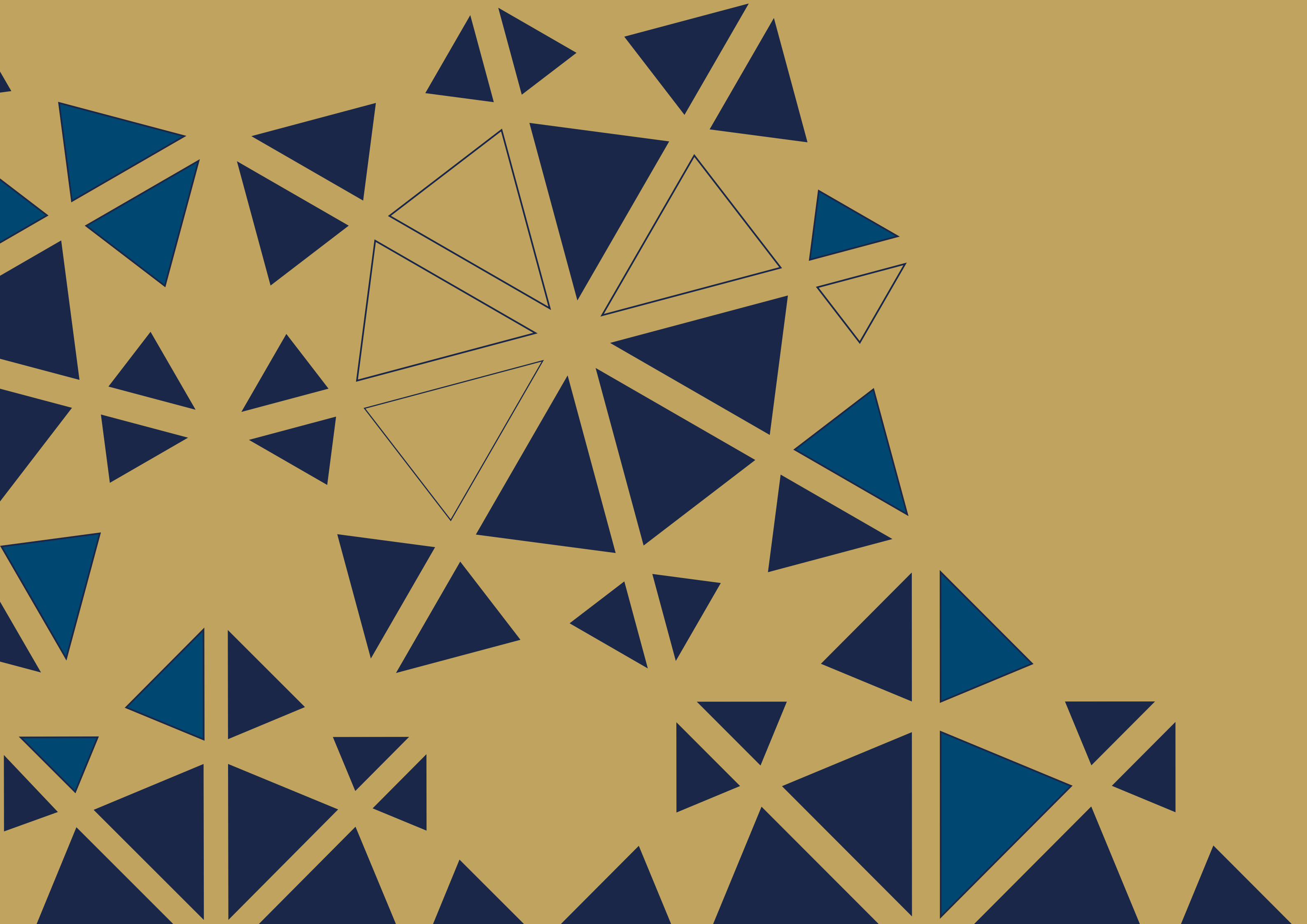
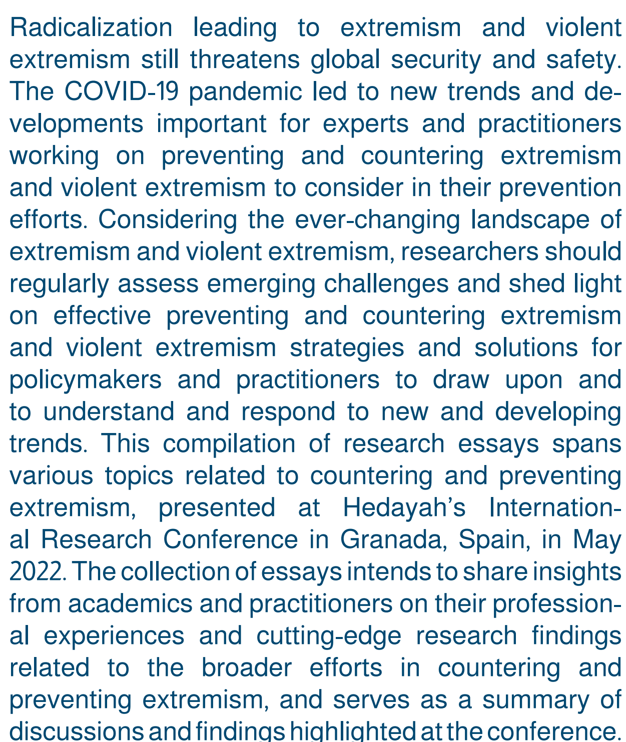
Introduction

Navigating Extremism Amidst Global Challenges: Latest Insights and Trends

Denis Suljić





Radicalization leading to extremism and violent extremism still threatens global security and safety. The COVID-19 pandemic led to new trends and developments important for experts and practitioners working on preventing and countering extremism and violent extremism to consider in their prevention efforts. Considering the ever-changing landscape of extremism and violent extremism, researchers should regularly assess emerging challenges and shed light on effective preventing and countering extremism and violent extremism strategies and solutions for policymakers and practitioners to draw upon and to understand and respond to new and developing trends. This compilation of research essays spans various topics related to countering and preventing extremism, presented at Hedayah's International Research Conference in Granada, Spain, in May 2022. The collection of essays intends to share insights from academics and practitioners on their professional experiences and cutting-edge research findings related to the broader efforts in countering and preventing extremism, and serves as a summary of discussions and findings highlighted at the conference.

Hedayah's International Research Conference has consistently aided in expanding research on countering extremism and violent extremism spanning over seven years. First, the conference presents recent, cutting-edge research, considering both academic and practitioner-led findings. This ensures that the presented findings include those with rigorous academic standards and the perspectives of the practitioner community. Second, the conference panelists are invited by Hedayah to contribute to the subsequent Edited Volume to publish their research findings. The Edited Volume ensures that these research results are disseminated beyond the conference attendees, and are made available to a larger network of policymakers, researchers and practitioners attempting to strengthen their activities, research, policies, and programs in this space. Therefore, the conference is designed to cover cross-cutting subjects and overarching themes across different panels, such as gender, youth, and cross-disciplinary challenges and lessons.

Hedayah's seventh Research Conference brought a range of policymakers, practitioners and academic experts together on issues related to countering and preventing extremism and violent extremism. It presented research in a discussion-oriented forum, providing our vibrant and diverse community with the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions and share novel ideas and suggestions on addressing new and emerging extremist and violent extremist threats, trends, and suggestions on how they could be treated. The sessions, divided across three days, covered diverse themes and topics. The panel that opened the conference discussions focused on the implications of COVID-19 on extremist and violent extremist actors, and efforts to address these new developments and emerging threats. Sessions that followed covered the role of the internet and new technology, the effects of environmental changes on extremism and violent extremism, the global rise of the radical right, and the unceasing threat of ideologically-inspired extremist, violent extremist and terrorist groups. The conference also included in-person and virtual breakout sessions, including a session concentrating on the future directions of the field, and another exploring the ethical challenges of research on preventing and countering extremism, along with innovative methodologies and techniques.

The Sponsor of Hedayah's 2022 International Research Conference was the Government of Spain, while the co-organizers included the Euro-Arab Foundation, the University of Granada, the European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict-Prevention, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, Moonshot, and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism. The Strategic Partners for 2022 were the Cyber Threats Research Centre (CYTREC) (Swansea University), Tech Against Terrorism (TAT), and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

Mapping new research on the impacts of COVID-19

Recent research has made significant contributions in a diverse range of sub-fields, some of which are still in the early stages of development but which offer important lessons and warrant further research.

An immediate and urgent interest among academics has been the COVID-19 pandemic and its diverse effects on ongoing and future efforts to counter and prevent extremism and violent extremism. The circumstances resulting from the health crisis – primarily global lockdowns and vaccination requirements– influenced extremist and terrorist groups to adapt their tactics and weaponize the COVID-19 circumstances. It also triggered diverse policy and programming responses, as well as research efforts. Examples of research in this context include inquiries into the effect of the pandemic on radicalization and recruitment (Avis, 2020; Yunus, 2022) and the mixed impact of COVID-19 on extremism, violent extremism and terrorism in the West, focusing on the influence of the health crisis on extremist beliefs and attitudes, and its effects on extremist behaviors. (Marone, 2022). The former has particularly been a popular theme among researchers, as there has been much discussion about the potential for an increase in radicalization and recruitment as more people spent increased time online due to lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions.

Academics also explored the broader developments and dynamics of individual extremism, violent extremist and terrorist organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly radical right movements (Pantucci, 2022), of which there was a global uptick in activities, especially online. The need for research and discussion on the radical right has become clear in response to the rapid growth of radical right movements and increased attacks in Western countries, particularly in the last few years. For instance, a report by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) found that there has been a 320 percent rise in attacks by radical right-inspired individuals, mainly in Western countries (CTED, 2020). Given the growth of the radical right and related movements online, many studies have attempted to understand the adherents of such movements, their intentions, recruitment patterns, and committed violence offline. In this context, noteworthy research has involved case study comparisons of different countries with recent and serious growth in radical right movements, focusing on social media platforms such as Facebook (Hutchinson et al., 2021). Such research inquiries are particularly important when considering the transnational nature of radical right movements, another observed trend in recent years (Hart, 2021), and help to map out trends for policymakers and practitioners to consider.

The continued role of the internet as an enabling environment has also inspired further research. Research has assessed prevention efforts in the online world, often exploring increasingly popular strategies and approaches such as counter-narratives, remedial interventions, positive and alternative narratives, and critical thinking and resilience building through media and information literacy, among other topics. (Tio, and Kruber, 2022). Moreover, academic inquiries have been conducted on the increasingly significant role of memes and media as drivers of radicalization (Askanius, 2021). These have in the past been popular among a diverse range of extremist and violent extremist groups, and understanding the dynamics surrounding this phenomenon is crucial for the practitioners and future program designs, particularly for programs focusing on digital literacy and online prevention mechanisms. The dangerous trend of extremist activities on gaming platforms has also sparked new investigations with a particular focus on this trend's significance for efforts to counter and prevent extremism online. Online gaming, with a particular focus on radical right extremists and violent extremists in the West and globally, has been the main focus in this context. For instance, research assessing the role of online gaming on platforms such as Steam has examined how radical right adherents use gaming platforms as hubs to connect and socialize but also radicalize and recruit (Vaux, Gallagher, and Davey, 2021). It is important to mention that studies in this context have also been conducted related to other extremist ideologies and groups, such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda, organizations that have similarly utilized this approach in their own recruitment methods (Schlegel, 2022).

Climate change is a key cross-cutting issue and one that has challenged experts in this field - given its complex nature, understanding the relationship between extremism and violent extremism and climate change is often difficult and highly context-specific. A range of extremist, violent extremist and terrorist groups have exploited the environmental degradation and effects of changing climates for their purposes in several regions, including parts of Africa, the MENA region and Southeast Asia. While the direct causation at play is often difficult to establish, scholars have continued to consider this important relationship. Several regional case study analyses in recent years have sought to unravel the nexus between extremism and violent extremism and climate change. For instance, one study explored the relationship between the two variables in the Maghreb region, which has been affected by extremism and violent extremism and climate change issues, including water scarcity, temperature variations and desertification (Bourekba, 2021). Water scarcity and food insecurity in Africa have also been shown to create grievances that violent extremist and terrorist groups can exploit in their radicalization and recruitment efforts. Studies have also been conducted in regions such as Southeast Asia, seeking to understand the relationship between radicalization and climate change (Latif, 2022). Rising sea levels, heat waves, floods and droughts are only some challenges that violent extremist organizations have exploited in this region.

At Hedayah's previous conferences, discussions emphasized the need for continued and greater emphasis on gender and youth-focused studies. As a result, one of the panels for the conference concentrated on the topics of gender and youth.

Concerning gender, from general research on gender approaches in countering and preventing extremism (Pate, 2021) to regional studies, such as in the context of the Western Balkans (Hadji-Janev and Jankuloska, 2021), experts have been contributing to a gendered understanding of the phenomenon from both policy and practice perspectives. The discussion surrounding program frameworks has subsequently been an important field of research, and the introduction of programs seeking to prevent and counter extremism which have focused on gender, has illuminated new approaches to frameworks in this area. (Ingram, 2021). This arrives at a time particularly needed in terms of focus on women in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts – concentrated on Daesh returnees – given their unique experiences. As a result, more and more organizations and governments are adapting their programs to incorporate gender-based analyses, and to better engage with the gendered needs and experiences of those they are targeting.

On the other hand, focusing on youth, studies within the field covered a variety of topics concentrating on different regions of the world. Topics such as the role of grassroots youth work to counter extremism (Hernandez, 2021), and applying the lens of international and local actor collaborations among youth in Indonesia (Sandyarani, 2022) are only a few case study examples of such research initiatives. Research efforts are also increasingly focusing on the psychological vulnerabilities of youth (Harpviken, 2020) and understanding education and particularly its role in radicalization leading to extremism and violent extremism, given the evidence demonstrating that many extremists and terrorists have engaged with formal education systems and schooling (Sas et al. 2020).

Experts are also continuing to investigate trends related to groups influenced by the religiously-inspired ideologies of Daesh and Al Qaeda, and the motivations of returnees that had joined Daesh in Syria and Iraq, often focusing on formers and family members (Schewe and Koehler, 2021) to bolster existing and emerging prevention programs and to support rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. As such, rehabilitation and reintegration efforts are underway in many countries. Concerning rehabilitation and reintegration, it is important to note that in various contexts, academics are increasingly applying a gender-based lens to understand the deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of female detainees (Talib et al. 2021) given their unique experiences and roles living and at times fighting under groups like Daesh.

Parallel to these research efforts, a significant amount of academic attention has also been paid to understanding the work of civil society organizations and their important role programming for preventing and countering extremism, particularly focused on programs countering groups such as Daesh and Al Qaeda in South East Asia both online and offline (Goodhardt et al. 2022). Daesh's utilization of mass media and communications continues as the group's campaigns are still active and new ones continue to be initiated. (Kadivar, 2021). While the group has been severely weakened, its online campaigns continue to pose threats, highlighting the need for these studies and for ongoing research.

Hedayah continues to strive to provide a neutral platform enabling policymakers, practitioners, and scholars to communicate new findings, advance knowledge and share lessons learned in the dynamic field of preventing and countering extremism and violent extremism, and related fields such as peacebuilding, counter-terrorism, online studies, psychology, and many others. The following essays are based on research publications from speakers who participated in the Research Conference in 2022, which we hope will serve to further these efforts. This publication's goal is to bring the lessons shared at the conference to a broader audience and to contribute to the evidence base in this field. Our research on preventing, countering extremism and violent extremism must continue to evolve and adapt to the new technologies, trends, and challenges that extremism and violent extremism present worldwide – these essays highlight some of the vital ways in which researchers have responded to this need.

Essays presented in this Edited Volume

The essays included in this Edited Volume are reflective of some of the research presented at the Research Conference in 2022. While not all speakers were able to contribute to this publication, the essays that were submitted and compiled in this report are briefly summarized below.

The first essay, entitled "Going Viral: **The Impact of COVID-19 on Extremist Narratives and Propaganda**," authored by Galen Lamphere-Englund, is a product of Hedayah's research project on the effects of the pandemic on extremist and violent extremist trends and developments in four different regions, including the Western Balkans, East Africa, West Africa and South East Asia. This paper offers overall results for all regions mentioned above and includes an examination of the metanarratives employed by extremist groups along with policy recommendations. The paper assesses how in the last two years during COVID-19, the circumstances have significantly impacted the creation of new fear-based narratives for violent extremist groups worldwide. It analyzes how and in what ways the terrorists and extremists have reached new audiences and converted their anxieties about the epidemic into concrete support by using popular, powerful messaging that plays on commonplace fears.

Joe Whittaker's paper **"Online Radicalisation During the COVID Pandemic"** challenges the notion that global lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to more recruitment online as more people spent time on the internet and were more likely exposed to extreme and harmful content. This chapter investigates this assertion and finds that further research is necessary before there is a definitive conclusion that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an upsurge in extremism and violent extremism. Whittaker argues that current knowledge emphasizes the significance of offline interactions in the radicalization process and that there should not be an automatic assumption that increased online engagement with radical content will lead to higher radicalization and recruitment, especially if it comes at the expense of offline interactions.

In his essay **"From Cells to Cultures: Responding to 'Hybridised' Extremism Threats,"** Milo Comerford examines two related trends in the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's (ISD) analysis of extremism and violent extremism globally. First, the author argues that there is a hybridization of extremist risks across ideological lines, making it more difficult to separate the threat of extremism and violent extremism from a wider variety of negative effects, including hate speech, misinformation, conspiracy movements, and other violent mobilization. The second dynamic is post-organizational, in which looser (online) networks rather than clearly defined violent groups and organizations are increasingly where extremist mobilization and threats of violence come from. The quantitative digital study of cross-platform online extremism by ISD researchers, quoted throughout the chapter, complements the qualitative examination of these developing patterns and national case studies that serve as the methodological foundation for this work.

Erin Saltman and Anne Craanen contributed to this Edited Volume with their paper **"Ethical Challenges in Open-Source Intelligence Research and Digital Hygiene for P/CVE Researchers."** From four viewpoints, the study explores the ethical issues faced by practitioners and scholars in the field of extremism and violent extremism prevention and counteraction. In four sections, this essay assesses: 1) Where existing research provides ethical frameworks and safety resources for researchers and practitioners online engaging in preventing and countering extremism and violent extremism (P/CVE) and terrorism space; 2) Where digital and platform-specific tooling can help researchers and practitioners in both preventative and reactive capacities to ensure heightened safety precautions; 3) Insights from the GIFCT Positive Interventions Working Group about best practices for sharing data and "do-no-harm" principles; and 4) Considerations when surfacing credible threats or actions available in online crisis response moments.

This Edited Volume also contains the essay by Carol Winkler entitled **"Contextual Factors Associated with Changes in Extremist Visual Messaging: The Cases of al-Qaeda and Daesh."** The paper discusses the internet messaging tactics used by Daesh and Al-Qaeda in their media campaigns and the balance of internal and external demands that violent extremist and terrorist groups have to navigate when deciding what, when and how they communicate with their adherents. Winkler presents a meta-review analysis of seven years' worth of research by Ph.D. presidential fellows, staff members, and faculty members at Georgia State University's multidisciplinary Transcultural Conflict and Violence Research Initiative. Each of these studies identifies environmental elements that have changed at the same time as Daesh and Al-Qaeda's communications tactics have.

In the time of growing threats of radical right actors, Imogen Richards, in her paper **"Far-Right Politics, Environmental Crisis & the Question of 'Eco-Fascism,"** discusses the nexus between climate change and extremism and violent extremism perpetrated by radical right actors. Richards explores the "pseudo-intellectual commitments" of such actors and their communicative expressions through multi-modal media and across institutional and non-institutional political venues. The research presented explored elements beyond the explicit pronunciations of politically violent actors to the broader white supremacist domains where radical right actors expressed exploitation goals of eco-fascist agendas. Richards' paper summarizes the aims of the research that uses a mixed-methods, theoretically driven qualitative and quantitative analysis, namely intended to: 1) Map the key ecological-environmental priorities of extreme right-wing actors communicated in online-offline spaces; 2) Account for far- and extreme right actors' discourse on security, development, and the environment. 3) Analyze and build an understanding of popular contemporary conceptions of eco-fascism in the context of wider political issues pertaining to the far right and the environment.

As deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives are undertaken in several regions, Joseph Garcia-Coll's essay **"Community Attitudes Towards the Reintegration of Violent Extremist and Terrorist Offenders: A Neglected Challenge?"** helps us understand the effectiveness of such programs by exploring the attitudes toward deradicalization interventions and programs of a diverse range of prisoners with Spain as the case study. The paper is a product of a review of the literature on community attitudes toward the reintegration of violent extremists and terrorist offenders. Garcia-Coll concentrates on the outcomes of recently released research on the subject, detailing the findings and their implications for academics and decision-makers. In doing so, Garcia-Coll shifts the attention from a broad examination of views regarding violent extremist offenders' rehabilitation to the particulars of the Spanish case. An examination of the most appropriate rehabilitative interventions created in Spain, their public presentation, and the community's perception of them based on current research is conducted.

In his paper **"The 3R Model for Youth PVE: Restore, Repair, and Reframe,"** Slim Masmoudi discusses the model for preventing the radicalization of youth, particularly as cognitive, emotional, and motivational breaches require a new model to

'Restore' the social bonds, 'Repair' the dysfunctional connections with family and community, and 'Reframe' thinking and feeling. Masmoudi describes the use of a data-driven methodology to adopt a four-stage process that included (1) Defining pertinent risk factors and behaviours and developing the first Arabic Youth Service Eligibility Tool (AYSET), (2) Identifying general risk youth and high-risk youth among them, (3) A three-dimensional intervention consisting of a family-centered intervention, a focused life skills coaching/training intervention, and a community-based intervention, and (4) The impact measure of intervention after.

In the chapter **"Misogynistic Extremism: Examining the Intersection between Misogyny and Violent Extremism"** Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill explore the nexus between violent incel attacks and misogyny with a focus on violent radical right extremism. The authors, among other interesting discussion elements, explore how growing evidence of violent subcultures specifically targeting women due to perceived threats to male dominance and sexual entitlement comes from misogynistic attacks in recent years. Using real-case examples, the authors assess how engagement in extreme acts of violence reshapes how we understand different strands of extremism and violent extremism and the relationship between different worldviews that may lead to violence.

Rafael Milan Kropiunigg, in his essay **"The Link Between Singular Identities, Domestic Violence, And Violent Extremism: Exploring Insights, Lessons, and Potential Solutions Through the Lens of Motherschools Model Implementations,"** analyzes the rising concerns and growing research related to gender-based violence and misogyny from the perspective of the work conducted by an NGO. Based on insights and findings from four of Women without Borders (WwB) impact reports published in 2022, this essay addresses questions such as the notion of misogyny and violence against women and gender-based violence and discrimination as crucial drivers of extremism. The author draws on his experience at the civil society organization Women without Borders, particularly focusing on implementing, monitoring, and evaluating recent community-based program iterations of its 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' Model.

Extracting findings from an original report, Adrian Shtuni presents the findings of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts in Kosovo in an essay, **"Rehabilitation and Reintegration Path of Kosovar Minors and Women Repatriated from Syria."** Shtuni's chapter provides an overview of Kosovar authorities' early rehabilitation procedures and reintegration initiatives. It emphasizes possible best practices, persistent difficulties, and chances for inclusive collaborations with key stakeholders. The author relies on primary sources for information on the rehabilitation and reintegration of minors and women repatriated from Syria and Iraq and official statistics and publications by Kosovar authorities, international organizations, and think tanks.

Finally, Michelle Blaya-Burgo et al. in their paper titled **"Preventing Violent Extremism in Youth Through Sports: The Spey Project"** evaluate the role of sports in prevention efforts to counter extremism and violent extremism through "The Spey Project." This project equipped young people at risk of exclusion with the necessary tools to help them integrate into society and develop their support network to thwart the process of violent radicalization. In addition, it worked to develop the measuring tools and indicators needed to analyze the project's results and contribute to the broader knowledge on the role of sports-based projects in deradicalization efforts.

The essays compiled in this Edited Volume highlight some of the most recent and relative research areas and efforts in preventing and countering extremism and present practical and relevant policy lessons and recommendations across a range of critical issues areas that can support policymaking seeking to counter extremism and violent extremism in all forms.

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Section 1

A Changing Online Landscape of Extremism, Violent Extremism and Terrorism in a Post-Pandemic World

Going Viral: The Impact of COVID-19 on Extremist Narratives and Propaganda

Galen Lamphere-Englund

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism patterns in divergent ways across the world. Hedayah commissioned teams from the Balkans, East Africa, West and the Horn of Africa, and Southeast Asia to uncover specific regional dynamics in areas less assessed by existing research to analyze terrorism and extremism trends. The team of researchers focused mainly on narratives and changes in communication strategies, as well as recruitment and radicalization trends and misinformation/disinformation campaigns run by violent extremists during 2020 and 2021. Each team designed slightly different methodologies to reflect local dynamics, culminating in a mixture of open-source intelligence analysis (OSINT) of social media data, face-to-face and telephonic interviews in East Africa (n=108), and a broad consultation of public datasets ranging from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) to Johns Hopkins University and World Health Organization (WHO) public health data. This summary article provides topline findings across all regions, an analysis of metanarratives used by extremist organizations, and policy recommendations. Comprehensive reports for the four focus areas, along with country-level analysis, are available online.

During the last two years, violent conflict incidences increased globally. However, data on violent extremist incidents are specifically challenging to disaggregate, and new figures from terrorism-specific datasets like the Global Terrorism Database were unavailable during the research period. In general, there was an observation of an initial decrease in violent armed group actions and peaceful protests during the pandemic that was followed by a rebound around the second month after public health restrictions were instituted in most countries (Berman et al, 2022). Violence declined during periods of particularly high caseloads, only to resurge shortly after (author's analysis of ACLED and JHU data, 2022). By the end of 2021, overall conflict and underlying drivers often linked to violent extremism had resurged globally. Diminishing trust in governments and institutions, increased economic hardship, and eroding social cohesion have all exacerbated ethnic, religious, and cultural divides (Mercy Corps, 2021). Still, in most of our regions of focus, health measures and restrictions in 2020 somewhat limited the operational capabilities of many violent extremist and terrorist organizations to conduct activities on the ground, namely to recruit, organize mass audience activities, or carry out attacks as readily. Foreign terrorist fighters also found their movements restricted and reduced by closed borders. As movement restrictions eased in 2021, violent extremist activities and terrorist attacks gradually escalated once again.

Reductions in violent extremist activity were still notable in Southeast Asia – largely due to changes in governmental policy and renewed enforcement activities. Even violent conflict activity in the region only began to note an uptick in the last months of 2021 (Berman et al, 2022; ACLED, 2022). Conversely, in West Africa, violent extremist activity increased in both years, taking advantage of the impacts of the pandemic on overburdened governments while manipulating public health backlash to their advantage. Country-level dynamics in East Africa recorded a 33% year-on-year increase in attacks by Somalia-based Al-Shabaab (Kishi, 2021), along with the limited provision of public health services by the group in an attempt to demonstrate competency in governing and subsequently gathered support. Similarly, country-level interviewees for this project attested to an increase in violent extremism in Kenya and Ethiopia and a late spike in Uganda towards the end of 2021. In the Balkans, the foremost preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) concern was the rise of the radical right, often enmeshed within conspiracy theories and fueled by harmful online narratives and ethnonationalist ideologies.

Methodology

The project limited data collection to four regions: the Balkans, the East and Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Sahel, and Southeast Asia. Fundamentally, all teams sought to address the same six research questions:

1. How have narratives advanced by violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and relevant non-state armed groups (NSGs), both through formal communication channels and informal platforms, changed during the pandemic period?

2. Have communication platforms and channels used by VEOs and NSAGs changed during the pandemic? If so, why?

3. Has the use of mis- and disinformation by VEOs and NSAGs decreased or increased shifted, or changed during the pandemic?

4. What have been the trends regarding the provision of public services by VEOs and NSAGs since the beginning of the pandemic?

5. To what extent have recruitment and radicalization patterns, including both domestic actors and foreign terrorist fighters (FTF), changed during the pandemic?

6. To what extent have country-level changes been reflected in regional trends during the pandemic, and which countries have seen the most significant impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism and terrorism?

For the Balkans, defined here to include Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia, data was collected from media sources in original languages spoken in the region and, to a lesser extent, from secondary data. Sources included: a collection of extremist content (including material shared by VEOs and their supporters) from the internet and social media related to extremist groups and individuals; press releases; and literature from the grey sector and academia.

In East Africa, the researchers examined the United Republic of Tanzania, the Republic of Kenya, the Federal Republic of Somalia, the Republic of Uganda, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, and the State of Eritrea. Several methods of qualitative data collection were employed for this study. The first included conducting key informant interviews (KIIs) with individuals operating and practicing in a diverse range of different fields related to countering violent extremism and terrorism– notably government officials, members of civil societies organizations (CSOs), non-government organizations (NGOs) employees, security personnel, academics, community leaders, private sector professionals, and the media personnel. A total of 108 KIIs were conducted, with 81 male and 27 female participants. This study analyzed primary source narratives from materials shared by VEOs on social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, and in magazines such as Gaidi Mtaani. The analysis also leveraged secondary sources from websites such as Statistica, Counter Extremism Project, Critical Threats, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

This Southeast Asia report covers the countries of the Republic of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Republic of the Philippines, and the Kingdom of Thailand. Analysis was conducted through an all-source – primary and secondary – data collection and analysis of open-source data. Much of the primary source material was collected from ideologically motivated violent extremist actors on social media in vernacular languages. Platforms covered in this research include Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, Element, and Matrix. Smaller platforms were targeted based on a general shift by VEOs away from major providers amid increased content moderation and takedown operations. This research benefits from access to a large longitudinal database built from Telegram data before the pandemic, thus allowing for comparison across time. Open-source coverage of more remote areas of violent extremist activity, such as Southern Thailand and the Southern Philippines, is less comprehensive, reflecting the relative isolation of these regions, their limited access to internet communications, and the difficulty of collecting material in diverse local languages. Yet, there is sufficient data to draw conclusions about broad trends in these areas and cross-check findings with the more comprehensive Indonesian data.

The West Africa report looked at trends in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Mali, – and, to a lesser extent, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Togo, and Benin. The authors collated and analyzed existing and relevant primary and secondary literature covering January 2020 to December 2021 across West Africa and the Sahel. Analysis was carried out on primary materials disseminated by VEOs on platforms such as Telegram, in propagandistic magazines such as al-Naba and Dabiq, and other VEO content hosted on websites such as Jihadology, Unmasking Boko Haram, BBC Monitoring, and SITE.

Findings

Ideologically motivated extremist groups quickly revised their narratives to address COVID-19. Capitalizing on the pandemic, VEOs opportunistically sought to influence and mobilize new followers through novel fears while justifying their broader ideologies, often already including anti-government, anti-Western, anti-Chinese, and ethnonationalist aims into existing narratives. While specific narratives used varied significantly, several common themes in meta-narratives emerged, including:

- **Restrictions as Repression** – a propagandized view that government pandemic measures were unjust, disproportionate, or designed only to control specific groups of people;
- **Divine Retribution** – promoting that COVID-19 was a form of punishment from God or was a "soldier of Allah" that would only attack enemies of religion;
- **Weaponized Conspiracies – explanations of COVID-19 and vaccines fueled by widespread mis**- and disinformation used to bolster extremist credibility;

- **End Times** – a metanarrative holding that the pandemic was a sign of an apocalyptic end of the world, often coupled with the belief that devout followers of specific ideologies advanced by extremists would be saved;

- **Intensified Ethnonationalism** – extremist narratives primarily across the Balkans pairing COVID-19 grievances with radical right and ethno-nationalist ideologies; and,

- **Foreign Fighter Plight** – narratives based on the cultivation of solidarity between lay followers and foreign terrorist fighter families perceived to be persecuted or particularly suffering during the pandemic.

Repressive restrictions, divine retribution, and weaponized conspiracy metanarratives were particularly prevalent and influential throughout all four regions. All are addressed in more depth later in this article.

2021 marked a shift in the use of weaponized conspiracy theories by extremist groups. In SE Asia and West Africa, amid loosening public health restrictions and less compliance with those remaining, extremists' use of COVID-19-related narratives broadly diminished. In the Balkans, however, extremist-related groups stepped up their use of weaponized narratives. No longer focused on denying the existence of the pandemic, conspiracies about the vaccine blurred with antisemitic, anti-democratic, and nativist rhetoric spread by ideologically motivated actors, mainly on the radical right. Meanwhile, in East Africa, Al-Shabaab weighed in on which vaccines were acceptable, inveighing against AstraZeneca and promoting its own, religiously-based remedies (Ero, 2021). Given the limited rollout and persistent vaccine inequality across the African continent (World Health Organization, 2021), as vaccination campaigns hopefully increase in 2022, it is probable that extremist rhetoric will increasingly tap into conspiracies around the vaccines. Evidence from other regions and limited cases across the continent in 2021 indicate that extremist groups may cast them as weapons of the West, un-Islamic (haram), or as bioweapons designed to attack specific ethnicities.

Interestingly, select narratives have been repurposed among ideologically opposed violent extremist actors. Extremist narratives were duplicated and adapted between non-aligned groups worldwide, frequently drawing on transnational misinformation or Western radical right propaganda, including anti-vaccine and anti-globalism tropes. This incongruous, 'ideological buffet' cross-pollinated conspiracy theories and metanarratives between seemingly divergent groups across the ideological spectrum. Similar global trends of hybridization across violent extremist groups have also been noted by researchers such as those at the UK-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue (Comerford and Havlicek, 2021). Common enemies and fears – globalism, vaccine companies, public health workers – may result and increasingly become the norm.

VEOs also hastened their shift from in-person to online radicalization and recruitment. Although this transition has been years in the making, due to lockdown restrictions, the pandemic provided VEOs with an opportunity to intensify the online dissemination of extremist propaganda and virtual activities on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Audio clips of sermons, the novel use of time-bound Instagram stories in attempts to dodge moderation, and strategic memetic (the use of memes) propaganda warfare proliferated. Groups also increased their use of newer, encryption-capable platforms to avoid detection by security agencies: Telegram groups featured in all regions despite stepped-up content takedowns of Daesh-linked content. International police and Indonesian governmental crackdowns on Telegram groups shut down large VEO groups, but smaller cells remained. Meanwhile, Gab, VK, and TamTam all emerged as platforms of importance in the Balkans. In 2021, pro-Daesh groups in SE Asia experimented with novel, decentralized communication platforms, including Matrix and Element, while working on propaganda distribution platforms such as Jihadflix.

An adaptation to virtualized communications reflected an operational necessity for groups dependent on physical contact as they became restricted by public health orders. But it also provided an opportunity to reach a more expansive, captive audience: lockdowns and reduced offline interactions led to a global surge in screen time in 2020 and 2021. While organizations globally have falteringly sought to virtualize, VEOs have often been ahead of the curve while rapidly upgrading their online capacities. The continued use of new platforms in 2021, even as life returned to public socialization in most of the world, demonstrates this reality.

With wide variations across firms, social media platforms broadly sought to limit violent extremist content and COVID-19 mis- and disinformation. Following government orders and internal trust and safety policy efforts, platforms, especially members of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), underwent large-scale removals of extremist content. These limitations encouraged VEOs to use other, smaller platforms or adapt their use of social media features. In Southeast Asia, Daesh affiliates used "Instagram Story" functions in an attempt to dodge content flagging by displaying it for only 24 hours before automatically disappearing. In West Africa and the Balkans, groups spread their content via encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp, Viber,

TamTam, and, if properly configured, Telegram. VEOs in East Africa relied predominantly on mainstream social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, to spread targeted narratives – potentially reflecting a lack of content moderation and trust and safety capacities in local languages. In the Balkans, radical right conspiracy narratives and disinformation campaigns often featured in mainstream media and politics, providing contextual cover from moderation efforts (Halilović and Veljan, 2021). Even as platforms and policy actors adapt, VEOs and extremist groups will continue to circumvent moderation efforts by finding new and smaller platforms to spread rhetoric and communicate among their members. This balloon effect, shifting content from one platform to another after enforcement actions, shows no sign of abating, nor do continued attempts by extremist entities to use large platforms and reach wider audiences despite improved moderation work (Comerford and Havlicek, 2021).

Although diminished in some countries, offline radicalization and recruitment efforts during the pandemic remained a significant P/CVE challenge. For instance, VEOs in West Africa continued to use traditional preaching and Friday prayers to disseminate COVID-19 narratives and ideological messages. Radical right groups and conspiracy theorists in the Balkans attended anti-government protests to leverage public anger toward their ideological ends. In under-governed spaces, VEOs entrenched themselves more deeply in communities. For instance, Al-Shabaab in Somalia actively provisioned public health services (Hockey and Jones, 2020), while pro-Daesh charities and foundations in Southeast Asia flourished by directly assisting communities in need due to the pandemic (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, 2022).

While varied country-to-country, P/CVE efforts were often constrained by the unfolding pandemic, with resources and attention focused on the COVID-19 response. As VEOs also weaponized mis- and disinformation about the pandemic to their ends, scattershot public policy responses to these narratives may have a long-term detrimental impact on P/CVE and public health efforts. Their corrosive impact on trust, especially towards health and security actors, will not disappear soon. Still, the global picture provides nuance. In countries like Indonesia, governments used public health responses while also availing themselves of a policy window created by the pandemic to increase policing against violent extremism, especially in online spaces.

Transregional Metanarratives

The following metanarratives provide insight into specific retooling of popular themes observed across all four study regions. Notably, these attest to the ability of strong stories and narratives that have held sway during the pandemic across cultures and geographic divides.

Divine Retribution

Divine retribution became a recurrent metanarrative in VEO communications in the four focus regions. Specific narratives in this category typically framed COVID-19 as punishment from God (Allah) against apostates, nonbelievers, and/or perceived enemies of the religion (often the West, China, and the US).

COVID-19, in the eyes of violent extremist groups, was usually on their side: retribution in viral form against their enemies. For example, amid rising case numbers in the Lake Chad Basin of West Africa in April 2020, the Boko Haram faction of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) released an audio statement claiming that COVID-19 was divine punishment for widespread fornication, sodomy, usury, and non-payment of zakat -- mandatory charity (Unmasking Boko Haram, 2020). The Al-Qaeda affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), present in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, released a similar commentary. Following an attack that left 30 Malian soldiers dead in April 2020, the group credited COVID-19 for weakening international troops in the Sahel and thanked God (Allah) for "deciding to send his soldier to help fight the enemy" (Al-Lami, 2020). In 2021, while most groups in West Africa and globally decreased their use of retributive imagery related to COVID-19, the JNIM al-Zallaqa news channel released a 17-minute audio message entitled "Unquestionably, the Help of God is Near." In it, JNIM's leader, Iyad al-Ghali, condemns France and other Western countries for their "war on Islam and Muslims" and reiterates the narrative that COVID-19 was a hidden soldier sent by God to help fight his enemies – specifically referencing France and the United States (Zelin, 2021).

Al-Shabaab, the most prominent VEO in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, also used divine retribution narratives to address the onset of COVID-19. The group claimed that the disease ("a plague from Allah") only affects enemies of Islam, that the virus was on the rise because of the "increase in human sins" and that nonbelievers across the globe would be punished for their "evil deeds against Muslims and Jihadists" (Haula, 2020). In Somalia, Al-Shabaab continued using COVID-19 to advance their narratives in 2021, blaming Western forces (crusaders, in their terminology) for spreading COVID-19. Civil society groups contacted by the field researchers corroborated this finding. That narrative soon spread to neighboring countries (ibid).

Daesh and al-Qaeda affiliated groups in East Africa and Horn also tailored narratives from global VEOs to address local audiences, foretelling the pandemic as God's wrath against the West (Meek, 2020). Notably, according to the accessed data from Uganda and Eritrea did not have locally developed COVID-19-related narratives from extremist groups. However, the spread of narratives from other countries – made easier via the internet – led to widespread fear and social tensions. Researchers found that conspiracy theories in Uganda followed similar patterns as extremist narratives in Kenya and Somalia: COVID-19 was characterized as a curse from God, a Chinese sickness, a biological weapon with efforts to initiate a World War III, or a punishment from God because of the destruction of mosques in China.

Extremist narratives depicting COVID-19 as a form of punishment were also present in the Balkans, although they were usually associated with radical – though peaceful – religious figures instead of VEO groups. For example, the religious leader Armand Ali, in Kosovo, described the pandemic as "Allah's punishment for mankind" (Facebook, 2021). In a similar vein, Shefqet Krasniqi, a conservative spiritual leader in Kosovo, also promoted this narrative (Krasniqi, 2021).

VEO narratives examined on Telegram in Southeast Asia also held COVID-19 to be a punishment for those who have wronged God. The disease allegedly spread via vice in their discourse. COVID-19 was also referred to as the "Soldier of Allah" in extremist narratives in Southeast Asia – perceived as targeting ideological enemies in the US, Europe, and China. This framing corresponds with the positive view promoted by JNIM in West Africa: COVID-19 was a divine helping hand in the fight against the enemy (Internal Telegram Database, 2021).

Another theme identified in Southeast Asia narratives - more notably in 2020 than during the following year - was apocalyptic messaging about end times. The COVID-19 pandemic became a religious signal that the world was ending in these cases. Although a distinct narrative, it is noteworthy in this discussion because it further highlights how COVID-19 was attributed to the divine by radical and extremist actors. This narrative was popularized by pro-Daesh militants over social media, particularly on Telegram during 2020, as they saw the spread of the infection as a sign of end times and the appearance of the eschatological figure in Islam known as Imam Mahdi (Telegram, 2021). A firebrand Indonesia Iman, Ihsan Tanjung, also found a receptive audience through his YouTube videos and audio sermons on Telegram that advised followers to make hijrah (migration) to Saudi Arabia to await the prophesied redeemer, seek higher land in Indonesia to avoid the coming apocalyptic tidal wave, or to wait and accept death (Islami.co, 2021).

Restrictions as Repression

Societal divisions and polarization around the world intensified during the pandemic. Government measures introduced to reduce the spread of the pandemic – including lockdowns, face masks, and limits on public gatherings – faced heavy criticism and public backlash. VEOs in the regions studied continually expanded their narratives to exploit these sentiments and rally against restrictions. Often their framing sought to warrant a broader anti-government stance or to advance views that specific religious groups were being unjustly targeted. In their view, restrictions in the aims of public health became repression.

In **West Africa**, VEOs used public health measures introduced in response to the pandemic as a narrative exploit to persuade their audiences. In April 2020, the former leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, described public health measures as an intentional ploy by non-Muslims and hypocrites to prevent Muslims from practicing their faith (Zenn, 2021). During the 2020 Eid festivals (both of which took place during national lockdowns), extremist groups operating across West Africa released videos and photos of congregational observance – some of which mocked and denigrated Muslims who observed public health measures during the festivities (Zenn, 2021). Daesh-affiliated VEOs circulated promotional documents (including propaganda such as photos of dead soldiers) with ideologically-based guidance to ignore COVID-19 restrictions (Zenn, 2021). Interestingly, extremist groups in the Lake Chad region and the Sahel did not keep pace in 2021 with the volume of COVID-19 misinformation they disseminated in 2020. This may be a result of different factors, including: (a) having produced a significant amount of misinformation on the virus the previous year, VEOs might have thought that they had sufficiently dealt with the topic; or, (b) as most public health measures had been lifted or wholly ignored in practice, COVID-19 itself had become less relevant to its audiences than the previous year; and/or, (c) the previous campaigns may simply not have been very effective.

In **East Africa**, VEO narratives often framed Muslims as victims of pandemic restrictions. Abubakar Shekau declared that social and distancing measures introduced by the Nigerian government constituted a war against observant followers of Islam (Campbell, 2021). Meanwhile, a Tanzanian religious leader reiterated that lockdowns aimed to deny Muslims the right to pray communally. In Somalia, Al–Shabaab denounced hypocrisy from governments that allowed shopping malls and markets to continue trading while mosques were closed in 2020 (Haula, 2020). The following year, the same group urged Muslims not to be used as "guinea pigs in the race to develop a potent vaccine" for COVID-19 (Odour, 2021). Al-Shabaab seemingly spread these types of harmful narratives to gain support from the public and advance recruitment efforts.

In **the Balkans**, as pandemic restrictions impacted religious and other social freedoms, extremist groups and actors sensed an opportunity. VEOs, particularly those associated with the radical right, promoted weaponized mis- and disinformation narratives about COVID-19, called for the rejection of governmental anti-COVID measures, and encouraged active participation in demonstrations where peaceful protesters met mingled with violent extremist groups. For example, banners used in the 2021 anti-government protests in Croatia called for greater participation by sympathizers of radical right political parties. Political figures present at these protests were exclusively members of right-wing parties, while the use of Ustasha (a historic fascist party) salutes and marches by linked military-styled battalions took place during the year (Stošić, 2021). In Albania, the spiritual leader Armand Ali used religious gathering restrictions to incite discontent about religious freedoms being taken away on his Facebook page. Comments on the page claimed that the government was infringing on religious freedom by limiting prayer gatherings under the pretext of COVID-19 restrictions (Ali, 2021). In other countries in the Balkans, radical right actors and groups spread misinformation drawing on repressive restriction narratives. In Montenegro, for example, radical right groups used social media tag-lines like "STOP Covid Tyranny" and "STOP Tyranny on Children" (Rights and Freedom Initiative, 2021). Bunt Crna Gora, founded in 2020 in response to Montenegro's new law on religious freedom, similarly expanded its political activism in 2021 by disseminating COVID-19 disinformation and propaganda focused on a loss of freedoms in the country.

As elsewhere in the Balkans, radical right actors across Bulgaria attempted to discredit public health measures through narratives denying the dangers posed by COVID-19. The Croatian group, "Rights and Freedom Initiative," called for people to "take off the mask, turn off the TV, live life to the fullest" and declared "better the grave than to be a slave" (Vulcan, 2021). In May 2020, a demonstration in Romania brought together the media channel Sputnik, conspiracy theorists, and the right-wing AUR (Alliance for the Unification of the Romanians). During the demonstration, speakers contended that COVID-19 did not exist and the government was dictatorial, criminal, and trying to restrict fundamental freedoms (Isaila, 2021). The activities and rhetoric of the radical right extremists became more extreme towards the end of 2021. For instance, during a demonstration supposed to commemorate the revolution of 22 December 1989, AUR sympathizers attempted to storm the Parliament building (Isaila, 2021).

Anti-government narratives in Serbia were also given credence by perceived heavy-handed police tactics at demonstrations against COVID-19 during 2020 (Andalou Agency, 2020). Subsequent Facebook groups and initiatives in Serbia (such as 'I live for Serbia') popped up and appealed to audiences with radical right views. Several of the most active groups in this space actively participated in anti-government protests and were visibly engaged online. They promoted anti-immigration, anti-vaccine, and anti-government narratives while arguing against the EU and the succession of Kosovo. This rejection of any 'territorial division' of Kosovo is mated with pandemic-specific twists accusing the government of using the lockdown as a cover to secretly settle migrants in Serbia.

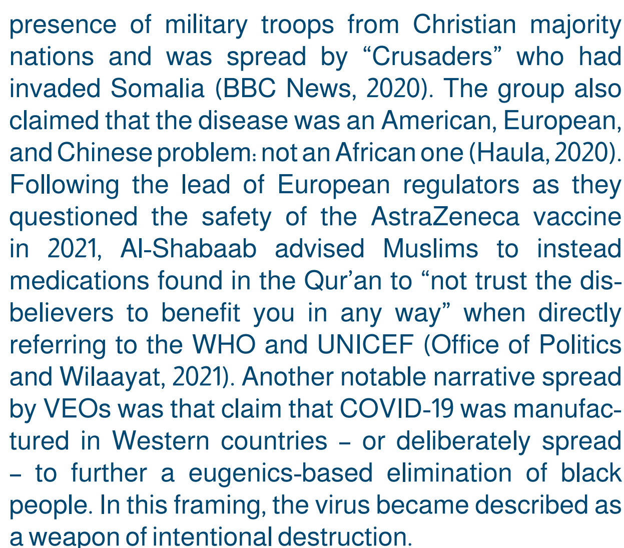
In Moldova and Romania, there was a strong religious influence in radical right and COVID-19 conspiratorial narratives, with religious symbology and clergy leaders often being present. A number of priests belonging to the Metropolitan Church of Moldova organized an anti-vaccination demonstration in August 2021. Demonstrators claimed they opposed compulsory vaccination and demanded liberty; some also claimed the vaccine was a biological weapon to reduce the world population through microchips, or that certain religious psalms protect against the pandemic (Digi24a, 2021). Individual religious icons and clergy were also present at anti-pandemic public health measure protests, despite the official position of the Romanian Orthodox church supporting government measures (Digi24b, 2021).

In Southeast Asia, narratives about repressive restrictions became more prominent toward the end of 2020 as COVID-19 cases multiplied across the region and governments imposed lockdowns. VEOs changed their narratives to reflect vehement opposition to these new restrictions – particularly when they began interfering with religious and political activities. In 2021, after leading attacks on COVID-19 public health measures and circulating disinformation on the origins of the virus during the year prior, a broad array of Indonesian actors, including Hizb-ut Tahrir Indonesia, pro-Daesh supporters, and others intensified anti-government online disinformation campaigns. Proliferating Telegram groups exhibited the most extreme anti-government rhetoric. These groups adopted some of the militant imagery and language of Daesh, using posters and videos to call on supporters, albeit in vague terms, to fight the Indonesian government.

Weaponized Conspiracies

Conspiratorial explanations of COVID-19 have been examined by researchers elsewhere but take on specifically problematic connotations when repurposed by VEOs and ideologically motivated extremist groups. Common conspiratorial narratives include that the pandemic was the work of Western or Chinese interests; claims that vaccines are dangerous or contain undesirable substances; and more general mis- and disinformation about the virus.

In **East Africa**, Al-Shabaab disseminated various COVID-19 conspiracy theories during 2020 and 2021, including that the virus transmission is caused by the



presence of military troops from Christian majority nations and was spread by "Crusaders" who had invaded Somalia (BBC News, 2020). The group also claimed that the disease was an American, European, and Chinese problem: not an African one (Haula, 2020). Following the lead of European regulators as they questioned the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine in 2021, Al-Shabaab advised Muslims to instead medications found in the Qur'an to "not trust the disbelievers to benefit you in any way" when directly referring to the WHO and UNICEF (Office of Politics and Wilaayat, 2021). Another notable narrative spread by VEOs was that claim that COVID-19 was manufactured in Western countries – or deliberately spread – to further a eugenics-based elimination of black people. In this framing, the virus became described as a weapon of intentional destruction.

Conspiracy theories in **the Balkans** were strongly associated with radical right groups, intensified online disinformation campaigns, and the QAnon movement. Tactical efforts to mainstream radical right views by utilizing more popular conspiracy theories as an entry-point for general audiences were widely used by extremist organizations. In all countries studied, there was evidence of both a rise over 2020 and 2021 in the number of individuals who supported radical right extremist narratives (for instance, anti-immigration, anti-LGBT+, and anti-abortion narratives), and the development of radical right groups that claimed, for example, that they were 'purifiers of society' and out to correct governments. Disinformation on COVID-19 included speculation that the virus and vaccines were weapons, perhaps even created by the American army or developed by the Chinese (Laterze and Romer, 2020). Many variations of these forms of narratives were identified in Balkan countries. The following examples demonstrate how the radical right and conspiracy theorists shifted their focus to spread narratives about the pandemic and undermine governments regionally. Through these, COVID-19 became a "lie" in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bieber et al, 2020; Rights and Freedom Initiative, 2021). Other misinformation in Albania contended that COVID-19 originated from a laboratory in Wuhan, according to individuals (BIRN, 2021) or in US labs for conspiracy theorists in Moldova (Bieber et al, 2020). Misinformation about Bill Gates and radical right diatribes against globalism often featured in conspiracies behind the pandemic in North Macedonia, Moldova, and Bulgaria (Europa Libera, 2020). Racism – a hallmark of the radical right – also figured in these narratives as Sinti and Roma minority communities became supposed "hotbeds of infections," and COVID-19 became a biological weapon designed to control the world population (Digi24c, 2020).

Anti-vaccination messaging was also prominent, particularly in the Balkans and Southeast Asia. In the Balkans, radical right extremist groups and individual conspiracy theorists shifted from COVID-19 denialism in the early stages of the pandemic to subsequently proliferate sentiments such as that "the vaccine is a poison…still in the testing phase" or that "vaccination is a type of organized genocide" (Istinom Protiv Lazi, 2021). Additional dis- and misinformation about the vaccines circulated widely, playing on religious and ideological beliefs across the region.

In **Southeast Asia**, vaccines – particularly those developed in China such as Sinovac – were also the subject of disinformation narratives. Common narratives spread across diverse ideologically motivated groups, despite occupying very different spaces on the extremist spectrum. In 2020, violent extremist networks claimed Chinese-manufactured vaccines were part of a plot by China to incapacitate local populations and occupy the region, narratives reflective of anti-Chinese prejudices held by many ideologically motivated VEOs in the region (Internal Telegram Dataset, 2021). Other conspiracy theories in the area also demonstrated this prejudice. Another VE-linked narrative explained SARS-CoV-2 as a bioweapon deployed by China – perhaps spread via Chinese migrant workers (IPAC, 2020). Such racist and nativist narratives were primarily found in Indonesia but also in Malaysia and the Philippines. Anti-Chinese conspiracy narratives functioned as a unifying commonality between different extremist groups and their followers (including Daesh-affiliates and the Islamic Defenders Front). As the pandemic became entrenched and there were no indications of it abating, regional extremist groups also began re-posting and adapting COVID-19 mis- and disinformation from US and Western sources, though their use of such messaging gradually decreased over 2021 (Internal Telegram Dataset, 2020).

The research team did not locate specific conspiracy theory narratives in extremist communications in West Africa beyond generalized global narratives on COVID-19. Given that local VEOs such as Boko Haram have previously rejected vaccines (such as the polio vaccine) and attacked vaccine distributors, it was expected that VEOs in West Africa would campaign against the COVID-19 vaccine. However, this did not happen. While groups operating elsewhere in Africa, such as Al-Shabaab, have released statements rejecting the AstraZeneca vaccine, their counterparts in the Sahel and the Lake Chad region did not issue any public statements regarding the vaccine. This may be partly a result of the reality of lower vaccine distribution compared to many other countries. Still, VEOs in this region did disseminate generic mis- and disinformation about COVID-19, even without novel adaptations, which may have contributed to non-compliance with public health measures across general populations (Edu-Afful, 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

As the above summary and metanarrative analyses indicate, the last two years of the pandemic have strongly influenced the development of new fear-based narratives for violent extremist organizations globally. Popular, effective forms of messaging building on mainstream fears have allowed terrorists and extremists to reach new audiences and leverage their concerns around the pandemic into tangible support. Amid a resurgence of distrust, weaponized conspiracies, and violence globally, there is more need than ever for effective prevention activities that foster more resilient societies.

Recommendations are provided here for policymakers and practitioners based on the findings of the report series – elaborated on in this article and through the full texts available online. These recommendations are grouped into three categories: **Anticipate**, or a set of future projections and recommendations for the coming one-to-three years; **Understand**, or how to improve prevention programming via increasing the comprehension of emergent narratives; and **Prevent**, through a set of tailored activities addressing extremist and terrorist narratives, especially online.

Anticipate

1. **Authorities should prepare for a continued rebound in violent extremist activity globally: especially in SE Asia and, to a lesser extent, the Balkans.** This follows the trend of increasing violence in late 2021, following COVID-19 restrictions easing and as inter-and intra-regional travel broadly restored. The al-Qaeda-aligned Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) group will likely also consolidate power in Indonesia and SE Asia.

2. **P/CVE practitioners should anticipate that successful metanarratives, such as anti-vaccine, public health, and globalist conspiracies, will continue to go viral across ideologically opposed groups and may be used in future health-related crises**. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) will likely retool successful messages for delivery by credible messengers trusted by their local audiences.

3. **Public health and safety actors should anticipate an increase in weaponized extremist propaganda against vaccines in East and West Africa; or potentially in future health-related crises.** VEOs had (mostly) not started public campaigns against COVID-19 vaccines, mainly due to the low number of vaccine doses administered in remote areas where these groups operated in 2020 and 2021. There is a strong likelihood that VEOs will start disseminating anti-vaccination content once vaccines become more available, particularly if pro-vaccine campaigns start and/or populations are mandated to be vaccinated. This is also relevant for future possible health crises, especially where there is an international response.

Understand

1. **Governments and tech platforms should work across sectoral divides with organizations such as Tech against Terrorism (TaT) and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) to improve coordination while limiting the appeal and spread of terrorist messages online.** This may include sharing tools, resources, and best practices to improve enforcement of harmful content disseminated by VEOs.

2. **Social media platforms must adapt their systems to detect more nuanced forms of messaging – and those offered in local languages – than current moderation systems are able to capture.** Platforms should also collaborate more closely with localized subject-matter experts to bolster their knowledge of and capacity to detect signals and language patterns being used by terrorist groups. Mainstream and especially less popular social media platforms remain vulnerable to violent extremist actors, despite the advances made in recent years in automatic detection and content moderation.

3. **Authorities and policymakers must fund the development of new tools and methods to identify and credibly counter extremist content and novel disinformation tools as the transition to decentralized communications and social media technology accelerates.** Although decentralized communications are at an embryonic stage, the region hosts a tech-savvy population who are likely to be early adopters of such technologies, potentially making it easier for extremists to radicalize, propagandize, and recruit on alternative platforms.

Prevent

1. **P/CVE practitioners and governments should increase online countermeasures such as positive interventions and 'pre-bunking' narratives via inoculation theory-based techniques**. Battlefield propaganda from Afghanistan has proliferated and inspired offline operations in Southeast Asia. The Taliban's return to power and the intensified fighting between Taliban

forces and Daesh (IS-Khorasan) in Afghanistan have given inspiration to all sides of the extremist community in Southeast Asia.

2. **Donors should support local, contextually relevant strategic communication campaigning and training for civil society organizations, media groups, and credible messengers and influencers on how to deliver tailored counter-narratives and alternative messaging campaigns.** These should build on addressing conspiracies used by VEOs that spread COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation.

3. **Governments and security actors must continue to observe human rights and work to deliver the appropriate provision of adequate social and medical services, to build trust in government and discourage citizens from supporting VEOs and non-state armed actors.** To counter violent actors, a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is needed. Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should work together to resolve internal grievances and improve trust in public institutions. These grievances and mistrust may be manipulated by VEOs to polarize communities and recruit individuals to their cause in the context of COVID-19.

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Online Radicalization During the Covid Pandemic

Joe Whittaker

Introduction

There has been widespread concern within media and policy circles over the effects of the pandemic on radicalization. This is often articulated as a fear that more time spent online will lead to greater exposure to extreme and harmful content, which in turn, may increase the chances of individuals turning to violent extremism. Combined with the high levels of stress, uncertainty, and socioeconomic upheaval, at first glance, this seems like a legitimate concern. This chapter will explore this claim, ultimately arguing that we do not yet know enough to make firm judgments as to whether the pandemic will cause an increase in violent extremism. Moreover, despite a clear adoption of COVID narratives as part of extremist messaging and increased engagement with such content during the lockdown periods, there are reasons to be skeptical that this will necessarily lead to more violence. Rather, existing knowledge highlights the complexity of the radicalization process and the importance of face-to-face interactions; CVE experts should not just assume that it will be exacerbated by more engagement with radical content online, particularly if it comes at the expense of offline encounters. As such, this chapter is relevant not simply to the ramifications of the COVID pandemic, but also the wider topic of online radicalization, investigating the relationship between engaging in radical content and violent outcomes.

To make this argument, this chapter will first highlight how policymakers and the media have articulated this concern, which is followed by a brief discussion of how some of the conditions brought about by the pandemic (not directly related to the Internet) may, theoretically, have created more opportunities for violent extremism. It then assesses the proliferation of extremist content during lockdowns, showing that propagandists have weaved the pandemic into their narratives and that research demonstrates that engagement with such content increased during this period. Despite this, the next section argues that we should be skeptical that this will lead to more violent extremism; one should expect propaganda to integrate current affairs into their narratives, and there was a widespread increase in online engagement during this period. More broadly, we still know very little about the effects of radical content on its audience, and we do know that offline interactions are still a key part of radicalization. The chapter then conducts a (very) early stocktake of attack data since the beginning of the pandemic up to the time of writing in 2022, finding little to support the idea that there has been an observable increase in attacks so far. The chapter ends by discussing policy and practitioner responses. In essence, the thesis of this chapter is that CVE experts and policymakers should not be especially concerned about the increase in Internet usage during the pandemic, and as such, our responses should not be solely confined to this domain either. Online and offline interventions offer different opportunities and challenges as part of a holistic CVE framework. Where online responses are used, inoculation may provide the most fruitful intervention, particularly in the context of COVID mis/disinformation, where studies are already demonstrating promising results.

Policy and Media Concerns

In June 2020, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UN CTED) warned against the short-term effects of COVID-19-related lockdowns, which led to a captive audience of young people spending more unsupervised time online. This, they argued, offered a greater opportunity for extreme groups to expose a large number of people to their ideas (UN CTED, 2020). The report indicates that the relationship between online activity and radicalization to violence is still not fully understood. In the UK, former Security Minister Damian Hinds noted that the government was increasingly worried that the pandemic may have exacerbated the number of "lone wolf" terrorists that had become radicalized online (Wood, 2021). His logic was that 'when you have more people who are spending more time in their bedrooms at their computer…you are going to get a growth in that tiny proportion for whom that is a dark journey' (Grierson, 2021).

The UK's law enforcement has also expressed concern. In December 2020, London's Metropolitan Police's former Chief Superintendent Kevin Southworth highlighted an increase in flagged far-right material by the Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit, which he suggested could result from young people being isolated and spending more time online during the pandemic (Sky News, 2020). His colleague, Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, described COVID-19 as the "perfect storm," with growing numbers of young people accessing hateful content as they were stuck at home during the pandemic, which could set them on a path towards violent extremism (Basu, 2020). In their Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT), Europol warned that a range of factors brought about by the pandemic could exacerbate radicalization, including social isolation due to lockdowns, fear of falling ill, increased time spent online engaging with radicalizing influences, financial worries, dissatisfaction with government measures to combat the pandemic, and misinformation online (Europol, 2021a).

One problem is that content that is clearly identifiable as "terrorist" or "violent extremist" only represents a fraction of the extremist ecosystem. Discussing social media recommendation algorithms, the EU Counter-Terrorism Commissioner notes that: 'The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the nexus between illegal content (hate speech and terrorism) and legally harmful content (conspiracy theories and disinformation). Not only are the boundaries between these types of content sometimes blurred, but disinformation can work as a tool to recruit new followers for extremist ideologies, which can lead to real-life violence' (Council of the European Union, 2020, p. 13). Although fraught with conceptual and operational issues, this classification of "legal yet potentially harmful" is at the forefront of policy, particularly in the EU (for example, see the Digital Services Act) and the UK (the Online Safety Bill).

Media sources have been keen to disseminate headlines which suggest that radicalization has been exacerbated by COVID. A recent example of this was the white supremacist-inspired terror attack in Buffalo, NY. in May 2022. It was reported that his family blamed the isolation brought about by lockdown, suggesting that he supplemented face-to-face contact by interacting with radical content online (Sarkar, 2022), which is supported by the attacker's own manifesto. In Australia, there have been warnings of angry and isolated people who were radicalized during the pandemic that 'could turn to violence after being exposed to "an echo chamber" of extremist messaging, misinformation and conspiracy theories during the coronavirus pandemic' (Hurst, 2022), while in the UK, newspapers have cautioned that the pandemic has spurred engagement in online extremism (Sabbagh, 2022). In the US, there have been stories about children being "brainwashed" by conspiracy groups such as QAnon during their time online during lockdowns, who must now be deprogrammed (Rodriguez, 2021).

The pandemic as an exacerbator of radicalization

Before moving to the role of the Internet, it is worthwhile to discuss some of the other ways in which the pandemic may have exacerbated violent (and non-violent) radicalization. This is important because few take the view that the Internet alone can radicalize, but rather that it can manifest alongside a range of other vulnerabilities and stressors. There is relatively valid theoretical logic that the pandemic may have exacerbated violent extremism. Francesco Marone (2021) notes that in the short-term, the West experienced states of mind or grievances that are identified in the academic literature as potentially problematic in this regard. This includes loss and trauma (from the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people); disruption of daily habits (including face-to-face conversations); psychological distress; and high levels of uncertainty. He also warns that there may be medium and long-term effects, including social, political, and cultural consequences (Marone, 2021).

Gary Ackerman and Hayley Peterson (2020) hypothesize ten potential outcomes of the pandemic on the terrorism landscape in the short, medium, and long term. One of their outcomes is that there will be an increased susceptibility to radicalization. Like Marone, they point to a range of factors that have been highlighted in the existing literature that could lead individuals toward political violence. They discuss the manner in which people have been dislocated from their daily lives and have lost loved ones, jobs, or face great uncertainty about the future. These psychological issues could lead to a greater propensity to blame out-groups in favor of extremist group narratives, particularly when accompanied by personal loss, frustration, or reminders of death (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020). They also discuss the potential of terrorists "working from home," in which they have more time to create and consume propaganda, as well as planning and coordinating attacks.

Nadine Salman and Paul Gill (2020) highlight that the pandemic may create or exacerbate existing stressors, which can play a role in radicalization. In particular, they note that many more people are spending time at home, which could increase vulnerability via isolation or mental health issues. Family conflict or domestic violence may also be a stressor. Like Ackerman & Peterson (2020) and Marone (2021), they also point to economic factors, such as losing jobs, being placed on furlough, or disrupting careers or education. This may coincide with more time spent online, which could result in more exposure to radicalizing environments which support violent extremism (Salman & Gill, 2020). Gill sums this up by stating: 'You have the perfect storm with COVID going on, and lockdown, where you've got people unmoored from their families and friends and going through psychological distress…Lots of people get radicalized for a lot of different reasons, but there is definitely a pool of people that have become more vulnerable as a byproduct of the lockdown' (Gill, quoted in Knapton, 2021).

It is clear to see why there is a substantial concern amongst policymakers, the media, and academics. Research into the potential drivers of radicalization has long posited factors that seem familiar here. The notion of a "cognitive opening" – a personal crisis that can be brought about by loss or an event that

dramatically alters someone's life – has been long theorised as a potential trigger (Wiktorowicz, 2005). Isolation has also been identified as a risk factor (Clemmow, 2020; Sageman, 2004), particularly if groups as a whole become isolated, as it can lead to rapid cohesion, which can form social ties (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Vikrant Desai (2021) notes that psychological distress has been identified as a contributing factor in the radicalization process, which has previously been well-established within the context of exposure to political violence (Canetti et al., 2013). This is also the case with uncertainty, which takes a high cognitive toll and can cause individuals to seek certain answers in black-and-white narratives of extremist groups (Hogg et al., 2013). Haroro Ingram notes that uncertainty and psychological distress are exploited by blaming the in-groups crises on specific out-groups, and in doing so, arguing that violence is the only solution (Ingram, 2016).

However, some scholars have been more critical. Michael King and Sam Mullins critique what they call the "perfect storm" theory of radicalization as espoused by Basu and other policymakers above. They assess whether there are theoretical reasons to be concerned due to increased risk factors (many of which are outlined above), which they agree with, but note that the drivers of radicalization are poorly understood, and none are necessary or sufficient. They argue that 'to speak of a "perfect storm" suggests a thorough understanding not only of the factors that trigger radicalization, but also of how these factors interact to significantly increase its likelihood' (King and Mullins, 2021). Rather they warn against overstating the case, given how much is unknown.

Should we be concerned about "COVID online radicalization"?

So far, this chapter has discussed how the factors brought about by the pandemic could exacerbate radicalization vulnerabilities, which are theoretically sound (if complex and multifaceted), yet there is not yet any strong evidence to support it. However, there is a central hypothesis to the "COVID radicalization" argument to which we should be skeptical – the idea that the increased amount of time spent online will make radicalization more likely. As noted above, this is often packaged by policymakers as part of a wider set of concerns, for which increased time spent online could be some kind of force-multiplier. This view has been expressed by Nikita Malik, who, in March 2020, argued that people might attempt to make sense of the crisis by turning to fake news, conspiracy theories, and extremist materials, which in turn could exacerbate or speed up radicalization (Malik, 2020).

From the beginning of the pandemic and the beginning of lockdown restrictions, extremists have attempted to interweave these narratives in pursuit of their wider goals. Research examining Twitter outlinks of German and French far-right ecosystems found conspiratorial COVID narratives to be one of the main categories that was spread (Macdonald et al., 2022). Similarly, when analyzing the Twitter activity of supporters of the German far-right party AFD, Lella Nouri and Suraj Lakhani demonstrate that they 'othered' out-groups and ineligible in-groups such as the German Government and the global establishment as part of their discourse (Nouri and Lakhani, 2021). Similarly, an analysis of radical right activity of Irish Telegram groups found that far-right groups heavily promoted anti-lockdown sentiment and pushed misinformation, including the adoption of antisemitic slurs (Gallagher and O'Connor, 2021). When summarizing the nature of radical right extremist content in 2021, Conway, Watkin, and Looney note that 'right-wing extremists continued to exploit the pandemic to support longstanding anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, anti-immigration and anti-Islam rhetoric, and accelerationist narratives' (Conway et al., 2022, pp. 16–17).

Research into religiously-inspired extremist groups at the start of the pandemic also found that they were keen to exploit the emergency for their own goals. Mina al-Lami of BBC Monitoring notes that they "cautiously welcomed" the pandemic. Daesh was the most vocal, using it as an opportunity to call for attacks. In contrast, al-Qaeda attempted to weaponize the pandemic as an opportunity to convert non-Muslims into their understanding of Islam. This distinction, she notes, is consistent with the differences between each group's propaganda and recruitment strategy. A common recurring theme amongst religiously-inspired extremist groups was gloating; many used the opportunity to frame the pandemic as divine retribution and ridicule the West's handling of it (al-Lami, 2020). In an analysis of Daesh's newsletter al-Naba, Aymenn al-Tamimi rejects the "clickbait" headline that the group warned its fighters against conducting attacks in Europe. Rather, he argues, they used the pandemic as an opportunity to exploit the division among its enemies that arose (al-Tamimi, 2020). Research on Daesh and Al-Qaeda's propaganda conducted by Europol has come to similar conclusions, noting that groups are using conspiracy theories and narratives to further their cause:

> ***"Official propaganda by jihadist groups focused around three main narratives: 1) highlighting the negative impact of the pandemic and the economic recession on Western societies; 2) blaming Western governments for the pandemic and framing a return to Islam as the solution; and 3) providing health and hygiene guidance to their adherents, in an attempt to demonstrate governance capabilities"***
>
> – Europol, 2021b, p. 37.

The report also notes that "pandemic chatter" became prominent amongst supporters online.

Cross-ideological research has also shown adoption of COVID narratives. In research comparing religiously-inspired extremism and the radical right, Milo Comerford and Jacob Davey find an overlap between radical right accelerationist and apocalyptic religiously-inspired narratives – ultimately both suggesting that society will break down in the wake of a new utopian reality. Each movement presented COVID as bringing about this change. Moreover, both movements present conspiratorial accounts of the pandemic, although the causes differ, with groups like al-Qaeda and Daesh framing COVID as God's work, while the radical right ascribed blame to minority communities (Comerford and Davey, 2020). In the summer of 2020, the UN Secretary- General warned that both religiously-inspired extremism and the radical right groups were seeking 'to exploit divisions, local conflicts, governance failures and grievances to advance their objectives' (United Nations, 2020).

Beyond the adoption of COVID into extremist narratives, evidence suggests that online engagement may have increased as well. Practitioner and research organization Moonshot monitors the frequency of white supremacist keywords, and found that, immediately after lockdown, there was a 13% increase in the United States, and that states with "stay at home" directives for more than 10 days had a substantially greater increase (21%) than those without (1%) (Moonshot, 2020a). Using the same methods in Canada, they found that Ottawa, Montréal-Laval, Calgary and Edmonton all saw statistically significant increases in searches for far-right content. Searches for violent radio and podcasts increased by 330% and video games by 324%, although searches for extremist slogans and symbols decreased by 23% (Moonshot, 2020b). Davies et al. (2021) analyzed a host of online fora under four broad categories, including the radical-right, religiously-inspired (or 'jihadist'), incel, and far-left, to assess whether traffic had increased as a result of the lockdown restrictions in the early months of 2020. They found that the radical right and incel fora showed significant increases in posting behavior, which they attribute to the health crisis being more aptly suited to these movements' narratives. They argue that just because religiously-inspired and far-left groups did not see a marked increase does not mean that they have not been affected by the pandemic; it is possible that each was using different platforms or disseminating narratives in other ways.

Research conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has also suggested an increase in extremist activity. Comerford and Lea Gerster also found a spike in online anti-Jewish sentiment by German and French far-right actors that were heavily related to the pandemic, finding a considerable growth of antisemitic keywords when comparing the first two months of 2020 and 2021 (Comerford and Gerster, 2021). Similarly, Jakob Guhl and Gerster analyzed radical right, far-left, and religiously inspired extremist online activity in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, finding that extremists' reach had increased in these ecosystems since the pandemic. Importantly, however, different ideologies experienced distinct effects; radical right extremists gained substantially more followers, particularly on fringe platforms such as Telegram (Guhl & Gerster, 2020).

Why we should be skeptical

Given these two interlinked factors – extremists are weaving the pandemic into their narratives, and engagement with radical content seems to have increased during lockdown restrictions – one may begin to understand why there is substantial policy concern, particularly when added to the theoretical concerns that the material conditions caused by COVID may exacerbate radicalization. However, there are good reasons to be skeptical that increased online engagement will necessarily lead to more radicalization. This is because much of the existing research demonstrates the importance of offline networks, which may be significantly disrupted during lockdown restrictions.

To begin with narratives, it should not be a surprise that bad actors are seeking to exploit the crisis to further their ideological goals; this is something that extremist organizations have always consistently done. Research by Julian Droogan & Shane Peattie (2016) into al Qaeda magazine Inspire found that the publication was inherently reactive to global events such as political volatility in the Middle East and North Africa, successful terrorist attacks, and the killing of prominent jihadists. Similarly, Arun Kundnani (2018) argues that much of the "counter-jihad" movement was borne out of the events of September 11th 2001 and the subsequent War on Terror, pushing Islamophobia to the top of the far-right agenda in place of other out-groups. Put simply, extremists are inherently reactive and will seek to remain relevant by weaving current affairs into their narratives. It would be

surprising if groups and movements were not using COVID as part of their messaging strategy.

One should also be cautious about the notion that more engagement with radical online content will increase the chances of violent extremism. Existing theories and models of "online radicalization" have typically focused heavily on the idea that consuming such content is a key aspect of the process (Whittaker, 2022). However, as Maura Conway correctly notes: 'There is no yet proven connection between consumption of and networking around violent extremist online content and adoption of extremist ideology and/or engagement in violent extremism and terrorism' (Conway, 2017, p. 77). There is a small but growing body of experimental research which seeks to investigate this relationship, with one piece suggesting that there may be some relationship between engagement with propaganda and supporting a fictional terrorist group (Reeve, 2019); that if existential threat or uncertainty is primed then it can increase interest or persuasion (Frischlich et al., 2015; Rieger et al., 2013); or that individuals with certain personality traits in the "Dark Tetrad" may positively interact with propaganda to make terrorist narratives more persuasive (Braddock, Schumann, et al., 2022). Perhaps the most compelling piece of research for this chapter assesses how subversive online activity – such as abusive behavior or engagement on problematic platforms – found that this was positively correlated with personal gratification, feeling the source was credible, as well as support for propaganda (Braddock, Hughes, et al., 2022).

These studies can be considered the gold standard of violent extremism research, as they use robust methods which have often not been utilized in the field, such as control groups and baselines (Neumann & Kleinmann, 2013). However, despite some evidence to suggest the effectiveness of propaganda, there are more reasons to be skeptical about its effects on a widespread audience. It should be noted that these studies are only able to test for cognitive changes (such as persuasion or support for violence) rather than behavioral ones (e.g. acting violently). Braddock (2019) highlights that laboratory studies such as these are limited because they cannot account for contextual factors that may affect psychological outcomes in the real world, noting that 'this is particularly true regarding phenomena like radicalization and terrorism, where decisions to engage in violence are often complicated and contingent on multiple social, psychological, and setting-based factors' (Braddock, 2019, p. 17). Relatedly, research into the long-term effects of violent extremist propaganda is still in its infancy. It is one thing to assess effects within a laboratory, but we know little about how long such effects last, particularly given the host of other factors that Braddock mentions. To demonstrate this difference, it is worthwhile to draw from an adjacent field – experimental research into violent video games. There is some consensus that they can prime violent beliefs or behaviors in the short term, but 'researchers tend to disagree on the long-term effects because of inconsistent or insufficient empirical evidence' (Wei & Borton, 2014, p. 558). Although the increase in experimental studies for terrorism propaganda is promising, there is not enough to link it to sustainable violent behaviors.

Beyond this lack of strong evidence of the effects of propaganda, one must also consider that lockdown restrictions increased Internet usage for all users. In June 2020, the UK's communications watchdog OFCOM observed that Internet usage in April 2020 – the first full month of lockdown – was at record levels of 4 hours per day, up around 30 minutes since the previous September (OFCOM, 2020). While the studies mentioned above are able to measure extremist usage against pre-pandemic levels (i.e. a baseline), they do not compare against a random sample of Internet users (i.e. a control group). While it is possible that certain search terms increased or extreme influencers gained more followers, it is plausible that this is part of a wider rising tide that lifted all boats because everyone was spending more time online. Needless to say, it is not ideal that extremists are part of such a tide, but it may alleviate some concerns if the wider economy of attention increased at a similar speed.

Policymakers and media concerns about "online radicalization" tend to place a heavy emphasis on online engagement at the expense of offline interactions, many of which were disrupted during the pandemic. Europol highlight that the increased time spent online engaging with radical content has increased radicalization vulnerabilities, despite the fact that 'the restrictions related to COVID-19 have hampered physical activities such as networking, training, [and] recruitment' (Europol, 2022, p.15). However, research into violent extremists' behaviors has repeatedly highlighted the importance of offline dynamics and interactions. Gill et al. (2017) demonstrate that UK-based terrorists that interact with co-ideologues or learn about their events online are significantly more likely to exhibit the same behaviour offline, as does Whittaker (2021) on a dataset of IS terrorists in the United States. Reynolds & Hafez (2017) test competing hypotheses of "online radicalization" and offline "network mobilization" on a dataset of German foreign fighters, rejecting the former and finding the latter to have the most explanatory power for their travel. Research conducted using closed-source data on UK terrorism convicts by Kenyon et al. (2022) found that although the use of the Internet was increasing, it was not replacing offline interactions – rather, individuals tended to operate in both domains, supporting the findings of Gill et al. (2017) and Whittaker (2021). Research conducted across eight countries by Hamid & Ariza (2022) found that of 439 terrorists, the majority (238) were radicalized "mostly offline," while 77 were "mostly online" and only 8 were classified as "online asocial radicalization."

These quantitative studies are supplemented with qualitative research, which demonstrates similar findings. Von Behr et al. (2013) tested a series of hypotheses, finding that although the Internet may increase opportunities for radicalization, this does not come at the expense of offline interactions, nor does it speed up the process. Interview research on the media diet of 44 German and Austrian radical, religiously-inspired extremists found that online and offline activity were inseparably linked. Individuals would consume propaganda and then discuss it in an offline setting with peers and preachers (Baugut & Neumann, 2020). The converse was also true. Discussions with friends at mosques would lead to recommendations for future propaganda to consume. Research by Whittaker (2022) also demonstrates the interconnected nature of the two domains. Terrorists attended "watch parties" in which they grouped together to stream extreme online content, or they would harness their pre-existing offline social networks to broadcast their presence in the caliphate to attempt to recruit peers. While some qualitative findings do suggest that the Internet may lead to some different online behaviors, such as entry points to radical movements, higher social status, and being emboldened by anonymity (Gaudette et al., 2020; Koehler, 2014), this research does not suggest that offline interactions are unimportant.

The notion that violent extremism is likely to increase because of more time spent online during lockdowns does not appear to be supported by existing empirical evidence. Of course, there are still many unknowns. For example, it is plausible, although not yet researched, that increased engagement with extremist content online was supplemented by face-to-face contact. We saw many anti-lockdown protests around the world, which could be the beginnings of potentially violent movements. On the other hand, there are factors that arose from lockdowns that could act as protective factors from online radicalization, such as individuals spending more time with family or loved ones (Salman and Gill, 2020). At this moment in time, both ideas are conjectures which could be the subject of empirical research in future.

What does the early data tell us?

At the time of writing, in 2022, it is clearly too early to understand long-term trends in violent extremism resulting from the pandemic. However, it may be worthwhile to take stock to see if there are any early signs in either direction. As well as their theoretical critique, King and Mullins also offer an early snapshot of the terrorist landscape in the West using available data on the first year of the pandemic. When it comes to religiously-inspired attacks, they found that there were 21 incidents in 2020, which, while an increase from 2019, is roughly in line with the average of 18 since 2014 (King and Mullins, 2021). Six of the 21 incidents had some link to the pandemic, many of which involved anger or frustration at lockdown restrictions. They note that it is more difficult to assess the radical right. In the US, the number of attacks in 2020 roughly equates to the same, relatively stable, number as in previous decades. In Europe, they draw from the Center for Research on Extremism's dataset, which shows a steady rise in non-fatal attacks for the years leading up to the pandemic, which means that a further increase would be difficult to attribute. The authors identify seven incidents of terrorism in the US for which they ascribed the pandemic as playing a role. Overall, they argue that 'the premise that the pandemic will result in more terrorism is based upon a series of assumptions that—although not entirely disproven—are far from foregone conclusions' (King and Mullens, 2021).

Raffaello Pantucci (2021) draws from a range of databases from across the world to assess whether 2020 saw a material increase in violence. Using data from The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED); University of Chicago's Chicago Projects on Security & Threats (CPOST); the Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index (GTI); the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research's (ICPVTR) annual assessment; Aaron Zelin's dataset tracking IS-claimed attacks during 2020; and The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), he finds that there is an increase of religiously-inspired attacks in Europe (which corroborates King and Mullins), but more broadly observes that violence is down. This is, in large part, due to a general downward trend since 2016. He summarizes that 'there is little evidence to show that COVID-19 had a material impact on militant violence' (Pantucci, 2021, p. 3).

Europol also offers comparative data on terrorist attacks within the European Union. In their 2020 Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT), published in June (and presumably written at the early stages of the pandemic), there was little mention of COVID outside of the foreword by Executive Director Catherine De Bolle. She warned that:

> ***"In the first months of 2020, lockdown measures introduced to combat the spread of COVID-19 could further escalate some of the trends identified in the TE-SAT, given the potential economic and social impact of the pandemic worldwide. These developments have the potential to further fuel the radicalization of some individuals, regardless of their ideological persuasion."***

– Europol, 2020, p. 4.

In essence, De Bolle is making an argument similar to that outlined above – vulnerabilities to radicalization may be exacerbated by the material conditions brought about by the pandemic.

However, the 2021 TE-SAT does not offer firm conclusions to support this concern. The total number of attacks within the EU remained relatively stable between 2019 (55) and 2020 (57), which is slightly down from 2018 (69). In terms of arrests, there was a sharp drop in 2020 (449) from the previous two years, which had just over 1000 each (Europol, 2021a). It should be noted that there are some difficulties in a direct comparison. The UK left the EU in 2020, so the 184 arrests reported in that country were not counted. Regardless, it still represents a large drop from previous years. However, they note that it is difficult to infer whether this is due to a lack of operational capabilities of terrorist groups or because law enforcement agencies have also been hampered by the pandemic. Fundamentally, they note that it is difficult to assess the impact of COVID, highlighting some anecdotal case studies that are clearly linked to the pandemic. On the other hand, noting that the lockdown restrictions have limited would-be terrorists' ability to meet physically.

The 2022 TE-SAT is similarly nebulous when it comes to the impact of covid. Qualitatively, the report highlights the impacts of the pandemic and the adoption of covid narratives into extremist propaganda. It argues that the combination of societal factors (i.e. the theoretical mechanism set out above), and more time spent online have deepened vulnerabilities. In particular, they warn about anti-government extremist movements from individuals not associated with traditional groups. That being said, attack data fell for a second straight year to 15 attacks and 388 arrests (Europol, 2022).

The most in-depth analysis to date is conducted by Berman et al. (2022), who use data from the ACLED to assess the effects of "shutdown" (i.e. lockdown) policies on demonstrations and armed conflict. It includes data from 134 countries from January 1, 2016, to September 1, 2020, and they compare these variables after lockdown restrictions are introduced. They find that there is a sharp decline in demonstrations in the opening months of such measures, but this is a short-term effect, with the numbers rising back to their original levels within two months. Moreover, they find that lockdown does not result in a drop in armed conflict; after restrictions are introduced, this type of violence actually intensifies in countries that exhibit fertile ground for conflicts – for example poorer, authoritarian countries, with higher polarization. This finding demonstrates the complexity of violent extremism, rather than merely introducing a single variable (such as lockdown).

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the most comprehensive data source on terrorist attacks around the world, also shows inconclusive results. The most recent year for which it carries data is 2020, so researchers should return to it in future years when there is more data. However, if one searches for incidents of terrorism fulfilling all three criteria and removing ambiguous cases, the year 2020 from March 15th (around when most lockdowns began) to December 31st, there are 5029 incidents (an average of 17 per day). This is in line with 2019, in which there were more over the whole year - 6769 incidents – averaging 18 per day. These two years are substantially lower than 2018 (7769 - 21 per day) and 2017 (8988 - 24 per day). In short, the GTD does not point to a marked increase in terror attacks after lockdowns. In fact, like other studies mentioned above, it shows a declining trend (START, 2022).

King and Mullins (2021), Pantucci (2021), and Europol (2021; 2022) are all reticent to ascribe an empirical link between the pandemic and an increase in violent extremism. Similarly, Berman et al. (2022) do not find a reduction due to lockdown but demonstrate that it is possible that violence may rise in certain scenarios. Furthermore, the GTD does not demonstrate a marked rise in terror attacks worldwide. Clearly, it is too early to make firm judgements; future years could see a rapid rise after individuals' grievances are given an opportunity to fester, or they could end up being subsumed by the next global crisis. However, even with future years' data, it will be impossible to ascribe a causative link; radicalization is a complex and noisy phenomenon, and many aspects are incommensurable (such as grievances and unconscious vulnerabilities).

Policy Responses

The key takeaway from this chapter is that there is far too much that we do not know about the long-term effects of the pandemic on the future of extremism and violent extremism. If one agrees with the "COVID online radicalization" thesis, it may be tempting to place a much heavier emphasis on online responses, including the removal of content, digital literacy, and counter-narratives. While these are all appropriate responses in the right context, this should not be done at the expense of offline interventions. Rather, the evidence base for online interventions – particularly P/CVE strategic communications – is extremely limited, with a recent meta-review highlighting significant shortfalls, including:

> ***"A paucity of empirical data on effectiveness, fragmented or outdated theoretical foundations and assumption-based logics constrain projects, particularly counternarratives, which attract disproportionate attention in the literature."***
>
> – Jones, 2020, p. 1.

Another systematic review was equally discouraged, including only 19 studies across 15 publications (from a total of 2,063 identified) that met the inclusion criteria of using an experimental or quasi-experimental design, and finding there to be 'little evidence that counter-narratives are effective at targeting primary outcomes related to violent extremism' (Carthy et al., 2020, pp. 30–31). Similarly, content removal has been criticized for leaving a vacuum within the messaging ecosystem (Reed et al., 2017), and digital literacy, often spoken about as a panacea, runs the risk of entering the highly charged political sphere and could be too narrow to successfully counter-extremism (Davies, 2020).

Although the evidence base for broader CVE is not necessarily much stronger – a recent metareview found that of 11,836 studies on primary and secondary interventions in CVE (offline and online) found, only 33 evaluations were of sufficient quality to include, of which only 18 reported mostly positive outcomes (Hassan et al., 2021). This suggests that offline CVE interventions are equally challenging. However, the two domains offer different opportunities, with the online offering the ability to hyper-target individuals based on factors such as keyword searches (Google, 2016) or posting behaviors (Frenett & Dow, 2018), while the offline may be better suited to signposting individuals to psychological services and social support (Schuurman & van der Heide, 2016). These approaches should be seen as complementary, rather than merely assuming that if the primary threat has gone online, so too should the response.

When considering online interventions, much of the recent research and evidence base points in the direction of inoculation as a potentially effective method of P/CVE. Analogous to medical inoculation, in which a pathogen or antigen is introduced to an individual to stimulate the growth of antibodies, communication inoculation theory hypothesizes that an individual can become resistant to persuasion if they believe that the speaker is attempting to manipulate them (i.e. psychological reactance) and if they are given information to refute it (McGuire, 1961). As with vaccination, individuals are given a weakened form of a narrative and information as to how someone may attempt to change their mind, so when they are confronted with it, they are better placed to reject the full version.

This technique – also known as "prebunking" – has become popular in P/CVE messaging in recent years. Braddock (2019) experimented on 357 participants that were exposed to an inoculation (and compared to a control group with no message), who then read either left or right-wing extremist propaganda. The groups that were inoculated were more likely to feel like they were being manipulated and react negatively to the propaganda, which in turn made them less likely to be persuaded. This has also been experimentally tested in the context of Islamophobic and religious extremist disinformation, again showing that individuals with the inoculation message were less likely to agree with the extremist content (Lewandowsky & Yesilada, 2021). This has also been adopted by Google, who have partnered with researchers at American University, who also report promising early results (Jigsaw, 2021). Particularly relevant to the topic at hand, this may be an approach that could be well-suited to tackling COVID dis/misinformation and the host of related conspiracy theories (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). A recent study has demonstrated that individuals exposed to a "prebunk" were significantly more likely to recognize and identify COVID misinformation and were more willing to receive a vaccine (Plitch-Loeb et al. 2022).

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is not to suggest that there is "nothing there" when it comes to COVID and radicalization; nor is it to suggest that the Internet is not being leveraged in a problematic way that could play some role in violent extremism. Rather, it has sought to temper the assumption that increased time spent online during the pandemic will necessarily exacerbate radicalization, which is a complex social process with many factors. Even if propaganda is exploiting COVID narratives and individuals are spending more time engaging with it, there are too many unknowns to make such assumptions. What we do know highlights that radicalization almost always occurs across both domains, and, as such, an increase in activity in one at the expense of the other will not necessarily exacerbate the problem. Importantly, even if policymakers do believe the problem resides on the Internet, it is prudent not to shape responses exclusively in that domain; P/CVE interventions in the online and offline spheres offer different opportunities and limitations and should be undertaken together as part of a wider holistic picture. That being said, recent research into inoculation seems to be one of the more promising avenues of P/CVE messaging, which could be incorporated into a response against pandemic-based extremist messaging.

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From Cells to Cultures: Responding to 'Hybridized' Extremism Threats

Milo Comerford

Introduction

This article outlines two related trends borne out of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's (ISD) analysis of (violent) extremism internationally. The first is a **hybridization** of extremism threats across the ideological spectrum, where the threat of violent extremism becomes harder to detach from a broader range of harms, including hate speech, disinformation, conspiracy movements and other violent mobilization. The second is a **post-organizational** dynamic where extremist mobilization and threats of violence increasingly emerge not from clearly defined violent groups and organizations, but from looser (online) communities.

It also looks at two factors which may have precipitated these trends - firstly, the seismic impact of COVID-19, which saw a broad church of extremist and conspiratorial actors opportunistically build loose coalitions around crisis points, shared goals and common objectives. Secondly, the fragmenting online ecosystems underpinning contemporary extremist mobilization. In considering these paradigmatic developments, the article will explore the long-term implications for policy – from prevention to regulation – and what the aforementioned trends mean for counter efforts from government, platforms and civil society actors alike.

The methodological basis for this paper is rooted in a literature review of academic and grey literature research on post-organizational and hybridized extremism threats, complemented by country case studies as well as qualitative analysis of these emerging trends from ISD experts. The essay also draws from a range of quantitative digital analysis studies from ISD researchers mapping the cross-platform online extremism, which are cited throughout the article.

The hybridization of extremism

Around the world, we are seeing evidence of extremist threats becoming increasingly 'hybridized', as the boundaries between disinformation, conspiracy theories, targeted hate, harassment and violence become ever more indistinct. Whilst CVE has traditionally been viewed through the lens of 'non-state' threats, these hybridized harms are further amplified by hostile covert and overt information operations, (Stanley-Becker & Mekhennet, 2022) and embroiled within highly technical considerations around the algorithmic amplification of hateful and extreme content on social media platforms. In parallel, global lockdowns have also catalyzed a trend of 'post-organizational' violent extremism, where the influence or direction of activity by particular groups or organizations is more ambiguous or loose.

These trends contribute to the growing concept of 'mainstreaming' extremism, whereby extremism is not viewed as synonymous with a 'fringe,' as extremist ideologies move far beyond the margins. (Miller-Idriss, 2021). In this context, it is important to avoid a purely relativist conception which defines extremism against the 'mainstream,' a challenge ISD has sought to address through its social-identity based definition, which holds extremism to be the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based 'in-group' over all 'out-groups.' By this definition, extremism necessarily advances a dehumanizing 'othering' mind-set incompatible with pluralism and universal human rights, and can encompass a range of actors, from violent groups to mainstream political movements.

These parallel trends pose a number of key questions for researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Are current conceptual frameworks fit for purpose when considering the fluid extremist dynamics which are observed today? What role does a backdrop of polarization, disenfranchisement and a more general mainstreaming of targeted violence in forming the mood music for extremist ideologies? In an increasingly post-organizational and ideologically fluid landscape, how do experts and the broader CVE community consider 'mobilizing concepts' - such as the Great Replacement and QAnon - within frameworks? What might more integrated typologies look like to reflect these hybridized threats, and how do we balance considerations around both behavior and ideology when creating frameworks? And what are the implications of conceptual frameworks for policy and programmatic responses, including prevention, interventions and digital regulation?

In the article below, we seek to address these questions and trace the lineage of these developments within international extremist movements.

COVID-19, extremism and narratives of crisis

Around the world, the COVID-19 circumstances were capitalized on by established violent extremist groups – including ideologically inspired and radical right groups – seeking to cynically weaponize the pandemic to spread violent and supremacist world views (Comerford & Davey, 2020). It was of no surprise to researchers that extremist groups from across the ideological spectrum opportunistically used the pandemic as a 'wedge issue' to promote conspiracy theories, target minority communities, and call for extreme violence.

After all, this is central to their ideological construction – JM Berger's social identity theory of extremism posits that extremist ideologies are at heart rooted in a crisis-solution construct – because one's 'in-group' is facing an existential crisis, radical, supremacist and often violent solutions are necessitated (Berger, 2022). To "put it more concretely, in the words of former EU counter-terrorism coordinator Gilles de Kerchove, Terrorists and violent extremists, aiming to change societies and governmental systems through violence, seek to exploit major crises to achieve their objectives" (Binding, 2020).

However, alongside such activity from established violent extremists, the pandemic has also served as a platform for more opportunistic coalitions to come together around crisis points and shared political goals, providing extremist movements with the opportunity to radicalize vulnerable audiences, and drawing on well-established alternative media ecosystems to broadcast their messages. In particular, in the wake of COVID-19, analysts have observed the massive proliferation of conspiracy networks across international contexts, allowing extremist movements to enlarge their sphere of influence to expanded audiences.

ISD research has shown how protest movements mobilizing against COVID restrictions commonly connect anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists, anti-government actors, and extremist movements. Comerford & Davey, 2021). Across case study research covering the USA, Canada, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, analysts qualitatively assessed anti-lockdown activity in each country through a combination of open-source assessments of reporting around protests against COVID restrictions and ethnographic exploration of social media activity.

This research sought to better understand the makeup of these protest movements; the extent to which they were engaged in potentially harmful activities, including threats of violence, hate speech, and the promotion of conspiracy theories; and the groups and individuals they target. We found that across borders, these communities have engaged in a range of harmful activities, stretching far beyond traditional violent extremist mobilization:

	Violence at protest	Spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories	Threats and intimidation	Calls for violence	Anti-minority hatred	Arson/ bombing/ armed attacks
Ireland	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
UK	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Netherlands	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Germany	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Italy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Canada	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
USA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Source: Between Conspiracy and Extremism: A Long Covid Threat?, ISD, November 2021.

Across all of these geographic contexts, we see protest movements mobilizing against COVID restrictions connecting anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists, anti-government actors, and extreme right-wing movements, and while the constituent parts of these movements consist of a wide-range of highly localized groups, the involvement of these diverse communities was near universal in the countries we monitored. Notably a strong online dimension to offline mobilization constitutes a unifying trend across the movements and different country contexts.

These heterogeneous movements speak to – and help feed into – this broader trend of hybridization, as we see greater entanglement between different threat actors, and boundaries becoming less defined. This is in large part because of the online-first architectures of such movements, and a direct product of the networking afforded by fringe and mainstream social media. Within these protest movements – which were established during COVID but continue to be mobilized by a range of issues polarizing issues, most recently the Russia-Ukraine war (Smirnova & Arcostanzo, 2022), – we see a physical manifestation of online ecosystems, whereby disparate groups of actors from New Age spiritualists to anti-vaxxers are coordinating and converging with more established extremist movements.

Hybridization of ideological perspectives

But it is not just across these broad-based social movements that we are seeing significant bleed-between. Even within seemingly established strains of extremism there are observed signs of cross-pollination and ideological interchange.

One notable trend in recent years has been towards what has been described as 'mixed, unclear and unstable' (MUU) ideologies, a phenomenon that has seen a considerable increase in the context of Prevent referrals in the United Kingdom (Comerford & Havlicek, 2021). Some experts have suggested that this is perhaps suggestive of a broader socialization towards violence, without a commitment to a specific extremist ideology and not necessarily looking to advance a political, ideological, religious or social cause. But this data also fits with an overall trend around an increasingly fluid ideological landscape of extremism, where constellations of related extremist narratives unite under broad movements, rather than clearly cohesive ideologies. This phenomenon has been labelled by Bruce Hoffman as 'ideological convergence,' in which we see more fluidity in traditional categorizations of extremist threats, including an ever-thinner line between what were "previously fringe movements and online subcultures, and more orthodox variations of the extreme right" (Hoffman & Ware, 2020).

As we will see below, firm ideological categories such as 'Islamist' and 'far-right' are becoming insufficient to describe more syncretic worldviews, which increasingly elude traditional categorizations of extremism, terrorism and hate – a trend which has considerable implications for prevention approaches geared towards addressing these specific ideological phenomena.

Far Right

Within the broader far-right landscape, this fluidity is manifesting in the range of subtle variations that can be found in different proportions across varied manifestations of white supremacy, white nationalism and cultural nationalism. While these forces are all united by a supremacist idea of the perceived degeneracy of Western culture and traditional values (including Christian identity, family and pride in the country), there are considerable divergences.

Such groups and individuals draw from what FBI Director Christopher Wray has described as a 'salad bar' of seemingly contradictory extremist narratives, which might include, to different degrees antisemitic conspiracies, anti-Muslim activism, anti-government sentiment, anti-migrant hate, as well as more overt notions of white nationalism. What such dynamics show are the shortcomings of existing categories for understanding extremism threats, notions which are becoming increasingly redundant as clear ideological divisions between extremist movements, giving way towards disparate threads aligning around specific political objectives.

Salafi-Jihadism

As Colin Clarke and Rasha al Aqeedi have noted, the phenomenon of what they describe as 'fringe fluidity' means that it is "entirely possible, and increasingly more common, for violent extremists to reconcile aspects of two competing ideologies, like neo-Nazism and militant Islamism" (Clarke & Al-Aqeedi, 2021).

Recent ISD research focused on an emergent online Salafi ecosystem known as 'Islamogram' evidences this dynamic.[1] This highly active online community merges Salafi ideas with alt-right memes and gaming subcultures, presenting a hybridized ideological trend

1 Salafism is a form of Sunni Islam whose followers advocate a return to the practices of the first three generations of Muslims who lived immediately after the prophet Mohammed.

within digital Salafism, especially among 'Gen Z' audiences (Ayad, 2021). Analysis of this cross-platform online universe, which has over 160,000 members, demonstrates how this self-defining Salafi community borrows heavily from the culture of the alt-right, with increasing ideological convergence around the alleged moral decline of the West and the need to return to an idealized 'pure' society.

Here, we see an 'alt-rightification' of Gen-Z Salafi spaces, which are metastasizing into a new battle-ground for Muslim youth identity. We see parts of this community self-defining as part of an 'akh-right' subculture – a play on 'alt-right' and the Arabic word for brother – as users see themselves as locked in a parallel culture war against 'libtards' and 'cute Muslims' (labels for progressive Muslims), language more commonly found on imageboards such as 4chan. Through a well-established memetic toolbox of coordinated 'brigading' and semi-ironic 's***-posting' characterized by plausible deniability, these sub-communities see themselves as waging a self-conscious digital insurgency against liberal Muslims and democracy, as well as LGBTQ+ and gender rights. This often manifests as calls for discrimination, online targeting or even violent threats.

Interestingly, these Gen-Z online Salafi communities have an ambivalent relationship with overt violent extremism. While generally opposed to ISIS as khawarij (outsiders), the groups nonetheless express support for more national jihadist groups such as Hamas and the Syria-based Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, who they describe as 'based' (internet parlance indicating respect). During the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, members of this community congratulated what they called the 'Chadliban' for its 'epic troll of the US military,' finding themselves agreeing with and amplifying memes created by alt-right communities similarly opposed to 'US imperialism.'

Case Study: 'Post-ideological' political violence in the United States

This collision of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and extremism is not new and has been especially present in anti-government extremism in the USA for decades (Neiwert, 2017). However, in recent years the threat landscape in the USA has undergone a wholesale transformation. What were primarily localized nationally-oriented groups have transformed into large scale, tech savvy movements with an international reach (Davey & Ebner, 2017). These movements are able to translate digital mobilization into effective offline action, (ISD, 2021), connecting the dots between a wide range of communities and grievances. A range of amorphous threats thrive in this grey area, with ambiguous relationships between this broad spectrum of inter-related threats, ranging from white nationalists and anti-government militia movements, to the Incel movement and male supremacists, to radicalized conspiracy theories disseminated by groups such as Qanon (Schaffner, 2020).

'Far-right extremism' (sometimes alternatively conceptualized in terms of 'radical right') is often the term used to describe this wide-ranging ecosystem of racists, anti-government extremists and conspiracy theorists. However, other terminology used by policy makers to address parts of this movement includes 'racially and ethnically violent extremism,' 'white supremacy' and 'domestic extremism.' Whilst policy attention to this threat has grown in the wake of the 6th January Capitol attack in the US, response efforts are still hampered by definitional ambiguities and narrow framings, and as this threat continues to grow, coherent policy responses may be hampered by fragmented conceptual framings around this interrelated spectrum of extremism challenges. As has been discussed above, words matter in how we discuss and conceptualize these issues, and there is a clear need for the expert community to develop frameworks and definitions that reflect the challenge we face today.

Such conceptual challenges were particularly acute in the case of the mass shooting in Highland Park, Illinois, where a 21-year-old killed seven people and wounded dozens more at a 4th July parade in 2022. Whilst certainly political in nature (with emerging evidence that Jewish communities may have been especially targeted) (Nehorai, 2022).

The attacker was seemingly not guided by a clear political or ideological motivation, and did not fit into established ideological categories for political violence such as white supremacism, Islamist extremism or antigovernment militancy. (Yousef, 2022). Instead, the attacker's links to a constellation of obscure nihilistic online subcultures, many of which glorify violence, fits more closely with a concerning trend of school shooters influenced by overlapping online milieus.

In this case, a specific aesthetic – rooted in the dehumanizing language of imageboards such as 4chan as well as fora devoted to sharing gory content such as beheading videos – is perhaps more tangible than any coherent ideological system. Experts have noted that while "most people who participate in these fringe communities do not go on to commit mass shootings [...] these are spaces that produce conditions for violence" (Yousef, 2022).

Whether such trends constitute a 'post-ideological' extremism paradigm has been a matter of debate among experts. (Amarasingam, 2022). Most scholars claim that the notion of 'non-ideological extremism' is a contradiction in terms (although the degree of ideological fervor or,

indeed understanding may vary). However, the question remains whether the incoherent aesthetic or belief system of an attack like that in Highland – where there is no clear out-group or in-group guiding supremacist action – does constitute an ideological function. (Argentino, 2022).

Post-organizational dynamics

Such considerations were largely moot in a context when a group or individual was associated with a clear affiliation to a violent extremist group – such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. And so the debate around individuals guided by uncertain ideological principles feeds into the second major concept explored in this paper, the notion of 'post-organizational' extremism.

In recent years terrorism and violent extremism across the ideological spectrum have been marked by a "post-organizational" trend – where the influence or direction of activity by particular groups or organizations is ambiguous or loose (Comerford, 2020). As Colin Clarke and Bruce Hoffman have described, "[a] confluence of ideological affinities is [becoming] more powerful in inspiring and provoking violence than the hierarchical terrorist organizational structures of the past" (Hoffman & Clarke, 2020).

This is not a new phenomenon. The notions of "leaderless resistance" and "leaderless jihad" were first discussed decades ago by extremist ideologues such as white-supremacist Louis Beam Jr. and al-Qaeda ideologue Abu Musab al-Suri. Nor is this to say that organizations have no role to play in violent extremism. For example, there is ambivalent evidence around the level of organizational unity amongst the UK's far-right movement, with some researchers arguing that it is conceivable that the current post-organizational moment may pass and return to a state of greater consolidation. (Allchorn, 2021)

However, post-organizational dynamics have certainly accelerated with the pandemic. As Argentino et al. have pointed out in a recent paper, in particular the mass de-platforming of various actors in January 2021, when anti-vaccine disinformation was proliferating from conspiracists and extremists alike, led to a new crop of individuals leaving mainstream platforms to join fringe social networking sites where violent extremist ecosystems thrive. (Argentino et al. 2022)

Yet despite the fracturing and franchising of violent extremist movements and the proliferation of decentralized online extremist spaces, responses to terrorist content online are still hampered by rigid organizational conceptions of the challenge. Many tech companies still gear their own internal policy enforcement and terms of service around "hateful" and "dangerous" groups, while specific policies around violent extremism and terrorism are largely hamstrung by the limitations of international lists of proscribed terrorist groups, such as the UN Designated Terror Groups list, which are overwhelmingly structurally geared towards combating an organized Islamist threat from ISIS and al-Qaeda. While things are moving, this has also impacted the relatively narrow bank of material included in joint tech company initiatives, such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism's (GIFCT) hash-sharing database.

Developing new frameworks for post-organizational threats

ISD has tried to make sense of this emerging post-organizational reality, and its implications for responses. In a paper for the GIFCT, researchers developed a prototype taxonomy that allows researchers, platforms and policymakers to move beyond a group-centered approach to understanding the threat from violent extremist groups, while ensuring approaches remain robust, transparent, and protective of fundamental freedoms (Davey et al. 2021).

Drawing on an analysis of a broad set of violent extremist case studies (from terror cases to online extremist content caches) which demonstrate different axes of post-organizational fluidity and the shortcomings of purely group-based approaches, analysts isolated cross-cutting categories of content which play distinct roles in the motivation, radicalization, and facilitation of violent extremist activity. Across both group-affiliated and 'post-organizational' content, we categorized:

1. **Instructional material** which contains guidance on operational aspects of terrorist and violent extremist activity. This includes guidance on the manufacture and execution of attacks, as well as guides on combat drills, fitness, and non-violent activism such as sticker campaigning.

2. **Ideological material** that is designed to specifically further a violent extremist or terrorist worldview. This includes key texts and lectures which provide the theoretical underpinning for a terrorist or violent extremist cause, and which provide an explanation for why the world is a certain way.

3. **Inspirational material** designed to reinforce a violent extremist or terrorist mindset. This includes a wide range of content that is designed to elicit a reaction or response in the radicalized mind. This includes material intended to provoke hatred towards a particular group of people or promote pride and support for a particular cause. Notably, this category of content is the least well-defined in the existing literature.

Practical definitions of each of these content types are provided in the framework below:

	Inspirational material Content which can reinforce a ciolent extremist or terrorist mind-set		**Ideological material** Material which is specifically trying to further a violent extremist or terrorist world-view		**Intructional material** content which contains instructions on opperational aspects of terrorist activity	
Violent	**Non-Group** Violent material not associated with a spcecific violent extremist group, designed to inspire violent extremism or terrorism, including copycat attacks.	**Group** Violent material group material designed to inspire violent extremist or terrorism.	**Non-Group** Material not associated with a specific violent extremist group. which makes the ideological case for extremist violence.	**Group** Violent material group material which makes the ideological case for violence.	**Non-Group** General instructional material providing operational guidance on carrying out acts of violence and terrorism.	**Group** Violent extremist group material providing guidance on conducting acts of violence and or terrorism.
Non-Violent	**Non-Group** Material not associated with a specific violent extremist group. which nonetheless inspires the mood music for violent extremism.	**Group** Violent extremist group material designed to inspire supporters, but not necessarily violence.	**Non-Group** Material not associated with a specific violent extremist group. which nonetheless helps to build the "system of meaning" underpinning a violent extremist ideology.	**Group** Violent extremist group material designed to build the "system of meaning" underpinning a violent extremist ideology.	**Non-Group** General instructional material providing operational guidance on non-violent activities relevant to violent extremism.	**Group** Violent extremist group material providing guidance on non-violent activities.

Source: A Taxonomy for the Classification of Post-Organizational Violent Extremist and Terrorist Content, ISD for GIFCT, 2021.

Based on applying the framework to several case studies, the full GIFCT paper considers a number of tiered approaches which might be considered when shaping content moderation efforts in response to these varied categories of post-organizational violent extremism-relevant material. This includes 'high risk' content flags in cases where non-violent non-group content is circulated by terrorist and violent extremist communities, such as texts associated with the harmful 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory, as well as the hashing (establishing archived digital fingerprints) of relevant material which might not necessarily cross the threshold for immediate removal. Meanwhile, behavior-sensitive moderation efforts could take into account the network dynamics of harmful communities and the broader behavior profile of potentially vulnerable individuals. For example, the case of a user sharing both ideological and instructional material in combination could represent a greater risk than someone sharing solely inspirational content.

Such contextualized approaches will be key to moving beyond an overly narrow framing of online threats rooted solely in clamping down on specifically designated organizations, branded terrorist material, and explicitly violent content. But crucially, implementing such a framework will require an approach that is proactively conscious of fundamental rights and considers policy and product approaches that are more nuanced than the blanket removal of violating content.

Implications for Policy & Practice

So what are the broader implications of these parallel trends of hybridization and post-organizational extremism; especially in a context where COVID-19 has served as a nexus for joining eclectic groups around shared grievances, and provided extremist movements with the opportunity to radicalize vulnerable audiences? What is clear is that such ideologically eclectic 'hybridized' threats to public safety and democracy undoubtedly require a new generation of responses, which go beyond existing counter-extremism policy paradigms. These implications broadly split into four categories - regulation, intervention, prevention and coordination:

Regulation: As has been outlined above, social media has played an essential role in the incubation and amplification of the online communities core to contemporary hybrid threats, and it is clear that self-regulatory efforts from platforms have had a limited impact on these challenges. Policy discussions in this domain are still primarily focused on the removal of content that breaches platform terms of service or national laws. But case by case removal of violent and terrorist content alone will do little to address the underlying drivers of extremism in the digital domain. Regulation must also focus on the role that platform design has in enabling, amplifying and targeting certain types of behavior and content over others, rather than on identifying individual instances of violating content. This will require a rights-based prioritization of transparency and systemic risk mitigation within government approaches to platform governance, which addresses the platforms' business models and the underpinning algorithmic architecture of online extremism. (Comerford & Havlicek, 2021).

Intervention: In the space of interventions, it is crucial that we develop the next generation of offline and online interventions to address these looser movements, and to bring people out of wider extremist ecosystems. Counter messaging-based responses developed for fringe and group-based extremism challenges are poorly equipped for this more mainstreamed threat, where audiences for extremist messaging and groups engaged in harmful activity extend beyond traditional movements. We must give fresh thought to identifying models, delivery mechanism and evaluation frameworks to help practitioners target impactful disengagement interventions. Beyond mainstream social media platforms, online interventions should target the more fringe online spaces in which these hybridized movements flourish, and ensure digital efforts better line up with offline service provision to support vulnerable individuals (Davey et al. 2019). To guide impactful and evidence-based prevention and intervention efforts, we also need a much better data infrastructure that integrates real-time inputs across a range of related harms to guide resource allocation.

Prevention: The field is overdue a rethink of the program, including curricula and community initiatives, required to raise awareness of and build resilience against hybrid extremism threats. As far right scholar Cynthia Miller-Idriss has put it in the US context, "to fight this amorphous kind of radicalization, the federal government needs to see the problem as a whole-of-society, public-health issue" which requires policy makers to both "beef up security at the U.S. Capitol, but also put the same kind of effort and money into preventing radicalization years before anyone would ever think to mobilize in Washington, D.C" (Miller-Idriss, 2021). Such 'public health' style approaches which recognize the importance of contextualizing extremism threats within their broader societal environment, are emerging in a range of contexts, including Norway, which has developed a national action plan to counter radicalization and extremism that engages ministries from across government, from education to social services and health, and New Zealand, where the response to the devastating Christchurch attack in March 2019 has seen millions of dollars of increased investment in education and early-childhood initiatives. It is crucial that lessons are learned of what works from these contexts, to help inform the future of prevention programming internationally (Comerford & Havlicek, 2021).

Coordination: Recognizing that hybridized extremism threats are increasingly transnational in nature, it is urgent that we consider the best mechanisms for international collaboration, learning from the successes of initiatives targeted at specific groups, e.g. ,the Global Coalition Against Daesh. Whilst different countries have diverse legal frameworks shaping what government-led responses to such threats look like, it is important that these international linkages are reflected in disruption models and counter efforts across country contexts. Beyond governments, greater cross-platform moderation is also required. The case of the Christchurch attacker, for example, saw the use of multiple social media platforms and forums in his radicalization trajectory and propaganda dissemination strategy. While there are clearly limits to how much a company can do with regard to activity outside of its platform, the trends outlined in this article do suggest that companies should consider more proactive approaches to communities using their platforms that are directing people to insightful or risky content elsewhere.

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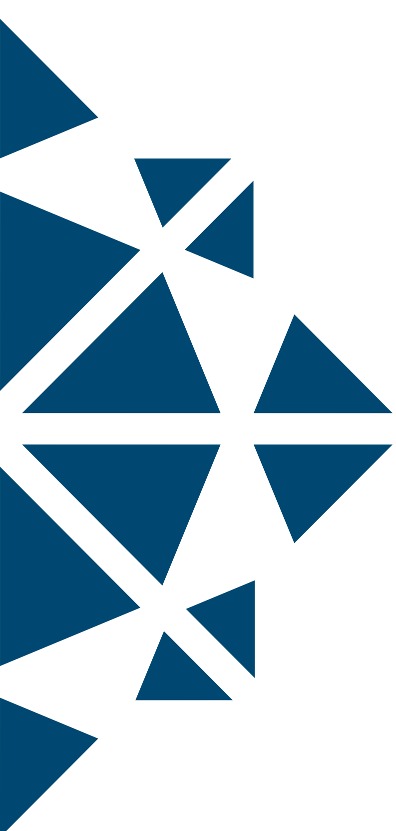

Ethical Challenges in Open-Source Intelligence Research and Digital Hygiene for P/CVE Researchers

Dr Erin Saltman & Anne Craanen

It is increasingly difficult to ignore digital spaces when it comes to research on processes of radicalization, countering violent extremism, and counterterrorism. Data pulled from social media platforms, chat forums, and media sites makes up a core space where researchers reside to find source information and create analysis about ideologically motivated violent extremist groups. On the one hand, this has provided a new lens to observe dangerous networks in a manner safer than engagement or infiltration offline, in real life settings with physical safety risks. On the other hand, safety parameters for these online spaces are centrally lacking in most academic or organizational institutions. The increase in research via online spaces to provide source material and conduct open-source intelligence is sadly often not paired with equally evolved ethical overview processes or safety infrastructure from academic institutions, think tanks, or organizations, as raised in previous global academic conferences such as VoxPol (Amsterdam, 2018), the Terrorism and Social Media Conference (Swansea, 2019), and the Hedayah International CVE Research Conference (Granada, 2022).[1]

Early-career researchers, and especially women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and ethnic minority researchers, often put themselves directly at risk by immersing themselves in violent extremist and terrorist spaces online. While the data found in these spaces can be rich and valuable for tracking a range of trends and threats, harm to the researcher and their online "subjects" should be proactively considered, with risk mitigation strategies at the forefront of methodological planning. This paper is based on a discussion session led by Dr. Erin Saltman and Anne Craanen at the International CVE Research Conference hosted by Hedayah in Granada on May 24th, 2022, entitled, Ethical Challenges in P/CVE Research OSINT and Digital Spaces. The paper discusses ethical challenges for researchers and practitioners in preventing and countering violent extremism from four perspectives. In four parts, this paper reviews:

1. Where existing research provides ethical frameworks and safety resources for researchers and practitioners online engaging in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) and terrorism space,
2. Where digital and platform-specific tooling can help researchers and practitioners in both preventative and reactive capacities to ensure heightened safety precautions,
3. Insights from the GIFCT Positive Interventions Working Group about best practices for sharing data and "do-no-harm" principles,
4. Considerations when surfacing credible threats or actions available in online crisis response moments.

Existing Research: Ethical Frameworks and Safety Resources

Before delving into the relevant literature, this article focuses on ethical practices for researchers and practitioners conducting research or open-source intelligence work on violent extremist and terrorist material online. Whilst most of the literature on ethics in online terrorism studies discusses ethical frameworks for university researchers, Conway (2021) reminds us that "many of the issues raised are certainly germane to, for example, those undertaking the same or similar research in think tanks or other settings." This article thereby focuses on the collection of primary resources, rather than secondary material. However, as seen in Whittaker's (2019) study on building secondary source databases, some of the ethical challenges that apply to secondary source data collection, such as data storage and self-care for researchers, also apply to research involving primary resources.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in academic output focused on the ethics around online extremism and terrorism research, stemming from sociological (Mills et al, 2019), security (Baele et al, 2018), and terrorism studies (Morrison, Silke, Bont, 2021). The most comprehensive overview of ethical dilemmas that arise when conducting open-source

1 While discussions about researcher safety began at the VoxPol Conference in Amsterdam in 2018, these were continued at the TASM conference in 2019, resulting in the launch of the REASSURE Project in March 2020 to document and detail researcher welfare issues as experienced by researchers, and develop strategies to mitigate these risks. See Introducing the REASSURE Project, 2020.

research comes from Conway (2021) in her article "Online Extremism and Terrorism Research Ethics: Researcher Safety, Informed Consent, and the Need for Tailored Guidelines." Here, Conway sets out crucial ethical themes which include researcher welfare (both psychological wellbeing and safety), identity of the researcher, consent (including deception and concealment), as well as the "do-no-harm principle," which includes harm to research subjects, as well as the responsibility academics, have in reporting material that may indicate a risk of a terrorist attack. This section will discuss these themes in more depth, bringing in relevant literature and guidance that has so far been given to researchers in the field.

Psychological welfare

Currently, one of the most discussed topics when it comes to ethics in P/CVE research is the potential psychological cost that comes with viewing terrorist and extremist material when conducting research (Winter, 2019; Whittaker, 2019; Conway, 2021; Cauberghs, 2022; Reeve, 2020; King, 2018; Massanari 2018; Dekens, 2020.). It has been established that repeated and prolonged exposure to extremist and terrorist content may lead to vicarious trauma or sometimes called Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) (Dekens, 2020). This may lead to symptoms of increased stress, sleep disturbances, a less positive outlook on life, and flashbacks, amongst others (Cauberghs, 2022; Dekens, 2020). Whilst there has been a significant increase in the discussion of mental health issues arising from T/VE research, there is still much that is unknown. Namely, not everyone who is exposed to graphic content experiences trauma (Cauberghs, 2022), and some material may impact researchers differently than others (Conway, 2021). Therefore, more research is needed to assess the extent of the problem regarding psychological distress experienced by academics and practitioners, so we can turn towards mitigation strategies that may decrease the psychological effects experienced.

Cauberghs (2022) interviewed academics, journalists, law enforcement personnel, and Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) investigators to assess how exposure to online terrorist content affected their mental wellbeing. Research showed a divide in impact based on how much time was spent exposed to content. People who watched material for more than ten hours a week experienced higher psychological effects, including sleep disturbances, cynicism, and less optimism when it comes to the future. Regarding mitigation strategies, he advised practitioners not to watch content late at night, to take audio out of exposure, and to take coffee breaks more frequently. Adding to recent resources for researchers, Swansea University's Cyber Threats Research Centre (CYTREC), VOX-Pol, and Moduslzad's REASSURE project aims to document researcher welfare issues, including mental health, and virtual and physical safety resources to provide guidance on how to cope with such challenges. In doing so, they are establishing a charter that aims to provide guidance specifically tailored to researchers who conduct research on extremism and terrorism online (Swansea University, 2022).

Several interventions and trainings have been made available for mitigating potential risks to researchers' mental health in other fields that can be applied to the counterterrorism and counter-extremism sector. First, there has been an increase in online safety protocols and guidelines for researchers and practitioners in journalism. Dubberly and Grant (2017) investigate vicarious trauma in journalism, and the Dart Center, focusing on experienced trauma by journalists, provides practical advice and insight into secondary trauma which can be applied to T/VE researchers.[2] Another noteworthy contribution comes from Ibex Mind, who provide training and support for building resilience and mitigating the potential negative effects of exposure to harmful content, including extremist and terrorist material.[3] In addition, some P/CVE organizations, provide therapy for practitioners focussed on open-source intelligence work and research on online harmful content (Craanen, 2022).

Whilst the availability of therapy and psychological support is a positive resource to have available for employees at an increasing number of think tanks and NGOs, in academia this is often not as easily accessible. Whilst universities usually have thorough ethics review before students and academics may embark on a research study on terrorism and violent extremism (Morrison et al, 2021), they struggle with providing mental health support. Universities face challenges with long waiting lists for wellbeing services, which can be particularly problematic for graduate students with dynamic work plans in short time spans (Whittaker, 2022, Hedayah Conference, 2022). In discussions with international academics at the Hedayah conference in 2022, it was concluded that there was a large gap in academic support structures and that more is needed from universities to support researchers' mental health in relation to exposure to disturbing, violent and/or illegal content (Hedayah Conference, 2022).

2 For more on the Dart Center and its work, visit: <https://dartcenter.org/>.

3 For more on Ibex Mind and their work, visit: <https://ibexmind.com/>.

Researcher Safety and Identity

Beyond psychological harm, counterterrorism researchers, journalists, activists, and practitioners all face potential risks to personal safety, both offline and online. When it comes to online risks, harassment, death and rape threats, cyberbullying, and trolling are but a few examples of violence that can be directed to T/VE researchers and practitioners. Oftentimes, these online risks can translate to offline risks, with doxing (whereby someone's personal details such as address and phone numbers are made public), swatting (whereby a SWAT team will be called to someone's house), and brigading (where users online congregate to harass someone in a group) being noteworthy examples (Conway, 2021). The risk of violent threats to researchers and practitioners has particularly increased in the West alongside the rise in far-right violent extremism and terrorism (Massanari, 2018; Berger, 2019).

A vital element at the crux of this is identity, which affects a researcher's safety and their mental wellbeing. Studies that discuss how the identity of researchers may affect their likelihood of receiving online and offline abuse remain limited. However, more recent studies address the fact that marginalized and vulnerable populations are disproportionately targeted (Massanari, 2018). In the counterterrorism and P/CVE space this includes undergraduate and graduate students, people of colour, adjuncts and non-tenured individuals, people of diverse gender and identity factors, and women, among others (Massanari, 2018). Conway (2021) builds on this by suggesting that the amount of emotional distress felt by examining one form of extremism or terrorism online may not be equivalent to another, which often relies on identity. As expressed during the panel in Granada on which this essay is based (2022), female researchers may struggle more with involuntary celibate (incel) material than other forms of extremism, or with more overtly misogynistic content. In addition, former extremists working in counter-extremism and counterterrorism are often disproportionately targeted, as they are seen as traitors by the movements they have moved away from.

Harassment can often lead to researchers pulling back from the public domain if they are not adequately supported by way of publishing under pseudonyms or sharing their work less on social media, which might affect opportunities and advancements over time. This harassment does not only lead to research potentially having less impact given it gets spread to a lesser extent, but it also leads to less representation from researchers with protected status and has a silencing effect on their research and, thereby, their freedom of expression. It is the shared responsibility of the more privileged to protect and offer support to those more affected by such harassment (Massanari, 2018, p.6). Tailored guidance to practitioners from specific marginalized identity groups includes: FemTechNet offering solutions to online violence against women, Reuter's Practical guide for women journalists on how to respond to online harassment, Feminist Frequency's Harassment Online, and the GIFCT's Member Resource Guide highlighting online tools and guidance for platform-specific safety tools.

Operational Security (OPSEC) in OSINT Research

Oftentimes early-career researchers and practitioners, including students who embark on terrorism studies and research, are not taught operational security (OPSEC) protocols. Whereas universities that run terrorism degrees often have a research methods class, to the collective panel's knowledge, there were no official courses that taught how to protect oneself online. Furthermore, where there are examples of institutions providing resources to students, this usually does not go beyond the use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN), the recommendation to not use personal devices, or the rare use of a burner phone. The underlying ethical question remains: To what extent should students be allowed and equipped to immerse themselves in extremist and terrorist spaces online, before equipping them with all the right tools to do so?

Thankfully, there have been some initiatives providing guidance on this topic. One example is the VoxPol Researcher Welfare: Privacy and Security resource, which collates researcher welfare sources for consultation. In addition, Marwick, Blackwell, and Lo (2016) provide recommendations to protect oneself from online harassment as well as best practice for universities. Recommendations to institutions and universities include setting clear definitions of harassment and abuse, and to provide clear references to security information, counselling, and other relevant services. Finally, OSINTCurious, a non-profit focused on sharing best practice, practical guides, and other information relevant to conducting open-source research, also share their OPSEC tips and tricks, which include tools, resources, advice on the type of machine one could use, as well as the importance of knowing who one's adversary is before immersing oneself in a digital space.

Consent and Deception

When it comes to OPSEC protocols, one ethical issue that arises for counterterrorism and P/CVE practitioners is that of informed consent. Namely,

researchers may use fake or misleading accounts that aim to deceive extremists and terrorists online to enter online groups. Conway (2021) concludes that research is often placed on the spectrum of total deception or full disclosure to the research subjects on the identity and purpose of the study (p.372). It is not illogical that researchers conceal their identity online for safety or access purposes. However, researchers also have a responsibility to protect the human rights of their subjects, according to the do-no-harm principle, including their right to privacy. When doing research on public and private channels, or when making big data requests, the chances are that these rights are at risk. In addition, this risk is also increasing as studies based on big data are also encouraged to improve research on terrorism and violent extremism (Conway, 2021). One way to respect consent is to ensure that consent is obtained from a moderator or administrator of a particular channel. However, this can also be problematic as oftentimes, moderators of such channels are either extremists or terrorists themselves, and it may not be safe to obtain permission from them using one's own identity. Another method may be to look at a platform's Terms of Service, as not all platforms allow the usage of fake accounts or scraping of platform data. Finally, when storing data, there are significant risks to privacy, and consent is often one way to ensure that those risks are at least made known to subjects.

One example of informed consent being built into OPSEC protocols is that of Tech Against Terrorism. Their open-source intelligence work is guided by an ethical and safety framework, which specifies passive observing and non-engagement. This means that channels can only be joined when links are shared, and no communication is needed to gain access to such spaces. In addition, whilst anonymous accounts are used to protect employees' safety, no form of deception is used, as all accounts would be a random combination of letters and numbers and no distinctive profile photos would ever reveal any ideological affinity. Finally, data would only be scraped when a platform's Terms of Service (ToS) do not prohibit this, and a remote machine is used to store data for the duration of a research project and afterwards, swiftly removed (Craanen, 2022, Hedayah Conference). Much of this points to the need for a better understanding of platform-specific tools and resources, addressed in the next section.

Digital and Platform-Specific Tooling

Activists, academics, journalists, and practitioners in the counterterrorism and counter-extremism space must find ways to mitigate risks to personal safety online. By using online platforms to research or challenge hate-based extremism and terrorism, individuals can put themselves or the sensitive communities they engage with online at risk. As researchers and practitioners, it is our duty of care to ourselves and the networks and individuals we study as subjects online to cultivate better fluency in the tools available to us for ensuring optimal levels of privacy and security. There are always trade-offs to consider for using online profiles in research and, depending on research questions and methodologies, a researcher's profile might want to be more open and transparent or more closed and locked down with privacy settings. The more open a social media account is, the more accessible, viewable, and open to other users you are. This can be positive for reaching out to online subjects if interaction, entry into networks, and potential interviews are being sought. However, being more open and public in your profile also makes you more vulnerable to potential "swarming", bullying, abuse, and personal attacks. Whatever methodology is employed, researchers and practitioners should proactively review tools and pathways available to them from the platforms they engage in for their work to ensure safety-by-design in their own practices.

Nearly all platforms have some form of safety centre, guidelines, or safety resources. It is increasingly important to ensure that users know how to flag abuse, manage privacy settings, and report concerns. For an online practitioner or researcher, this could be anything from knowing how to flag illegal or violating content to reporting a potentially hacked account, or nefarious activities of dangerous organizations. Given the diversity of platforms exploited by extremist groups, researcher and practitioner online usage often includes larger social media platforms, gaming chat forums, meeting and call services, media hosting sites, and smaller, less regulated parts of the web. This section reviews some of the resources available on GIFCT member platforms that are widely used by practitioners and researchers in the counterterrorism and P/CVE field. Links to safety and transparency centres for all members as well as P/CVE resources, where applicable of GIFCT member companies can be found on the GIFCT Member Resource Guide (GIFCT Resource Guide). Core safety hubs are usually the first port of call for providing guidance on how to flag or report a wide range of abuses and how to risk mitigate and build personal best practices.

Social Media

Social media platforms tend to be the primary online space that researchers and practitioners engage with to find source material about extremist and terrorist networks online. As example, Discord is a voice, video and chat app with instant messaging capacity often

used as a gaming-adjacent chat platform. It has increasingly been researched by practitioners looking at research on the nexus of extremism and gaming (Discord Trust & Safety). The Discord safety center provides account tips, server management tools, and details on how to report problems directly to their Trust and Safety team. Since Discord allows 13+ aged users, there is also a safety section for parents and educators, guiding them on how to have safe oversight of minors using the platform in coordination with the Better Business Bureau's Children's Advertising Review Unit (Hills, 2020). Facebook also ensures that its safety hub caters to a range of different users to address the needs of different stakeholders, including a bespoke law enforcement portal and separate portals of support for parents and young people (Facebook Safety Center). Similarly, YouTube's safety resources focus on a range of online harms with specific resources for parents, teens, and educators (YouTube Creator Safety Center). With rapid growth in users during the Covid19 Pandemic, Zoom has increased its safety resources to include guidance on how to prevent uninvited guests from joining meetings, blogs on security and privacy, and classroom safety tips for parents and teachers (Zoom Trust Center).

Instagram's Safety Hub provides comprehensive safety tools and a help centre that gives safety guidelines (Instagram Safety and Privacy). The centre provides resources around privacy and security, reporting abuse, and digital wellbeing resources for its community. Microsoft's reports hub provides a Digital Safety Content Report that explicitly details its mechanisms for prohibiting certain content and conduct. It dedicates a significant section on what they do to help to prevent terrorists and violent extremists from exploiting digital platforms, including by addressing images and videos on their hosted services that include terrorist or violent extremist content (Microsoft Reports Hub).

Sometimes safety resources include third-party experts to ensure safety measures evolve as adversarial shifts occur. For example, Twitter has a dedicated Twitter account with the latest safety tools, resources, and updates to support its community (https://twitter.com/twittersafety) and Twitter's Trust and Safety Council hosts a global group of independent expert organizations to investigate issues from online safety and harassment to human and digital rights (Twitter Trust and Safety Council). Meanwhile, platforms such as Facebook have a Safety Advisory Board, composed of global internet safety organizations to provide expertise, perspective, and insights that inform their approach to safety (Facebook Safety Advisory Board).

End-to-End Encrypted Platforms

When privacy is of paramount concern, End-to-End Encrypted (E2EE) chat platforms provide higher levels of safeguarding from interception. The same reasons why activists, journalists and marginalized communities seek these privacy safeguards are equally why certain bad actor networks might also look to use these services. Even in E2EE spaces, where the platform host does not have the ability to see user messages or shared content, safeguards can still be put in place. WhatsApp aims to ensure that all users remain safe while using its platform through a range of safety tools, including privacy controls and reporting mechanisms (WhatsApp Safety). WhatsApp has also added features to help users block unwanted users, report in-message content (which de-encrypts the abusive content being reported to the platform), and Two-Factor Authorization to decrease potential hacking attempts on an account. Similarly, MEGA provides users with a range of tools to remain safe across their different E2EE streams and has safeguarding advice on how to secure an account after it might have been compromised (Mega Security).

Content Storage and Saving Services

While social media and wider chat platforms take up a large space for where researchers go to explore extremist networks, there are also a myriad of other online surfaces exploited by extremist groups or where researchers and practitioners go to store or share their findings and source materials. These spaces also try to develop best practices in providing a safe space while respecting human rights. Dropbox and Pinterest have developed principles and platform-specific approaches to tackle terrorist exploitation on their platforms with a focus on keeping users safe (See: Volkmer, 2019 and Pinterest Privacy, Safety and Legal). Even Tumblr has developed "safe mode" and other risk mitigation tactics so that users have more control over what types of the content surface more proactively on the platform.

For broader P/CVE practitioner advice and tips, activists and researchers can consult the Campaign Toolkit (GIFCT Campaign Toolkit). This online toolkit, funded by GIFCT and developed with ISD Global, includes a Digital Security Checklist, and resources in five languages which lays out the basics for digital security and steps to take if a campaign is threatened, harassed, or targeted by bad actors. However, there is no silver bullet in ensuring full protection from online harassment or attempts by bad actors to derail research on violent extremist and terrorist

movements. These groups are adversarial by nature. There is also a myriad of platforms that are lacking in safety tools, reporting functions, and responses to flags of misuse, abuse or harassment. In these cases, researchers need to be particularly vigilant and reflect on ethical and personal safety questions with advisors or managers. Overall, safety across digital platforms is a shared industry responsibility furthered by a range of stakeholders including from the private sector, academia, civil society, governmental and intergovernmental actors.

"Do-No-Harm" Principles and Duty to Report

While central or internationally agreed upon parameters for researchers and practitioners do not exist, there are ethical principles and frameworks to lean into. The overarching framing behind any work in the counterterrorism and counter-extremism space is to embrace and think through "do-no-harm" principles (The Belmont Report, 1979). Do-no-harm principles were originally developed for application within field work within the humanitarian sector and field work or patient testing within medical sectors. Research or engagement with violent extremist networks online naturally identifies three different groups of vulnerable audiences. There is potential harm to (1) the researcher or practitioner, (2) the online participants in terrorist or violent extremist networks being studied online, and (3) wider followers or information consumers of the researcher/practitioner.

Focusing on researchers and practitioners, the GIFCT Working Group on "Positive Interventions and Strategic Communications" produced a paper on good practices, tools and safety measures for researchers and practitioners in the counterterrorism and counter-extremism sector (White, 2022). Lessons learned from other sectors included encouraging organizations and academic institutes to ensure that staff should have the right to cease work if they felt in danger or had reached a personal limit. While the ability to step away from a particular line of work temporarily should be made available to researchers and practitioners. If mental health feels in jeopardy or risk to oneself feels insecure because of a line of work, there should not be pressure or coercion to continue that line of work. This feeds into the general wider duty of care from institutes to individual researchers and practitioners. Proactively ensuring awareness of mental health resources and institutional policies around allowing for pauses or breaks in research to preserve mental health as well as safety concerns is crucial.

Another area where proactive safeguarding to access is paramount is around terrorist and violent extremist content archives. Initiatives like Jihadology, an archive on Salafi-Jihadi material (2019) and Tech Against Terrorism's Terrorist Content Analytics Platform (TCAP) are two examples of password-protected content archives with oversight to ensure relevant researchers can gain access but bad actors looking to distribute propaganda cannot. The TCAP, alerts terrorist content to tech companies when found on their platforms, and at the same time functions as an archive that will be made accessible to researchers and civil society members to encourage evidence-based research. To ensure do-no-harm principles, the process has included legal reviews and consultations (See: The TCAP's Legal Review). The access to researchers hopes to include mental health appropriate filters, such as blurring of content, the content appearing black and white, graphic warnings, and maximum viewing times.

While often overlooked as a "vulnerable" community, those inhabiting and/or participating in (violent) extremist ecosystems online also have vulnerabilities. Particularly for practitioners engaging in "counterspeech", "counter-narrative", or "alternative narrative" activism online, approaches to creating and delivering content to at-risk audiences need to account for sensitivities and appropriateness so that harm or further alienation does not befall an online individual or group (Archetti, 2012; Cornish et al, 2011; Stevens and Neumann 2009). There are many research sensitivities to targeting audiences online and research has shown this includes ensuring that content is tailored to an audience with effective messengers employed as the source or delivery partner of messaging (Aly, 2016; Dauber and Winkler, 2014; Guenther et al, 2020). Previous successful online intervention models have worked with former extremists as well as psychological health providers to ensure that interventions take into consideration sensitivities around audience vulnerabilities (Saltman et al, 2021; Davy et al 2018).

The final ethical question to consider is a researchers' responsibilities in reporting terrorist and violent extremist material or activity when they surface online. Often, there is an internal researcher conflict between the need for access to violating or illegal content for research purposes, and the ethical imperative to facilitate removing content that could lead to further real-world harm. However, this unhelpful dichotomy puts conducting meaningful research at odds with the larger goal of countering terrorist use of the internet. One solution to this problem is archiving, which aims to real-time archive material before alerting it to tech companies for removal. While some previously mentioned platforms like Jihadology or TCAP are working to advance this, it is not institutionalized by most academic bodies or organization. There is also a difference in severity when "threat-to-life" material is surfaced, which generally includes a threat of murder, a threat of bodily harm, or a threat of serious sexual

assault (UK Home Office, 2022). In these cases, there is a clear responsibility to report material as soon as it is surfaced. However, even beyond severe scenarios, terrorist content is illegal in many jurisdictions and often goes against a platform's Terms of Service (Knowledge Sharing Platform, 2021). In addition, terrorists and violent extremists share content for different purposes, one of which is to disseminate propaganda for radicalization and recruitment. For anyone working in the counterterrorism space, it is therefore the opinion of the authors that it is vital to alert such content to either the tech platform on which the content is hosted, or to the relevant authorities in question.

Lastly, good academic research has a foundation in citing sources and evidence. However, citing terrorist content comes with a risk of leading people to terrorist content or networks online. As Baele et al (2017) put it, "violent groups may use information produced by research." As recommended by those engaged in discussion on this topic at the Hedayah International CVE Research Conference (2022), best practices involve ensuring that links to T/VE operated websites, links to source content, source handles, or full post screenshots should be avoided in social media or formal publications from researchers. This is also in line with more global academic networks with ethical oversight from entities like the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), with research highlighting best practices for distributing findings without disseminating T/VE sources (Sold and Junk, 2021).

Credible Threats and Crisis Response

Law enforcement agencies, think tanks, NGOs and other institutions that operate in the field of online counterterrorism can all be reasonably expected to have crisis protocols in the event of a threat to life. However, such protocols are not often taught to researchers who conduct T/VE research. The below section details Tech Against Terrorism's Crisis Protocol, to inform researchers about a potential approach to alert authorities to a threat to life when surfaced. Throughout T/VE investigations online, there is the possibility of surfacing content which gives information about an ongoing or future attack. Tech Against Terrorism's Crisis Protocol Policy covers three key areas of emergency incident management: (1) pre-incident, (2) during the incident, and (3) post-incident. The authors discuss pre-incident protocols here for the benefit of researchers and practitioners and how most researchers surface content. The protocol aims to be flexible to ensure effectiveness. Effective protocols should ensure that provisions are in place for researchers or practitioners to alert the appropriate authorities and mitigate the threat posed by online violent extremist content. The first step is to assess and evaluate the credibility and imminence of a potential threat-to-life and what proportionate actions should be taken.

A threat-to-life can be considered as:

- A real and immediate threat to a loss of life
- A threat to cause serious harm (including sexual assault)
- A threat of injury to another
- A threat to life (including rape)

Assessments should consider the intent and capability of a potential attacker and collate intelligence to share with the appropriate law enforcement agencies. Organizations like Tech Against Terrorism and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism consider the ethical responsibility of reporting a threat-to-life as a top priority. Therefore, an individual or group does not have to reside on a government designation list to be considered under threat-to-life policies or practices. In the event of a potential, credible threat-to-life, local authorities, and any relevant intelligence agencies should be informed. An accurate archive of all relevant data should also be retained. In the event of a threat-to-life which cannot be verified as credible or immediate, such as in the event of doxing of a public figure, relevant authorities and intelligence agencies should still be informed. An example of Tech Against Terrorism's threat-to-life protocol is below, showing the workflow progression and key decision-making involved in an assessment.

Threat-to-life-protocol

Terrorist Content Analytics Platform

Intent

- **Did the attacker post a well-thought through reason for wanting to commit an attack, such as a manifesto or video?** "I want to kill" is not sufficient in this regard. It needs to be a well-thought out reasoning for why a person wants to do something.
- **How was the manifesto released?**
- **Did the attacker release this reason on a platform that is a known beacon?**
- **Are you meant to believe the threat?**
- **Has any motivation to carry out the attack been stated?**
- **Is the ideological motivation included, such as Salafi-Jihadism, violent far-right idea, violent misogynist ideology?**

NO

Capability

- **Can the attacker be identified:**
  - Name
  - Description
  - Membership to a group
  - Method of attack
- **Does the attacker seem to have a history of violence?**
  - This might need to be analysed by the law enforcement agency in the specific jurisdiction
- **Does the attacker seem to have access to weapons?**
- **Does the attacker seem to have access to the intended victim(s)?**
- **Does the attacker need to do anything to prepare and gain the capability to carry out an attack?**

NO → **No threat to life**

YES → **Low threat to life**

YES

Capability

- **Can the attacker be identified:**
  - Name
  - Description
  - Membership to a group
  - Method of attack
- **Does the attacker seem to have a history of violence?**
  - This might need to be analysed by the law enforcement agency in the specific jurisdiction
- **Does the attacker seem to have access to weapons?**
- **Does the attacker seem to have access to the intended victim(s)?**
- **Does the attacker need to do anything to prepare and gain the capability to carry out an attack?**

NO

Medium threat to life

- Establish PoC
- Alert Management
- Monitor for change
- If change in capability. escalate to HIGH THREAT

YES

Collate all information including:

- Keeping an archive of all relevant data
- What information is missing/ what do we not know?
- What the risks are to open-source intelligence?
- Is there any other evidence that can be investigated by law enforcement agencies?
- Can we identify anything to assist the investigation?

Information Collection

The Location

- **Can the place of the attack be identified or deduced?**
- **Does the post / description of intent reveal a location?**
- **Does the post include an image that reveals a location, is geo-tagged, or can be geo-located?**

The Victim(s)

- **Can the victim(s) be identified:**
  - Their name
  - Their description
  - Membership of a group
- **Can anyone else be hurt due to proximity to the victim?**
  - Family members
  - Children
  - Close associates living elsewhere
  - Ability of victim to retaliate

The Timeframe

- **What is the timescale for the attack?**
- **Does something need to happen before the attack can take place?**

NO

High unspecific threat to life

- Establish PoC
- Continue to monitor for change to SPECIFIC
- Collate all information
- Alert TAT Management
- Alert UK Police

YES

High specific threat to life

- Collate all information
- Establish PoC
- Alert TaT Management
- Alert UK Police

tech against terrorism

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the ethical challenges in open-source intelligence research that so many P/CVE researchers and practitioners face. Based on breakout session discussions at the 2022 Hedayah International CVE Research Conference in Granada, it was clear that while our research community is not starting at zero, there is still a significant lack of support, infrastructure, and tooling made available for researchers, who are often vulnerable to the terrorist and violent extremist groups they study across online spaces. The authors support Conway's (2021) call for more tailored and institutionalised guidelines. Some of the solutions to this problem can be found in better highlighting and providing training on digital and platform-specific tooling that already exists to ensure preventative and reactive capacities in digital hygiene for P/CVE researchers, such as the resources made available through the GIFCT Resource Guide or Campaign Toolkit. Insights from the GIFCT Positive Intervention Working Group were also highlighted to show where P/CVE researchers and practitioners can build on safety measures developed by other fields, such as medical science and journalism. Lastly, do-no-harm principles are paramount for researchers in considering safety to oneself, online target audiences, and wider research communities sharing sensitive content. Tech Against Terrorism's guidance on flagging content and protocols for when credible threat content is surfaced are of key importance to ensure that research and practitioner activities do not unintentionally further harm, online or offline.

By increasing our collective capacities and sharing resources as a community studying and working on preventing and countering violent extremism, we can evolve the sector and better ensure higher standards of ethical oversight, personal safety, and the safety of relevant wider stakeholders.

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Contextual Factors Associated with Changes in Extremist Visual Messaging: The Cases of al-Qaeda and Daesh

Carol Winkler

Those seeking to prevent or counter violent extremism should keep in mind that the online messaging strategies incorporated in such groups' media campaigns are not static. Extremist groups regularly face internal and external pressures that coincide with their decisions regarding what, when, and where to communicate to followers. Indeed, a group's capacity to remain flexible and adaptive in its media production and distribution practices contributes to the group's chance of success in achieving its objectives. Former and current leaders of extremist groups have certainly articulated the priority they place on using their media messaging to achieve group success. Osama Bin Laden pronounced that al-Qaeda's media efforts "may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles" (Bin Laden, Letter to Mullah Muhammed 'Umar), and his successor Anwar al-Zawahiri concluded that "More than half the battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media" (Zawahiri, "Letter from al-Zawahiri," para. 69 of 88). Thus, the tracking of extremist groups' changes to online messaging strategies should help define patterns that responders can both anticipate and adjust to in their future endeavors.

Herein, I conduct a metareview of seven years of studies conducted by faculty, staff, and presidential doctoral fellows working in Georgia State University's interdisciplinary Transcultural Conflict and Violence Research Initiative. Each of these studies identify environmental factors that have coincided with changes in the visual messaging strategies of Daesh (also known as ISIS, ISIL, or the Islamic State) and al-Qaeda. The focus on visual messaging is deliberate for several reasons. Visuals help break down the language barriers that emerge as groups attempt to reach and influence global audiences. Also, the fact that visual images capture more viewer attention than other modalities (Graber, 1990; Pfau et al., 2006) helps address the challenge of reaching and sustaining followers in the information-heavy online environment. Additionally, the proven tendency of viewers to believe what they see with their own eyes positions online followers to more quickly process and more readily accept the information that they consume (Barry, 1997, Finnegan, 2001; Pfau et al., 2006). Further, the demonstrated capacity of visual images to aid in viewer recall (Knobloch, et al., 2003; Newhagen & Reeves, 1992; Lang, Newhagen & Reeves, 1996) is useful to help overcome the short times that online users spend on a single site as they "surf" the web. Finally, the proven ability of images to heighten the emotional responses of viewers (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Lang, et al., 1996; Nabi, 2003) can create an environment potentially ripe for recruitment.

Method

In seven of the studies presented here, we utilized a quantitative content analysis of 8,855 still images extracted from the online publications of al-Qaeda and Daesh. The specific publications included Jihad Recollections, Inspire, al-Masra, Dabiq, Rumiyah, and al-Naba. Images in al-Qaeda's publications constituted 45.7 percent of the database, with 442 photographs appearing in the four issues of Jihad Recollections, 2091 in the 17 issues of Inspire, and 1512 in 66 issues of al-Masra newsletter. Daesh displayed the remaining 54.3 percent of the database's images, with 1473 extracted from the 15 issues of Dabiq, 565 from the 13 issues of Rumiyah, and 2772 from the first 243 issues of al-Naba. In the one remaining study, we analyzed images appearing in photo reports and daily news briefs from Daesh's Ninawa province, as will be indicated below. In that study, the dataset included 770 images from 51 photo reports and 873 images from the province's daily news briefings.

The coding instrument used in the analysis focused on several factors. It identified presentational characteristics of the photographs (e.g., photograph size, number of images per page, image position, viewer position, and viewer distance from the photo subject). It also included items related to the people appearing in the photographs (e.g., number of humans, age, gender, facial expressions, eye contact), the role of the photo subjects (e.g., militant, leader), violent outcomes associated with those roles (e.g., death, about to die, destruction, and cause of death), and items associated with the governance of states/caliphates (e.g., state-building, societal infrastructure, religion, and flags). Repeated pilot studies and revisions based on the images in a single issue of Dabiq eventually produced acceptable levels of intercoder reliability across all variables (that is, .80 or higher). Intercoder reliability across the dataset was 0.91 using Cohen's kappa.

Statistical analysis[4] determined if any differences existed in the extremist groups' visual messaging strategies before and after each of eight environmental factors: intensified military operations conducted against the group, announced troop withdrawals of opposing forces, online account suspensions, extremist group attacks, shifts in territorial control, loss of media leaders, the strength of regional currencies, and the weakening of competing extremist groups in the region. Linear regressions determined changes over time in a subset of the studies as noted below. The significance level utilized in the studies was most often 0.001. Sharpe's (2015) analytical method determined which variable was responsible for each significant finding related to a coding category. His approach identifies when an observed frequency differs from the statistically expected results by more or less than one standard deviation (+/- 1.96). The results of each Sharpe analysis will be noted in the study findings.

Environmental Factor #1: Intensified Military Operations

To assess if any correspondence existed between intensified military operations and the visual media campaigns of extremist groups, we analyzed 1643 Ninawa province images distributed on Daesh's Nashir telegram channel (Damanhoury, et al., 2018). We compared the images appearing in the pre-escalation period, defined as the four months prior to the start of the Battle for East Mosul (June-September 2016), with those appearing in the four-month escalation period after battlefield operations began (October 2016-January 2017).

Our findings revealed that for media products reliant on easy production and dissemination (such as photo reports and daily news briefings), the visual output in the escalation period more than tripled, from an average of 3 distributed images in the pre-escalation period to 10 images per day after the onset of intensified military operations. Images of state-building (that is, provision of social services, law enforcement activities, economic markets, maps, and media operations) remained the same in the pre-escalation and escalation periods. By continuing the expected supply of images demonstrating ongoing operations in the caliphate, Daesh reinforced both the existence of its physical entity and its imagined governing structure. The number of Daesh's 'about to die' images also changed in relation to all distributed images, jumping from a figure constituting 33 percent of all images distributed in the pre-escalation period to 69 percent in the escalation period. The most significant changes apparent in the about-to-die images included a much higher display of certain death (mainly images of Daesh martyrs) and a much higher display of presumed death images (i.e., showing military weaponry to reinforce the group's capacity to inflict future death on its enemies). Combined, the 'about-to-die' image types visually emphasized the heightened threat posed by Daesh forces.

Environmental Factor #2: Announced Troop Withdrawals

To determine if troop withdrawals corresponded to changes in extremist groups' visual messaging campaigns, we compared image distribution from the year before and the year after President Donald J. Trump's tweet of December 19, 2018, announcing that U.S. forces would leave Syria (Lokmanoglu, et al., 2022). We focused on images displayed in issues 111-203 of Daesh's Arabic newsletter al-Naba, as those issues served as a consistent, weekly distribution of content distribution covering the entire time frame of the study. After the troop withdrawal announcement, the use of visual images increased by 31 percent, which, if the findings of past experimental studies apply in the Daesh context, heightened viewer attention on the group.

After the troop withdrawal tweet, Daesh visually rebutted claims of its premature defeat. The group continued its normal pattern of documenting its authority within the caliphate by displaying the expected number of images showing its militants, social service providers, maps, and law enforcement activities. The group also visually reinforced its resilience by exhibiting a higher-than-expected number of shots showing small groups (3.2) and large groups (2.8) of its community members, and a higher-than-expected number of photographs showing its members in standing positions (2.6), a metaphor for the group "still standing."

Besides inoculating viewers against claims of premature defeat, Daesh adopted a less provocative posture to characterize its ongoing presence. The group showed a higher-than-expected number of photo subjects looking away from the viewer (3.8) and a higher-than-expected number of its militants with negative facial expressions (2.7), the latter a stark contrast to the groups' typical display of its members' exuberant countenance. Daesh also displayed a lower-than-expected number of images of dead foreign fighters (-3.7), a lower-than-expected number of images showing individuals facing possible, impending

4 In this study, chi square analyses were used.

death (-2.8), a lower-than-expected number of images advertising their media products (-5.9), and a lower-than-expected number of shots showing pristine landscapes available for group expansion (-2). These various forms of visual de-emphasis combined to potentially avoid goading coalition forces into carrying out more attacks against its group.

Despite the more cautious approach in the short-term, Daesh still placed greater emphasis on projecting its strength moving forward. The group showed a higher-than-expected number of images displaying other groups pledging allegiance to its leader (2.8), which visually expanded the size and territorial range of its fighting force. Daesh also displayed a higher-than-expected number of presumed death images that featured future implements of warfare (4.7), such as guns, ammunition, bombs, and drones, to highlight their continued reconnaissance capabilities. Together, Daesh photographs appearing after troop withdrawal announcements sought to stress that Daesh would be back.

Environmental Factor #3: Online Account Suspensions

To assess if changes in Daesh's visual messaging strategy accompanied online account takedowns, we compared the photographs appearing in Daesh's weekly Arabic newsletter during the six months before and after the November 2019 Telegram suspension of "terrorist affiliated accounts, bots, groups, channels, and vital networks disseminating Daesh official media" (McMinimy, et al., 2021, p. 4). After the significant, coordinated online response by Telegram and Europol, Daesh altered its visual agenda-setting strategy by placing a heightened emphasis on external threats to the MENA region. The group quadrupled the number of images it displayed that showed foreign fighters (3.5). The group also emphasized the immediate consequences that awaited such enemy forces by showing a higher-than-expected number of images of dead foreign fighters (2.8) and by reducing the newsletter's typical pattern of focusing on future death through the display of presumed death images (-3.1). At the same time, Daesh virtually eliminated visual documentation of its own militants' deaths in al-Naba. In the pre-account takedown period, Daesh displayed 14 martyr images; in the six months after the suspensions, only one martyr image appeared (-3.6). The approach of showing fighters from both sides in the conflict and their respective fates that awaited them placed a focus on the on-the-ground instead of the losses the group was experiencing in its virtual caliphate. The group also used other visual strategies to reinforce the ongoing strength and needs for its group. The group continued its expected image count, its standard number of state-building images, its visual patterned indicators of credibility and dominance of its own militant forces, and its routine number of photographs showing regional leaders the group considered apostate.

Environmental Factor #4: Attacks by Extremist Groups

To examine if successful attacks by extremist groups corresponded to changes in visual messaging strategies, we examined Daesh attacks associated with low death/low publicity (< 13 deaths; <600 international news items), high death/high publicity (> 30 deaths; >3500 international news items), low death/high publicity, and high death/low publicity (Winkler, et al., 2020). We analyzed four types of authority images (militant, leaders, state, and religion) that appeared in Daesh and AQAP Arabic newsletters in the three issues before and the three issues after representative attacks in each of the four attack categories. A key finding was that after attacks that resulted in low numbers of deaths, neither Daesh nor al-Qaeda changed their visual messaging strategy. Once attacks resulted in high death rates, however, the relative level of publicity associated with the incidents emerged as a distinguishing factor, with the results varying by group and type of authority image. After attacks with high death/high publicity levels, for example, Daesh media reduced its visual power projection by showing a much lower-than-expected number of pictures of dead foreign fighters (-2.5), whereas al-Qaeda placed more emphasis on pictured maps (2.0), perhaps to emphasize its long-term goal of leading the caliphate. After attacks resulting in high death/low publicity levels, Daesh placed a lower-than-expected emphasis on religious imagery (-5.5), perhaps to maximize the recruitment potential of attracting individuals from different faiths to join its successful fighting forces. Al-Qaeda, by contrast, placed a higher-than-expected emphasis on state-building images, particularly those associated with social services (2.5) and the group's media products (2.1). Al-Qaeda's strategy reminded followers that support services and information were key factors in who should lead the caliphate. Al-Qaeda also placed a lower-than-expected emphasis on tribal leaders, Shiite leaders, and other leaders (-2.7), perhaps to avoid raising possibilities of allegiance pledges in the aftermath of Daesh's attacks successes. However, the results of this study are tentative due to the low sample size of the attacks investigated.

Environmental Factor #5: Territorial Control

To assess whether changes in territorial control accompanied shifts in extremist groups' visual media campaigns, we examined how the images in Daesh's online publications (Dabiq, Rumiyah, and al-Naba) varied over the course of the group's territorial gains and losses (based on data extracted from Live Universal Awareness Maps) between July 2014 and September 2018 (Kaczkowski, et al., 2021). In addition to the quantitative content analysis described above, we also conducted a linear regression analysis to assess changes over time in the group's number of visual images, its use of militant images, and its use of state-building images.

Daesh increased the number of images in both its Arabic and non-Arabic publications in periods of increased territorial control and decreased them when the group lost territory. Increases in the use of militant images, however, varied based on whether the group still maintained its secure base of Syrian operations where it could produce and distribute media products. Surges in the use of militant images, for example, did occur during the battle for East Mosul and when the group captured the city of Abu Kamal. During periods of territorial decline, Daesh shifted from a higher-than-expected emphasis on its images of militants to a higher-than-expected use of images of state-building, a pattern that was particularly apparent in the group's non-Arabic publications. Territorial control explained 50 percent of the variance in the group's Arabic newsletter, suggesting that the group desired to visually document its gains in territorial control for the Arab target audience. By contrast, territorial control only explained 29 percent of the variance associated with visual images in non-Arabic publications. The fact that the territorial changes were mainly occurring in Arabic-majority countries may help explain why such shifts were more likely to correspond to changes in the image strategies incorporated in the Arabic newsletter.

Environmental Factor #6: Loss of Media Leaders

To assess if media leader loss corresponded to changes in the visual messaging strategies of extremist groups, we examined the images in al-Naba during the periods before, during, and after senior Daesh media leaders died (before: December 19, 2015-August 30, 2016; during: September 6, 2016-October 26, 2017; after: November 2, 2017-September 20, 2018). We also compared the deaths of administration-level media leaders (e.g., lead spokesperson, Minister of Information, etc.) with those of media elites operating at the next level of the Daesh media hierarchy (e.g., media emirs, producers, etc.) to assess if the rank of the official who died produced different results (Winkler, et al., 2019).

The loss of media leaders did accompany a loss in the total number of visual images displayed and in their use of the military and stable homeland image frames. After the media leader loss, Daesh substantially reduced its expected use of militant images (-4.9) and its presumed death images showing implements of war (-5.4) perhaps in an effort not to provoke coalition forces to carry out further attacks on their media personnel and infrastructure. The group did, however, focus more on images showing dead bodies of foreign fighters (6.6) and citizens facing impending death (3.3), arguably to show the strength of its fighting force to counterbalance the group's losses on the media battlefield. Daesh also exaggerated its use of media product advertisements (12.7) after the leader losses. The strategy emphasized that despite the attacks on its media personnel, the group had continued resilience in its media production and distribution operations.

Disaggregating media leaders by rank produced nuanced results. The loss of leaders at the administrative level did not correspond to changes in the security frame, but the loss at the media elite level did, as Daesh used a higher-than-expected number of images showing dead foreign fighters (4.2) and citizens facing impending death (3.8). The difference may have resulted from a felt need to bolster its group's image of strength as more and more of its leaders at all high levels faced death. Comparisons of the loss of administrative level and media elite level leaders, however, showed differential changes to the visual, stable homeland frame. Deaths of the leaders at the administrative level accompanied a lower-than-expected use of state-building images (-3.1), while the deaths of the media elite corresponded to a higher-than expected emphasis on Daesh media products (5.4). Both visual strategies emphasize the virtual caliphate, but the focus on media product advertisements after the loss of the media elite was a more direct approach.

Environmental Factor #7: Regional Currencies

A Transcultural Conflict and Violence presidential fellow completed a dissertation that examined how the strengths of regional currencies in relation to the U.S. dollar corresponded to changes in Daesh's economic messaging over time (Lokmanoglu, 2021). The corpus of analyzed textual and visual artifacts included those found in Dabiq, the English language version of

Rumiyah, the first 232 issues of al-Naba, and the 1434 videos publicized in the same magazines from April 2014 to April 2020. Economic messaging content was extracted through computer searches for the following words: money, finance, economy, bank, dollar, market, currency, euro. Linear regression analyses evaluated changes over time in Daesh's media campaign.

Neither the Syrian pound nor the Iraqi dinar corresponded to changes in the economic messaging over time. The relative strength of the Turkish lira, however, did correspond to changes in the levels of Daesh's economic messaging. The differences found between the three currencies likely resulted from the fact that the Turkish monetary system was the strongest of the three investigated in the study and reports that Daesh militants often traded in Turkish lira.

Environmental Factor #8: Weakening of Regional Competitors

The last environmental factor that corresponded to changes in the extremist groups' messaging was the weakening of competing, non-state extremist groups. To analyze this factor, we compared the visual messaging strategies of al-Qaeda in three online publications (Inspire, Jihad Recollections, and al-Masra) in the year before and during coalition force operations in the efforts to retake Mosul and Raqqa from Daesh (Winkler, et al., 2020). We defined images distributed between September 2015 and September 2016 as occurring in the Daesh "pre-weakening period" because those months occurred prior to the beginning of the battle for East Mosul. We defined images distributed between October 2016 and October 2017 as falling within the "Daesh weakening period" as that time frame covered the period when coalition forces engaged Daesh militants in battles to retake Mosul and Raqqa.

In the Daesh weakening period, AQAP maintained its expected number of images displaying religious content, perhaps to reinforce its central identity to followers. However, the group did change its use of military, state-building, and leadership images in ways that connected to the fluctuating power dynamics at play in the region. As coalition forces weakened Daesh, AQAP displayed a higher-than-expected number of images of its foreign fighters (6.6), arguably to reinforce the need for its own group to defend Muslims, of its own media products (4.3) to attract the attention of followers, and of tribal Muslim leaders (2.7) to identify current or future allies of its group that were present in the region. Despite these efforts to strengthen its standing, AQAP also removed almost all images of dead foreign fighters in a move potentially designed to avoid provoking potential retaliation by coalition forces against its own group.

In the weakening of Daesh period, AQAP displayed its most significant changes in its target audiences by language. In its Arabic language publications, the group used a much higher-than-expected number of images showing its own fighters (15) and enemy forces (9.4). In AQAP's English magazines, by contrast, the reverse occurred, with the group using a much lower-than-expected number of the group's own fighters (-15) and enemy fighters (-9.4). The bifurcated strategy framed al-Qaeda as remaining a strong entity in the region for Arabic followers while reinforcing a much more reserved posture for its English audience.

The significant differences in audience targeting approach in the Daesh weakening period also applied to AQAP's display of state-building images. The group's English language publications displayed a lower-than-expected number of images showing the provision of social services (-3), law enforcement activities (-5.3), advertising of media products (-8.3), and other state building activities (-6.9). The Arabic language publication, by contrast, displayed the same state-building image categories at higher-than-expected levels: (3.0) provision of social services (3.0), law enforcement activities (5.1); media propaganda (8.3), and other forms of state-building (6.9). The difference in audience targeting approach suggested that al-Qaeda's strategy was to elevate its importance in relation to the goal of achieving a caliphate for Arabic-fluent followers with similar views. As was the case with the military-related images, however, the group was more cautious for English-fluent audiences who could interpret such a strategy as more threatening to their own global positions.

Lastly, AQAP varied its use of leader images in relation to language-based target audiences as Daesh was weakening. In English language publications, AQAP used a much lower-than-expected number of images of al-Qaeda leaders (-10.2), Western leaders (-8.1), and Arab state leaders (-6.7). The number of images showing each of the same three types of leaders in the Arabic publications, by contrast, was much higher-than-expected (10.2, 8.1, and 6.7 respectively). The difference in approach underscored al-Qaeda's more cautious approach when interfacing with English audiences; it visually avoided drawing lines of conflict between al-Qaeda leaders and those the group considered infidel or apostate particularly when Daesh was weak and enemy forces were still present in the region.

Conclusion

The examples presented here clearly document that extremist groups vary their visual messaging campaigns in relation to important on-the-ground events. Accordingly, those seeking to prevent or counter violent extremists should be aware of and continue to track the factors that accompany the shifts in the messaging strategies of groups active in their surroundings. Given the power of images to attract attention, enhance recall, aid message believability, and prompt emotional responses, anticipated spikes in extremist groups' visual images based on their past should be met with corresponding hikes in opposing visual media output. When patterned changes in the message strategy relate to specific environmental factors, respondents can predict and develop a coordinated response to help blunt the impact of extremist groups' messaging shifts. As the cases of Daesh and al-Qaeda illustrate, responders should remember to remain focused both on the media campaigns of groups experiencing events and of competing extremist groups operating in surrounding areas. They should also anticipate that when extremist groups experience public losses in one area (e.g., offline battlefields), they are likely to seek ways to visually compensate in other available alternatives (e.g., online activities, state-building activities, etc.).

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Far-right politics, environmental crisis & the question of 'eco-fascism'

Imogen Richards

Introduction

Greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution produced through the burning of fossil fuels, alongside aggressive industrial-agricultural practices such as mining and deforestation, contribute to the bridge of tipping points beyond the climate's capacity for recovery (Song et al. 2021). Along with sea level rises and the collapse of local ecosystems, the many anthropological impacts of climate change include 7 million 'environmental migrants' displaced by natural disasters in 2020 (Migration Data Portal 2021), with a 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report projecting 1.2 billion people displaced by 2050.

The large-scale impacts of climate change have been met by some actors in Global North settings with assignations of blame on the Global South, often through reference to parochial concerns about migration, and alleged resource scarcity, and usually involving rhetoric about population control and fossil fuel usage (Richards, Brinn and Jones, 2023). This has occurred despite the fact that corporations and individuals situated in wealthy Global North countries have historically been responsible for the greatest per capita contributions to climate change through resource and labor extractivism attached to long production and supply chains (Hickel et al. 2022), while many developing countries do not have the levels of industrialization required for sustainable living in the context of climate change (Carrington et al. 2018).

White supremacist actors have also expressed utilitarian concerns with climate change in connection with their acts of public violence. Among a slew of recent attacks by white supremacist actors were the actions of Australian self-described neo-fascist, Brenton Tarrant, who in March 2019 perpetrated a mass shooting at two mosques in Christchurch, causing the death of 51, while describing himself as an 'eco-fascist' in his so-called manifesto. In the manifesto, Tarrant cited inspiration from the neo-Nazi actor Anders Breivik, who in 2011 murdered 77 people in bombings and a mass shooting in Norway, and spoke of a 'global population cap' in his manifesto. The events at Christchurch then went on to inspire other violent actors. One among several was Patrick Crusius, whose mass shooting at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas in August of 2019 targeted Hispanic and Latino people, leading to the death of 23, and who named his manifesto The Inconvenient Truth after Al Gore's climate change documentary. A manifesto posted online by the alleged perpetrator of a mass shooting at a Buffalo supermarket in May 2022, which led to the death of 10 people of color in the US, also heavily plagiarized Tarrant's The Great Replacement, while describing the attack in Buffalo as in the interests of 'green nationalism'.

The pseudo-intellectual commitments of such actors and their communicative expressions work alongside wider political networks of climate change responses to legitimize different forms of far-right violence, through multi-modal media, and across institutional and non-institutional political venues. To establish evidence of these connections, the research described in this essay sought to look beyond the explicit pronunciations of politically violent actors to the broader, white nationalist domains where ideas conducive to the exploitation of eco-fascist agendas are expressed. The research methodology was inductive and did not presume that news media or professional political discourse exploited in white nationalist fora primarily sought to legitimize eco-fascist violence to a physical or symbolic extent. Rather, it investigated key themes of popular response to climate change that are vulnerable to the co-option of far-right elements. In the course of this work, the investigation sought to excavate different layers of political actor contributing to high-profile incidences of 'eco-fascism,' and other far-right ecologisms,[1] through attention to global online extreme right media platforms advocating accelerationism and other violent ecological-environmental activities. This media was considered in concert with statements made by well-known politically violent actors. Through a mixed methods, theoretically driven qualitative and quantitative analysis, the project sought to:

1. Map the key ecological-environmental priorities of extreme right-wing actors communicated in online-offline spaces.

1 'Ecologisms' generally refer to the range of political ideologies that place a high importance on ecological concerns. These ideologies or philosophies can significantly vary, as they might be based on different beliefs about the relationship between humans and the environment, the severity of environmental problems, and the best methods to address these issues.

2. Account for radical, far- and extreme-right actors' discourse on security, development, and the environment.

3. Analyze and build understanding of popular contemporary conceptions of eco-fascism in the context of wider political issues pertaining to the far right and the environment.

Literature Review

This research accounted for different conceptions of eco-fascism, including the different political philosophical ideas that inform far-right environmental priorities, from esoteric neo-Nazism to state and non-state ethno-nationalism. Contributing to the conceptual literature, the project commenced from the position that 'eco-fascism' as a concept is highly contested and has until very recently been subject to limited empirical research. We considered how a division exists at first instance between 1) those who argue that environmental movements can adopt fascistic positions in the service of ostensibly 'green' motivations, and 2) others who emphasize far-right movements' co-optation or appropriation (surface-level or otherwise), of environmental priorities. Aside from the reactionary climate sceptic Right, who have positioned environmentalism as fascism, most of the existing research has addressed examples of the latter type of actor. This has typically referred either to far-right groups or individuals who exhibit substantial environmental elements, or fascist and other far-right actors who have insubstantial, disingenuous, or opportunistically 'green' ideological elements.

In distinction from much of the existing research, this project contributed a comparative approach to understanding how non (physically) violent types of far-right actors contribute to what might be understood as an eco-fascist milieu. In this conception, limited actors under focus were interpreted as eco-fascist in nature, but currents of far-right and other ideologies responsive to climate change were understood as continuous with eco-fascist principles – though they may not integrate an 'eco-fascist vision' in a holistic fashion. For instance, as Zimmerman (1995) highlights, the terminology of eco-fascism has often been misappropriated for the purpose of political slander, whereas in his view, its apt usage exists only to the extent of the subjects' 1) emphasis on 'racial miscegenation'[2] as a form of 'pollution', and 2) their intention to install authoritarian forms of rule in response to ecological-environmental concerns. While rejecting Zimmerman's (2004) suggestions that radical environmentalism may be intrinsically proto-fascist, this project similarly cast a critical light on catch-all designations of eco-fascism as a historical case phenomenon, also seeking to look beyond formerly isolated or disparate interpretations of the extreme right and often genocidal actors in question (for more detail see Richards, Brinn and Jones 2022; 2023). The analysis drew on multi-mediated forms of discourse to seek to illuminate eco-fascist actors' more mainstream ideological supports, and their political connections, alongside the communicative proximity of eco-fascist doctrine to other forms of far-right ideology, to which it is also, in other respects, often ideologically adjacent.

Through an empirically informed analysis, this project also responded to long-running debates about eco-fascism's associations with 'deep ecologism'. Radical environmentalists, often following the work of Arne Næss, have been argued by social ecologists – influenced often by the work of Murray Bookchin – to exhibit eco-fascist tendencies (Biehl and Staudenmaier 1996), although deep ecologists would often defend against such accusations of 'biocentrism'[3] (Anker & Witoszek 1998). Some US-based 1980s and 1990s ecological movements, for example, were said to exhibit both 'green' and 'brown' elements and were even connected in some cases to Nazi ideology, including 'blood and soil' tropes, eugenicist notions of population control, and a radical anti-humanism (Thomas and Gosink 2021).

The analysis considered how anti-civilizational and accelerationist climate actors are also sometimes interpreted as eco-fascist, where they can be seen expropriating from and practicing 'entryism'[4] within progressivist environmental movements; such as punk autonomy and anti-imperialist, anti-war and anti-capitalist movements in the mid-twenty-first century (Ross & Bevensee 2020). Selective tenets of progressivist ideology are drawn upon in new organization formation in a 'syncretic' fashion, such as with so-called national anarchism in the late twentieth century within the UK and Australia (Hughes et al. 2022). As Macklin (2005) elaborates, these groups

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2 'Miscegenation' is a term that historically has been used to refer to the 'interbreeding' of people of mixed heritage, considered to be of different racial types. The term is used in far-right propaganda, and is now generally regarded as outdated and offensive due to its association with historical periods of racial segregation and anti-miscegenation laws, particularly in the United States.

3 Biocentrism is a philosophical concept that asserts the value and rights of all living beings, regardless of their utility to human needs. It posits that all forms of life – humans, animals, plants, and even ecosystems as a whole – are inherently valuable and deserve moral consideration.

4 Political entryism, or simply entryism, is a strategy used by a political actor or organization, where its members join another political grouping, with the intent to influence its direction and policies.

sought to establish localized sub-state ethno-communities, organized along hierarchical, radically traditionalist, and masculinist lines, in contrast with the egalitarian philosophical principles of anarchism proper (see also Macklin 2022).

Explicitly far-right movements referred to as 'eco-fascist' today are often rhetorically associated with the German Nazi historical context, or in more limited cases with interwar popular notions of 'regeneration' in Fascist Italy (Campion 2021). Influential in contemporary theorizing on eco-fascism have been the German Völkisch movement, the Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture Richard Walther Darré's *Blut und Boden* ('blood and soil'), and Ernst Haeckel's social Darwinist definition of 'ecology' (Biel & Staudenmaier 2011). Some of this research, however, has neglected the historical subordination of ecological-environmental principles within the Nazi regime alongside Darré and the 'green factions' marginalization, overcome ultimately by the Nazis' environmentally destructive militaristic incentives and the regime's aims of a fascist (capitalist) imperialism. Today, then, it is also important to recognize how the stated environmental priorities of self-described eco-fascists are ultimately also subordinate to their overwhelming and characteristically partisan racial-national aims.

Methodological approach

The aim of creating translational research impact in this project was in line with a 'practice-based' approach to research, predicated on the empathic principles of a critical criminological behavioral understanding (Ferrell 1997). We emphasized the importance of de-colonizing knowledge formation via recognition of oppressive governance structures and the mitigation of Global North influence, in particular in Global South settings of environmental degradation where populations have been subject to racialized socio-economic discrimination. 'Violence' is understood in this framework to extend beyond the physical realm to include different forms of psychological-emotional, cultural, economic and other harm caused by accelerationist, authoritarian and ethnonationalist policies and cases.

The first part of the data for the research presented in this essay was sourced from Stormfront, one of the first transnational online white nationalist forums. This data included environment-themed messages exchanged between users on public messaging discussion boards, similar to 'chat rooms', pertaining to eco-fascist propaganda and ideas, and discourse on acts of political violence committed by self-described eco-fascist actors, including written content and links to audiovisual media. Relevant channels were identified through an initial scoping exercise, and information from the sites was extracted using web scraping via Python software under the OSI-approved open-source license. The combinations of keywords that were used are listed in the table below.

Keywords
Australia
Australian
Climate change
Climate heating
Eco-fascism
Eco-fascist
Ecological
Ecology
Environment
Environmental
Global change
Global heating
Immigrant climate
Immigrant nature
Immigration climate
Immigration nature
Malthus
Migrant climate
Migrant nature
Migration climate
Migration nature
Pollutant
Pollute
Pollution

Table 1 | Keywords used to query Stormfront.

The thread lists were composed of metadata about indexed threads, including their URL, title, identification number, author, last post, last post author, replies, views and the forum with which they were associated. Sample 1 in the first dataset (DS 1) was composed of 6663 threads, which were retrieved from a scrape in May 2022, once duplicates were removed. This dataset included all threads from the 6th of October 2006 until the date of collection. The threads were subject to a preliminary social network analysis using the Python library NetworkX, where threads were connected to associated search terms as a series of nodes connected by links, and the degree centrality[5] of threads was calculated. This social network analysis determined which threads were most relevant by using degree centrality to quantify how often they were associated with search terms related to eco-fascism.

To create Sample 2, 174 threads from Sample 1 with a high degree centrality were isolated. Next, all threads mentioning eco-fascism, eco-fascist, or Malthus were identified. These were included in the analysis to mitigate the risk of omitting relevant data from the last threads that were scraped, which would have fewer comments and, therefore, a lesser degree centrality score, but still be useful to an exploration of the key research themes. These threads were combined with the 174 threads and duplicates were removed, before titles were coded for content, and relevant threads were isolated. After less relevant threads and duplicates were excluded, 94 threads remained, from which we then scraped the comments (or 'replies'). 10,115 comments in total were scraped across the 94 threads.

Owing to our research interest in analyzing relationships between white supremacist attacks and eco-fascist discourse online, we then went on to collect a second dataset (DS 2). This approach was in line with a Bourdieusian (1990) approach to researcher reflexivity, whereby illustrative social observation might only be achieved through ongoing self-reflection. In the wake of the Buffalo shooting and the prominent feature of 'eco-fascist' discourse in the shooter's manifesto, the guiding premise of this research was thus revised to incorporate a greater focus on the nature of response to this and other white supremacist attacks in which the perpetrators cited ecological motivation via Stormfront. Our second dataset was comprised of several dozen threads, and created through purposive sampling across the Stormfront website that mentioned recent acts of white supremacist mass violence in connection with climate change and other ecological-environmental themes.

A second component of the analysis presented in this essay also employed a qualitative, case study approach, examining how key conditions for contemporary cases of non-state violent and hateful extremism reflect Global North-South divides related to their contemporary reception of climate change and respective developmental histories. For the purposes of comparison, this analysis drew on qualitatively identified cases of high-profile commentary from both far right and neo-jihadist actors that pertained to international development, security and the environment. These included the substantive content of so-called manifestos published online by white supremacist attackers prior to their acts of mass public violence, and, for comparative purposes, historical rhetoric communicated in global statements by leaders of the neo-jihadist organizations, Daesh and al-Qaeda.

Via literature reviews and initial scoping analysis of far-right media, key discursive signifiers for eco-fascism were identified across these large-scale datasets. The initial scoping exercise undertaken in preparation for this research revealed that key thematic areas of interest drawn from online far-right discourse include: debates about economic growth imperatives versus environmental priorities; eugenicist or Malthusian population control measures; political treatment of regular or irregular migrants as a 'foreign species' or 'pollutant'; and expressions of denialism, resignation or accelerationism in response to the gravest impacts of ecological-environmental devastation, with reference to Global South countries in particular.

Eco-fascism online

Qualitatively coding the titles and first post content of threads from our Sample 2[6] revealed that approximately 16% appeared to express climate denialist views, while 70% accepted or exploited climate change, and another 14% of engagement was neutral in terms of either climate change acceptance or denial.

Threads that exploit fear about climate change often feature populationist and 'blood and soil' logics. This is evident through titles such as 'Only White people care about Nature / Ecology' (12/5/2019), 'Asia, Africa cause 90% Of plastic pollution in the world's oceans' (17/6/2019), 'Contemporary Ethno States – Let's escape to them' (13/2/2019), and 'TreesNotRefugees: Ecofascism, a neo-nazi movement on the web' (26/11/2018). Other threads capitalize on

5 Degree centrality refers to the total number of links incident on the node, which in this context shows the prominence, or centrality, of the thread within the broader dataset.

6 This sample contained 94 threads and 10,115 replies.

societal reactions, often from white identitarian perspectives, towards 'environmental migrants' displaced due to the effects of global heating. These threads, prevalent in white nationalist online spaces like Stormfront, include 'Bill Gates sounds the alarm: If migrant flows not stemmed, Europe will be overrun' (7/4/2014), 'Grandpa Joe Considers Plan to Invite "Climate Migrants" into U.S.' (23/4/2021), 'White Nationalists' extreme solution to the coming environmental apocolypse [sic]' (22/8/2019), and 'Join the Eco-Fascism movement, save our race and planet' (25/11/2019).

In several threads across the dataset, Neo-Malthusian reactions were also apparent. These often referenced alleged impending threats of food and resource scarcity, using titles and messages often derived from alt-right and far-right media sources, for example: 'Our glorious future on this planet… food rationing' (17/1/2019), '8 million starving blacks: Zimbabwe imports corn as catastrophic hunger looms' (1/5/2020), 'Should white nations stop exporting so much food to poorer countries?' (18/3/2021), 'Earth's resources consumed in ever greater destructive volumes' (7/23/2018), and 'Sub Saharan Africans expected to double by 2050, be 50% of the world population by 2100' (10/13/2018).

Several threads then associated international progressivist advocacy with the political left, using conspiratorial language to challenge or deny the anthropogenic (and corporate, Global North) causes of global heating. Threads illustrating this trend include 'A third, gullible far-left state bans plastic bags' (29/3/2019), 'Climate scientists admit to major math error after global warming study debunked' (15/11/2018), and 'The Climate Change Hoax: What to Tell the Incredulous' (26/9/2019). Other popular threads contained a symbol of three parentheses marks denoting antisemitism, such as '(((Activist))) helps indigenous communities adapt to changing climate' (8/12/2017), and '(((Harrison Ford))): Climate change is the greatest moral crisis of all time' (10/2/2019). Further denialist threads include 'Global Warming Shock. Antarctica Posts Coldest Winter Since Records Began' (4/10/2021), and '"Tolerant" liberals want to arrest climate-change deniers' (19/12/2021).

Certain threads present conspiratorial narratives about the intersecting threats of climate change and the Covid-19 international virus pandemic, implying an impending racial-civil war. These include 'Eco-fascism on the rise because of the coronavirus' (24/6/2020), 'The Great Reset' (20/8/2021), and 'Should Whites and East Asians band together to control planet Earth' (2/4/2021).

At the time of the research, the thread with the greatest number of views, 442634, was 'Alternative Energy and Free Energy, Post All Links Here' (6/10/2006). Later threads with significant views include 'Are Black people really incapable of creating advanced countries of [sic] civilizations?' (26/12/2019), which had over forty thousand views, and two threads referencing the white supremacist conspiracy narrative of white demographic replacement: 'How do you convince more people to have babies?' (16/5/2021) and 'Experts sound the alarm on declining birth rates among younger generations: "It's a crisis"' (3/3/2021), with almost five thousand and over 27 thousand views, respectively. The latter thread also had one of the highest reply counts by publication date, with 365 replies. Apart from the oldest thread, 'Alternative Energy and Free Energy, Post All Links Here', the thread with the most replies in this data sample was 'Is a nationalist revolution happening in France?' with 858 replies.

A search across all 6,663 threads of Sample 1 for explicit references to 'eco-fascism' revealed mixed results, similar to those of Sample 2's climate change politics investigation, suggesting to us that there is no consensus among Stormfront users regarding the term's meaning. This was perhaps to be expected given the public and open orientation of the platform, its invitation to disparate right-wing political audiences, and the lack of a coherent ideology characterizing eco-fascism – or indeed, other far-right ecologisms drawn on in the context of the discussions set out here.

Across the spectrum of commentary on eco-fascism on Stormfront, our analysis revealed varied actors' engagements with the subject of eco-fascism, including narratives such as that: of course human-induced change is real; of course, climate change is real but is rather a product of natural cycles; or that climate change is a scam, but environmental degradation is occurring because of populationist issues and the tyrannical controls of Jewish-run corporations. No environmental issues raised in the discussion threads we examined were dismissed outright. Moreover, all approaches to the matter of how white supremacists might use environmental issues also bore examples of people endorsing the definition of eco-fascism alongside others who rejected it, as well as users who positively identified and engaged in the discussion as eco-fascists. Perhaps most holistically, eco-fascism was used as a catch-all term for a far-right ideological disposition that takes seriously – or appears to take seriously – environmental issues for their value as a recruitment asset.

Patterns of discussion across the threads might, in certain respects, be understood as products of their time, reflecting popular far-right commentary, particularly in the US context. Several comments across the dataset in the run-up to 2020, for instance, echoed right wing climate denialism and the US Alt-right's propagandized exploitation of global heating, calling for population control and limits to US-bound migration (Neiwert 2017). Across the later time period examined, various commenters also reflected on international far-right activist trends and their political influence, including the adoption of metapolitical strategies such

as promoting 'hipster' trends, and discussion of pseudo-Eurasianist or European New Right notions of 'Great Space' politics (Bar-On 2016).[7] Discourse in the last months of our dataset also reflected increased public awareness of the concept of 'eco-fascism', and the topic was often raised in response to a proliferation of news media articles addressing this element of self-description increasingly deployed among white supremacist terrorist attackers.

The next part of our analysis drew on our combined datasets (DS 1 and DS 2) to examine Stormfront users' rhetorical engagement with acts of political violence, and their emphasis discussions of ecological-environmental issues in connection with this. Of several posts referencing the Buffalo shooter's commentary on environmentalist politics in their manifesto, the one that did so most explicitly in the context of our dataset blamed the attack on the political Left, writing:

Excerpt: Eco-fascist Content Posted Online

Confirmed: "Buffalo killer wasn't conservative, also despised Fox News, Greg Gutfeld, Ben Shapiro, Rupert Murdoch … In parts of the manifesto, he claimed he was an 'authoritarian left-wing[er],' said he hated Christianity and also said he was interested in 'green nationalism' … The thread title needs to be changed: Buffalo shooter was left-winger, who hated Christianity and Fox News; two of his victims were White." (15/5/2022)

Some posters also expressed celebration or outright admiration for the perpetrator of the attack, including an allegedly Australia-based user who wrote: "He must have had an awful lot of free time … the manifesto is 180 pages, typed, with graphics and charts … He must have been planning this for awhile" (14/5/2022). Another user similarly stated: "As far as the Buffalo shooting goes, the downside is that the Leftist news media is having another field day denigrating 'white supremacists'. On the other hand, the shooter's Manifesto made clear he was reacting to the White Replacement Theory – thus bringing that term to the forefront of discussion. That's the upside" (19/5/2022). Dialogue between user accounts was also illustrative of the usage of the event to the end of furthering an eschatological US civil-'race' war, with another user arguing that "for such a coup 'in the lower ranks' to succeed, it would require massive coordination among these ranks, numbering in the thousands to the tens of thousands in order to build up the necessary brute force" (19/5/2022).

The other noteworthy associations between commentary on the Buffalo attack and green politics, which were also returned in our study, were comments on older threads about environmental politics, the commenters of which had updated their profiles or by-lines in order to link to an online copy of the Buffalo shooter's manifesto. The manifesto link was featured in recent replies across threads about population control and the environment, such as the aforementioned threads about "8 million starving blacks" (5/1/2020) and 'Black civilizations' (26/12/2019), or of threads about white supremacist propaganda strategies, such as: "The Term 'White Nationalist' has become Toxic, Let's use 'Identitarian'" (30/9/2019). The link and the alleged perpetrator, Payton Gendron's image, were also featured beneath the bylines of authors commenting on threads about environmental activists, such as "Exposing Greta, the lefty child actress" (22/8/2019). The manifesto also featured in the profiles of influential forum users participating in threads regarding climate change denial, such as "The Climate Change Hoax: What to Tell the Incredulous" (26/9/2019), or "Biden wants Americans to eat only one burger per month" (24/4/2021).

It was important to recognize the convergence between discursive characteristics of the Stormfront platform and the manifesto/s in question. A noteworthy aspect of the Buffalo shooter's manifesto relevant to this paper's exploration of eco-fascist memes was its selective misappropriation of population genetics research. In this aspect, the manifesto referenced the work of academic, Michael Woodley, who co-authored a book alleging that ethnicity and cognitive abilities are linked, and authored papers funded by the Unz Foundation, run by the Holocaust denialist software entrepreneur, Ron Unz, alleging that humans can be divided into subspecies (Price 2018). Woodley has been affiliated with the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and been awarded degrees from Columbia University and Royal Holloway, University of London. Alex Mas Sandoval, a researcher in population genetics, began an online petition after the shooting at Buffalo to have Woodley's PhD revoked. Specifically, a table in which Woodley compared humans with animal species such as jaguars and leopards was featured in Gendron's manifesto

7 'Great Space' refers not just to geographical space but also to a civilizational concept, historically emphasising Russia's unique role and destiny. The concept derives from Eurasianist political thought, and is sometimes also applied by far-right pseudo-Eurasianist, and European New Right political thinkers. They argue that Russia and European states and regions are meant to form independent, self-sufficient geopolitical, cultural, and civilization entities.

(Pronczuk & Ruckewaert 2022), which echoes similar discredited race science prevalent on Stormfront fora where genetics research is ranked for its utility in offering ideological support for the ideologies of white nationalism (Price 2018).

Development, the environment, and political violence

Justifications of violence from white supremacist actors in Northern or developed states - including European Identitarians,[8] Australian Patriots and the US Alt-right – often express grievance at a loss of inherited privilege tied to the exponents' European or settler colonial ancestral histories. The 'counter-jihad' movement that emerged after 9/11 is also sometimes cited in calls for violence against Muslim communities in particular. Centrifugal, neo-jihadist organizations such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State, conversely, tend to call for methods and modes of violent resistance against the institutions of global governance, portrayed as their historical oppressors. It is useful in exploring the distinctive characteristics of a white supremacist engagement with 'eco-fascist' ideas to explore how these actors, relative to neo-jihadist organizations in their propaganda, reflexively cite the enduring impacts of economic and industrial development impacting the natural environment in less developed countries.

Developmental discourse used by white supremacists for propagandizing, for example, included The Great Replacement manifesto published online by Brenton Tarrant, prior to his perpetration of a massacre at two mosques in Christchurch in March 2019. Relevant tracts include:

Excerpt: Eco-fascist Content Posted Online

"This stripping of wealth and prosperity in order to feed and develop our cultural competitors is an act of civilization [sic.] terrorism resulting in the reduction in development and living conditions of our own people for the benefit of those that hate us." (Tarrant 2019)

While citing inspiration from Tarrant, Patrick Crusius also named his manifesto after Al Gore's climate change documentary, in that document stating: "If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can be more sustainable" (Crusius 2019). The manifesto of the perpetrator of the mass shooting at a grocery store in Buffalo on May 14 in 2022, then, featured significant excerpted content from Tarrant's manifesto, and included the statement:

Excerpt: Eco-fascist Content Posted Online

"Green nationalism is the only true nationalism. There is no conservatism without nature, there is no nationalism without environmentalism, the natural environment of our lands shaped us just as we shaped it. We were born from our lands and our own culture was molded by these same lands." (Anon 2022)

Indicating evidence of mainstream political absorption of related eco-fascist ideas, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, accelerationist and populationist tendencies became prevalent through the circulation of online viral memes displaying slogans such as 'bees not refugees' and 'humans are the virus' (Allison 2020).

As one of this essay's authors explored in an Emerald Handbook chapter on the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals and countering violent extremism policies (Richards 2020), the recursive, propagandized usage of developmental histories in the Middle East and North African region by al-Qaeda and Daesh is also under-recognized (see also Richards 2023). In one example referring to UN peacekeeping operations in Somalia in the 1990s, former al-Qaeda leader Bin Laden stated: "the most disgraceful case was in Somalia; where - after vigorous propaganda about the power of the USA and its post-Cold War leadership of the New World Order - you moved tens of thousands of international forces, including twenty-eight thousands [sic.] American soldiers into Somalia" (Bin Laden, 1996, p. 12).

8 'Identitarian' refers to relating to or supporting the political interests of a particular racial, ethnic, or social group that shares an underlying identity. The term has been associated with various social and political movements throughout history, which advocate for the rights or interests of specific identity groups.
In a European context, it is often associated with a far-right political movement that originated in France known as the 'Identitarian Movement' or 'Generation Identity'. This movement is characterized by its nationalist stance, emphasizing the preservation of national and European identity against perceived threats such as immigration and 'Islamization'.

In another case, the first person charged with treason since WWII, Adam Gadahn, in the al-Qaeda English language magazine Inspire, called on the 'Government of the Crusader West' to:

Excerpt: Eco-fascist Content Posted Online

"Prove that you are serious when you talk about turning over a new leaf and changing Western policy towards the Islamic world, by… calling off your proxies, agents, "jackals" and "economic hit men", [and] leaving the Muslims alone to rule themselves by themselves, free from the "global governance" of your organizations and institutions." (AQAP 2013)

It is important, moreover, to examine further evidence of institutional economic relationships between opposing political actors in these contexts, despite the counter-hegemonic tones of al-Qaeda and Daesh propaganda. This is also particularly prescient in light of the environmentally destructive extractivist fossil fuel industries controlled by Western powers and exploited by organizations such as Daesh in the Middle East, which are predicated on the supremacy of the US petrodollar. In the first two years after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, US and UK companies expropriated more than US$2 billion in oil revenue earmarked for local development (Whyte 2007). While the Islamic State in Iraq, the precursor to Daesh, emerged from this conflict, the revenue it garnered from its trading of oil brought about massive financial windfalls, also contributing toward its 2015-2017 attempts at establishing governing legitimacy within its occupied territories. Daesh revenue from oil was up to US$730-1460 million in 2014 (Brisard & Martinez 2014, 7), between US$435-550 million in 2015, and US$200-250 million in 2016 (Heißner et a. 2016). Indicating the scale of the organization's exploitative agricultural activity, the total value of its wheat production in Syria and Iraq in 2015 also equaled almost that of its oil production revenues in late 2014 and early 2015, with a net yield of 2.45 million tons (Jaafar & Woertz 2016).

Conclusion

The relatively exclusive, extreme cases highlighted in this essay do not detract from the importance of more mainstream engagements with ideas of population control and allegations of resource scarcity (as opposed to attention toward resource distribution), that can err toward far-right 'eco-fascist' agendas. Indeed, as the Stormfront threads showed, these tropes are not only present in 'manifestos' associated with political violence. They are also prevalent in increasingly mainstream political ideas echoed in radical, far and extreme right online media incorporating such ideas such as the European New Right and identitarian advocacy of 'remigration,' referring to policies for the forced repatriation of regular and irregular migrants away from European towns and cities back to their alleged ancestral homelands (Richards 2022). Evidencing this, the related notion of a 'Great Replacement,'[9] originally conceptualized by French New Right writer Renaud Camus, formed the basis of significant political agitating throughout the 2022 French Presidential election in the case of three different parties. Nativist green politics drawing on these ideas, moreover, does not typically contextualize the impact that Global North and wealthy states had on the environment through their ongoing neo-colonial developmental histories.

Derived from other white genocide theories prevalent throughout modern history on the extreme right worldwide, such ideas as the Great Replacement theory have also found political purchase in mainstream news outside Europe. Far-right pundits in the US and Australia also periodically refer in explicit terms to a 'Great Replacement' of white people, echoing the aforementioned title of the Christchurch attacker's manifesto. Indicating the intersectional prejudice at play, this theory has roots, meanwhile, in prolific European historical racism targeting Jewish people as 'borderless enemies', alleging that they sought to undermine White Christian national identities by, differentially, communism or internationally capitalism, while promoting gender and sexual perversion (Hanebrink 2018)).

The analysis in this research project also revealed how it is relevant to recognize impacts of the post-9/11, US-led 'war on terror'. The contemporary, pejoratively termed 'migrant' or 'refugee crisis', that forms the basis of much far-right institutional political agitating in Europe, for instance, proceeded from 2015 when millions of refugees were displaced from the Middle East, and Syria particularly, following the mass brutality of Daesh and civil wars across the region, following years of regional conflict and environmental crises. Often omitted again from such narratives fearmongering about migration to Northern states are the geo-political circumstances of state conflict from which Daesh emerged (Phillips 2020).

9 The theory holds that political and economic elites are orchestrating the deliberate replacement of white people in wealthy states with people from less wealthy states, including Muslim people in particular, through mechanisms of outbreeding and large-scale migration.

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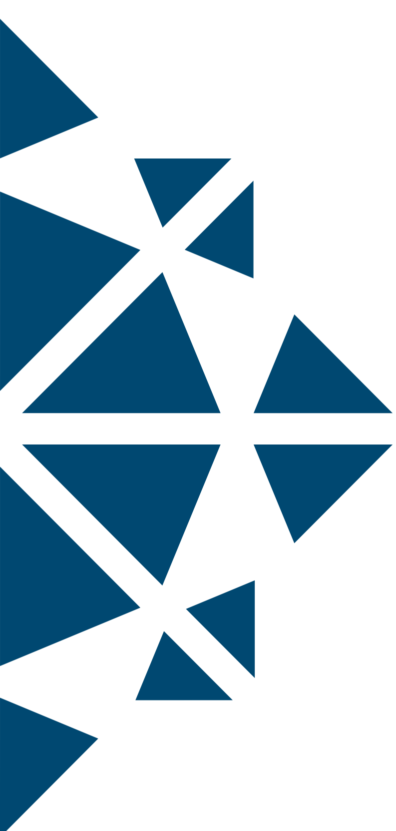

Misogynistic Extremism: Examining the Intersection between Misogyny and Violent Extremism

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Introduction

The growing evidence base of risk factors associated with violent extremism suggests overlaps with mass murder and different types of gender-based violent behaviors such as intimate partner violence, sexual assault and sexual harassment. To a varying extent, misogynistic beliefs underpin each manifestation of violence. For instance, research consistently shows that mass shooters share histories of gender-based violence such as domestic violence (Pagliery & Devine, 2018; Everytown for Gun Safety, 2017), sexual assault (Vives, Hamilton, & Sondheimer, 2018; Marganski, 2019), stalking (Topping, 2018), and online harassment of women (Duncan & Bogel-Burroughs, 2018). This suggests mass and gender-based violence may intertwine (e.g., Lopez, 2017; Sakuma, 2019). Similarly, research highlights multiple cases of violent extremists engaging in violent misogyny prior to committing terrorism (e.g., Smith, 2020). As such, domestic and intimate partner violence are increasingly considered possible warning signs for potential acts of targeted violence (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2017; DHS, 2022). Despite these obvious links, policy makers as well as mainstream discourse tend to shy away from a gendered approach to explaining and debating acts of targeted violence (Ramsey, 2015).

Methodology

The main aim of this paper is to draw on several recent cases of mass violence to (1) analyze the role of misogyny within recent acts of targeted violence and thus, to (2) examine the potential intersection between misogyny, violent extremism and other acts of targeted violence such as violent incel attacks. First, we analyze the role of misogyny within incel violence. Second, we examine the relevance of misogyny within recent radical right terrorism. Third, we establish overlaps in regard to the motivational underpinnings driving violent extremist attacks and acts of mass violence.

Violent Incel Attacks

Recent violent misogynistic attacks in the U.S. and Canada highlight the functional role misogyny can play in motivating acts of targeted violence. Some of these attackers self-identified, to different degrees, as 'involuntary celibates' – more popularly known as 'incels' (Hoffman et al., 2020; Tye, 2021). Incels are a loosely organized online community of men, who define themselves by their inability to obtain a romantic or sexual partner. The violent fringe of the movement expresses hatred and vengeance toward women for not acknowledging their male entitlement to women and sex (Beauchamp, 2019; Williams, 2018). Common among most perpetrators is their engagement in misogynistic online communities prior to committing the attacks (Hines, 2019), further highlighting a connection between targeted and gender-based violence.

Incels believe in genetic determinism, whereby women are perceived both (a) to be genetically inferior and (b) to prefer what they call genetically superior men over incels, who have a supposedly inferior physical appearance (Ging, 2019; Hines, 2019). They categorize men and women alike into a sexual hierarchy, which determines their chances within what they perceive as a 'sexual marketplace' (Preston et al., 2022). Incels typically consider themselves at the bottom of this hierarchy in society, and while they still feel entitled to women's bodies, they perceive themselves as being denied access to sexual and romantic relationships (Menzie, 2022). As a result, they express extreme misogynistic attitudes and blame all women, and attractive and sexually active men, for their sexual and romantic rejection and celibacy (Hines, 2019; Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).

While not all incels hold violent attitudes towards women or seek vengeance, 'misogynistic incels' regularly call for violence against women (Kelly et al., 2022; Baele, et al., 2019; O'Malley et al., 2020). Misogynistic incels tend to turn their frustration outwards, which often translates into hate and support for violence against women as well as 'genetically superior' men, yet, a significant number of incels internalize their grievances and do not act upon them. The latter group often suffers from deep shame, loneliness and depression, where some affiliates openly encourage other members to commit suicide to escape their perceived hopeless situation (Ging, 2019).

In regard to violent incel attacks, misogyny is enacted by indiscriminately targeting individuals who are symbolic of a whole group in society, in this case women. By externalizing their anger and hatred, which stems from a deep sense of violated entitlement, misogynistic incels hyper-conform to violent masculinities through acts of mass violence (Aggeler, 2018; Chavez & McLaughlin, 2018; Wendling,

2018). Elliot Rodger, one of the most well-known misogynistic mass shooters and a former member of the incel community, killed seven people (including himself) and wounded 14 people in May 2014 in Isla Vista, California. The case of Rodger particularly highlights how romantic and sexual rejection from women can induce a sense of violated entitlement and a perceived injustice (Allely & Faccini, 2017; Manne, 2018). In his manifesto, 'My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger' (2014), the shooter describes his lifetime of romantic and sexual rejection and identifies women and more broadly feminism as being responsible for his suffering. In his manifesto he speaks of a 'Day of Retribution' stating "I am so angry, I am going to get even with you. Violence is the way you get even. [...] Violence in this case is revenge. It's retaliation." (p. 1) (Rodger, 2014).

His own perceived superiority simultaneously transformed shame and anger into a desire for revenge against women, but also against sexually active men, ethnic minorities, and wider society (Murray, 2017; Vito et al., 2018). The manifesto and videos produced by Rodger were a fundamental part in the rise of the misogynist incel movement shaped around sexual entitlement, the dehumanization of women and the glorification and perpetration of violence. This attack inspired several further misogynistic acts of targeted violence committed by individuals identifying with the incel movement within recent years (Hines, 2019; Tomkinson, Harper, & Attwell, 2020). One of the most well-known of these attacks was committed by the then 25-year-old Alek Minassian who murdered 11 people and injured 16 others when he repeatedly drove his van into a crowd of people in Toronto.

In the days leading up to the attack, Minassian posted admiring comments about Elliot Rodger (Branson-Potts & Winton, 2018). Immediately before the attack he wrote on Facebook: "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman [Santa Barbara perpetrator]!" (Minassian, 2018). This attack exemplified and highlighted again that sexual rejection and the hatred towards women can represent key motives driving acts of mass violence. Following the Toronto attack, incel hubs on platforms such as Reddit gained a significant number of new subscribers (Gothard, 2020).

The Toronto attack was followed by an attack committed by a 40-year-old man, Scott Beierle. The attacker opened fire at a yoga class in Tallahassee, Florida, killing two women and injuring three others (Zaveri et al., 2018). While not a self-identified incel, the attack was argued to be inspired by violent incel ideology and was later labelled as "misogynistic extremism" by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS, 2022). Prior to the attack, the perpetrator posted songs and videos to his YouTube channel espousing racist and misogynistic beliefs, raging about his lack of success in developing or maintaining relationships with women (Hoffman et al., 2020; Sugiura, 2021; Young, 2019). He also openly expressed support for misogynistic incels who committed acts of mass violence, while also making threats of misogynistic violence online himself and comparing Rodger's feelings to his own (Rouda & Siegel, 2020).

On the day of the attack, he left a note in his hotel room, stating: "If I can't find one decent female to live with, I will find many indecent females to die with. If they are intent on denying me life, I will have no choice, but to deny them life" (Hurley, 2018). Importantly, there were many red flags which were missed, presenting missed opportunities to prevent the mass shooting: The perpetrator engaged in multiple instances of inappropriate and criminal behavior directed towards women and girls such as stalking and groping women. His behaviors resulted in him losing several jobs, being banned from public locations, and having multiple contacts with law enforcement, some of which resulted in arrest (DHS, 2022).

Jake Davison, who showed sympathy with violent incel ideology, was 22-years of age when he killed five people in Plymouth, UK, in August 2021 (Grierson, 2021). He first shot and killed his mother at home and then went on to kill four other people close to his house, only weeks after his shotgun and license had been given back to him (Williamson, 2021). The Plymouth-attacker voiced strong misogynistic as well as homophobic views on incel online forums. He further expressed extreme desperation and disillusion, stating "for the most part it's just been me against the world" (Weaver & Morris, 2021). The perpetrator's online posts were filled with hatred and rage towards his mother, his inability to find a girlfriend as well as his frustration in being unable to form friendships and not having a support network.

In this case, the link between domestic violence and mass violence also becomes clear. The deteriorating relationship with his mother and the eventual murder of his own mother show how underlying grievances can lead to both types of violence (e.g., Smith, 2020). At the time of writing, there is an upcoming inquest into whether and to what extent mental health issues, personal grievances as well as ideological motivations influenced his actions, which will hopefully further clarify the role of violent misogyny in this attack.

Misogyny within Violent Radical Right Extremism

Although the focus has largely been on the 'incel' movement, misogyny and related threats to masculinity as well as violated entitlement go far beyond it. Misogynistic belief systems also form a core part of radical right ideologies and have mobilized to real-world harmful behavior with several radical right terrorists committing ideological violence (e.g., Smith, 2020; Wilson, 2018). Common among violent extremists, particularly white supremacists, are extreme misogynistic attitudes, such as advocating for the (sexual) subjugation of females and strict patriarchal societies, while some go further and openly call for violence against women who are perceived to betray the white race by having sexual relationships with non-White men (Blee, 1996; Bjork-James, 2020). Qualitative research shows that a significant proportion of extremists who have engaged in terrorism within Western countries in recent years, share histories of domestic violence or have expressed misogynistic sentiments (Díaz & Valji, 2019; Smith, 2020). Similarly, failed relationships and rejection by women have been identified as motives, not just for various mass shootings (Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Fox, Levin, & Fridel, 2018) but also among radical right terrorists (Jasser, Kelly, & Rothermel, 2020; Wilson, 2018).

The manifestos of recent radical right terrorists, who were predominantly white males, have highlighted that violent misogyny constitutes a key motivating factor for committing these attacks across Europe, the U.S. and Canada (Wilson, 2020). While these terrorist attacks have been largely motivated by the white genocide and great replacement conspiracy theories and other personal grievances, the perpetrators additionally demonstrated substantial misogynistic motives (Smith, 2019; Wilson, 2018). For example, a fundamental aspect of these manifestos was a hatred of feminism and a strong desire for women's subjugation to restore male dominance (DiBranco, 2020; Oltermann, 2019). Similar to incel violence, the majority of these male perpetrators did not have intimate relationships in the years prior to the attacks (Wilson, 2020).

Thus, not all acts of targeted violence where misogyny is a driving factor, are committed by incels or are inspired by incel ideology. Yet, some mainstream media outlets and researchers have tried to connect unrelated misogynist violence to incels (for a discussion see Jasser et al., 2020). In the case of the February 2020 attack in Hanau, Germany, by the radical right terrorist, Tobias Rathjen, some outlets claimed the attacker was an incel because of a paragraph in his manifesto stating that he had not been in an intimate relationship with a woman for 18 years (Kelly et al., 2022). The attacker opened fire at a shisha bar and a nearby late-night restaurant killing nine people and injuring more. After the attack, the suspect returned to his home, killed his mother, and then committed suicide (Bartsch et al., 2020). In addition to featuring a toxic mix of anti-Semitic and white supremacist narratives as well as conspiracy theories and extreme paranoid thoughts, the manifesto under the section 'Topic Women' addressed his desire but also failure to find a romantic partner as well as his sense of entitlement to women and sex (Jasser et al., 2020; Oltermann, 2020). While the manifesto and the videos uploaded prior to his attack demonstrated misogynist beliefs, they did not suggest a direct connection to incel ideology, either in terms of evidence that the shooter frequented incel forums or shared specific incel ideology (The Soufan Center, 2020).

Misogyny was also a motive for the German radical right terrorist who killed nine people in Hanau in February 2020. Stephan Balliet's attempted to forcibly enter a synagogue in Halle in Germany to commit a mass shooting livestreamed online on the gaming platform Twitch. As observed in other cases, the perpetrator's manifesto reflected deep sentiments of misogyny and perceived existential threats to the white race. After failing to enter the building, he randomly shot two people nearby. He addressed issues relating to white genocide and misogyny, blaming feminism for the falling birth rates in the West and for the perceived decline of white male hegemony (Oltermann, 2019). While the perpetrator was driven, to an extent by a violent misogynistic ideology, other grievances related to his white supremacist and anti-Semitic views seem to have been key motivating factors for his attack (Köhler, 2019).

Other cases where misogyny factored into perceived grievances include the mass shooter Patrick Wood Crusius, who killed 23 people outside a Walmart in El Paso Texas in August 2019. He stated in his manifesto that he was defending his country from cultural and ethnic replacement while holding deeply misogynistic attitudes and expressing a strong sense of entitlement toward white women (Wilson, 2020). Similarly, misogyny was a fundamental element of Anders Breivik's manifesto and reports show that he experienced rejection by women in the years leading up to the attack (Borchgrevink, 2013; Wilson, 2020). Similar to Rodger he defended white male supremacy against a perceived threat in which 'whiteness' and 'maleness' were allegedly increasingly undermined (Lucken, 2016).

Discussion

The above accounts describe a common pattern among heterosexual, predominantly white men who engaged in extreme acts of violence, partly as a retaliation against women (Hoffman et al., 2020). While there are various other grievances and factors, such as conspiratorial world views, paranoia and mental health issues that motivated them, misogyny appears to also have played a crucial role (Wilson, 2020). Such incidents highlight that misogyny, male violated entitlement, revenge motivations as well as status threats have motivated explicit misogynistic

attacks but are also common motives among radical right terrorists (Hines, 2019; Jasser at al., 2020) and represent drivers for joining extremist groups (DiBianco, 2020). More specifically, it becomes evident that perceived threats to status within the ethnic and gender hierarchy can lead to feelings of injustice and victimhood (Center on Extremism, 2019; DiBranco, 2020), resulting in a sense of frustrated entitlement and superiority, which further transforms shame and anger into a desire for revenge against women, ethnic minorities but also society as a whole (Baele et al., 2019; Kimmel, 2017; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). The fixation upon these threats and a perceived victimhood appear to be important drivers for the current wave of targeted violence committed by white males (Hoffman et al., 2020), whereby retributive violence is seen as a legitimate and righteous response to their suffering and a valid means to restore justice (Marganski, 2019). Accordingly, Hoffman et al. (2020) argue that misogyny, extreme opposition to feminism and a sense of violated entitlement, are the most fundamental shared beliefs between 'inceldom' and radical right extremism.

Importantly, these incidents point towards significant overlaps in regard to the motivational underpinnings between violent extremist attacks and related acts of mass violence, such as incel violence, by highlighting the role of misogyny, violated entitlement beliefs and masculinity threats as precursors to various acts of violence (Díaz & Valji, 2019). These commonly shared underlying grievances between misogynistic incels, violent radical right extremists as well as other male supremacists have been studied for decades by gender scholars in relation to gender-based violence. A wealth of research has linked such attitudes to a range of adverse outcomes including intimate partner and domestic violence, rape proclivity, and substance use among men (e.g., Casey et al., 2017; Munsch & Willer, 2012; Peralta, Tuttle, & Steele, 2010), yet rarely are these concepts applied to studying targeted violence and violent extremism.

Conclusion

Misogynistic attacks within recent years provide growing evidence of violent subcultures explicitly targeting women due to their perceived threats to male and sexual entitlement (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Gotell & Dutton, 2016). Relatedly, mainstream discourses are increasingly reporting a link between gender-based violence and mass violence (e.g., Lopez, 2017; Sakuma, 2019). Notably, a history of gender-based crimes or violence (e.g. harassment and stalking of women as well as sexual assault, such as intimate partner violence or rape), are common among perpetrators of targeted violence (e.g., Smidt, 2018; Snyder, 2018) and violent radical right extremists (Smith, 2020). While there has been a shift towards slowly recognizing misogyny as a motivating ideology for radical right mobilization and acts of mass violence, empirical research into gender-based mechanisms underlying these acts of targeted violence is currently limited (e.g., Scaptura & Boyle, 2020; Kelly et al., 2022).

Misogynistic motives within recent acts of targeted violence describe an emergent trend whereby a gender-based ideology seems to drive violence against women and society more broadly, which has been labelled as 'misogynistic extremism' (DHS, 2022). Yet, the vast majority of research on ideological motivations of violent extremists predominantly emphasize religious, political or ethnic grievances, while there is a lack of research studying gender-related grievances and motivations of individuals (men and women) espousing violent (extremist) ideologies. Importantly, alongside other behavioral indicators, engagement in (violent) misogynistic behaviors should be treated as a warning sign for a potential escalation of violence (DHS, 2022).

Further, rather than being the sole motive, misogyny seems to be interrelated with various other grievances and adverse experiences, which together appear to have formed an extremely hostile worldview where anger, perceived victimhood and frustrated entitlement are played out through retributive violent acts. For instance, most of these perpetrators tend to have experienced various achievement failures and severe strains (e.g., rejection and humiliation) (Marganski, 2019), which left them feeling wronged and victimized. Feelings of male violated entitlement are fundamental to these incidents, pertaining to beliefs that men are entitled and justified to use violence to restore what they believe is 'rightfully' theirs and inspiring revenge against those who have wronged them (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). Hence, we argue that rather than assessing those grievances and strains in isolation, it is imperative to analyze the interplay of factors that provide men a sense of being unfairly deprived of their deserved place in society, which may lead to support of and engagement in (extremist) violence and which ultimately intends to provide them a sense of empowerment and male superiority. Research on these concepts may offer promising avenues for examining the mechanisms underlying misogynistic violence and attraction to extremist groups more broadly (see Rottweiler, Clemmow, & Gill, 2021; Rottweiler & Gill, 2021).

Lastly, we argue that it is fundamental to apply a gendered framework to better understand targeted violence and violent extremism. Acknowledging gendered socialization processes in relation to both violence perpetration and gendered radicalization processes will be an important step forward. Continuing to downplay the relationship between gender, sex, masculinity, and mass violence and failing to acknowledge the fact that perpetrators of these crimes are predominantly men and thus, treat it as gender-based violence, will contribute to and further sustain a culture of male dominance and aggression. As such, we encourage further research into the gender-based mechanisms underlying acts of targeted and extremist violence.

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Section 2

New Lessons from Policy and Programming Across the Field of Prevention and Countering of Extremism and Violent Extremism

Community Attitudes Towards the Reintegration of Violent Extremist and Terrorist Offenders: A Neglected Challenge?

Josep García-Coll

Summary

Rehabilitation and reintegration of Violent Extremist and Terrorist Offenders (VETOs) is a complex process that can only work with the cooperation of local communities. Public policies and P/CVE programming do not always consider this aspect. After examining the case study of Spain, we propose the need to rethink political discourse and communication strategies concerning VETO rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

Introduction

Prison sentences for offenses related to violent extremism have increased in recent years. In 2019 alone, there were 1,004 arrests for terrorism offenses in Europe (Europol, 2020). The diversification of violent extremism crimes has caused many sentences to be shorter, leading a large number of Violent Extremist and Terrorist Offenders (VETOs) to be released in the coming years in Europe (Vidino & Clifford, 2019). Thus, the deradicalization and reintegration of detained VETOs have become a priority for European governments. However, despite efforts to deradicalize and disengage violent extremist offenders in prison and probation, their rehabilitation will not be complete until they are able to reintegrate in the community. At this point, relevant questions are posed concerning the readiness of communities to accept former VETOs and the possible public communication strategies that governments can adopt to enhance reintegration. In this essay, we suggest that P/CVE strategies and programs must include local communities as future hosts of reintegrated VETOs. The relevance of this issue and its implications are explored by looking at the main pieces of research on the topic published in the last few years.

Methodology

This article is the result of a literature review on the topic of community attitudes on the reintegration of Violent Extremist and Terrorist Offenders. It will focus on the results of recently published research on the topic, outlining the results provided and the implications for researchers and policymakers.

To do this, we will begin with a general analysis of attitudes toward the rehabilitation of VETOs, then move to considering the specifics of the Spanish context. To do this, we will review the most relevant rehabilitation interventions developed in Spain, how they were presented publicly, and how they are perceived by the community based on recent studies. Finally, some relevant ideas for future research and recommendations for policymakers are provided.

Attitudes toward deradicalization interventions

Recent studies on the effectiveness of deradicalization and reintegration policies have looked at public support as an essential element for reintegration to be effective. Therefore, successful reintegration depends on community acceptance (Barrelle, 2015). This has been observed in experiences with former extremists, where they report stigmatization from the community as the main challenge to leaving militancy behind (Ferguson, 2014).

A relevant question in this sense is what influences community attitudes towards the reintegration of former VETOs. The scientific literature on the topic is scarce and has provided very general conclusions. From existing literature, public support for criminal re-entry programs is relatively high (e.g., Garland et al., 2013; Vuk et al., 2020). However, this support seems to depend on various factors, such as the type of crime or the extent of harm inflicted on victims, with violent, sexual, and recidivist offenders having the least support (Reynolds et al., 2009; Vuk et al., 2020). In this way, when it comes to violent extremism, we know that people tend to be less favorable toward rehabilitation programs for terrorists than convicted criminals (Altier, 2021). The same author observed that this kind of program receives less support when the VETOs are inspired by groups like ISIS or Al Qaeda than when they are inspired by white supremacist groups. Altier (2021) also found that support for rehabilitation programs was higher among men, younger individuals, those with higher levels of education, and liberals.

However, a key question arises when exploring the results of these studies. How do these sociodemographic characteristics connect with attitudes toward reintegrating VETOs and other criminals? Studies

that explore this issue in more depth are scarce. A recent article by Lobato et al. (2022) explores the underlying psychological characteristics such as personality traits, ideologies, feelings, and other psychological mechanisms. The article divides attitudes toward the rehabilitation of VETOs into three main categories: incapacitation of inmates, treatment effectiveness and mandated treatment. Through two studies, this piece of research explores how these attitudes are influenced by the perception of threat, on the one hand, and by other psychosocial constructs, on the other.

The Spanish context

To understand the relevance of this study, it is of interest to examine how violent extremism has affected Spain. Spain is a country with an important exposure to violent extremism. Recent history in the country has included a civil war, a fascist dictatorship that lasted more than 40 years, and the emergence of insurgent and terrorist groups in the 60s-70s.

The ideologies that inspired these groups were mainly extreme right and left-wing, and Basque, Catalan, and Galician nationalisms. In addition to this, Spain suffered on March 11th, 2004, in Madrid what is in recent history the deadliest terrorist attack suffered in the European Union. The attack was followed by further failed attack attempts and a series of terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils in 2017. This important incidence of violent extremism carried out by terrorist organizations presents relatively big numbers of VETOs in the Spanish Prison System, as can be observed in the chart below.

	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna	Grupos de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre (GRADO)	Galician Nationalism	Jihadism[1]
Prosecuted	187	17	3	68
Preventive Imprisonment	8	0	4	47
1rst Degree	103	10	3	94
2nd Degree	83	6	3	21
3rd Degree (open regime)	9	1	1	0
Men/Women	170/25	13/4	6/1	104/11
TOTAL	195	17	7	115

Source: Based on Fundación Centro para la Memoria de las Víctimas del Terrorismo (FCMVT; 2021)

VETO Rehabilitation Programs in Spain

Public information on rehabilitation programs for VETOs is not easily accessible in the Spanish context. There is little information on the interventions carried out with terrorist offenders until the recent publication of some protocols, which would leave out of the ttscope of this article what was done during the earlier years of ETA and Grapo. (1960s to 2010s). The few initiatives that have become public were developed by individuals and organizations external to the Prison Authorities. For example, volunteers organized

1 Please note that the nomenclature used in this table is drawn from its original source, the Centro Memorial de Las Victimas del Terrorismo (Memorial Centre of Victims of Terrorism), available at https://www.memorialvt.com/publicaciones/.

mentorship programs with ETA prisoners in 1st degree ('1st degree' denotes a closed prison regime normally given to those sentenced to the most serious crimes) in the first decade of the 2000s (Ríos Martín et al., 2008). Interventions with restorative justice approaches were also implemented with some ETA prisoners placed at the Nanclares de Oca Prison that were willing to disengage from their terrorist group. These initiatives were also implemented with victims and perpetrators of the train bombings in Madrid in 2003 (Biffi, 2021).

Concerning VETOs related to the attacks in Madrid and the subsequent movements inspired by Al Qaeda and ISIS, the Spanish Prison Authorities developed a the "Framework Program for Intervention in Violent Radicalization with Islamist Inmates" in 2016 (SGIP, 2016). This is a program that seeks to modify precursor factors of criminal activity, as well as to promote alternative paths. The objective of the program is thus "the prevention, disengagement and deradicalization of those inmates with a deep-rooted assumption of an extremist ideology." (Revelles, 2020). It is voluntary, and as prerequisites to participate, inmates must expressly apologize to the victims, carry out activities leading to the reparation of the damage caused, and collaborate with the authorities to reduce the consequences of the crime committed. Inmates that decide to take part are required to sign a "behavioral contract." Treatment can be prioritized and each of them with "the intention that it be perceived by inmates as an instrument of support and not as an imposition of the Penitentiary Administration" (Revelles, 2020). One of the noted limitations of the program, however, is that it is only conducted in the Spanish language.

The Framework Program implemented with group A (inmates linked to terrorist crimes) involves individual meetings with psychosocial professionals in the prison context. Its main aim is to foster criminal desistance (i.e., the abandonment of criminal careers). The intervention with inmates that did not go to prison for violent radicalization, but are vulnerable to it, is carried out in a group setting (Revelles, 2020).

The Framework Program is complemented by an educational intervention with foreign inmates, which includes Instruction 3/2019, of February 14, on Penitentiary Institutions (Revelles, 2020). The educational intervention sets as a priority access to compulsory basic education for foreigners who have not obtained it, as well as access to Spanish language (or the co-official language in the region) instruction. Therefore, the educational intervention is projected in two directions: 1) general educational programs, such as literacy, primary education, vocational training and higher education, and; 2) specific programs to contribute to the personal development of foreign inmates, as well as their integration into a democratic, tolerant and peaceful society.

As of 2020, the Framework Program has been implemented with 44 inmates in 8 penitentiary centers (Revelles, 2020). Evaluation of the program has shown success in reducing the use of violence but not in modifying the ideology behind it. Thus, participants have disengaged but not necessarily deradicalized.

Challenges regarding the Framework Programme have to do mainly with the lack of a specific budget and the reduced number of translators available to implement the interventions (Revelles, 2020). Furthermore, the program has as its main objective the cognitive deradicalization of inmates and the acceptance of a moderate interpretation of religion. This presents some practical challenges. First, this would deem all the disengagement cases as failures since cognitive deradicalization has not occurred. Second, it gives prison authorities the power and responsibility to establish the correct interpretation of religion (Carou-García, 2019). Third, focusing on belief change might be incompatible with the right to religious and ideological freedom, expressed in article 16.1 of the Spanish Constitution. Because of these reasons, some scholars have suggested that the objective of the Program should not be to modify the ideology of a person, but to offer inmates alternatives and strategies that broaden their perspectives in life and strengthen their self-esteem and their personal and intellectual development in order to foster their resilience in the face of manipulation (Moreno Lara, 2018).

Framing of Deradicalization Programs

Studies exploring the framing of deradicalization programs are generally scarce. The few studies carried out in other European countries have provided some hints on how the media tend to frame these programs, for example, pointing out how media support for deradicalization programs is rarely based on data about its effectiveness but rather on the desire for it to be effective. However, media criticism of deradicalization programs tends to be based on data (Clubb et al., 2021). This dichotomy makes it difficult for actual analyses on the effectivity of deradicalization and disengagement initiatives to reach the general population. Therefore, these initiatives are commonly perceived as idealistic or unrealistic, this essay goes on to discuss.

In the case of Spain, deradicalization programs for prison inmates are neither part of the political rhetoric, nor often found in press releases from Prison Authorities. However, this could be said about any rehabilitation program implemented for offenders Information about the "Framework Program," for example, cannot be easily found online, not to mention data on its imple-

mentation or impacts. Only through direct interviews with frontline professionals can relevant information about deradicalization initiatives be recovered. Media references to this kind of programming appear to follow the trends seen in other European countries by Clubb and colleagues (2021). In fact, despite the lack of empirical studies, supportive mentions of deradicalization interventions in the Spanish context seem to be mostly focused on the anecdotal (e.g., Sancha, 2021), whereas more thorough explanations of these programs normally have to do with failed cases, e.g., in France (e.g., Zuloaga, 2022; Garde, 2021; Valderrama, 2017; Euronews, 2017). This failure is especially notable in the case of Usman Khan, who committed an attack right after completing a deradicalization program in the UK (EFE, 2019). Otherwise, articles dealing with the topic are generally used to remind the audience of how much of a threat VETOs in prison pose (e.g., Infolibre, 2020).

Attitudes towards Deradicalization Programs in Spain

Lobato et al.'s study (2022) carried out with a sample of around 800 individuals from the general public in Spain, remarked that members of the public who considered nothing could be done with VETOs also perceived criminal offenders as a greater realistic threat than terrorists inspired by groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh. Therefore, in the eyes of the general public, common criminals are still seen as a greater realistic threat. However, the same individuals had more negative feelings towards supporters of Al-Qaeda and Daesh than towards supporters of groups like ETA. They also perceived terrorists inspired by groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh as a greater realistic and terrorist threat than ETA terrorists. A very similar observation emerged with the evaluation of treatment effectiveness, since both those that considered rehabilitation efforts with VETOs to be less effective or those that wanted it to be compulsory, had more negative feelings and considered terrorists inspired by groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh to be a greater realistic and terrorist threat than nationalist terrorists. This highlights a contrast between common trust in rehabilitation measures and existing efforts. As discussed previously, the first structured rehabilitation program for VETOs has been developed to deal with terrorists inspired by groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh. As stated at the beginning of this section, this discrepancy might be the consequence of inefficient communication strategies from government officials.

On the other hand, the number of deaths caused by nationalist terrorism exceeds the number caused by terrorists inspired by groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh, which contradicts the perception of these groups as a higher realistic and terrorist threat. Possible explanations for these divergent attitudes can be found in previous studies carried out on the perception of threat that connects the perception of threat with the experience of negative contact with the outgroup (Stephan et al., 2002). Furthermore, perception of threat has significant indirect effects on negative attitudes towards the outgroup, connecting negative contact with the outgroup with prejudice. In fact, realistic threat (meaning the threat to our basic needs like jobs, food, etc.) from the outgroup is also linked to negative prejudice against the outgroup (Riek et al., 2006). If contact with the outgroup is scarce and media depictions of it are quite often remarking realistic-threat perceptions (see Scroggins, 2005), threat perception and prejudice may rise. The amount and quality of contact between local Spanish communities and Muslim communities were not within the scope of the studies examined for this article. However, the perception of threat is significantly higher with ideologically inspired extremism akin to groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh, which can be related to a lack of knowledge about Islam and scarce actual experiences with the Muslim population. This would be congruent with studies carried out on attitudes towards the Muslim community in countries like the Netherlands (Velasco González et al., 2008), which predicted negative perceptions of Muslims based on higher realistic and symbolic threats. Europe-wide studies carried out on the topic (Bell et al., 2021) have also seen higher prejudice towards Muslims in countries that actually have a smaller Muslim population.

Future research

In any case, Lobato et al.'s study (2022) highlights the importance of the ideology of terrorist groups as a determining factor in supporting rehabilitation programs. Therefore, further research could be carried out specifically exploring the connection between attitudes toward Muslim communities and attitudes towards VETOs inspired by groups such as Al-Qaeda and Daesh. This could inform public policies concerning media characterization of Muslim community members and the rehabilitation of VETOs, as carried out in initiatives like the Framework Program.

Lobato et al.'s study (2022) also shows how political ideologies held by the public are a determining factor in the trust they put in VETO reintegration efforts. Conservative media outlets could therefore be a target for inclusion in future communication efforts based on the data collected by government authorities on the actual implementation and effectiveness of rehabilitation programs.

In addition, further empirical research on the effects of media framing of deradicalization programs could

provide additional insights into how these influence public opinions on deradicalization efforts. It would also be relevant to empirically test general attitudes after the implementation of campaigns intended to increase community support for deradicalization programs in order to analyze the most effective initiatives. Likewise, media incidence of failed deradicalization cases like that of France has an effect on public attitudes that have not yet been evaluated empirically.

Similar research to Lobato et al.'s (2022) study should also be carried out with attitudes towards right-wing or white supremacist VETOs. This factor, which was present in Altier's study but not in Lobato et al.'s study (due to the lack of a large number of right-wing VETOs in Spanish prisons), would be relevant to examine the biases that the community might hold and the reasons behind it. It is also an issue that might increase its incidence in the following years, following the recent drastic increase of right-wing extremism in the USA and other European countries.

The study carried out by Lobato et al. (2022) hints at the idea that Spaniards would rather accept the terrorists they are more familiar with (e.g.,Basque nationalists) instead of ideologically-inspired terrorists. A possible explanation for this could be found in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), according to which prejudice against an outgroup increase due to the perceived threat from it. Further research testing this theory would be very informative of the nature of this prejudice against ideologically inspired VETOs ahead of nationalist VETOs or organized crime individuals.

Likewise, similar studies carried out in countries like Syria or Iraq could be very informative of the nature of this prejudice and provide insights into rehabilitation and communication policies in these countries. It could be inferred that since the ingroup and outgroup in these countries is different, the reintegration of ideologically inspired VETOs should be easier than that of individuals from other ideologies or from minorities.

Further research on the matter, however, cannot be carried out without an evaluation of the impact that specific media campaigns have on attitudes toward the rehabilitation of VETOs. Analyzing the effectiveness of such campaigns, and the changes in the perception of threat and the prejudice against VETOs they caused, will be of relevance in orienting future research and policies on how to communicate about rehabilitation programs. In this vein, the impact of terrorist attacks or the failure of deradicalization programs should also be evaluated, as well as the most effective way to communicate instances of failure or relapse in a way that does not reduce the overall effectiveness of deradicalization efforts and the significant amount of programs that have otherwise succeeded in rehabilitating VETOs.

Further research is still needed concerning community attitudes towards the rehabilitation and reintegration of VETOs. Carrying out further studies related to the research avenues explained above would complement the incipient work done on the topic. But most importantly, they would be necessary to implement successful P/CVE interventions.

Recommendations

Some practical recommendations can be extracted from examining these recent studies on the reintegration of VETOs. First, public opinion should be considered key in the design of deradicalization and disengagement programs. The reintegration of VETOs cannot be successful without the willingness and collaboration of local communities. Thus, the risks of not developing a strategy that engages them in these processes are high in terms of community rejection of reintegrated individuals and possible cumulative radicalization.

Second, media interventions which portray the reality of deradicalization efforts need to be developed, especially in the case of religiously-inspired VETOs. Similar trends in other European countries suggest a need to implement training initiatives for media experts. Likewise, policymakers should be able to articulate comprehensive analyses of deradicalization efforts that can address the general lack of knowledge and empirical data on the effectiveness of deradicalization programs. Last, public campaigns appealing to the general community should be developed. Inspiring examples are found in initiatives that frame deradicalized individuals as victims of their own vulnerability to recruiters (Boucek, 2009; Rabasa et al., 2010). These public campaigns should especially target more conservative audiences due to the tendency of right-wing media outlets to depict deradicalization processes negatively and the general tendency of right-wing individuals to distrust deradicalization efforts.

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The 3R Model for Youth PVE Restore, Repair, and Reframe

Slim Masmoudi

Introduction

Restoring social bonds, Repairing dysfunctional connections with family and community, and Reframing thinking and feeling in youth at risk of radicalization are the three pivotal action lines in the 3R model. Together, they seemed to be efficient ways to prevent violent extremism in youth.

Radicalization is a multidimensional process based on cognitive, emotional, and motivational vulnerabilities nourished and enlarged by family, community backgrounds, and today's world of online extremism. Therefore, cognitive, emotional, and motivational vulnerabilities need a new model to 'Restore' the social bonds, 'Repair' the dysfunctional connections with family and community, and 'Reframe' thinking and feeling: a "3R model" of secondary prevention.

Through a data-driven approach, we adopted a four-stage methodology based on (1) defining relevant risk factors and behaviors and constructing the first Arabic Youth Service Eligibility Tool (AYSET), (2) identifying general risk youth and high-risk youth among them, (3) a three-dimensional intervention: a family-centered intervention, a focused life skills coaching/training intervention, and a community-based intervention, and (4) an impact measurement of intervention after six months and twelve months.

Results indicated that 95% of youth on the AYSET index had a shallow risk of being radicalized. The 3R model was proven to be efficient and promising in PVE interventions.

Introduction: Roots of the 3R model

When screening the various definitions of radicalization, we see cognition, emotion, and motivation as the main spheres out of which extremist thoughts and behaviors arise. Radicalization can be defined (Trip et al., 2019, p. 1) as "a process of developing extremist beliefs, emotions, and behaviors." For other scholars, radicalization is a process that empowers and motivates individuals to resort to violence against people perceived as different (Doosje et al., 2013). For others, again, it is a phenomenon that succeeds in restructuring the dissatisfactions of young people by giving them new motives, drivers, and ways to satisfy their needs and resolve their deficiencies (Schott, 2014) or as a form of emotional and behavioral compensation for a perceived moral violation (Khosrokhavar, 2014; 2015). Radical thoughts and behaviors are developed based on a perceived dysfunctional community and environment. Through a Rational Emotive Behavioral Conceptualization focusing on the psychological mechanisms involved in radicalization and extremism, Simona Trip and her colleagues defined radicalization as a process of developing extremist beliefs, emotions, and behaviors (Trip et al., 2019). This process originates at the intersection of a failing psychological base and inappropriate ideological, familial, and social factors. According to Kruglanski et al. (2014), radicalization is the process of endorsing or taking part in actions that others see as violating significant social norms. According to this definition, radicalization is a matter of degree, with actual acts of violence reflecting a high level of radicalization. This assessment is made subjectively by those who value the violated norms but not by those who have suppressed or devalued them.

Several models have been developed to understand, explain, and guide field interventions for youth at risk of radicalization. Among these models, the prevent-pyramid model was developed by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) to reduce terrorism and supporters' violent extremism and eliminate radicalization. It is based on an ascending progressive approach that follows the level of radicalization. Four levels are defined: (1) the general community (at the base), (2) the vulnerable youth, (3) the radicalized youth (who support terrorist acts but do not participate), and (4) the active terrorists (at the apex, who commit terrorist acts) (Christmann, 2012). The present 3R secondary-prevention model includes this progressive approach. However, it overcomes the failure of the prevent-pyramid model to explain how people move from one level to another or to identify the risk factors involved. Indeed, it specified the degree and the nature of psychological vulnerabilities, including deficits, deficiencies, and dysfunctions inside the dynamics between the youth and its family and community, and identified twelve risk factors. This model can highlight the presence of different triggers of the radicalization process. Also, the prevent-pyramid model is criticized for insisting on a religious component that we see as not being intensely involved in this process.

Three essential elements were included in the radicalization/deradicalization model that Kruglanski et al. (2014) presented: (1) the motivational component (the pursuit of personal significance) that defines a goal in which one may be engaged, (2) the ideological

component that further identifies the means of violence that are necessary for attaining this goal, and (3) social networking and group dynamics that allow the individual to become a part of the violence system. In the 3R model, we consider that violent extremism is the outcome of a radicalization process based on vulnerabilities in the three motivational, cognitive-ideological, and social-emotional components. The 3R model was implemented to address these vulnerabilities.

Marc Sageman's four-stage process (2008), mainly applied to religious extremism, identified four steps for youth to be radicalized: (1) an angry reaction to moral violations which leads to a sense of 'moral outrage,' (2) moral violations which are perceived as a war against one's religion, (3) a resonance with personal life experience in which people relate perceived moral violations to their negative personal experiences (social, economic, and political environments are seen as a consequence of those perceived violations), and (4) social networks that nourish and accelerate the process of radicalization of young people. The psychological cognitive-emotional-motivational vulnerabilities defined in the 3R model are built on moral violations. Moreover, vulnerabilities are created and strengthened by the life experiences of young people. These vulnerabilities work as security breaches in an information system, leading to weaknesses and difficulties stopping external threats.

Inspired by Sageman's work, Michael Taarnby described the structure of a recruitment process that characterizes the Hamburg Cell Structure before September 11, 2001. Taarnby's eight-stage recruitment process (Taarnby, 2005) identified the following steps: (1) individual alienation and marginalization, (2) a spiritual quest, (3) a process of radicalization, (4) meeting and partnering with like-minded people, (5) progressive reclusion and cell formation, (6) acceptance of violence as a legitimate political means, (7) connection with a gatekeeper, and (8) becoming operational. Taarnby and Sageman agree on the importance of networks created by recruiters to radicalize young people. For the 3R model, networks and peers capture vulnerabilities to provide youth with responses to their deficiencies, weaknesses, and failures, whether cognitive, emotional, or motivational. This model clearly illustrates the critical role of risk factors such as social vulnerability, cyber-radicalization, religious extremism, guilt neutralization, and peer and family radicalization influence.

One of the controversial issues relates to religion's role in the radicalization process. Recent research indicates that radicalization is strongly motivated by the political context. Thus, recruiters use international political events as a reliable argument to legitimize their actions and beliefs. Nevertheless, we claim that radicalization has nothing to do with religion as the process occurs in right-wing extremism and white nationalists, anti-gay zealots, black separatists, racist skinheads, and so on. Indeed, religion and the political context are used as a pretext to justify extremist acts and violent behaviors. What motivates people to follow a process of radicalization is the need to belong to a community that values them and gives them a purpose in life. This alternative community captures the psychological vulnerabilities to reshape and remodel their minds. Olivier Hassid (Hassid, 2014) noticed that religion is of little importance compared to the risk factors that push an individual to engage in violent and extremist acts. He explained that this phenomenon is unrelated to a reflective and progressive religious maturation. Instead, to compensate for perceived moral violations, the young person is looking for affiliation and recognition that the radical group or radical persons provide. Thus, we suppose that two processes take place, one latent slow process of marginalization of the young person that is fed by his psychological vulnerabilities (which in turn are also provided by the process), and one visible short process of radicalization that leads to a sudden observable change highly influenced by peers. Again, psychological motives shape the process of radicalization - essentially the feeling of injustice, rejection, and hatred against society (Lafaye, 2016), which are fed by psychological vulnerabilities.

This paper defines radicalization as a multidimensional process based on cognitive, emotional, and motivational vulnerabilities nourished and enlarged by family, community backgrounds, and today's world of online extremism. This three-component conceptualization of radicalization is based on the psychological mechanisms involved in the process and its progressive nature. It is based on a three-sphere conceptualization of the mind called the CEM model, which stipulates that behavior results from the integration of cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes (Masmoudi, 2010, 2012b, 2012a; Masmoudi et al., 2012; Pessoa, 2013; Pierce & Hawthorne, 2012). Any vulnerability in a sphere leads to a kind of psychological breach. Cognitive vulnerabilities are related to a lack of thinking skills, such as critical thinking, creative thinking, and abstract thinking, and deficiencies and weaknesses in reasoning, problem-solving, or decision-making processes. Emotional vulnerabilities are related to difficulties understanding and expressing emotions, showing empathy towards others, self-regulation, and feeling guilty when offending others. They are also related to social problems and a lack of belonging feelings. Motivational vulnerabilities are related to difficulties in managing one's needs, a lack of goals and purpose in life, difficulties in developing an interest in things, situations, or persons, the propensity to develop maladaptive (e.g., antisocial) and unproductive motives, and the incapacity to start, maintain or finish a behavior (see Ryan & Deci, 2000 for the self-determination theory).

An example of cognitive vulnerabilities is what Wiktorowicz (2005) called “cognitive opening,” describing the moment when a person experiencing prejudice, socioeconomic hardship, and political repression is struggling to find meaning in his life and to make sense of his life events, when suddenly, his preconceived notions start to change, making him vulnerable and open to radicalized ideology. The individual uses cognitive biases unintentionally, increasing the acceptance of the radicalized ideology and legitimizing violence. An example of a cognitive bias is the “Selective abstraction” bias which consists of selecting one element (a person was unfair to me) at the expense of others, taking it out of context, and expanding it (all the community is unjust with me). Another cognitive bias, the propensity to overestimate how much other people concur with their ideas, behaviors, attitudes, and values, is known as the false consensus effect (the extremist group deeply understands my feelings and pain). Also relevant is anchoring bias, the propensity to be unduly swayed by the first piece of information we are exposed to (“the policeman was violent” becomes an anchoring point for “police are violent”). Cognitive biases are distortions that may function as cognitive vulnerabilities and play a role in creating other vulnerabilities.

Some emotional vulnerabilities are built on feelings of uncertain identity and an unstable sense of belonging. Hence, negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and sadness occur in everyday life and maybe poorly managed by the person. According to the uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg & Wagoner, 2017), people are driven to lessen their sense of ambiguity, particularly regarding their life, future, and sense of identity. Group identification is one way to overcome this self-uncertainty. However, uncertain identity can be nourished by deficient self-regulation and difficulties in expressing or understanding emotions. In general, extremist recruiters use the uncertain-identity vulnerability to increase youth anxiety and anger levels towards creating a solid radical-group identification.

One of the most impactful motivational vulnerabilities is what Kruglanski and his team called imbalance. Kruglanski et al. (2022) offering a unique multidisciplinary exploration of extreme behaviors relating to terrorism, dieting, sports, love, addictions, and money. In popular discourse, the term ‘extremism’ has come to mean largely ‘violent extremism’, but this is just one of many different types: extreme sports, extreme diets, political and religious extremisms, extreme self-interest, extreme attitudes, extreme devotion to a cause, addiction to substances, or behavioral addiction (to videogames, shopping, pornography, sex, work assert that the idea of extremism contrasts with the concept of moderation. The two are described in terms of how the basic needs of individuals are related—whether in balance or imbalance. The condition of extremism is defined as the dominance of one need over all others (imbalance). In contrast, the state of moderation is defined as the balanced attempt to satisfy all of one’s basic needs. This motivational imbalance significantly impacts motivation, cognition, conduct, affect, and sociality. The most significant result of imbalance is the acceptance of actions that weaken other fundamental needs. Different levels of attention for the focal needs against the alternative needs represent the imbalance (Kruglanski & Gigerenzer, 2011). Security, identification, autonomy, competence, and relatedness[1] are such needs.

Reframing ways of thinking helps young people acquire or relearn cognitive tools and mechanisms such as objective evaluation, comparison, deductive-inductive reasoning (critical thinking), flexibility, fluency, and divergent thinking (creative thinking). Reframing ways of feeling helps them build capacities such as regulating and sharing emotions, expressing empathy, or developing positive emotions and using them in problem-solving and decision-making. Reframing thinking and feeling allows beliefs, feelings, and behaviors to be more rational, regulated, positive, flexible, and socially constructive. Beliefs, feelings, and behaviors are the three pivotal components of Rational Emotive Behavioral psycho-therapy (REBT). One fundamental idea in REBT is that evaluative cognitions are the primary predictors of human emotions and behaviors (Ellis, 1994). When describing rigid extremist beliefs, Ellis (1986, p. 148) offered a very relevant example: “Our views of people and universe are absolutely and everlasting true, and nobody deserves to live who opposes these supreme views. Our political or religious cause is the only worthy one that should exist. We can save humanity and prevent evil. We must do anything to make sure that we extirpate everyone who prevents our noble cause from prevailing.” This example shows how a belief may combine absolutist cognition, latent hate, and anger emotions, motivated violence, and maladaptive inflexible violent behaviors. REBT is a practical interventional approach responding to beliefs that have inspired the 3R model.

Reframing motivational vulnerabilities helps young people manage needs and create balanced ways to satisfy them, and find adequate means to achieve goals. Radicalized youth choose violence to express their dissatisfaction or rejection of differences from

1 Relatedness represents the need to be emotionally linked to and interpersonally engaged in warm interactions. It is the psychological need to form strong emotional connections to and attachments with other people. Because people perform better, are more resilient to stress, and report fewer psychological concerns when their interpersonal interactions satisfy their need for connectedness, relatedness is a crucial motivational concept (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reeve, 2012; Osterman, 2000).

others. They should learn new ways to communicate their differences and new emotional and social tools and skills to manage dissatisfaction. Risk factors -individual, family-related, and peer-related- are based on these psychological vulnerabilities. More than 17 risk factors are revealed by research worldwide, such as lack of empathy (Awan, 2008; De la Corte, 2007; Yusoufzai & Emmerling, 2007; Nilsson, 2015), lack of guilt (Glucksmann, 2002; Roy, 2016), antisocial tendencies (Hassid, 2014; Khosrokhavar, 2015), religious beliefs and identity (Wiktorowicz, 2004; Christmann, 2012), cognitive style (e.g., authoritarianism is characterized by a rigid and dualistic cognitive style (LaFree & Freilich, 2017)), and critical life events (e.g., traumatized individuals grow up mistrusting others and seeking revenge, so they find refuge in radicalized groups (Fields, 1979; Akhtar, 1999)) are all examples of risk factors.

The above models and theories inspired the 3R model, an interventional model oriented to resolving the cognitive, emotional, and motivational vulnerabilities in at-risk youth. These vulnerabilities need new ways to Restore social bonds, Repair dysfunctional connections with family and community, and Reframe thinking and feeling: this is the 3R model. Restoring social bonds means recovering healthy relations in the family system that were lost, both horizontal (between brothers, sisters, parents, and the young person) and vertical (between aunts, uncles, grandfathers, grandmothers, and the young person). Repairing the dysfunctional connections between family and community is achieved through social problem-solving and managing conflicts between family members and the young person and between the community members (peers, teachers, etc.) and the young person. Creativity, problem-solving, artistic, and space planning or organizing workshops accomplish reframing thinking and feeling. These workshops use collective activities rather than individual ones designed to build collaboration and cooperation between youth and community/family members. The creativity workshops consist of finding new and creative solutions for problems and creating new valuable objects using available ones; the problem-solving workshops involve cooperating to solve mathematical or practical issues. The artistic workshops consist of painting and drawing to improve the aesthetics of the school, home, or community. Space planning or organizing consists of contributing to better organizing spaces in the school, at home, or in the community. These workshops are based on mentorship, guidance, and learning by doing.

Method: The four-stage methodology

The Tunisian context

The study was conducted in Tunisia from January 2017 through February 2018. The Tunisian context during this period was post-Arab Spring and impacted by the 2015 terrorist attacks. The “Terrorism in Tunisia through judicial files” study (Guessoumi et al., 2016) conducted by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism in 2016 on a sample of 994 people (959 males and 35 females) based on 384 cases involving 2,224 accused people showed that about 89% of radicalized people are between 18 and 39 years old, with a shared sense of marginalization, imbalanced needs, and weak social bonds to community. Some of the characteristics of the Tunisian context include an educational system with limited civic and religious curricula, high-level marginalization, frustration and feelings of injustice among youth, family relationship issues between parents and children, marginalized communities, normalization of violence in streets and homes, a strong ‘urban-rural’ divide, and a high level of social network users.

The context of the ETTYSAL program

Ending Terrorism through Tunisian Youth Service Action Locally (ETTYSAL) is a successful pilot program designed to identify Tunisian youth at risk of extremism, repair their vulnerability and reinforce family resilience to prevent youth's participation in violent extremist groups and integrate them into their local community. ETTYSAL came at an opportune time to garner the political will to test new violence-reducing approaches. The program also served as 'proof of concept' of the 3R model, informing the policy debate with much-needed evidence to show that identifying and targeting higher-risk youth for specific interventions is one of the most effective ways to address potential recruitment or participation in illegal or extremist activities.

Procedure

A four-stage methodology was applied to implement the 3R interventional model. First, the Arabic Youth Service Eligibility Tool (AYSET) was designed based on the YSET (Hennigan et al., 2014; Hennigan et al., 2015; Hennigan & Sloane, 2013; Hennigan & Spanovic, 2012)in the United States approximately 10% to 19% of youth between the ages of 12 and 16 are likely to join a local street gang in these high-risk areas. While a substantial proportion of those who join a gang drop out relatively quickly (within a year or so which was designed for use in context dealings with gang-related violence, and based on locally-relevant risk factors. Second, high-risk youth were identified among a randomized sample of 600 general-risk youth in Manouba and Kasserine governorates based on the administration of the AYSET. Third, a three-dimensional intervention was achieved to implement the 3R model, including (a) restoring horizontal and vertical family relationships through genogram activities[2], solving family-related problems (such as conflicts and unemployment), and creating new social and economic opportunities in the family system, (b) community-oriented initiatives and interventions to build capacities in the local stakeholders and integrate the youth in 'mini' economic projects, and (c) capacity-building workshops and training in social and emotional intelligence skills for youth and their families. All the interventions addressed the three 3R model goals: restoring social bonds, repairing dysfunctional connections with family and community, and reframing thinking and feeling in youth. Fourth, the intervention was evaluated after one year, with an AYSET assessment action in the beginning and after six months.

The four-stage methodology applied to implement the 3R model is summarized in the following four steps:

1. Defining relevant risk factors and behaviors and constructing the first AYSET.

2. Identifying general-risk youth and high-risk youth.

3. Implementing three-dimensional intervention: family-centered, community-based, and social and emotional training-oriented intervention.

4. Impact measure of intervention in three moments: at the beginning, after six months, and after twelve months.

The AYSET was designed following a systematic methodology based on the following steps: (1) a preparatory phase including an online survey covering a sample of 203 students and focus groups with NGOs and activists on extending the 9-risk-factor gang original YSET and improving it to be adapted to the Tunisian context; (2) a theoretical review covering PVE/CVE concepts, theories, and models, with a particular focus on radicalization risk factors, the various related assessment tools, and the intervention tools and approaches; (3) analysis of the online survey and focus group data; (4) design of the AYSET based on the adaptation of the YSET items to PVE/CVE and the Tunisian context, and based on the outputs of the survey and the focus groups; (5) the final AYSET after refinement, validation by family counselors, and conducting a pilot; and (6) training of the family counselors on the administration of the assessment tool.

Technical and methodological workshops and training sessions were organized for the family counselors, the principal actors in the field. These sessions covered the 3R model, the family system intervention model, the thinking skills (TS) tools, the social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, and the related tools.

A general framework was designed to control the links between the AYSET assessment of risk factors and the implementation of the 3R model in the field. Dashboards based on the AYSET results were used to guide interventions and customize workshops according to the youth profiles according to the assessment. Administrating the AYSET at three moments allowed for monitoring the risk factors indicators and the change level of the risk factors. In addition, a digital model fidelity tool was used to guide the counselors in the intervention with the youth. This

2 A family tree and a genogram share a similar structural design, although they have completely distinct uses. While a family tree simply shows genealogy, a genogram also contains information on the social and emotional ties and interactions among family members. The basis for fostering generational strengths and overcoming flaws is laid by genograms.

tool included the family system intervention model and the various activities with the youth, the family members, and the community.

The AYSET data analysis

The administration of the AYSET provided us with rich data. This data was analyzed with the Statistical Package IBM SPSS Software Version 20. For visualizing some results, we used Microsoft Excel 2010. Three steps are followed before starting to analyze row data: (1) Cleaning row data by correcting some abnormal/out-of-range data; (2) Replacing missing data by using the multiple imputation method[3]; (3) Calculating the scales' scores using the sum method. Cutting points helped select the 600-youth sample and the 100-qualified youth group eligible for the intervention.

The scoring system of the AYSET was based on three types of item responses: 5-point Likert scales (e.g., totally disagree --- totally agree), Yes or No questions, and open-ended questions (used to gather qualitative information about some behaviors or contexts). Scoring is based on assigning each item the highest rating to the riskiest behaviors and the lowest rating to the less risky behaviors. Thus, for a 5-point Likert scale, the score "5" means the highest risky behavior in the item, and the score "1" means the less risky one in this item. For a Yes or No question, the score "2" means the highest risky behavior in the item, and the score "1" means the less risky one in this item.

The AYSET is composed of a set of scales. Each scale is a risk factor. Risk factors were organized according to two categories: type of the factor (risk factor, protective factor, intervention factor) and source of the factor (Individual, Family, Peer). The individual risk factors are composed of "Antisocial tendencies," "Critical life events," "Impulsive risk-taking", "Neutralization of guilt," "Deviant behaviors," "Religious extremism 1 (concerning behaviors)," "Religious extremism 2 (worrying behaviors)," and "Social vulnerability." The individual protective factor is "Empathy." The family risk factors are "Weak parental supervision" and "Family radicalization." The family protective factors are "Family disciplinary" and "Attachment." The family intervention factors are the "Horizontal family system" and "Vertical family system." Finally, the peer risk factors are "Peer influence" and "Peer radicalization influence."

With a high-reliability index (between .85 and .95 for Cronbach Alpha), the AYSET seemed to be a reliable tool for assessing risky youth vulnerable to violent extremism.

Family-centered intervention

The family-centred approach aimed to restore the social bonds and repair the dysfunctional connections of the young with his family and community. It is based on the systemic family model which aims to involve all the family members and restore/repair their relationships. Restoring social bonds and repairing dysfunctional connections helped set a positive social and psychological climate necessary for doing activities, reframing ways of thinking and feeling, and creating new motives based on balanced needs. The systemic family model is composed of six main phases starting with establishing agreements and finishing by reevaluating the family's achievements and successes. Many repairing activities were based on multigenerational training with strengths-based genograms. This is called the "Vertical strategy." Many other repairing and restoring activities were based on problem-solving strategies. This is called the "Horizontal strategy."

Research results

The main result of implementing the 3R model was that less than only 5% of youth remained eligible for a secondary prevention program, which implies that more than 95% of youth were not eligible for a secondary prevention program – meaning that they showed reasonable indications of restoring, repairing, and reframing. The mean percentage of change between the first administration of the AYSET (T1) and the last administration of the AYSET (T3) was 30% of global change and 32% of change if we do not include the "Critical Life Events" Scale. Indeed, the lowest percentage of change was observed in the "Critical life events" scale/risk factor (8% of change), which is evident as it is not a behavioral factor, and the following lowest percentage of change was observed in the "Deviant behaviors" risk factor (12.3% of change). The highest percentage of change was observed in the "Family radicalization" risk factor, with 84.3% of change. The following high percentage of change was observed in the "Impulsive risk-taking" risk factor, with 46% of change.

3 Actually, replacing the missing data by the mean method is a common way which has the following disadvantages: It artificially reduces the dispersion of the results, and this artificial decrease is proportional to the number of missing values in the variable (i.e., the more missing values, the more artificially we add artificial results "equal to the mean "In our data); Since it will replace the missing values with artificially created "mean" data, the mean-replacement method can significantly alter the correlation values. We opted instead for an underused but a more useful and relevant approach for our data: the multiple imputation (Helenowski, 2015). This regression-based approach is appropriate for data that may be missing randomly or non-randomly. It is also appropriate for data that will be used in inferential analysis.

These results demonstrate a significant change in decreasing risk factors related to youth, their families, and their peers, despite the very challenging conditions in the local community. They showed the success of the 3R model implementation program in reducing the risk factors and in creating a real and significant change in the lives of the youth who were eligible and qualified for the secondary-intervention program. The high percentage of positive change in the family radicalization risk factor indicated the successful repairing and restoring activities and their effectiveness in resolving the family's dysfunctional connections. The high percentage of positive change in the impulsive risk-taking risk factor showed how practical the thinking and feeling reframing activities were.

A gender-disaggregated analysis suggested that boys showed high risk than girls on the "Weak parental supervision," "Impulsive risk-taking," "Neutralization of guilt," and "Deviant behaviors" risk factors, but had lower risk than girls on the "Peer radicalization influence," "Religious extremism 1," and "Family disciplinary" risk factors. Consequently, boys seem to show more deviant behaviors and impulsive risk-taking than girls, while girls seem to show more religious extremist concerning behaviors and peer radicalization influence than boys. This suggests it is likely that while boys are more at risk due to risk-taking behaviors or limited supervision, girls represent a 'dormant' risk, as they were less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors but more influenced by peers, family, and religious narratives.

Conclusion and learned lessons

Through a data-driven approach, the 3R interventional model designed for a secondary prevention program aimed to restore social bonds between youth at risk of radicalization and their families, peers, and communities, repair the dysfunctional relationships in the family system such as conflicts, family breakups, broken horizontal or vertical generational relationships, and reframe thinking, emotional, and motivational skills such as setting a purpose in life, self-regulation, and managing balanced needs. The implementation of the 3R model was successful, leading to positive and significant results and showing a good percentage of change in risk factors for one hundred 'high-risk' youth. The effectiveness of the 3R model provided evidence that it is efficient in a secondary prevention program to work in parallel on improving family and community systems and building capacities in cognition, emotion, and motivation. Blending two types of interventions - social interventions with family-centered activities within horizontal and vertical relationships and capacity-building and mentoring activities in thinking, emotional, and motivational skills – seems to be the most effective way to disrupt the radicalization process and prevent youth from engaging further.

The implementation of the 3R model led to many lessons learned. The local partners involved in the program increased its efficiency and sustainability. The family counselors, who were highly committed to working with the youth and their families, were also a strong guarantee for the success of the various interventions and their full implementation. The family counselors used all their creativity to develop new strategies in the family intervention model, applying them and sharing them to increase trust with the youth and give a sense of connectedness with them, which aids in framing their ways of thinking and feeling. Sound guidance and training of the family counselors helped the youth supported by the program to integrate quickly into the community.

Overall, the 3R model introduced an adapted diagnostic/assessment tool and an interventional model for preventing violent extremism in Tunisia. Building local capacities in new, validated models gave youth, families, and communities the psychological and social resources and skills needed to disrupt the radicalization process and increase resilience. Developing youth services, networks, and partnerships in the local communities strengthened the impact of the implemented model and provided sustainability. The implementation of the model allowed professionals from different youth service providers in the country to work together, increasing the collective intelligence and the effectiveness of the outputs. The family intervention model positively impacted the youth and their families and ultimately showed that family is the core of change in any secondary prevention program.

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The Link between Singular Identities, Domestic Violence, and Violent Extremism: Exploring insights, lessons, and potential solutions through the lens of MotherSchools Model implementations

Rafael Milan Kropiunigg & Laura Kropiunigg

Introduction

> *"In cases where domestic violence is seen as something normal, extremism has already started there … In this instance, those children will be raised in silence, physical violence, or verbal violence. And automatically these children can become the criminals of the future. The collective violence over time can turn into another form of violence. And if this happens in every family, the future with the same perspective means it can happen to all of us."*

– MotherSchools Kosovo Graduate, Kaçanik, Exit Interview

Gender-based violence, rooted in deeply entrenched patriarchal and misogynist structural realities that help to normalize cycles of violence, is a long-overlooked driver of radicalization. In recent years, findings from so-called perpetrator research have made the nexus between terrorism and violence against women increasingly difficult to ignore. A consideration of perpetrator biographies suggests that domestic violence and misogynist attitudes have figured in various and divergent ways in the lives of most terrorists. Researchers have even contended that 'misogyny is often the gateway, driver, and early warning sign of most of this [extremist] violence' (Díaz & Valji, 2019, pp. 44, 38). Evidence-based research in support of this hypothesis has been on the rise.

A recent multi-country study comprising three thousand survey participants found that individuals favoring hostile sexism and gender-based violence are most likely to support violent extremism. The researchers also identified restrictions on women's rights as a common early warning sign for potential violent extremist engagement. Conversely, findings demonstrate that factors like religion, gender, age, employment, and education—all of which arguably have received far more attention to date—are not correlated or strong predictors (Johnston and True, 2019). Supported by a mounting evidence base, the understanding that gender-based violence and discrimination are contributing to a rise in violent extremism has now also begun to permeate the highest international policy-shaping levels. In 2019, UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted that terrorist attacks, extremism, and other violent crimes are directly linked to the 'violent misogyny' of offenders.

The growing consensus that misogyny and violence against women contribute considerably to the spread of violent extremism raises several key questions. Why has gender-based violence and discrimination been missing from the conversation around drivers of violent extremism for so long? How can the broader counter-violent extremism (CVE) community ensure that contextual information lags and knowledge gaps are plugged and adequately addressed in real time? Does the prevention of counter-violent extremism (PCVE) practitioner environment offer clues and insights that could aid politicians and policy-shapers to avoid remaining in a perpetual loop of playing gender-policy-catch-up?

This essay addresses the above questions by drawing on the author's experience at the civil society organization Women without Borders (WwB) of supporting the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of recent community-based program iterations of its 'MotherSchools: Parenting for Peace' Model. Our program, adopted in sixteen countries, observed that peace and conflict can be trained at home.[1] It works with parents to prevent and reduce the spread of violence and extremism in vulnerable families and environments. WwB Parenting for Peace programs now also include FatherSchools and engage up to six hundred parents and trainers every year, in line with and corroborated by other study findings in more recent years that 'empowering women and men, as parents, is a critical prevention strategy' (True & Eddyono, 2017, p.44).

1 MotherSchools have been implemented in Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, England, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kosovo, 1 Montenegro, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Zanzibar.

From the outset, we have measured impact based on the participants' 'distance travelled,' doing so mainly through entry and exit interviews with all local-level participants. Having conducted thousands of semi-structured baseline and impact interviews over the past decade, WwB's monitoring and evaluation process has helped to uncover hidden stories, dynamics, and factors that put family and community members at heightened risk of recruitment and radicalisation. The qualitative analysis of a data set well in the thousands has allowed WwB to identify significant and universal themes.

A dominant set of recurring themes across all implementation sites have been gendered hidden contributing factors and drivers leading to violence and extremism. This paper discusses two of these. Firstly, we will discuss how gender-based discrimination locks women into singular identities of motherhood, which in turn has an isolating effect, quashes confidence, competence, and leadership, and hinders many from recognising and working on their security role model potential. Secondly, and related to this, we will consider domestic violence as a driver, and how it fuels dysfunctional family dynamics that can act as a push factor. In employing the MotherSchools Model as a case study example, this paper proposes that the field of P/CVE needs to mainstream gender-inclusive programming that uncovers hidden gendered drives of violent extremism and unlocks the agency of women to address these and other factors in the process.

Methods

Employing a practitioner's lens, the paper draws on insights and findings from four of WwB's impact reports published in 2022.[2] To discern context-specific radicalization dynamics and capture the transformation of program beneficiaries over time, Women without Borders pursued a qualitative data analysis (QDA) of the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with all MotherSchools participants, teachers, and notetakers before and following the MotherSchools. The target groups comprised concerned and affected mothers of adolescents and young adults whose environment had put them at risk of radicalization. In total, WwB staff conducted and coded 562 semi-structured interviews: 113 in both Bangladesh and Kosovo; 113 in Kosovo; 88 in Montenegro, and 248 in North Macedonia. Each interview lasted an hour on average. The Entry Interviews, conducted prior to the start of the program, were analyzed to gain community insights and establish the 'baseline context', which refers to the Participants' point of departure in terms of awareness, confidence, and competence. The Exit Interviews conducted following program completion were analyzed to determine the 'distance travelled' by graduates, and thus to establish the impact of the three MotherSchools groups running in parallel. The QDA method made it possible to code against significant themes and identify the main building blocks that proved integral to developing the prevention potential of mothers, with a view to positioning them as role models who work to reduce the spread of violent extremism in vulnerable families and communities. The five common MotherSchools building blocks that emerged through the coding of all recently implemented programmes are the following: 1. Heightening Awareness and Developing Knowledge; 2. Building Trust and Confidence; 3. Addressing Push Factors by Upgrading Parenting; 4. Addressing Hidden Drivers; and 5. Addressing Common Drivers & Strengthening Resilience. The fourth of these macro-level blocks is the subject of this essay.

2 Women without Borders. (2022). MotherSchools Bangladesh: Parenting for Peace in Dhaka. Impact Report; 'MotherSchools Kosovo: Parenting for Peace in Pristina and Kaçanik'; 'MotherSchools Montenegro: Parenting for Peace in Podgorica, Nikšić, and Tuzi'; and 'MotherSchools North Macedonia: Parenting for Peace in Skopje and Beyond'. (Note that all four publications are WwB impact reports published in 2022).

Losing Security Allies to Gender Discrimination and Singular Identities

"First it caught my attention that it was 'Mother-Schools', and I thought, 'We should not reinforce motherhood as the only identity of women'. But when I checked the organization's website, I could see how women were interacting together and how important it is for mothers to come together to challenge motherhood rather than reinforcing it. And here in Kosovo, especially, we have these set ideas of what motherhood means that is usually very submissive; they do not have agency in their house. Having these women in one place and talking with them about what motherhood is—that is powerful. We have women who never had the chance to go to school because here you have kids, and your job is to take care of them, and that's it. This is why I found this really interesting, because working with women as mothers can be really empowering. They can find new identities and their agency as women; not to limit themselves in life anymore." [3]

- MotherSchools Kosovo Teacher, Pristina, Entry Interview

Gender-based discrimination has continuously emerged as a MotherSchools theme that locks a high number of participants firmly into singular identity constructs. This results in roles often being confined to the domestic sphere and identities limited to motherhood. These prescribed roles serve to restrict the social interactions and physical movements of mothers to the home, where many live to serve in-laws and husbands. This has serious implications, because in deeply gender-policed environments, half of the potential security actors are ultimately not considered or engaged. As part of a whole-of-society security architecture, counter-extremism work needs to consider the consequences of leaving gender discrimination unaddressed. The limits placed on their leadership and prevention potential make gendered perspectives less visible to the counter-extremism community. As a result, it reduces their potential to communicate with legitimacy and authority not only horizontally amongst peers, but also vertically with security stakeholders at all levels.

During MotherSchools entry interviews, conducted at the start of each programme, common clusters of statements generally emerge around early and forced marriages, domestic violence, the denial of basic rights, and a plethora of other psychological and physical methods that preserve the culture of systemic discrimination against women. Isolation and low self-esteem are common side-effects of singular identities, meaning women are less likely to have or seek access to information, networks, and other factors that are required to be role models at home and leaders outside.

An analysis of a recent MotherSchools implementation in Kosovo offers a prime example of the wide-ranging implications of singular identities. A lifetime in the service of anyone but themselves, as the entry interviews lay bare, had left many prospective participants without a trusted network and far from having asserted their voice and reached their potential. The conversations with future participants at the time clearly indicated that self-confidence levels were being suppressed by familial and community factors and actors. In the absence of, inter alia, self-respect, hobbies, and personal aspirations, many defined themselves through—and made their confidence contingent on—the lives and decisions of their husbands and children. In the telling words of a Pristina participant, 'The most influence comes from my husband, and this determines whether I feel good or bad'. Questions around pride and confidence frequently prompted interviewees to mention their children, and to discuss the lack of support they had received to pursue an education beyond primary or high school. While the latter ranked as the most frequent source of low self-confidence, it also acted as a motivating factor to begin to challenge barriers, with several hoping that the MotherSchools provided an opportunity to work on themselves for the sake of their children. Given how inextricably linked their identities were to the actions and inactions of their children, however, several future participants were unable yet to define themselves beyond motherhood.

The entry interviews in Kosovo also speak to how gendered local-level programming can secure access and build trust in isolated communities to uncover hidden, context-specific dynamics impacting the prevention potential of isolated community members. A consideration of their biographies uncovers a myriad of complex layers of wartime trauma resulting in isolation and social marginalization that, throughout their lifetimes, had placed downward pressure on their sense of adequacy and ability. The motivation to join the program can in some cases be traced back to the legacies of the war and society's neglect and stigmatization of women as survivors of rape. In the words of a mother from Kaçanic,

3 200205 XK MST EnRK 1 | Pristina, Paragraph 22.

> *"I belong to the generation that saw the war stop dreams. Because I wanted to have an education and to have a better job but unfortunately it was a war situation in Kosovo. Now the only thing that I am proud of are my children, because I have very good boys who are good and kind to the community, and well-respected as well. And that is the only thing that I am proud of—to be a mother."*

With a singular identity, personal views beyond motherhood tend to be pegged to that of others, which in turn limits agency and heightens vulnerabilities. This can be viewed through the broader lens of the so-called push factor potential of parents, especially with respect to at-risk youth growing up in the absence of a role model. Revisiting identity constructs ultimately acts as the foundation to overcoming perceived personal limitations and supports the process of moving from victimhood to agency.

When coupled with knowledge and practical tools, the resulting formula embodies the MotherSchools theory of change, namely that self-confident and competent mothers position themselves as the first line of defence in the fight against extremism. Starting with 'the Self' is a prerequisite. For even where an individual may possess knowledge of early warning signs and a theoretical understanding of how to respond, insufficient conviction and low self-trust can make the difference between rendering someone a bystander or 'upstander'—an individual who stands up for the rights of others or indeed their own in the face of injustice. The paralysing effect of low self-esteem demands identifying and addressing the chief symptoms. This includes questioning self- and community-imposed identity constructs that confine women as mothers to a singular conception of their role. The MotherSchools education therefore has a strong taboo-breaking dialogue function by providing a platform and space to unearth, discuss, and work to remove possible barriers holding participants back from achieving their potential and exploring their multiple roles beyond the domestic sphere.

The Push-Factor Potential of Domestic Violence

> *"You can be the push factor. You can't help that person who is in danger if you do not know how … If there is domestic violence from the father, that child will want to find shelter, will want to belong somewhere. If there is a cold home and the family structure is not strong, I think then those children are very much in danger of getting into extremist groups, because they want to feel they belong … I think it is hard to live with this fear. MotherSchools should have real schools in every country, because it helps women learn how to protect themselves and their children—from bad groups, from bad husbands. If you do not have communication with your child, I don't think you have information how this child feels and how he or she has problems …. We can be that push factor for the child; to make them go."*

– MotherSchools North Macedonia Graduate, Ljubin Group, Exit Interview

Communication and tolerance can be taught at home but so can violence and prejudice, as the above excerpt proposes. While the trajectories of communities, societies, and future generations are linked to parenting styles and family dynamics (Tankosic Girt, 2022), these are the preserve of the private sphere. This, in turn, renders their push factor potential more difficult to probe and uncover than community-level factors like poverty. In this view, experiences of family violence can be deemed 'hidden drivers' of violent extremism. The MotherSchools method, through its local-level parenting approach, aims to create the trust necessary to permeate this otherwise largely inaccessible realm. The resulting insights are unique in that they allow us to trace the intimate journey by which participants identify barriers to their prevention role and begin effecting changes that work to safeguard their homes, communities, and future generations.

Chief among the 'hidden drivers' within families appears to be domestic violence. Women without Borders has yet to monitor and evaluate a MotherSchools country iteration where intimate partner violence against women does not emerge as a key theme among programme participants—first as a taboo topic, and finally as a push factor to address. What we often see is that singular identity constructs further perpetuate the problem. Where identities are tied mostly to husbands and children, generally, we see a pattern that violence is tolerated, excused, and generally not discussed or critically reflected on.

There is a clear interplay between the previously discussed issue of singular identities and domestic violence. Seeing that many mothers ultimately become trapped in this singular identity of motherhood to be closely associated with their children, they often become the sole source of blame for the actions of their children. In turn, this heightens their vulnerability to and acceptance of their position. To draw on a telling example from Bangladesh, when one of the mother's children was imprisoned for carrying drugs, the husband blamed and physically abused her as a direct result. Initially, as she conceded in her exit interview, she had accepted the blame until she had her new support network of mothers who helped each other to challenge these notions.

Everywhere, but in Bangladesh in particular, domestic violence has been front and centre in interviews with MotherSchools participants. Reinforcing this assessment, a participant noted: 'There's violence against women in the community, but I did not think it's a mentionable thing. It's a very common and normal thing in every family', so much so that ultimately wives do not question their relationship in the face of violence.[4] Further highlighting the severity of the problem, one participant, who also described it as a common problem, expressed feeling 'proud' that her husband did not use physical force against her.[5]

As is the case with structural violence—underpinned by psychological and physical abuse—community members can all play a role in the cycle of gender-based subjugation that restricts women's identities across generations. In perfect albeit destructive harmony, a common pattern in successive stages can be gleaned from the data we evaluated through recent MotherSchools implementations: first, conservative family milieus within which children are raised lay the groundwork (e.g., denial of education, early/forced marriage, children as witnesses of domestic violence), their husbands go on to sustain the culture of psychological and physical forms of violence against women (e.g., violence and restrictions on career and physical movement), and, finally, individuals like in-laws often chime in to create an orchestra of suppression (e.g. superimposing parenting expectations and household duties).[6] Some of these dynamics at play are astutely summarized in the following excerpt from an entry interview with a MotherSchools teacher from the Gostivar group in North Macedonia:

> ***"A violent home is a way of life … In a research study we conducted here, forty-three per cent of women we interviewed admitted they have been violated by the husband, mothers-in-law, or fathers-in-law. Especially the children are traumatized and will find any excuse to run away from the house. I worked with children at my school and have seen some who have problems—are more withdrawn, isolated in themselves … Those who are isolated do not talk at school or home and have problems expressing themselves … It usually happens when the father is violating the mother. Children are traumatized and unable to do schoolwork and creative things that every child does at this age... One factor is enough to push a child into radicalization. There are children who are not connected with families, and this influences them, pushes them into radicalization."***

That violence is learned and perfected at home emerges as a common finding. In one case in Bangladesh, a MotherSchools participant's thirteen-year-old son purportedly took to beating his mother with an iron rod; the woman's husband was paralysed and could now only abuse her verbally. 'The son', as one of the teachers from her group relayed, 'thought this is the behaviour of a son; he would hit his mother for not making good food, clean clothes, not doing enough.' Such examples point to the need for more programming that builds awareness around generational systems of gender-based violence that sustain hidden drivers of violent extremism. In such cases, it requires building awareness that this type of abuse tends to breed violence, and that in identifying with the aggressor, children may carry over such drivers into their future lives. In the short-term, such dynamics can act as a push factor that further isolates children and makes them susceptible to recruiters who act as substitute role models and offer false promises of escaping this culture of violence.

4 'There's violence against women in the community, but I did not think it's a mentionable thing. It's a very common and normal thing in every family … they will continue their loving relationship.' (190619 BDN MSP EnM 7, Paragraph 57).

5 'The most proud thing is that my husband is an honest person. In my community it is common [that men use] violence and other things, but my husband never do that activity, so it is the most proud thing. I am happy in family life'. (190619 BDN MSP EnM 4, Paragraph 30).

6 For context-specific examples and further analysis, the reader may wish to consult the four 2022 Women without Borders impact reports cited in the bibliography.

Conclusion

> *"MotherSchools is the idea of removing all family violence in a peaceful way. It can help to reduce family violence, gangs, and the recruiting of our children. They can learn it from the mothers of our groups."*

– MotherSchools Bangladesh Teacher, Dhaka, Exit Interview

Although international conferences now generally convene gender panels, women are still underrepresented in practice on the ground, most notably in at-risk communities. This is surprising, seeing that the notion of women as promising local-level security stakeholders in the fight against violent extremism has been lauded by national and international counter-extremism stakeholders for nearly two decades. Disproportionately few resources have ultimately trickled down and into putting this assumption to the test. Women are too seldomly engaged in vulnerable settings, and thus are missing from the conversation in the very environments where extremism often takes root. To borrow from Caroline Criado Perez's concept, the counter-extremism space may be troubled by an 'invisible women' problem (2019). In this logic, counter-extremism approaches have been designed mostly by men and, thus, inevitably also for men. With women's perspectives largely lagging behind and, at times, absent altogether, counter-terrorism and prevention considerations become the product of an imbalanced, biased, and incomplete data set. Such gaps in our understanding will only continue to hinder broader whole-of-society ambitions.

The lived experience of women living in communities that are vulnerable to radicalization thus demands our attention. The P/CVE space will otherwise continue to operate with gender blind-spots and forsake up to half of its possible community safeguards. Some of the most isolated and least visible members of our societies will otherwise continue to be overlooked, and their potential to challenge the very gendered hidden drivers that also help to lock them into singular identities will not be reached. Favorable resolutions and theory-based consensus notwithstanding, identifying the most effective ways in which women can guide our understanding of evolving radicalization dynamics and contribute to reducing the spread of violent extremism is contingent on their inclusion in the P/CVE programming. This requires focusing on gender-sensitive prevention to uproot factors in the very environments where violence often is trained, normalized, and eventually carried over into wider society and emulated by the young generation. In so doing, we will unlock multiple identities and challenge generational cycles of violence in the process.

As this essay has proposed, Women without Borders' MotherSchools Model is an example of a methodology that alerts us to how women at the local level are an underutilized information source on radicalization dynamics. It suggests that barriers to women's participation in P/CVE can be overcome even in the most isolated of communities, and that authority gaps can be closed when women position themselves as role models and security stakeholders. Many have disseminated through their personal networks parenting and push-and-pull factor knowledge, and some have intervened directly in challenging hidden gendered drivers like domestic violence. Such insights and interventions are generally beyond the scope and radar of local authorities. This only further highlights the need to work with women directly to uproot the factors that keep them restricted and future generations more prone to being affected by or engaging in violence and radicalization. By no means should the expectation arise that women must become security allies or that women are intrinsically peaceful. In the case of mothers, this would only further limit them to an expected and singular identity of the 'good mother'. Instead, it is about providing an option space and toolkit to confront such stereotypes and become part of the broader whole-of-society prevention effort and conversation; an offer to have a stake in efforts that tend, by and large, to be the preserve of men.

Practitioners, researchers, and policy-shapers may wish to consider the following recommendations to put a central puzzle piece of the whole-of-community P/CVE architecture in the right place.

- Prevention practitioners applying a gendered lens could consider more seriously the lived experience of women. This includes adopting a longer-term approach to build and sustain trust. The resulting access will allow for a better understanding of the nature and repercussions of hidden drivers, including gender-based violence and related contributing factors like singular identities. Only in this way will programming also be able to adapt to evolving dynamics over time and inform policy in real time, bottom up.

- Researchers in the field of PCVE—aided by resulting practitioner insights—could continue building an academic evidence base that investigates possible causal relationships like the apparent link between gender-based violence and violent extremism. Another and related avenue of enquiry might be the conceivable link between gendered symptoms of regression (roll-back of women's rights / increasing levels of gender-based violence) and an uptick in concern levels or, indeed, manifestations of community-level radicalisation.

- Policy-shapers could pay more attention to the absence of women-led PCVE organisations and networks at the local level. A more gender-balanced practitioner environment may help to close authority gaps and ensure that the gender lens is incorporated from the outset. Rather than reinventing the wheel, policy-shapers may also find merit in picking up on existing methodologies and supporting evidence-based methodologies encouraging women leadership and networks that not only uncover hidden gendered drivers but also address these directly.

Finally, further research on the role of women and violent extremism may also benefit from situating analyses more definitively within the framework of gendered power dynamics. Heightened interest in viewing women through the lens of perpetration and complicity without an adequate framework can do harm. This may lead to stigmatisation and social exclusion more broadly, leading us to oscillate between the two extremes of victimhood and perpetration. While warranted and important in equal measures, the lens applied must always account for the power dynamics at play. After all, structural gender 'prisons' are not dissimilar to the cynical leadership promises of extremist movements, which 'empower' women only to sustain a system of misogyny that strengthens gender inequality and perpetuates cycles of violence. This arguably can lead to a false sense of multiple identities. In the absence of a balanced understanding of power dynamics, we may also run the risk of exaggerating the roles of women as either victims or perpetrators, further marginalising already isolated individuals and blocking efforts that seek to encourage their positive agency in PCVE.

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Rehabilitation and Reintegration Path of Kosovar Minors and Women Repatriated from Syria

Adrian Shtuni

Introduction and Context

Following the end of the 1998-99 armed conflict, Kosovo entered a complex sociopolitical transition as it struggled to recover and rebuild its war-torn economy. Against this backdrop of profound challenges and rapid transformative changes, this nascent country experienced a sharp rise in radicalization into violent extremism (Shtuni, 2016 and 2017). The start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 marked the beginning of an unprecedented wave of Kosovar nationals traveling to the Middle East—including with family members—to join armed militias and designated terrorist groups fighting against the Syrian government or to migrate to territories administered by them (Shtuni, 2021).

As of August 2020, the majority of the Kosovar foreign fighters and family members had returned home, often accompanied by children born in the conflict. In April 2019, Kosovo became one of the first among a few countries to have voluntarily and publicly repatriated a large group of nationals from Syria, mostly non-combatant minors and women but also adult male combatants (Bytyqi, 2019). The adoption of this proactive repatriation approach has not been without challenges. At the same time, it has placed Kosovo at the forefront of efforts for the rehabilitation and reintegration of repatriated minors and women from Syria into mainstream society.

This paper provides an overview of Kosovar authorities' initial rehabilitation steps and reintegration efforts. It highlights potential good practices, ongoing challenges, and opportunities for inclusive partnerships with strategic stakeholders. The paper also provides recommendations for improved implementation practices, programmatic effectiveness, and increased sustainability.

The findings rely primarily on official data and publications by Kosovar authorities, and international organizations. They think tanks on the rehabilitation and reintegration of minors and women repatriated from Syria and Iraq. It also reflects the views, observations and suggestions of civil society practitioners, psychologists, security specialists, researchers, and civil servants—some of whom are directly involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration of repatriated Kosovar nationals— obtained through virtual interviews conducted by the author in August – September 2020 and during in-person and virtual P/CVE working group sessions and policy roundtables organized by international organizations and think tanks in 2020.

Context

At least 359 Kosovar nationals traveled to Syria and Iraq starting in 2012 to either join designated terrorist organizations or to migrate to territories controlled or administered by them.[1] A previous study found that about 11 per cent of Kosovar nationals who traveled to Syria and Iraq during the timeframe in question held dual citizenship and may have departed from other countries (Shtuni, 2016). About 71 per cent of the total contingent were male adults at the time of departure, 15 per cent women, and 14 per cent minors. At least 81 children were born to Kosovar nationals in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2019, bringing the total number of Kosovar nationals (or individuals entitled to Kosovar nationality) to have spent time in Syria and Iraq to 440.

By August 2020, at least 242 Kosovar nationals had returned to Kosovo, including 110 individuals repatriated in April 2019 by the Kosovar government with assistance from the US military. The number of Kosovar nationals remaining in Syria and Iraq is estimated to be 102, of whom 47 are adult male, 9 women, and 46 minors.[2] An unspecified number of adult male Kosovars are currently held in Kurdish-controlled prisons, while the rest continue to be embedded with militant organizations active in Syria (Shtuni, 2019).

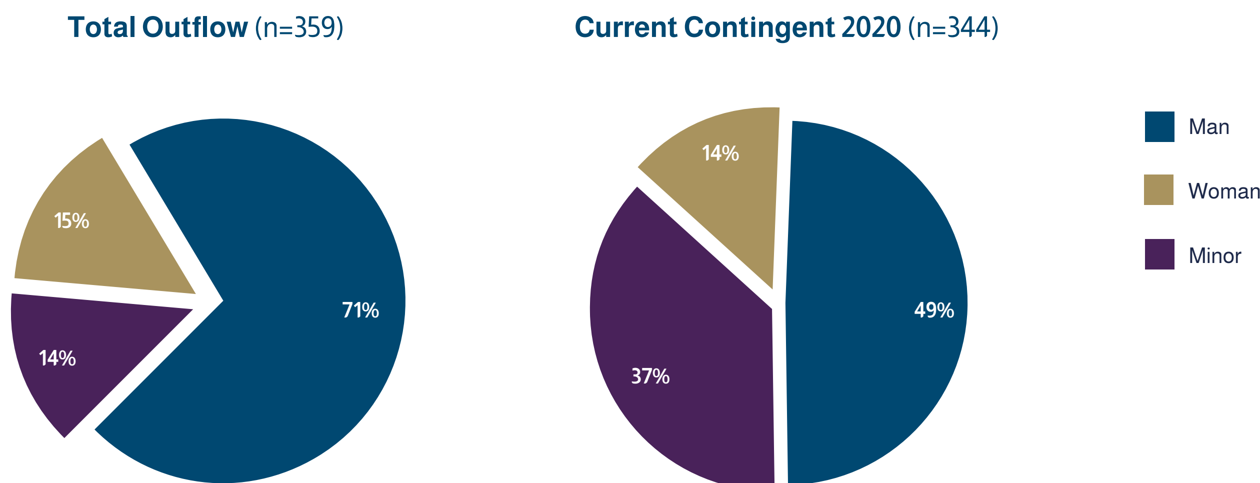
Of all remaining[3] Kosovar nationals who spent time in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2020, adult males

1 The data in this report is referring to Kosovar citizens who traveled to Syria and Iraq, returned independently, or were repatriated by the Kosovar government during the relevant timeframe was provided or released by Kosovar law enforcement agencies.

2 It is likely that some individuals may have relocated to other countries.

3 Including Kosovar citizens who traveled to Syria and Iraq or were born in the conflict theater and excluding those who have been reported killed or have died of natural causes.

2012-2020 Kosovar Nationals in Syria and Iraq



account for about 49 per cent, women 14 per cent, and minors 37 per cent. This significant demographic shift resulted from an increase of two and a half times in the number of minors due to new births, and a drop of one-third in the number of adult males due to battlefield deaths. In sum, the Kosovar contingent is dominated by minors and women, largely non-combatants.

Understanding the Paths of Repatriated Children and Women

The highlighted demographic shift from predominantly adult males to mostly minors and women is of particular consequence for policy formulation, resource allocation, and programmatic planning in response to the dynamic needs and risks associated with those repatriated. While much research already exists on male foreign fighters, the place of women and children within the broader strategy of Daesh is less explored. Certainly, returning foreign fighters represent a more significant security risk, but the greater numbers of vulnerable children that have returned or will be repatriated demand increased attention. So do their mothers, often the sole caretakers of children whose fathers may have been killed or incarcerated. The first step to understanding the implications of this demographic shift is unpacking the reasons behind its manifestation and the roles of women and children in the context of the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

Returning Women

The involvement of women in insurgent movements and terrorist organizations for different motivations and in a broad range of roles, including as combatants, is well documented. Indeed, stereotypes that depict war and violent extremism as a male domain and women as helpless victims or coerced wives who lack agency are simplistic and inaccurate. They ignore that just as some women have been coerced or manipulated into joining violent extremist organizations, the participation of others in support roles or active combat has been a direct result of their own convictions and uncoerced free will (Darden, Henshaw, & Szekely, 2019; Bloom, 2012; Moaveni, 2019; Moser & Clark, 2001).

Daesh placed strategic importance upon attracting and enlisting women to its cause early on. This approach was particularly driven by its state-forming ambitions in Syria and Iraq that exceeded the region's seemingly more modest militaristic goals of similar non-state actors. The Daesh propaganda apparatus portrayed women as key actors in building a utopian religious society where they could lead fulfilling lives under Sharia law by supporting and encouraging their fighter husbands and growing the next generation of fighters. As a result, an unprecedented number of women—in many cases accompanied by their children—traveled to territories controlled by Daesh in Syria and Iraq (Saltman & Smith, 2015). This migratory wave of women supporters gained particular momentum in the immediate aftermath of the proclamation of the so-called Caliphate in June 2014. In the case of Kosovo, about 80 per cent of the women known to have traveled to Syria did so between the second half of 2014 and 2015.

Unlike other similar organizations like al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Daesh has allowed women recruits a prominent operational role on social media platforms (Gardner, 2019). Accordingly, these women have actively engaged in the dissemination of propaganda, recruitment of other women, and fundraising on behalf of Daesh (Cook & Vale, 2018). They have also carried out functional roles as teachers, nurses, doctors, etc., which are much required in strictly gender-segregated societies. Although the documented cases of women's participation in armed combat in Syria and Iraq are few, Daesh managed to militarize women by reviving the model of the early mujahidat.[4]

Women are also known to have been enlisted in policing roles by Daesh as part of the all-female al-Khansaa brigade, a religious enforcement unit prone to the use of violence (Moaveni, 2015).

In sum, women who migrated to territories controlled by Daesh have played a wide range of integral roles in implementing their organization's vision and strategy, which has no precedent in previous waves of foreign fighter migrations. Some continue to embrace these roles with fervor and determination despite the territorial defeat of Daesh (Vale, 2019). A woman who had managed to smuggle herself out of Syria told a journalist: "We will bring up strong sons and daughters and tell them about the life in the caliphate; Even if we hadn't been able to keep it, our children will one day get it back" (Mekhennet & Warrick, 2019).

Returning Children

As in the case of women, children have been an integral part of the Daesh's strategic vision and efforts to secure the longevity of the organization. Historically, minors have been enlisted in various roles, including as child soldiers, by both state and non-state military organizations (Singer, 2006). Yet, due to its unparalleled success in recruiting foreign adults, the Daesh succeeded in attracting record high numbers of foreign minors, exceeding previous efforts by other religiously-inspired extremist organizations.

The number of children increased as women were encouraged "to have as many children as their bodies would permit and be open to remarriage if their husband was killed on the battlefield (Winter & Margolin, 2017)." A study from 2018 found that at least 4,640 foreign minors were living at some point in the territories controlled by the organization (Cook & Vale, 2018). The territorial defeat of Daesh at Baghouz in March 2019 revealed that the number of children affiliated with foreign fighters was much higher. Over 7,000 foreign minors were evacuated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and sheltered at Al-Hol, a camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) in north Syria (Syria: Dire Conditions for ISIS Suspects, 2019).

Numerous publications and propaganda material released by Daesh media affiliates testify to its extensive exploitation of children. Widely disseminated videos show young boys, dubbed "the Cubs of the Caliphate," socializing, playing, and receiving schooling, but also attending camps for religious indoctrination and military training, and in some cases, even engaging directly in acts of choreographed violence (Sherlock, 2015). Whilst in Daesh-controlled areas, children were routinely exposed to stonings and executions to desensitize them to violence or death as a way of preparing them for the battlefield (Horgan, Max, Bloom, & Winter, 2017).

The extent of psychological trauma caused to these children from prolonged exposure to violence, destruction, abuse, bombings, and loss of relatives is yet to be fully understood. Likewise, the implications of such traumatic experiences on their long-term physical and psychological well-being are unclear. Without a thorough analysis of the scarring experiences these children have gone through, as well as the political strategy and dynamics that set these experiences in motion, it will be hard to fully understand or reverse the effects of indoctrination and trauma they have endured, or the risks associated with them. Some scholars argue that uninformed or rushed responses may have counterproductive effects (Singer, 2006; Horgan, Max, Bloom, & Winter, 2017).

In sum, despite its territorial defeat in Baghouz in early 2019, the Daesh's strategic vision and ideology continue to enjoy the support, including among those stranded indefinitely in IDP camps in northern Syria. Both women and children have appeared in footage shot inside Al-Hol, chanting Daesh slogans, waving its flag, and issuing statements reconfirming their alliance to the organization (Ibrahim & Francois, 2020). By repatriating its women and children from Al-Hol shortly after their evacuation from Baghouz, Kosovo removed them from an environment that may increase the risk of further radicalization and trauma, especially among minors.

The Rehabilitation and Reintegration Experience

Kosovo's proactive repatriation of children, women, and a limited number of male combatants from Syria is in line with what various national security experts and scholars propose as the most viable approach

4 Mujahidat were female companions of prophet Muhammad who fought alongside him.

from a legal, moral, and long-term security perspective (Mehra & Paulussen, 2019; Unless we act now, the Islamic State will rise, 2019). Many constitutions and national laws, as well as international conventions and UN Security Council Resolutions, bind countries to protect their citizens' rights, ensure the children's wellbeing, investigate war crimes committed by their nationals, and bring terrorists to justice.[5] However, most countries are reluctant to repatriate, given the range of associated challenges.

Furthermore, there is growing consensus among experts that coordinated repatriation of foreign fighters and family members, along the lines of Kosovo's approach, allows for a more effective administration of justice. For example, as of August 2020, three repatriated men and 27 repatriated women had been found guilty and sentenced for terrorism offences by Kosovar courts. Despite not being a member of the U.N. or a signatory to international laws and conventions, Kosovo appears to have taken multiple responsible steps, well aligned with them. It has done so by taking responsibility for its citizens and administering justice without delay, thus opening a possible path to the returnees' rehabilitation and reintegration into mainstream society. Moreover, repatriation is arguably one of the most effective counter-messages to the hateful narratives of Daesh.

Initial efforts and encouraging steps

Strategic and Institutional Frameworks

The de-radicalization and reintegration of radicalized persons are one of four strategic objectives of the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization (2015-2020) drafted by the Kosovo government in 2015. While the document does not discuss "rehabilitation" as a separate process or provide definitions of "de-radicalization" and "reintegration," the inclusion of this strategic objective is indicative of the level of importance placed on reintegration. This is broadly described as an inclusive process, implemented in close coordination between relevant line ministries in collaboration with local government authorities, expert practitioners, and representatives of religious communities, with support from international partners and donors. Although the strategy and action plan emphasize the importance of a whole-of-government approach and the critical role of civil society in its implementation, the latter is not included as a key stakeholder within the section dedicated to this strategic objective.

Key implementing institutions for de-radicalization and reintegration efforts include the Ministry of Justice; the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare; the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport; and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Listed activities include the provision of psychological and religious counselling for inmates, social support for families, and the development of new employment programs for reentry. The corresponding action plan for the implementation of the strategy, which is revised annually, includes a list of planned activities under de-radicalization and reintegration efforts. Nevertheless, the document does not identify all financial costs and sources of financing for foreseen activities, which has likely had an adverse impact on their implementation rate.

The National Coordinator for the Prevention of Violent Extremism is another key component of the institutional infrastructure relevant to the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees. Until recently the coordinator served as the security advisor to the Prime Minister and was in charge of coordinating the implementation of the strategy and action plan. A number of coordinators have held the position for relatively short periods of time since its creation. In July 2020, the functions and responsibilities of the national coordinator were transferred to the Minister of Interior Affairs after the position was removed in February 2020 by the previous government (Ahmeti, 2020). The frequent regular changes in this position have created difficulties in implementing and coordinating efforts relevant to the rehabilitation and reintegration.

Another pertinent strategic framework developed in 2017 by the Kosovar government is the National Strategy for Sustainable Reintegration of Repatriated Persons in Kosovo (2018-2022.) Although the document does not include a specific section or dedicated protocols for returning foreign fighters and their families, it has relevant guidelines for reintegrating persons returning from conflict zones (particularly children and women) and those returning from correctional institutions. According to this document, a key factor affecting the sustainable reintegration of repatriated persons is the decentralization of competencies and the active participation of local authorities.

In May 2018, the Kosovar government established the Division for Prevention and Reintegration within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In October 2018, the Minister of Justice set up an inter-institutional working group to coordinate efforts. The stated mission of

5 See for example UN Security Council Resolution 2178 and 2396, the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

this division is to "prevent the radicalization of young individuals and other groups, and to help reintegrate those who have returned from conflict zones" (Ministry of Interion Republic of Kosovo, n.d.). The division has received capacity-building assistance from a number of organizations, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and Hedayah. Nevertheless, insufficient staffing and resources have limited its effectiveness (Country reports of Terrorism: Kosovo, 2019).

As of August 2020, an inter-ministerial working group was drafting a revised strategy and action plan for countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment with an enhanced focus on the reintegration of returnees from Syria.

Activities following repatriation and a comparative look at alternative approaches

The repatriation of 110 citizens from Syria to Kosovo, including 74 children (nine of them orphans), 32 women, and four men, on April 20, 2019, with the support of the U.S. military, marked the start of a 72-hour emergency plan coordinated by the Division for Prevention and Reintegration. The men were detained at the airport by the police, while the children and women were quarantined at a dedicated reception center where, over the course of three days, they were screened for infectious disease and received medical checkups, as well as psychiatric and psychosocial evaluations.

Moreover, besides being processed by law enforcement, they were interviewed by social workers in order to identify their immediate needs. In the meantime, families of the repatriated individuals were notified of their arrival and asked about their willingness to receive and accommodate their next of kin after their release from the reception center. Upon completion of the 72-hour emergency protocol, most of the repatriated individuals were released to their families, with the exception of those hospitalized. The completion of the emergency plan was followed by a two-phased approach of rehabilitation and reintegration, discussed separately below.

Processing 106 returnees in three days required a great level of commitment from a small team of medical personnel and first-line practitioners who remained at the reception center throughout the implementation phase of the emergency plan (Dr. Valbona Tafilaj: We are taking all possible steps in Kosovo to reintegrate returnees from the Islamic State, 2019). This kind of personal dedication and empathy was a particularly encouraging step, especially considering limited resources and the short timeframe. By comparison, for example, the women and children repatriated from Syria to Kazakhstan have been accommodated in dedicated rehabilitation centers for a minimum of one month. The psychosocial aspects of their assessment and treatment were only initiated after allowing returnees a period of adjustment. The decision regarding the length of the mandatory accommodation in dedicated centers was taken to encourage communication and reflection in an approach corresponding with therapeutic community practices (Wolfe & Orozobekova, 2020). The Kazakh choice to deliver the first stage of rehabilitation efforts to the repatriated women and children through a more structured approach and extended timeframe appears to have yielded initial good results (Ashimov, 2019).

In addition, the fact that all repatriated Kosovar children and women, including nine orphaned children, were released to the care of their welcoming extended families signaled an initial level of acceptance with potentially beneficial effects on their adjustment and reintegration process.

The different approaches of French authorities may provide some valuable procedural insights. About 115 French children have returned to France from Syria since 2015, of which 28 were repatriated (Gonzales, 2019; Meheut & Hubbar, 2020). The latest repatriation operation took place in mid-June 2020, and the children were handed over to judicial authorities and social services. French authorities have prioritized the repatriation of orphans and children whose mothers were willing to surrender custody due to health complications and growing concerns about the potential radicalization of their children in the IDP camps (Meheut & Hubbar, 2020).

As a standard procedure, upon arrival in France, minors appear in front of a juvenile judge and authorities assess their physical and psychological state of health and the viability of returning them to the family of origin. In other words, the judicial authorities evaluate whether or not the relatives and potential caregivers of repatriated minors are radicalized and are able to provide care. So far, the majority of those repatriated have been placed in foster institutions or foster families. Very few have been entrusted to their extended families, and when they are, the families are closely monitored by judicial authorities (Gonzales, 2019).

Initial rehabilitation steps

According to the psychiatrist coordinator for health and mental health under the Kosovar government's rehabilitation and reintegration program, initial evaluations of repatriated women and children revealed clear signs of PTSD, characterized by sleeplessness, anxiety, depression, panic triggered by loud noises such as airplanes flying overhead or firecrackers, etc. After

their release from the reception center, the mental health team provided an option for 24/7 phone consultations to the returnees and their receiving families, especially on how to manage the children's behavior and adjustment to the new environment (Qenaj, 2019; Dr. Valbona Tafilaj: We are taking all possible steps in Kosovo to reintegrate returnees from the Islamic State, 2019; Kosovo: Challenges of integrating women returnees from Syria, 2020). The consultations proved helpful in containing the reported tensions that, in some cases, emerged due to issues of overcrowding and the reemergence of past family conflicts (Ruf & Jansen, 2019). The ongoing support and counsel of the team of 16 psychiatrists and four psychologists to both returnees and receiving families, sometimes working 15-hour shifts, reportedly helped overcome the stressful transition that nonetheless revealed a critical shortage of personnel (Ruf & Jansen, 2019).

During this stage, the Division for Prevention and Reintegration, in coordination with other government agencies, facilitated the returnees' registration with the civil registry office, issuance of personal identification documents, inclusion in social assistance schemes, and arranged housing accommodation as needed. Municipal family medicine centers provided vaccination, dental services, and follow-up medical checkups. Cultural and sports activities supported by the International Organization for Migrants were organized in coordination with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to prepare children to transition into the formal education system (Pristina: Discussing about Reintegration and the Role of Communities in this Process, 2020). Moreover, the mental health unit reportedly held individual sessions with the children and their mothers, integrating other family members at a later stage in a joint session. Children received arts and games therapy to help them deal with trauma, anger, or grief, release tension, and express and manage their feelings and emotions in non-verbal ways (Ruf & Jansen, 2019).

Although there is no reporting on the frequency of individual or group therapy sessions and supporting activities, or the overall achieved progress at the time of writing, comments provided to local media by the coordinator of the health and mental health unit suggest that initial efforts have yielded promising results *(Kosovo: Challenges of integrating women returnees from Syria, 2020)*.

Initial reintegration steps

Following the preparatory work by the Division for Prevention and Reintegration in coordination with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 40 children were initially integrated in the education system, including five at the preschool level, 25 at the primary level and 10 in kindergarten. Some issues were reported with access to kindergartens in municipalities that do not have such public facilities. Nevertheless, steps have been taken to subsidize access to private kindergartens and public transportation for children attending school *(Evaluation of the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism, 2020).*

With the support of intergovernmental organizations, repatriated women have received parenting training. At least 12 women were enlisted in a sewing course and will be provided with sewing machines and supplies, free of charge, for use after the completion of the course. Other women have been enlisted in a cooking course and will receive cooking supplies upon successful completion of the course. These skills development programs constitute encouraging initial steps that are likely to enhance employment opportunities for repatriated women, including self-employment.

The prospects of future employment or getting a bank loan for self-employment purposes, were further compromised in the case of some returnees following their convictions on terrorism charges. On September 03, 2019, the Basic Court of Pristina issued the first guilty verdict against a repatriated woman who received a two-and-a-half-year suspended prison sentence (Woman returned from Syria gets two and a half years suspended sentence, 2019). By August 2020, a total of 27 out of 32 repatriated women were handed down similar suspended prison sentences.

The participation of civil society organizations in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts related to repatriated children and women has so far been limited. The Kosova Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims is one of the few NGOs that started implementing a project in November 2019. The first goal of the project is to build primary health care providers' capacities to recognize signs and symptoms of trauma in children. The second goal is to provide psychosocial interventions in the school setting for repatriated children. This latter goal has proven harder to pursue, due to the lack of direct access to repatriated children and their mothers. In June 2020, Partners Kosovo Center for Conflict Management implemented two trainings with social workers aiming to support the process of reintegration of returned children in the school setting (Partners Kosova, n.d.). The Kosovo Center for Security Studies started the implementation of a project in November 2019, focusing on the development of interpersonal skills through extracurricular activities aiming to facilitate the process of reintegration for children returnees between the ages of 6-13 and other minors that may be vulnerable to radicalization *(Youth for Youth: Increasing resilience among the vulnerable youth in Kosovo, n.d.).*

The implementation of these projects, funded by

the U.S. Embassy in Pristina, slowed down from March-May 2020 because of social distancing measures imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Qenaj, 2020). Moreover, repatriated children during this period were unable to attend online classes regularly because, in most cases, they did not have access to the electronic devices required to attend classes. The City Hall of Pristina and the NGO Community Development Fund reportedly provided children with the necessary tablet computers to resume class attendance. This is a good example of proactive engagement by local government authorities in addressing the needs of returnees. Nevertheless, despite their potential to substantially expand engagement in the rehabilitation and reintegration process, so far local authorities have mostly provided support with administrative procedures, for example, in facilitating the issuance of personal identification documentation and school registration.

Ongoing Challenges

Kosovo is currently the country with the highest concentration of returnees from Syria and Iraq—including those repatriated—in Europe, relative to population size. It would suffice to compare Kosovo's 242 returnees to the European Union's overall 1,250 returnees to put the size of the problem in perspective (Pantucci, 2020).

At the same time, Kosovo has modest resources which makes the allocation of adequate financial resources to address the needs and risks associated with the high number of returnees challenging. Interviews with practitioners and reviewed reports revealed a critical shortage of specialized psychologists and social workers, especially in the municipalities hosting most of those repatriated (Ruf & Jansen, 2019).

Closely related to the above, it is important to stress that the repatriated individuals have returned to the same communities where some of them were radicalized before departing for Syria and where, according to recurring counterterrorism (CT) operations, radicalization networks committed to the cause of the Daesh continue to operate (Shtuni, 2019; Sejdiu, 2019; Shala, 2018). In fact, Kosovo's high rate of recruitment into violent extremism is, to a large extent, the result of extremist groups' operations after the war (Shtuni, 2016). It is therefore conceivable that extremist networks, known to leverage humanitarian aid and social services to promote their extremist agenda, may try to exploit the returnees' vulnerabilities. The COVID-19 crisis is likely to further expose these vulnerabilities.

Lastly, in Kosovo as elsewhere, polls have revealed concerns among the general population related to returnees from Syria and reservations about accepting them. According to a survey from 2019, about 53 per cent of Kosovar respondents were unwilling to accept returning foreign fighters from Syria in their communities, but only 30 per cent were unwilling to accept returning women and children (Kelmendi, 2019). In France, by comparison, a survey published in 2019 found that 89 per cent of respondents opposed the return of adult fighters, while 67 per cent also opposed the return of children from Syria and Iraq (The French massively approve the judgment of jihadists by Iraq and don't want to see their children returned, 2019). It is worth noting the lack of differentiation between men and women in the French poll.

Despite the high rate of general unwillingness to accept returnees in Kosovo, the respondents' differentiation between foreign fighters and noncombatant children and women returnees is worthy of note. Although the French respondents make a similar differentiation regarding children, their opposition to repatriating them is over twice as high as in Kosovo. Overall, the less adversarial attitude of Kosovar respondents toward the repatriation of children and women is likely conducive to a less challenging process of reintegration. Nevertheless, the concerns of receiving communities must be addressed since rehabilitation and reintegration efforts and any resulting economic assistance provided to returnees may otherwise be misperceived as a reward (Holmer & Shtuni, 2017).

Opportunities for More Decentralized Efforts and Inclusive Partnerships

Undoubtedly, the health and socio-economic crisis resulting from COVID-19 added to the challenges faced by the country in the past few years. These challenging times nevertheless have presented opportunities to rethink strategic planning and implementation processes for rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, which have so far been largely centralized and insufficiently inclusive of community-based organizations.

There are a number of reasons why CSOs are strategically positioned to engage in P/ CVE initiatives, including rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. They are locally based, enjoy unmatched access to communities, and have unique knowledge of relevant dynamics that may help or inhibit the reintegration of returnees into mainstream society. Moreover, they have legitimacy in communities due to their independence from the government, have experience in working with marginalized sections of society, and have a genuine interest in directly promoting their community's well-being and safety *(The role*

of civil society in preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization related to violent extremism, 2018).

By virtue of all the above, they are well positioned to work with returnees and their families, engage with receiving communities, and coordinate efforts with local government stakeholders. There are numerous examples of CSOs engaged in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts in a range of roles by providing psychosocial and trauma counseling, enhancing vocational and trade skills, delivering academic training, etc. (Nemr & Bhulai, 2018). It must be pointed out that while community-based organizations may not have a sufficient level of expertise or staff to deal with all aspects of rehabilitation and reintegration, their valuable input may help mitigate the shortage of resources at the disposal of central or local government authorities.

According to interviews with first-line practitioners and reviewed reports, the participation of local government authorities in drafting the P/CVE strategy and implementing activities foreseen in its action plan has been limited (*Evaluation of the Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism, 2020).* This represents a missed opportunity that government could address. From a practical standpoint, it is not sustainable in the mid-to-long run to have core rehabilitation and reintegration efforts developed, coordinated, and implemented by staff operating from the capital city when the repatriated individuals have been distributed across nine or more Kosovar municipalities. While the local authorities' support with administrative procedures related to repatriated individuals has been a valuable addition during the initial stages, they have the potential to take on a range of additional roles.

The central government authorities in charge of P/CVE, international organizations, law enforcement agencies, CSOs, and private sector stakeholders can all benefit from a more decentralized engagement framework leveraging municipal structures and capabilities to deliver much needed rehabilitation and reintegration support. For example, one of the municipalities most affected by the phenomenon of foreign fighters in the country had only one psychologist employed following the repatriation of Kosovar nationals in April 2019 (Ahmeti, 2019). Several interviews and reports noted a critical shortage of locally-based psychologists in most municipalities (Ahmeti, 2019). Clearly, this is a matter that requires particular attention, starting with providing local authorities the needed resources. Developing localized mental health capacities will be critical for providing timely and comprehensive medical and social support to repatriated children and women affected by PTSD in the mid-to-long term. The capacity for providing other services, like vocational training and social services, could also be scaled up.

This investment in boosting localized capacities will require some time, but a good starting point would be developing municipal or region-specific P/CVE plans that would prioritize rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives, allocating some initial government resources, and working with international organizations to identify additional funding streams. There are already some emerging good practices from similar sub-national efforts that may be useful in Kosovo (Rosand & Skellet, 2018).

Recommendations

This report took stock of good practices and lessons learned from initial efforts for the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning children and women from Syria, reflected on ongoing challenges affecting their implementation, and identified possible opportunities for more inclusive partnerships and sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes. Below are a number of overarching recommendations that policymakers can consider:

Integrate representatives of local government and CSOs in the development of the revised national CVE strategy and action plan. By allowing a more meaningful role for local government authorities and leveraging the expertise of community-based organizations at the national policy and strategy development level, it is possible to design an organic model of rehabilitation and reintegration that can utilize more efficiently the local capacities and facilitate more sustainable local solutions. Building strategic multi-sectoral partnerships is particularly convenient in times of economic hardship and inadequate resources. The integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration broadens the spectrum of options.

Support the development of tailored municipal/regional rehabilitation and reintegration plans aligned with the strategic priorities of the national CVE strategy. This partially decentralizing feature of the strategy will foster increased engagement and ownership of the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts at the local level. The approach would help gradually transition some of the core efforts from technical staff housed in the capital city to the municipalities where returnees reside. Locally based practitioners like psychologists and social workers would be more accessible to returnees, and the services more consistent, predictable, and cost-efficient. If provided adequate resources and personnel, these municipal institutions can be gradually transformed into vibrant hubs for the coordination of multi-stakeholder rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives, delivery of services, and sharing best practices across Kosovar municipalities.

Provide repatriated families with adequate financial assistance and opportunities for economic stability in order to avoid further radicalization. The returnees are vulnerable, traumatized, and in some cases, radicalized. Often a woman caretaker of multiple children has to rely on a monthly welfare check that is insufficient to meet the basic needs of the family. This precarious socio-economic situation is more likely to lead to marginalization and possible radicalization than reintegration. Particular attention should be given to teenage returnees in stressful situations, who may be more vulnerable and possibly become a target of radicalization networks.

Create a multi-agency childcare system and provide personalized long-term care for child returnees. The initial psychosocial evaluations of repatriated children by the mental health team revealed clear symptoms of PTSD. Prolonged exposure to extreme violence and traumatic experiences affects the psychological wellbeing of children in different ways. Their treatment requires an individualized, timely, and precise assessment of needs differentiating between age, gender, type of trauma, and exposure. Some countries have developed assessment systems with detailed information about the child's background, exposure to violence, family relations, type of support required, etc., to tailor the long-term treatment. The consensus is that the child's wellbeing, needs, vulnerabilities, and possible risk factors should be assessed concurrently and addressed continuously via multi-agency cooperation, including child protection and law enforcement agencies.

Develop a specific communications strategy for engagement with receiving communities and the press on the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees and P/CVE efforts in general. Pre-repatriation polls revealed a considerable number of respondents opposed to the repatriation of citizens from Syria and reluctance to accept them in Kosovar communities. To discourage negative and stigmatizing messaging against returnees, and potential resentment linked to any assistance they may be receiving— especially in communities facing chronic economic challenges—it is important for central and local government officials to adopt a clear public engagement strategy. They should communicate to the public clearly, sufficiently, and consistently the benefits of the returnees' rehabilitation and reintegration to the whole Kosovar society. The goal should be to manage the public discourse on returnees, use positive narratives, provide updates of government efforts, and inform the public about any positive progress in order to assuage concerns and foster support for successful reintegration.

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Preventing Violent Extremism in Youth Through Sports: The SPEY Project

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Introduction

Today's world faces uncountable challenges and threats. Education, health, the economy, the environment, inequality, security, and defense are only some realms that require efforts from governments, institutions, and individuals to implement programs that make the world a better place for future generations. A more specific yet overarching challenge is extremism and violent radicalization, which suppose major threats to social coexistence and challenge safeguarding security and democratic values within societies (Moyano et al., 2021).

Although there is no consensus on its definition, radicalization can be defined as a multidimensional and multifactorial process that encompasses psychological and social changes (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) in an individual who is involved – whether supporting or engaging – in acts of violence aimed to achieve ideological goals of a political and/or religious and/or ethnic nature (Trujillo y Moyano, 2019). It is also defined as the process through which individuals, at times, increase their commitment to a radical group, which encourages using violence as an instrument to achieve goals (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Trip et al., 2019).

A wide range of factors potentially contributes to radicalization and violent extremism (Trip et al., 2019). These include ideological extremism, affective states, perceived conflict, relative deprivation, violent disinhibition, legitimization of terrorism, radical propaganda, cognitive closure, sensation seeking, negative models, vital needs, social exclusion, injustice, frustration, humiliation, oppression, polarization, stressful life events, personal crisis, social pressure, threat perception, and social alienation (Emmelkamp et al., 2020; Moyano, 2011, 2019; Moyano & Trujillo, 2013; Trujillo & Moyano, 2019). Conversely, a substantial and diverse number of factors can potentially protect people from falling into the clutches of extremism. These protective factors include resilience – fundamentally based, among other possible aspects, on self-esteem, personal coherence, acceptance of problems and commitment to solve them, cultural intelligence, internal locus of control, and tolerance for uncertainty and frustration –, critical thinking, democratic values, human rights, alternative narratives, social integration, social support, social cohesion, perception of justice, personal meaning and meaning of life, training, employment, positive role models, positive intergroup contact, and institutional support (Gøtzsche-Astrup et al., 2020; Moyano et al., 2021; Trujillo & Moyano, 2019).

Adolescents and young adults can be especially vulnerable to the threat of radicalization due to globally shared characteristics of this life stage and various biological, cultural, social, cognitive, emotional and behavioral factors (Adam-Troian et al., 2021; Doosje et al., 2016; Moyano et al., 2021, 2022). Thus, to ensure a hopeful and secure future for our nations, safeguarding youth through preventive programs must be prioritized as a critical component of counter-radicalization strategies

The 3N model of radicalization

Understanding the process of radicalization, its contributing factors, and the relationships between them is fundamental to developing interventions and ultimately preventing it. For that reason, academics have developed several models to explain the process (see Lobato, 2019; Moyano et al., 2021). Among those is the 3N model of radicalization by Kruglanski and collaborators (Kruglanski, Bélanger, & Gunaratna, 2019; also see Webber & Kruglanski, 2017), which has received strong empirical support during the last years (see Bélanger et al., 2019, 2020).

The 3N model of radicalization, proposed by Kruglanski and colleagues, is a theoretical framework that explains the radicalization process as an interplay of three factors: needs, narratives, and networks. The model acknowledges that individuals, particularly young people, may engage in extremist behaviors and groups for various reasons. Kruglanski and colleagues argue that radicalization is a complex process influenced by the relationships and interactions among individuals, groups, and their contexts (Kruglanski et al., 2014, 2019, 2022). A brief explanation of these three factors is as follows.

Needs

Conceptualized as the quest for personal significance, this is the motivational factor for radicalization. It refers to the human need to be someone, to be

respected, and to matter. Individuals seek an answer to the question "Who am I?" to make sense of the world and where they belong; the response to this question can be attained by gaining membership in a group that provides meaning, purpose, and social identity (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Hogg, 2018). In this context, extremist groups are one such group that can become especially attractive under specific circumstances (Belavadi et al., 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2019).

Narratives

Refers to the ideology or system of shared beliefs and social norms followed by a group. This ideology establishes the group and individual identity and is legitimized as a means to obtain personal significance. In the case of extremist groups, their ideological context justifies violence as a legitimate means of attaining the group's objectives (Kruglanski et al., 2019; also see Forgas & Crano, 2021).

Networks

Defined in the model as the various – or limited – social networks that an individual is a part of. These networks have different roles in the radicalization process, including providing membership, identity, status, and meaning (Gøtzsche-Astrup et al., 2002); and acting as a transmission channel for the group's ideology, and a context to legitimize it. In the case of extremist groups, the network or group becomes a strong source of purpose, motivation, belonging, and camaraderie (Kruglanski et al., 2019).

Sports and Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE)

Historically, sports have played a prominent role in promoting peace by bringing different groups together in a context of positive relationships and values such as resilience, partnership, respect, and tolerance (Gerstein et al., 2021, UNOCT, 2021). Recent research supports the claim that sport-based programs can be powerful tools to achieve positive outcomes. These programs not only help develop social skills and improve intergroup relationships but also provide a sense of belonging and purpose, creating opportunities for participants and their communities. Furthermore, research has shown that incorporating an educational approach by adding other types of activities to sport-based programs can exponentially increase participants' benefits (Lenos & Jansen, 2019; Richardson et al., 2017; UNODC, 2020). PVE programs that have such characteristics allow the development of more cohesive, safe, and resilient communities and spaces.

Although sports have an encouraging history and a promising present and future as tools to help reduce crime and other disruptive behaviors (Khoury-Kassabri & Schneider, 2018; Spruit, Hoffenaar, et al., 2018; Spruit, van der Put, et al., 2018), the link between PVE and sports has not yet been thoroughly studied. As a result, despite the number of programs incorporating sports to promote peace, there is still a need for data-based impact assessments to better understand the effects of sports on preventing violent extremism (Hassan et al., 2021).

The SPEY project

The SPEY project, led by the Unió de Federacions Esportives de Catalunya (UFEC) and co-funded by the European Commission, was created from the necessity to contribute from the sports field to the prevention of violent extremism among young people in the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Spain) and develop a program with a solid measure of its effectiveness. The program was conceptualized and developed within a context of pro-sociality and institutional support, with the goal of minimizing risk factors for radicalization in youth by combining the practice of sport and the learning of transversal psychosocial skills (Arnal et al., 2022; Moyano et al., 2022).

Project Stakeholders

The SPEY project was a sports-based project led by the UFEC and co-financed by the European Commission. The project aimed to prevent radicalization of young people through the practice of sports. With a total duration of 30 months, the SPEY project had the support of 7 countries and 9 'partners,' including the Confederation of Sports of Sweden, the Union of Federations of Latvia, the International Council of Sport and Physical Education of Germany, the City Council of Gondomar of Portugal (União das Freguesias de Gondomar, S. Cosme, Valbom e Jovim), the Ministry of Culture and Sport of Greece, the French 'think tank' Sport and Citizenship, and the University of Cordoba.

Objectives

The primary goal of the project was to establish a sports-oriented program that would equip young people at risk of exclusion with the necessary tools to help them integrate into society and develop their support network to thwart the process of violent radicalization. Additionally, a parallel objective was to develop measuring tools and indicators to assess the program's outcomes, thereby contributing to the body of knowledge on how sport-based PVE initiatives can improve the prevention of radicalization.

Methodology and implementation

The SPEY project was implemented over two years, starting in February 2020. It consisted of 18 sessions,

with a total duration of approximately 50 hours. The working team comprised social educators, psychologists, and sports coaches, among other professionals.

To attain its main goal, the program used different action-oriented educational methods, techniques, and tools such as role-playing, group dynamics, e-games, videos, social networks, debates, songs, service-learning, and sports. All these activities were framed in the context of offering the young participants counter-engagement opportunities and positive pathways and social networks.

To guide PVE practices such as policies, programs, and communication strategies, it is crucial to understand the relationships between the variables involved in the radicalization process. The SPEY project aimed to enhance this understanding by implementing a research-based content design, conducting pre- and post-evaluations, and implementing continuous monitoring to quantify the program's benefits.

Using the 3N model of radicalization as its theoretical background, the intervention was shaped by combining the sports practice with educative dynamics designed to influence the participants' needs, narratives, and social networks. The activities aimed to improve the participants' integration and sense of belonging, create and expand support networks, and provide them with constructive and positive tools. The program's content was grouped in blocks based on the different levels tackled (individual, group, and socio-structural) and according to the three factors proposed by the 3N model.

First block - the individual level

The initial block of sessions addressed the "needs" factor. During the first session, a code of coexistence was established to create a safe, respectful, and clear context and set shared expectations. The following sessions focused on socio-emotional skills and included icebreaker games designed to build trust among participants and professionals. Subsequent sessions focused on promoting self-awareness, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and empathy. During this block, participants were also given opportunities to reflect on their individualities and skills and discuss their life aspirations and values.

Middle block - the group level

The following block of sessions targeted the "narratives" factor. During these, participants learned about and worked on resilience, problem-resolution abilities, and other personal skills. Because positive relationships and a safe learning space were established by then, the program incorporated various sports such as soccer, basketball, volleyball, and table tennis. Outdoor activities (e.g., hiking) were also included to promote well-being and healthy lifestyles. Additionally, individual and group activities were incorporated to encourage reflection on gender inequalities, gender stereotypes, and the perceptions of masculinity.

Final block - the socio-structural level

The last block of sessions focused on the "networks" factor. In these sessions, participants engaged in different social activities and worked on self-criticism. In addition, sports practice was used to channel frustration tolerance and promote cooperation and positive peer relationships.

Measures[1]

The program's outcomes were evaluated using measures grouped according to the three factors of the 3N model.

- Needs. Assessed through two variables: sports motivation and search for meaning in life.
- Violent narratives. Assessed through two variables: moral disengagement, and support for political violence.
- Social network. Assessed through two variables: social support, and level of deviant peers.
- Satisfaction with the implementation process. Measured through seven indicators to assess the participants' impressions of the program: fun, interest, usefulness, attitudes toward activities and educators, understanding of content, and appropriate number of sessions.
- Sociodemographic data. The variables assessed were age, gender, occupation, and whether participants were in a foster care program during the pre-test.

Results

A total of 120 participants were recruited to participate in the program through the associations they belonged to. To compare the program's effects, a control group of 104 secondary school students from the area was

1 For a more detailed description of the measures used and the results of the program, please refer to the published paper by the authors of this chapter (see Moyano et al., 2022).

recruited. Both groups completed a questionnaire before and after the program. Impact indicators and results of participating in the SPEY project were assessed using quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative evaluation relied on pre- and post-test data from the intervention and control groups. The qualitative evaluation was based on pre- and post-test data from the participants' adult referents (the first line practitioners and professionals working or living daily with the young participants).

When analyzing the quantitative data, descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were calculated for all intervention and control group variables. Next, mixed-model analyses of variance were carried out to test for differences between pre and post-test scores. Besides, to evaluate satisfaction with the program implementation process, Student's t-tests were calculated. An inductive thematic analysis was carried out of the qualitative data collected.

Overall, the program demonstrated positive effects on variables related to the 3N model of radicalization (needs, narratives, and networks), as evidenced by the comparison of the intervention and control groups, as well as within the intervention group over time. More specifically, participants in the program had a higher motivation for sports and a higher search for meaning than the control group. Besides, participation in the program resulted in reduced moral disengagement and increased social support among participants compared to their baseline levels and the control group. These results suggest the benefits of participating in the program for the youth. Interestingly, we also observed that the control group presented more support for political violence and higher levels of deviant peers compared to their baseline levels and the intervention group. These variables remained unchanged in the intervention group. These results also support that participation in the program seems to have a preventive part, helping hinder negative factors. Ultimately, these results suggest that the intervention had a positive impact through the narratives and social network factors of the 3N model, although it did not affect needs.

In terms of participants' satisfaction with the implementation of the program, they provided positive feedback, emphasizing that they enjoyed their participation and appreciated the work and support from the educators.

Regarding the qualitative data obtained from surveying the participants' referents (i.e., the different professionals who worked or lived with them), we found different themes that spoke to the wide interpersonal differences among participants. The themes identified before the program were diverse. Under the needs factor, the themes identified were: polarized interest in sports and lack of life objectives. Under the narratives factor, the themes were: polarized empathy (while most participants were empathic and respectful, some exhibited a lack of these qualities), justification of violence (mostly related to frustration and anger), and negative attitudes (i.e., prejudices toward specific groups). For the networks factor, the themes identified were: reduced support networks and restricted positive social role models.

In contrast, the main themes observed after the program were a sense of belonging, increased social support within the group, and specific life objectives. According to the referents, participants' social integration improved thanks to belonging to the SPEY group and the development of positive skills associated with the values of sports, leading to an increase in their social networks. Nevertheless, referents also noted that, due to the participant's socioeconomic insecurity, in some instances their objectives and goals did not seem aligned with the reality of their situation.

To summarize the qualitative results, the analysis showed positive changes in participants' attitudes and behaviors. Some of the positive outcomes of the program for the youth, as reported by both participants and referents, included:

- Expanded participant's positive social network.
- Obtained opportunities to join sports clubs and other social organizations with contracts as players or trainers.
- Gained access to job and volunteering opportunities.
- Increased motivation to further enhance their abilities and acquire new skills.
- Improved communication skills and cultural knowledge.
- Gained access to high-quality sports practice and educational activities.
- Obtained opportunities to promote healthy habits and behaviors.

Summarizing these results, one of the referents noted that:

> ***"More than just a change, the program has been a comfort zone for [participant] during a life stage change process. He had a point of reference and felt part of a peer group where he knew people were waiting for him."***

Limitations

Some limitations need to be considered when interpreting the implementation of the program and the study results:

- The participation of female participants and local youth (i.e., Spanish national youth) was limited, which could lead to biased results and an incomplete understanding of the studied phenomenon.
- Complete attendance to the sessions was hindered due to commuting issues for some participants; with incomplete participation, some results may not have reflected the expected changes in participants' attitudes and behavior.
- The COVID-19 restrictions posed a challenge for the program's implementation, particularly with regard to practicing non-hegemonic team sports, such as those other than soccer, due to the fact that most sports centers and facilities were closed to the public.
- The language barrier was also identified as a limitation, particularly for participants who did not speak Spanish, as it posed a challenge when carrying out the educative parts of the program.

To ensure future interventions and their evaluations are successful, it is essential to acknowledge and address the limitations of the current program. In doing so, steps can be taken to improve field interventions and research.

Conclusions and lessons learned

Largely, the results of the study suggest a positive impact of the SPEY program across the factors defined by the 3N model, especially in the social network area. Although it appears that the use of sport-based interventions is more connected to the social network than the other factors, the results support that these types of sport-based interventions are an indirect pathway to minimizing the risk of radicalization. The practice of sports proved to be a strong tool for motivating positive social interactions, developing personal skills and goals, and fostering a positive social network. However, it is important to note that sports should not be the sole focus of preventive interventions for radicalization. Other factors that directly educate participants should also be incorporated into such interventions. In this way, sports can be used as an additional tool to positively influence social networks and values. Future programs should therefore consider incorporating sports, along with other relevant elements, to further improve the outcomes of such interventions.

Overall, despite the difficulties encountered through the process, the effects of the SPEY project went beyond the program. These results also align with other interventions focused on using sports to reduce juvenile delinquency (Johns et al., 2014; Spruit, Hoffenaar, et al., 2018; Spruit, van der Put, et al., 2018).

To build on the positive outcomes of the SPEY project, future interventions should integrate sport-based interventions with other interventions that address critical aspects of youth development. Additionally, it would be valuable to implement such programs in a variety of groups, including those more diverse in terms of gender, culture, and other identities, to determine whether these interventions are universally effective or need to be tailored to specific groups.

If you wish to learn more about the SPEY project, please visit https://ufec.cat/spey/the-project or consult the final results in the published paper by the authors at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2022.102283.

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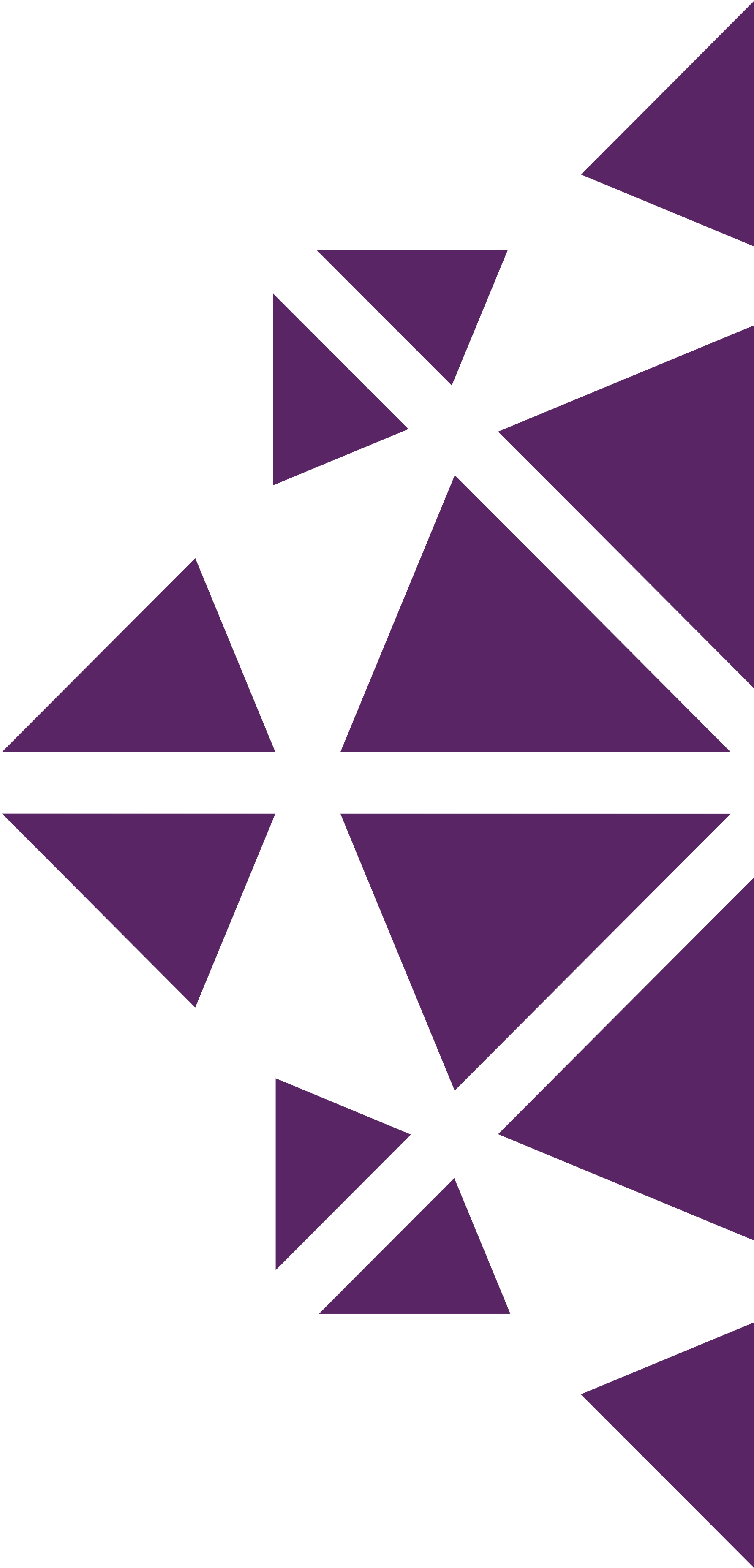

Hedayah

Countering Extremism & Violent Extremism

This **Edited Volume** is a compilation of essays resulting from the presentations delivered at Hedayah's **Seventh Annual International Research Conference** held in Granada, Spain, in May 2022. The Conference was sponsored by the Government of Spain, and co-hosted by Hedayah, the Euro-Arab Foundation, the University of Granada, the European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention (EICTP), the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), and Moonshot. Strategic partners included the Cyber Threats Research Centre (CYTREC) (Swansea University), Tech Against Terrorism (TAT), and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

Hedayah's annual **Edited Volume** series aims to support ongoing efforts in preventing and countering extremism and violent extremism by collecting the latest research essays on a diverse range of related topics, incorporating findings relevant to theory and practice. The **Edited Volume 2022** collates essays written by academics and practitioners considering the constantly evolving landscape of extremism and violent extremism, in two sections focused on 1) the changing online landscape of extremism, violent extremism and terrorism after the COVID-19 pandemic and 2) new lessons from policy and programming in the field of countering and preventing extremism and violent extremism.

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