

# PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

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## Words of Welcome from the Editors

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume XV, Issue 4 (August 2021) of *Perspectives on Terrorism* (ISSN 2334-3745). Our independent online journal is an Open Access publication of the *Terrorism Research Initiative* (TRI), Vienna, and the *Institute of Security and Global Affairs* (ISGA) of Leiden University's Campus in The Hague. All past and recent issues are freely available online at URL: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/perspectives-on-terrorism>.

*Perspectives on Terrorism* (PoT) is indexed by JSTOR, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar where it ranks No. 3 among journals in the field of Terrorism Studies. Now in its 15th year, it has nearly 9,500 registered subscribers and many more occasional readers and website visitors in academia, government and civil society. The *Articles* of its six annual issues are fully peer-reviewed by external referees while its *Research Notes* and other content are subject to internal editorial quality control.

The current issue features ten **Articles**. The opening articles are from Thomas Renard and Michael Shkolnik, the two winners of the bi-annual TRI Award for the Best Doctoral Thesis on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism (more on them and the third finalist, Gian Maria Campedelli can be found in the Announcements section). The third article is an update of a previous contribution by Omi Hodwitz, noting the continuing low recidivism rate of terrorists and supporters of terrorism released from the US prison system. Two articles by Gabriel Weimann and Asia Vellante on the one hand and by Lisa Schlegel on the other, address the role of the Internet in terrorism, looking at 'dead drops' and the influence of computer games respectively. In the next article, Phillip de Bruin surveys the vast literature of violent extremist communication. Then Carlos Igualada explores the international links of two terrorist attacks in Spain in 2017, based in part on new court documents. Mette-Louise E. Johansen and two of her colleagues look at how organized crime and terrorism in Denmark combine to affect the government's security policies. Nodirbek Soliev discusses Central Asian foreign fighters in terms of a new typology. And finally, Nathan Thompson and Amber Hart show how supporters of terrorism have used allegedly 'heroic' prison experiences as propaganda tools in past and recent cases.

The ten articles are followed by a **Research Note** from the hands of Alex Schmid, James Forest and Timothy Lowe. It complements the one they published (on terrorism research) in the June issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*, this time looking at the state of counter-terrorism research.

The **Resources section** features five brief reviews by Joshua Sinai, the Book Reviews Editor of our journal, followed by a large bibliography on the United States in Judith Tinnes' series of 'Terrorism by Country'. Then David Teiner provides a bibliography on the Palestinian Hamas, and Berto Jongman presents his survey of recent online resources on terrorism and related subjects.

In **Announcements**, the chairman of the TRI Award jury presents the finalists and winners of the bi-annual TRI Thesis Award, praising their contribution to our knowledge and providing links to the full text of their outstanding doctoral theses. In a further announcement, we welcome three new members to the Editorial Board of *Perspectives on Terrorism* and advertise a vacancy for an Associate Editor in the Editorial Team of our journal. This is followed by the regular Conference Calendar assembled by Olivia Kearney. The articles and other texts of the current issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* have been edited by Alex Schmid and James Forest, the journal's principal editors. Editorial Assistant Jodi Moore handled proof-reading, while the technical online launch of the August 2021 issue of our journal has been in the hands of Associate Editor for IT Christine Boelema Robertus.

# Counter-Terrorism as a Public Policy: Theoretical Insights and Broader Reflections on the State of Counter-Terrorism Research

by Thomas Renard

## Editor's Note:

*This article has been written by invitation of the chairman of the jury of the Terrorism Research Initiative. It summarizes key aspects of Thomas Renard's doctoral dissertation (Ghent University), for which he was the co-recipient of the TRI Award for the best Ph.D. thesis in the field of terrorism studies written in 2019 or 2020. For more information on the Award, see the Announcement at the end of this issue of Perspectives on Terrorism.*

## Abstract

*In spite of the growing amount of literature published on terrorism over the past 20 years, counter-terrorism is rarely considered as a subject of research by itself. Empirical or data-driven research on counter-terrorism policy is relatively rare, and theoretical approaches are even scarcer. This article first reflects on the seeming absence of 'counter-terrorism studies' (contrasting with the thriving 'terrorism studies'). Then, it suggests studying counter-terrorism policymaking through the lens of public policy theory. This approach offers innovative insights to our understanding of counter-terrorism and opens new horizons for the development of a theory of counter-terrorism policymaking.*

**Keywords:** Counter-terrorism; P/CVE; policymaking; terrorism research; public policy theory

## Introduction

Over the past 20 years, following the 9/11 attacks in the USA, massive efforts and resources have been invested in counter-terrorism policy worldwide. Counter-terrorism has become the dominant security priority in many countries, as well as one of the main structuring forces in international relations. The scope of "counter-terrorism" has expanded quite significantly over the past two decades to include both upstream and downstream policies, aimed at preventing so-called radicalization at home on the one hand, and external operations (military or civilian) under the CT-label on the other hand. This evolution has attracted considerable attention, as well as triggering passionate discussions about core dilemmas, such as the one regarding the proper balance between *security* and *liberty*. However, surprisingly, conceptual or theoretical work on counter-terrorism remains quite limited, which has been hindering our ability to understand and explain key dynamics in this major policy field. This article starts from the observation that there are few theoretical counter-terrorism studies, in contrast with the thriving field of terrorism theories. Then it borrows key concepts from public policy theory literature to demonstrate how they could be used for the study of counter-terrorism policymaking.

## The Absence of Counter-Terrorism Studies

Research on terrorism, and more specifically *terrorism studies*, is often traced back to the 1970s.[1] The interest for terrorism as a subject of research emerged first and foremost among political scientists in the United States and in Western Europe, following a series of spectacular terrorist events. In the following decades, and particularly after 2001, this field of research continued expanding. More scholars became interested in this topic, coming from more disciplines, including (but not limited to) psychology, criminology, sociology, and law. The quantity of research increased significantly over the years, although innovative, data-driven research increased most significantly only in recent years.[2] Terrorism studies have been characterized by a number of disagreements or controversies, not least on the very nature of the problem of study (whether the main focus

should be terrorism, extremism, or radicalization—and how to define these). A number of scholars working on terrorism-related issues would not necessarily identify with terrorism studies as such. However, the existence of university departments, programs, or certificates on terrorism, as well as specialized journals,[3] book series, and even a research association (the *Society for Terrorism Research*) nevertheless provide a certain consistency to the field.

In contrast, there is no such thing as *counter-terrorism studies*. A significant amount of research has been conducted on various aspects related to the responses to terrorism. There have, for instance, been many studies conducted on specific counter-terrorism operations or campaigns, as well as on specific aspects of counter-terrorism such as targeted killings, the use of drones, or on counter-terrorism ethics more broadly. Some other disciplines or studies are also particularly relevant, such as *intelligence* or *policing studies*. There is, however, relatively little research conducted on counter-terrorism policy as such, seeking to conceptualize what counter-terrorism is, in order to determine its evolving contours and to better understand the making of counter-terrorism policy and the drivers behind its agents.[4] While one problem of terrorism studies is the abundance of conceptualizations and theories, the problem of counter-terrorism studies—if there is such a field—is the absence thereof. Definitional or conceptual work on counter-terrorism has been “virtually inexistent”, according to some observers.[5] Many researchers seem to assume that the term is self-explanatory, or perhaps simply consider counter-terrorism as a practice, or as a subdiscipline at most—one that requires no theoretical effort. For instance, Lindekilde speaks of “terrorism studies” but only of “counterterrorism policymaking”.[6] As a result, counter-terrorism remains significantly under-theorized, with damaging consequences for rigorous research and evidence-based policies.[7] Furthermore, whereas research on terrorism has seen a spike in empirical and evidence-based research recently, a similar jump forward is still needed in the study of counter-terrorism.

The field of counter-terrorism research is also arguably less structured, with fewer recognizable dedicated journals,[8] book series, or research associations. This is also a field that is comparatively more populated with practitioners, hence sometimes blurring the lines between academia and policy, which is further reinforced by prominent networks that bring together researchers and practitioners, such as the EU-funded Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) or the European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues (EENeT). It has even been argued that many terrorism researchers actually perceive themselves as counter-terrorism agents, not least as a result of government funding which is partly setting the stage for the research agenda.[9]

I do not want to suggest that interactions between academia and practitioners are a negative thing. On the contrary, I am a fervent advocate of building bridges between these distinct communities. However, I do believe that counter-terrorism could benefit from more attention as a subject of research in its own right, and thereby become more consistently structured as a field. After all, today’s counter-terrorism in Western democracies is much more wide-ranging than in the past, covering a broader range of actors and policies beyond those driving the traditional security community. It is also much more resource-consuming, with ever-expanding human and financial resources dedicated to the fight against terrorism, both at home and abroad. And overall, it is increasingly encroaching on privacy and civil liberties, for instance through the normalization of emergency laws and measures, leading to what some have called “the counter-terrorist state”.[10] This evolution of counter-terrorism has generated a great deal of critical comments and analyses, and rightly so. Indeed, it is a trend that calls for greater scrutiny as the stakes are simply too high, both in terms of security *and* liberty, not to pay attention. However, there has been remarkably little research seeking to conceptualize this evolution, let alone explaining it.

The near-absence of conceptual or theoretical approaches to counter-terrorism in the academic literature becomes apparent when trying to answer some relatively basic questions: What is actually counter-terrorism today? What binds together a policy that ranges from the deployment of soldiers in Africa and the Middle East to fight terrorist groups, all the way to socioeconomic and psychosocial measures to prevent the so-called “radicalization” of vulnerable individuals domestically, conducted notably by social workers or teachers? How can we explain the expansion of counter-terrorism policies in Western democracies over the past two decades, although terrorism has been a recurring challenge for more than half a century? What factors can explain, for

instance, how France has evolved from a firm resistance to the “global war on terror” narrative in the 2000s, to declaring that “France is at war” in 2015? (Of course, France suffered dramatic attacks in 2015, but it had been struck before without declaring war, and other European countries have equally experienced attacks without responding in a war-like manner). Furthermore, what factors can explain that counter-terrorism responses have developed differently across Europe and in the USA, in spite of a shared perception of the seriousness of the terrorist threat? Why is it, in other words, that counter-terrorism strategies and policies look so different from one country to another, with some countries involved militarily abroad and others not, or some governments preferring an intelligence-led approach to counter-terrorism whereas others favor a judiciary- or law enforcement–led approach.

There is clearly ample room to improve our understanding of counter-terrorism, empirically and conceptually, but also through developing innovative theoretical insights. In this article, I posit that counter-terrorism policy can be studied as any other public policy. I propose therefore to make use of the literature on public policy theory, which arguably has much to offer for the study of *counter-terrorism policymaking*, notably for understanding its evolution since 2001.

### ***Public Policy Theory***

The literature on public policy is extensively theorized, as opposed to the literature on counter-terrorism, thereby offering an interesting vantage point to analyze counter-terrorism policymaking. While there is no single consensus definition of “public policy”, it is generally understood to include the actions and measures adopted by a government, and often also the processes or intentions that led to adopting these.[11] Public policy theory helps us understand why policies change (or not), and how.

To explain change, it is first important to understand some of the most fundamental concepts of public policy theory. To begin with, it is widely accepted that policymakers do not operate in a context of “comprehensive rationality”, which would assume that they have full knowledge of all problems and potential solutions, and are therefore in a position to decide rationally between all possible policy options. In fact, they are constrained by “bounded rationality”, which limits their ability to gather and process policy-relevant information. In other words, policymakers “are faced with incomplete knowledge of the policy environment and the likely consequences of their solutions.”[12] In this sense, most policies are designed on a “good enough” knowledge basis, rather than being based on the most efficient response, as recommended notably by the advocates of “evidence-based policymaking”. This is an important point, since much research on counter-terrorism wrongly assumes strategic rationality of governments and CT policymakers. Rather, counter-terrorism policy should instead be recognized for being the result of “political negotiation and organizational practice,”[13] and “a reflection of the domestic political process.”[14]

### ***Factors Shaping Public Policy***

A key aspect of public policy theory is that policy choices result from a “complex policy-making environment”, in which a number of factors influence public policies.[15] Generally speaking, the literature on policy change distinguishes between exogenous factors, which are outside the realm of public policy actors (such as “events”), and endogenous factors, which consistently influence the information available to policymakers and their preferences.[16] Public policy theories, and particularly neo-institutionalist ones, have emphasized the weight of three main endogenous variables in the making of public policies: ideas, interests, and institutions.[17] *Ideas* refer to the “cognitive and normative” aspects behind public policies, that is the values, norms, beliefs, or paradigms that underpin or shape policies. *Interests* refer to the rationality of the policymakers, who act on the basis of cost-benefit analyses, preferences, strategies, and power relations. *Institutions* (not to be confused with organizations) refer to the importance of formal and informal rules, routines, cultures, resources, or constraints that shape the behavior and relationships of policymakers. The advantage of looking at the “3 Is” (ideas-interests-institutions) is that this highlights the plurality of causes in the process of public policymaking. The downside is that most theories have tended to isolate one of these dimensions at the expense of the others,

failing to recognize that these need to be identified and combined simultaneously.[18]

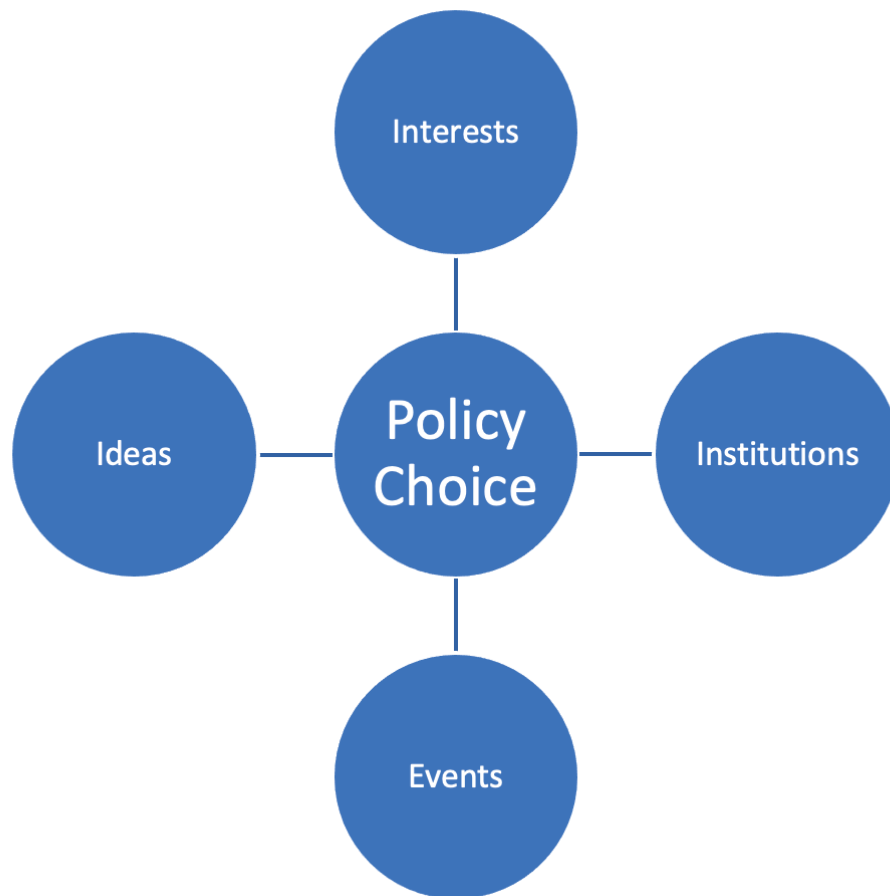
A number of theories in the public policy literature are based on the (over-)emphasis of one of these three dimensions. This is notably the case of the “path dependence” theory, which posits that policy options are strongly influenced by previous policy choices and institutional design.[19] In other words, the preferences of actors are constrained by rules and patterns that result from previous decisions, in a form of “historical contingency”, which implies that it is more costly to fundamentally revamp a policy than to simply adjust it.[20] As such, path dependency explains a certain consistency and continuity in public policies over time, in spite of political changes. Foley relies notably on this theory to explain how “routines and institutions formed in previous times continue to shape France and the UK’s responses to the current threat posed by Islamist terrorism.”[21] In other words, national CT policies will always partly reflect, for good or bad, pre-existing approaches and lessons from dealing with terrorism (and other security issues).

Regarding the weight of “interests”, Crenshaw offered an interesting analysis of the politics of counter-terrorism, explaining how “multiple actors, inside or outside government, will compete to set the agenda and to determine policy through public debate.... Each actor, whether an executive branch agency, Congress, or an interest group, wants to forge a national consensus behind its particular preference.”[22] Crenshaw’s article is one of the rare exceptions in counter-terrorism research using a public policy approach, although not referring explicitly to public policy theory or specific authors from this school of policy analysis.

Other theories have focused more on the “idea” dimension. While some theories contend that ideas are “power” and can impose themselves naturally, most theories rather explain how ideas are diffused through various mechanisms.[23] Some of these theories highlight notably how certain policies can be “transferred” from one policy area to another, or from one institutional setting to another.[24] Some authors have also distinguished between the processes that lead “actors to select a different view of how things happen (‘learning that’) and what courses of action should be taken (‘learning how’).”[25] Learning can be influenced by “early adopters” who first implemented the policy and therefore engaged in a kind of experiment, which implies certain risks due to the experimental nature and the uncertainty of impacts, including the possibility of producing unexpected and unwanted effects.[26] The role of policy “innovators”, actors who take the lead in policy change, and persuade others to follow suit, has been highlighted by some scholars,[27] and so has that of “policy entrepreneurs”.[28] Policy learning or transfer can be facilitated by a variety of factors and actors, such as “epistemic communities”, that is a group of “like-minded professionals” sharing a common knowledge base and driven by a similar mission.[29] Other mechanisms for policy diffusion are, among others, policy networks and international organizations, which can be both “vehicles” for policy transfer as well as the “locus” where new policies are shaped.[30] Policy transfer may be voluntary, as in the form of policy learning, or it can be imposed in a top-down manner.[31] Either of these can occur at the national level or from country to country.

For instance, policies focused on the “prevention” of radicalization first emerged in certain countries (UK, Netherlands, Denmark) which “pioneered” early social policy interventions.[32] They were inspired notably by what had been developed in the public health sector, but they were also influenced by the increasingly dominant discourse on “radicalization” among experts, which created the political space for such programs.

These innovative policies then diffused elsewhere in Europe and beyond, notably via the mechanisms of the European Union (for instance through the 2005 EU Action Plan against terrorism), but also through networks of professionals such as the EU-funded Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which gathers thousands of CT and P/CVE practitioners from across the EU to discuss local and national experiences and good practices.

**Figure 1:** Factors Shaping Counter-Terrorism Policymaking

### *Change in Public Policy*

Another relevant key aspect of public policy theory is that there are different types of changes that can occur at different frequencies. In the words of Hall, there are three “orders” of policy change.[33] First-order policy changes are incremental, characterized by a simple adjustment of policy instruments (e.g., reinforcing certain existing measures), but with no change in the existing policy approach nor in the overall policy goals. In a second-order policy change, while the overall policy goals remain unchanged, the policy instruments are being changed, and new instruments are being created. In a third-order policy change, there is a real “paradigm shift” in the existing approach, resulting from a different understanding of the problem and from different policy objectives. Although the boundaries between these various orders of change can be relatively blurred and subjective, third-order change is considered to be more radical, as it “requires a major departure from the way that policymakers would normally think and act.”[34]

Most of the time, policy changes are incremental and of a first- or second-order, which is considered “normal policymaking” with adjustments being made within the existing dominant paradigm. The “punctuated equilibrium theory” describes continuity in public policies as the result of an equilibrium resulting from a widely accepted framing of a policy problem among dominant policy-making forces, and from a lack of competing interests or ideas to disturb the equilibrium.[35] In other words, policymakers constrained by their “bounded rationality” have few incentives or lack the ability to fundamentally challenge the existing policy since it is based on an apparent “great deal of agreement on the nature and solutions to policy problems,” at least among the dominant policy-making groups.[36] When change occurs, it is often in a path-dependent manner or, according to Thelen, in the form of “institutional layering” (new rules are added to old ones) or “institutional conversion” (existing institutions evolve more drastically to perform new functions, different

from those for which they were originally created).[37]

More fundamental policy evolutions can occur nonetheless, notably as a result of a “focusing event” or successful attempt by an interest group to draw attention to “their” particular issue. Such events are not deterministic (it is not the event itself that triggers change), but they create an opportunity to put a new issue on the public agenda (*agenda setting*) or to frame a policy issue differently and suggest alternative, non-traditional solutions. In other words, they offer an opportunity for new “ideas” to emerge or new “interests” to prevail. These moments of shifting equilibrium are defined as “critical juncture” or “windows of opportunity”.[38] As highlighted by multiple streams analyses, not every “focusing event” leads to policy change, as it depends on how different streams (policy problem, proposed solutions, political attention, institutional constraints, *inter alia*) come together at critical times.[39] However, under certain conditions, these “focusing events” can lead to a “paradigm shift” (or “third-order change”), by triggering a new understanding of policy problems calling for new policy instruments. Crises, it is argued, often reveal the inadequacy of the policies that are in place, stressing the need for upgrading if not transforming existing approaches. However, new conflicts are also likely to emerge as a result of new ideas and new actors becoming involved in the policy changes.[40] Thus, for instance, Hall explained how the economic crisis in the early 1970s opened a window of opportunity for new policy conceptions (monetarist economics), calling for new policy instruments.[41]

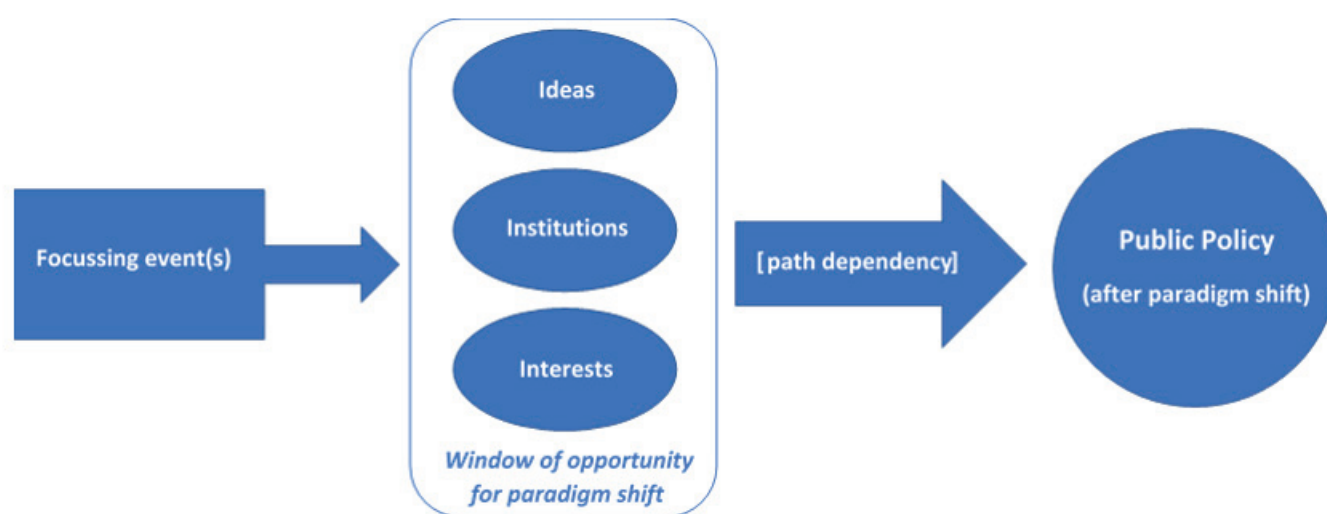
Crenshaw notes that “in the case of terrorism, focusing events frequently come in clusters so that it is often difficult to trace a specific policy response to a single event.”[42] This certainly echoes the evolution of counter-terrorism policies in Europe over the past two decades, which were shaped by a series of events (significant plots, attacks, mobilization of foreign fighters, etc.) in Europe and worldwide. Argomaniz argued that terrorist attacks are the “most significant” factor explaining policy change in counter-terrorism at the EU level, “producing critical moments that have resulted in institutional innovation.”[43] Before him, Crelinsten argued that the 9/11 attacks fundamentally changed the counter-terrorism paradigm in the US, from a “criminal justice model” to a “war model”.[44] The terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004), Amsterdam (2004), and London (2005) have also led to the emergence of a new concept and discourse (or “idea”) on “radicalization”, which eventually opened the way to the broadening of the counter-terrorism agenda to include P/CVE practices. This evolution can be considered a “paradigm shift” in the sense that the understanding of the nature of the problem was displaced (from an external threat to a threat from within), that the solutions envisaged were different (so-called “prevent” agenda), and a new terminology emerged (“radicalization”, “P/CVE”) that created a new community of ideas and interests.[45] Bigo goes even further and talks of the “semi-autonomization” of the community of radicalization practitioners after 2005, and even more clearly since 2015, which distinguishes itself from, and to some extent competes with, the traditional CT community.[46]

Of course, not every crisis leads to policy change, and similar crises can lead to different responses in different countries. This is because exogenous factors interact with endogenous ones. Indeed, an important finding from the public policy literature is that “significant institutional differences are likely to develop in each country, because a different set of initial conditions produces a different set of actions and events which have a cumulative effect and set institutional development on a different path.”[47] Thus, for instance, the 9/11 shock and successive terrorist attacks in Europe led to different counter-terrorism responses in the UK and France.[48] Similarly, in Europe, a number of EU counter-terrorism instruments were poorly or belatedly introduced by a number of member states, possibly due to different threat perceptions but more likely due to different political needs and administrative capacities.[49] To put it more simply, if it were just for the terrorist threat, many countries in Europe (at least those who share a similar threat level) would share a similar counter-terrorism policy, which is far from being the case.

An additional lesson from the “punctuated equilibrium theory” is that policymakers are often not fully receptive to the “signals” they receive. For prolonged periods of time, policymakers may be unwilling or unable to adjust policies. Then, at a critical juncture, some of them become “hypersensitive”, which creates a sense of catch-up necessity. This, in turn, can lead to a sudden “overreaction”. According to Maor, public policy oscillates permanently between under-reaction and overreaction.[50] Policy under-reaction is defined as systematically slow or insufficient response to an increased risk (or opportunity), while overreaction is defined as a policy

that imposes objectives and/or perceived social costs without producing offsetting objectives and/or perceived benefits.[51] In counter-terrorism, criticisms of overreaction are quite common in times of high threat levels, stressing the high costs of counter-terrorism, financial or in terms of declining human rights and liberties[52]. Criticisms of governmental under-reaction are equally common from political opposition figures or from media experts (“*more should have been done...*”). This is particularly true during the waxing and waning phases of specific terrorist threats, and notably in periods of what the former EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove called “CT fatigue”. Paul Wilkinson has described counter-terrorism policy in liberal democracies as part of an “inescapable dilemma” between overreaction and under-reaction, as a “tightrope...pitched at a different height and angle in each case.”[53]

**Figure 2:** Change in Counter-Terrorism Policymaking



Although overreaction and under-reaction may be the result of different factors influencing policymaking, such as the “3 Is” mentioned above, they can also be the result of strategic calculations.[54] Indeed, public policy scholars have highlighted the logic of overinvesting in certain instruments for their “symbolic or ideological value”, and for addressing a problem “politically rather than substantively”,[55] which has been referred to as “good politics, bad policy” by some scholars.[56] This links to the notion of “performativity” developed by Dutch scholar Beatrice de Graaf. In a study from 2011, she claimed that counter-terrorism policies and the corresponding official discourse are as important as the actual effect of these measures, as they communicate a form of power.[57] In other words, some counter-terrorism policies can be adopted for their symbolic value or the message they communicate, more than for their expected effectiveness (which often remains difficult to measure).

## Conclusion

The literature on public policy theory offers a number of useful insights and concepts to study counter-terrorism policymaking, if one accepts the notion that counter-terrorism can be investigated like any ordinary public policy issue. On the basis of the public policy literature, it becomes possible to explain the evolution of counter-terrorism policies in different national contexts, as well as studying it in a comparative manner.

This article offered a brief reflection on the field of counter-terrorism research. In the mind of its author, there is a clear need for more research on counter-terrorism as such, although the added value of creating specific *counter-terrorism studies*, distinct from existing *terrorism studies*, can be disputed. Such research should be more empirical, data-driven, and evidence-based. Above all, it should be underpinned by robust conceptual and theoretical frameworks. This article is an invitation to create more synergies within the (counter-)terrorism research community, with a view to identify new research questions, methods, and projects on counter-terrorism.

**About the Author:** Thomas Renard, PhD, is senior research fellow at the Egmont Institute and adjunct professor at the Brussels School of Governance. He is the author of 'The Evolution of Counter-Terrorism Since 9/11: Understanding the Paradigm Shift in Liberal Democracies' (Routledge, September 2021). This article is derived from his PhD dissertation, which received the 'Best Thesis on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism' biannual award from the jury of the Terrorism Research Initiative in August 2021.

## Notes

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# Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections: Why Some Militant Groups Wage Sustained Insurgencies

by Michael Shkolnik

## Editor's Note:

*This article has been written by invitation of the chairman of the jury of the Terrorism Research Initiative. It summarizes key aspects of Michael Shkolnik's doctoral dissertation, "Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections: Why Some Militant Groups Wage Sustained Insurgencies" (Carleton University) for which he was the co-recipient of the TRI Award for the best PhD thesis in the field of terrorism studies written in 2019 or 2020. For more information on the Award, see the Announcement at the end of this issue of Perspectives on Terrorism.*

## Abstract

*Why do some militant groups wage sustained insurgencies while other groups do not? This study shows that shifts in nascent rival relations between militant groups, from competition to consolidation, are key to understanding this puzzle. A militant group which has consolidated its rivals—whether by destruction, merger, or hegemonic dominance—should be in a stronger position to fight the target state than groups preoccupied with counterproductive violence against rivals within a militant movement. This study uses a multi-method, three-stage, research design starting with a novel quantitative regression analysis of 246 prominent militant groups worldwide from 1970–2007, featured in the Global Terrorism Database. I find that, on average, organizational capacity and constituency dominance are stronger indicators for engagement in sustained insurgencies than traditional proxies for observable group capabilities, thereby challenging conventional wisdom. The second stage focuses on a more bounded population (Middle Eastern and North African insurgent groups) and uses cross-case comparative methods to build my theory based on three forms of primary rival relations: competition (infighting or outbidding), strategic alliance, and hegemonic consolidation. Process-tracing methods are also used to explore within-case inferences and identify causal mechanisms in three diverse case studies: Hezbollah, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Rival consolidation helps dominant groups mobilize resources effectively and overcome two major organizational hurdles: collective action and principal-agent problems. Without major competitors, dominant groups attract recruits and support, while militant leaders divert their attention to strengthening organizational capacity and preparing for war with the target state. My temporal theory of rival consolidation offers a more compelling explanation that accounts for the timing of insurgency onset, compared to scholarly arguments that rely on largely static factors or remain incomplete. From a policy perspective, this study challenges assumptions and presents a generalizable framework identifying nascent rival relations as a pragmatic indicator that can help counterterrorism analysts and practitioners better anticipate potential insurgent threats.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism; insurgency; armed conflict; militant group; Middle East; mixed methods

## Introduction

Why do some militant groups wage sustained armed conflicts (or insurgencies) while other groups do not? It is puzzling why some armed groups, like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or Hezbollah, evolve from a rag-tag group of fighters into formidable forces that confront far more powerful militaries. Most militant groups do not survive beyond their first, and most vulnerable, year of existence.[1] Even fewer wage full-fledged insurgencies. Some groups, like the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood or Egypt's al-Jamm'a al-Islamiya, launched armed insurrections but failed to sustain military operations against their respective target regimes beyond a few years. Among 246 of the most prominent militant groups featured in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD),

I identify 77 (~31 percent) groups that have waged a sustained insurgency against their target state.[2] What explains this variation?

Research on insurgency tends to focus on why some insurgent groups defeat the states they fight or why some groups fighting in a civil war target civilians under certain conditions.[3] A more recent research program assesses militant groups largely based on organizational cohesion or capability indicators such as group strength, size, or control of territory to help determine civil war dynamics and outcomes.[4] More importantly, this body of research tends to prioritize powerful militant groups that are already fighting in full-fledged insurgencies or civil wars. The processes and dynamics characterizing the initial stages of insurgency prior to armed conflict onset remain poorly understood. There are few scholarly attempts trying to explain why some nascent militant groups evolve to into viable insurgent threats in the first place.[5]

This research puzzle poses important implications for policy since militant groups that are capable of launching sustained operations gain more influence, enhance recruitment, and increase fundraising capabilities while further weakening the target state. The Islamic State's attacks on Iraqi police and military targets in 2014, for example, diminished government resources and deterred recruitment into the state's already-fragile security apparatuses, creating more power vacuums that enabled the insurgent group to seize territory and pursue its strategic objectives.[6] By launching a sustained armed conflict, organizations also improve their coercive bargaining power vis-à-vis the state.[7] From a policy-making perspective, nascent militant groups tend to be most vulnerable in their early stages and states maintain crucial influence over their trajectories. It is far easier for states to prevent a nascent insurrection from developing than defeating a matured and consolidated insurgent organization.[8]

This article summarizes findings from my Ph.D. dissertation and proceeds as follows. I briefly review related literature and present my theory before defining key concepts. Subsequent sections outline the multi-method research design and briefly discuss the results. The final sections identify implications for theory and policy, concluding with some future directions for research.

### ***Indicators of Proto-insurgency Success***

Byman (2008) launched a discussion that motivates this study's research puzzle by outlining key factors explaining why some nascent militant groups evolve into mature insurgent organizations. To facilitate this transition, a group usually needs to establish a salient identity related to a popular cause or grievances that resonate with constituents beyond the founding group members. Some militant groups should be more capable of capitalizing on grievances than others—particularly religious and ethno-nationalist groups that can draw on resources from a well-defined constituency.[9] Groups seeking to challenge the target regime need to also consolidate a safe haven to effectively train, recruit fighters, and hide from national counterinsurgent or local security forces. Territorial control plays a particularly important role—enabling militant groups to shift tactics, from bombings largely targeting civilians often associated with clandestine terrorist groups to hit-and-run guerrilla strikes against military targets.[10] Would-be insurgent groups also need access to sufficient resources to sustain militant operations and to develop durable organizational structures that ensure group cohesion. Outside support, like state sponsorship, is often cited as a key factor in a militant group's broader success.[11] But in some cases, state sponsorship can destabilize militant group objectives—especially if the sponsor shifts its support to a rival group to punish its proxy.[12] Other rival organizations, not the target government, are usually the focus of nascent militant groups during the initial phases of an armed insurrection. Competition with rival groups is a critical part of the origins story behind some of the most well-known militant groups, such as Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Palestinian Fatah, and Lebanon's Hezbollah.[13]

My dissertation starts with a comprehensive review of relatively disparate literatures on terrorism dynamics, insurgency development, and civil war onset. By integrating insights from related research, I identify debates and gaps in the literature that help produce testable hypotheses for further exploration. The literature review outlines rival explanations and different ways to assess militant group success, allowing me to build a new theory and test the argument against competing alternatives.

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***A Theory of Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections***

So, why do some armed groups wage full-blown insurgencies? And what explains the timing of insurgency onset? There is no single pathway that can explain all cases, and each counter-militancy campaign requires context-specific tools. However, I argue that shifts in rival relations between militant groups—from competition to consolidation—are key to understanding this research puzzle. A militant group which dominates its constituency and has consolidated its rivals—whether by destruction, merger, or hegemonic dominance—should be in a stronger position to fight the target state than groups preoccupied with counterproductive violence against rivals within a militant movement.[14] My research focuses on relations between prominent militant groups and rivals within a broader movement that represent a similar constituency (e.g., Turkish Kurds, Syrian Sunnis, Lebanese Shi'a). Rival groups may differ on ideology or ultimate objectives—like secession or regime change. But the unifying trait is the common constituency they emerge from and claim to defend.[15]

Highly competitive movements force groups to pay most of their attention to internal matters, such as enhancing recruitment and improving their own positions within the wider movement. Through the strategic use of violence, prominent militant groups can eclipse more established rival groups to gain dominance over their respective constituencies.[16] Militant groups vying for constituency support may escalate violence to outbid rivals or directly fight one another in an effort to destroy the competition. Militant groups that unite in a strategic alliance, however, should have a better chance at mounting a sustained insurgency than groups preoccupied with violent competition. Strategic alliances allow groups to plan and coordinate attacks against a common enemy. But groups in an alliance still maintain loyalty to their respective chains of command despite efforts to cooperate strategically. Disagreements over ideology and leadership are some of the reasons that militant alliances tend to be fragile and often break down, especially within civil war contexts.

In the nascent stages of an insurrection, I expect that militant groups are primarily focused on two organizational hurdles: overcoming collective action and principal-agent problems.[17] Consolidating constituent rivals and reducing counterproductive violence (e.g., infighting, outbidding) from within the militant movement should help alleviate these issues. Dominant militant groups that consolidate their rivals have access to new resources—pooled from other organizations or derived from the local constituency.[18] Without other viable options, dominant groups are in a stronger position to persuade nonaligned civilians to support or formally join the organization. While alleviating the more immediate collective action problem, militant leaders can divert more of their attention to strengthening their internal organizational capacity and preparing for war with the target state. Lacking major competitors, leading militant groups signal their credibility to members and are in a better position to keep lower-ranking fighters in line with leadership objectives, helping address principal-agent problems.[19] Hegemonic militant groups are also in a stronger position to secure a critical safe haven to sustain an insurgency, attract outside support, and effectively absorb new resources. My temporal theory of rival consolidation offers a more compelling explanation that accounts for the timing of sustained insurgency onset, compared to existing scholarly explanations that either rely on largely static factors or remain incomplete.

***Unit-of-Analysis: Militant Group***

I define militant group as a collective organization with a designated name that engages in the use of illegal violence to achieve a political or ideological goal.[20] My broader sample is drawn from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and encompasses prominent militant organizations that survive their most vulnerable first year and have conducted at least 10 attacks throughout their lifespan.[21] I argue that these organizations represent a set of potential militant groups that engage in sustained insurgencies because they demonstrate a willingness and serious capacity to use violence to address some grievance against their target states. My research focuses on militant groups operating primarily from the states where they emerge. Transnational terrorist groups, like the Japanese Red Army, which execute the overwhelming majority of attacks outside their origin state, are left out of the analysis.[22] Armed groups affiliated with transnational vanguard organizations like al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, which mainly participate in local insurgencies, are within this study's scope.[23]

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***Dependent Variable: Sustained Insurgency***

I define insurgency based on the relatively fine-grained UCDP armed conflict data set which includes lower-intensity conflicts, characterizing the phenomenon as: “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year.”[24] A “sustained insurgency”, for this study’s purpose, refers to an armed conflict between a militant organization and an enemy state characterized by violent hostilities at this threshold for a minimum of five consecutive years.[25] It is important to avoid discounting prominent militant groups that participate in lower-intensity armed conflicts or those that never launch full-blown insurgencies in the first place.

Failing to sustain an armed conflict is conceptualized broadly as encompassing groups that do not get an insurgency off the ground or are defeated within the first few years after the onset of an armed conflict. Both militant groups and states would prefer to fight and win early, as opposed to sustaining operations for a long time. There are several ways that militant groups, who want to militarily challenge a state, fail to sustain an insurgency. Some groups may achieve their political objectives through negotiations or concessions from the state before widespread hostilities erupt. Other groups could ultimately defeat the target state within a few years and avoid a drawn-out conflict—although this outcome is extremely rare.[26] Some militant groups eventually renounce violence, while others are crushed militarily or through the efforts of law enforcement. This study does not explicitly distinguish between the various ways that militant groups cease to exist as violent threats or fail to launch a sustained insurgency.[27]

***Research Design******Quantitative Regression Analysis (Large-n)***

To test this puzzle, I use a mixed-methods, three-stage research design based on different ontological understandings of causation. In the first stage, I conduct quantitative regression analysis—using a probit estimating technique—on 246 prominent militant groups active between 1970–2007 and featured in the GTD. I code my dependent variable based on existing armed conflict data sets, primarily the UCDP, and secondary literature to determine which of the militant groups under study engage in sustained armed conflicts.

I first adopt a macro-level approach to make cross-case inferences among a wider population: prominent militant groups from around the world throughout an almost 40-year time period. Large-n quantitative analysis relies on a variance-based ontological understanding of causation, which focuses on the average mean effects of certain factors—holding other variables constant.[28] While I make efforts to account for endogeneity, clear causal explanations are difficult to establish at this stage of the analysis.[29] However, my quantitative findings present generalizable empirical associations across diverse militant groups and highlight interesting factors to unpack in subsequent analyses.

***Comparative Methods (Small-n)***

The second stage of the research design explores a positive-on-outcome (similar to Mill’s method-of-agreement) comparative analysis of all 10 Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) militant groups that engage in sustained armed conflicts. Relying on a comparative logic of elimination, this exercise is used to disconfirm individually necessary conditions and to potentially identify one or more particular variables that are most commonly associated with the outcome of interest.[30] This method helps identify cross-case inferences across a more bounded population and develop more limited-scope conditions for a particular theory to operate.

Case-based researchers understandably find limited value in purely large-n quantitative approaches and often place a high value on similar contextual conditions. For example, comparativists are likely to point out that the causes of democratization in Latin America differ considerably from Western Europe. According to this view, lumping all cases of democratization (and lack of democratization) across the world would skew results

for a highly contextual phenomenon. Similarly, factors driving militant mobilization and armed conflicts in 1970s Latin America vary widely from post-9/11 Islamist insurgencies. Case study researchers therefore tend to prioritize a more in-depth analysis of a small number of militant groups, usually from a particular region and time period.

Whereas quantitative or variance-based scholars warn against selecting on the dependent variable, picking cases solely based on their membership in the outcome (or where the dependent variable equals one in variance-based terminology) can also yield interesting results in a search for a more generalizable theoretical understanding of the phenomenon in question.[31] My quantitative regression and qualitative comparative methods explore important, yet different, causal inferences and justify case selection for a deeper inquiry.[32]

#### *Case Studies (n=1)*

In the third and final stage of the research design, I carry out three in-depth case studies. I use process-tracing methods and a mechanistic logic of causation to explore within-case inferences.[33] Unlike the large-n quantitative or small-n cross-case comparative analysis, the case studies are used to identify specific causal mechanisms linking my cause of interest (i.e., rival consolidation) to the outcome (i.e., onset of sustained insurgency). Rival plausible explanations are taken into account throughout each case study. My approach mirrors the logic of historical explanation and the sequence elaboration method, whereby the relative importance of causes is evaluated based on their temporal position and role within a particular chain of events.[34]

To conduct the case studies, I primarily rely on prominent journalistic and historical accounts for each case, in addition to scholarly books and journal articles. I also consult older news articles, government sources, and declassified intelligence reports for specific pieces of evidence and information using source-aggregating programs such as Lexis Nexis, ProQuest, and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. This more detail-oriented approach better outlines how relations with rivals impact the trajectory of prominent militant groups during their nascent stages.

Some qualitative methodologists suggest that case study research should rely on an asymmetric understanding of causation.[35] Through this ontological prism, understanding why some militant groups engage in sustained armed conflicts is not necessarily the inverse of why others fail. However, keeping in line with variance-based logics of causation, I also explore a deviant or “negative” case—a group that seemed to have a chance to sustain a nascent insurgency but failed to do so.[36] The following table summarizes the different methods and logics of causal inference used in this study.

Table 1: Different Methods &amp; Logics of Causal Inference in This Study

| Method                                        | Quantitative Regression Analysis (Large-n)                           | Comparative Methods (Small-n)                                                                            | Process-Tracing Case Studies (n = 1)                          |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ontological Understanding of Causation</b> | Variance-based, frequentist logic                                    | Comparative logic of elimination                                                                         | Mechanistic logic                                             |
| <b>Types of Causality Assessed</b>            | Mean causal effect of independent variable X on dependent variable Y | Necessary and/or sufficient conditions that produce Y                                                    | Identifying causal mechanisms, linking cause(s) to an outcome |
| <b>Types of Inferences</b>                    | Cross-case inferences to the broader population                      | Cross-case inferences to more contextualized population                                                  | Within-case inferences                                        |
| <b>Associated Components of this Study</b>    | Probit analysis of militant groups worldwide from 1970-2007          | Theory-building exercise (Positive-on-Outcome analysis); disconfirming individually necessary conditions | Case studies identifying causal mechanisms                    |

## Summary of Findings

### Quantitative Regression Findings:

#### *Motivation, Organizational Structure & Competitive Environments*

This study is the first attempt, to my knowledge, to empirically test determinants of militant group engagement in sustained insurgencies. By exploring a novel outcome of interest and incorporating all prominent militant groups—not just those groups already waging insurgency—the first stage of my analysis helps overcome selection biases prevalent in the quantitative literature on insurgency and civil war.[37]

Guided by a social movement framework, I find that proxies for organizational capacity and constituency dominance are stronger indicators, on average, for engagement in sustained armed conflicts than traditional proxies for observable group capabilities (e.g., group size, multiple & coordinated attacks, hard target strikes). [38] Overall, my quantitative model correctly classifies roughly 85% of the cases under study.

Religious groups rarely achieve their ultimate objectives.[39] But my findings suggest that religiously motivated militant groups are far more likely to engage in sustained armed conflicts than other ideologically oriented groups—whether they are ultimately successful or not. Religious militant groups often rely on relatively robust social networks and may be in a stronger position than other types of groups to mobilize resources for war. Religiously motivated groups also tend to be more lethal and maintain indivisible objectives, making negotiated settlements improbable and armed conflict more likely.[40]

More centralized and integrated groups are more capable of allocating resources effectively and keeping lower-ranking members in line with the group's broader objectives.[41] Militant groups with hierarchical structures tend to be more lethal and have a higher likelihood of ultimately defeating the states they fight.[42] But by

looking at a different dependent variable, my findings challenge conventional wisdom: groups with relatively less centralized command and control are similarly as likely to engage in sustained armed conflict as the most hierarchically structured organizations. It may be more difficult for states to disrupt less-hierarchical militant groups, which often rely on more autonomous and flexible units that better adapt to battlefield conditions.

A militant group's competitive environment plays an especially important role. I find that the more militant groups there are operating in a state, the less likely a particular militant group is to engage in a sustained armed conflict. Environments with more militant groups likely reflect increased levels of competition for limited resources and constituency support. After conducting the comparative analysis presented below, I identify a new cause of interest (constituency dominance) and incorporate the variable into a more powerful quantitative model. I find that the proxy for constituency dominance outperforms many other measures. This type of iterative process, similar to other forms of nested analyses, better synthesizes the various components of my research design.[43]

Previous research shows that in a full-fledged war, governments are more likely to defeat a single-group insurgency compared to a multi-group insurgency.[44] But a single-group insurrection—featuring only one active group at the time an armed conflict is launched—is the strongest determinant of whether a particular militant group challenges a target state in a sustained insurgency or not. Dominant groups may have been embroiled in a more competitive environment prior to consolidating rivals and then challenging the regime. This dynamic is particularly crucial among militant groups in the early phases preceding the onset of insurgency, as organizations strive to dominate a wider movement in order to pursue more strategic objectives vis-à-vis the states they fight.[45]

### *Comparative Analysis Findings:*

#### *Constituency Dominance as a Key Determinant of Sustained Insurgency Onset*

I develop my theory of rival consolidation in nascent insurrections based on this study's quantitative and qualitative comparative analyses, and insights from recent research on militant group relations. Militant groups engage (or do not engage) in sustained armed conflicts in a variety of contexts—in weak and relatively strong states, in democracies or autocracies, with the help of a state sponsor and without, with varying levels of capabilities, resource profiles, and territorial control, with different motivations and organizational structures, and facing diverse counterinsurgency campaigns.

A comparative analysis of all 10 MENA groups that wage sustained insurgencies in this study suggests that no single theoretically relevant causal factor can be deemed an individually necessary condition. Yet one factor stands out when comparing all positive-on-outcome cases: being the *Top Dog* (a militant group that commits the most attacks—against military and/or civilian targets—in a given year compared to all other active militant groups in their country of origin) at or around the time they begin engaging the target state in a sustained armed conflict. Of course, in reality, the most active group does not necessarily mean it is the most powerful. But being the most active militant group in a particular environment is a crude, yet intuitive, proxy for groups that dominate their constituencies before going on to challenge the regime.[46]

This proxy for constituency dominance further approximates reality when a particular militant group maintains its *Top Dog* status throughout the initial stages of the armed conflict. For example, the PKK and LTTE emerged in the mid-1970s and early 1980s and dedicated most of their attacks against rival Kurdish and Tamil groups, respectively, until challenging regime forces in an armed conflict in the mid-1980s. Both groups are the *Top Dog* groups in their respective environments throughout the early years of full-fledged armed conflict.

Table 2: Positive-on-Outcome Analysis

| Militant Group                          | Country                        | Start Year (Insurgency Year) | Ideology                                    | Goal                | Militant Origins                       | Org. Structure | Regime Type | # of Groups | Criminal Engagement               | External State Support | Territorial Control | Top Dog |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------|
| Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK)                | Iran                           | 1965 (1979)                  | Religious (Shia Islamist)/ Marxist-Leninist | Regime change       | Political party                        | Bureaucracy    | Autocracy   | 1           | None                              | Military               | No                  | Yes     |
| Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)          | Turkey                         | 1978 (1984)                  | Nationalist (Kurdish)/                      | Territorial control | Student group                          | Bureaucracy    | Democracy   | 2           | Trafficking; Extortion; Narcotics | Military               | Yes                 | Yes     |
| Polisario Front                         | Morocco                        | 1973 (1975)                  | Nationalist (Sahrawi)                       | Territorial control | Splinter; student/youth group (Merger) | Bureaucracy    | Autocracy   | 1           | Trafficking; Robbery              | Military               | Yes                 | Yes     |
| Hezbollah                               | Lebanon                        | 1982 (1990)                  | Religious (Shia Islam)                      | Regime change       | Splinter (Merger)                      | Bureaucracy    | Anocracy    | 14          | Fraud; Narcotics                  | Military               | Yes                 | Yes     |
| al-Jamma al-Islamiya                    | Egypt                          | 1977 (1993)                  | Religious (Sunni Islamism)                  | Social revolution   | Informal political/social movement     | All-Channel    | Autocracy   | 3           | None                              | Military               | No                  | Yes     |
| Armed Islamic Group (GIA)               | Algeria                        | 1992 (1993)                  | Religious                                   | Regime change       | Political party                        | Bureaucracy    | Autocracy   | 5           | Extortion; robbery                | Military               | No                  | Yes     |
| Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)  | Algeria                        | 1998 (1999)                  | Religious                                   | Social revolution   | Splinter                               | All-Channel    | Autocracy   | 4           | None                              | None                   | No                  | Yes     |
| Hamas                                   | Israel/Palestinian territories | 1987 (1993)                  | Nationalist/Religious (Islamist)            | Territorial control | Religious organization/movement        | Hub-Spoke      | Democracy   | 8           | None                              | Non-Military           | No                  | Yes     |
| Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) | Israel/Palestinian territories | 1964 (1965)                  | Nationalist                                 | Territorial control | Refugee community; foreign fighters    | Bureaucracy    | Democracy   | 1           | Extortion                         | Military               | Yes                 | Yes     |
| Palestinian Islamic Jihad               | Israel/Palestinian territories | 1978 (2002)                  | Religious/nationalist                       | Territorial control | Religious organization/movement        | Hub-Spoke      | Democracy   | 9           | None                              | Non-military           | No                  | No      |
|                                         |                                |                              |                                             |                     |                                        |                |             |             |                                   |                        |                     | No      |

I narrow in on the MENA region because of gaps in related scholarly work and for policy-relevant reasons.[47] The few systematic studies that explore similar research puzzles from the militant group's perspective focus on other geographic regions, including Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South/Southeast Asia.[48] While other regions experienced declines in violent intra-state conflicts since the early 1990s, violent conflicts have generally increased in the MENA region over the past two decades.[49] The MENA region also witnessed the most dramatic rise in terrorist attacks during this period.[50] Compared to civil wars and insurgencies in other regions, violent conflicts in the MENA region are far more difficult to resolve and impact international security to a greater degree.[51]

Many comparative studies on militant groups set up a most-similar systems design, whereby groups are selected based on sharing all similar traits except for the cause of interest that seems to vary accordingly with the outcome. In reality, however, it is very difficult to control for all theoretically relevant variables given that insurgencies vary considerably across contexts. For example, two groups selected for comparison may emerge in relatively weak states with access to state sponsorship. Digging deeper into factors that are selected as qualitative controls may reveal that each group receives different levels of outside support (i.e., military assistance vs. logistical assistance) or face varying levels of repression or weak counterinsurgency campaigns. In this study, on the other hand, a positive-on-outcome design was adopted which is rarely used in the social scientific study of militant groups. As discussed, militant groups emerge in a variety of contexts. But constituency dominance is one factor that seems to unite prominent militant groups that fight in sustained insurgencies.

Militant groups that consolidate their constituent rivals are in a stronger position to mobilize resources and shift attention toward fighting the state than groups embroiled in counterproductive competition. Insights from this argument correspond to Peter Krause's (2017) work which argues that hegemonic movements featuring one clearly dominant militant organization are most likely to achieve broader strategic successes—such as statehood or the expulsion of an occupying force compared to united or fragmented movements lacking a clear hegemon. Internal power distribution is at the core of Krause's argument, whereby strength is operationalized as a function of a group's membership, popular support, and financial resources.[52] But these measures, including public opinion polling or seats in political institutions are not as useful or appropriate in the study of nascent militant groups prior to the onset of insurgency. Militant groups do not need large numbers of members to get an insurgency off the ground. Similarly, militant groups usually secure major forms of financing and domestic political support or representation only after developing sufficient coercive capacity and maturing into viable insurgent organizations. While Krause's movement structure theory is instructive here, I argue that the primary nature of nascent relations between rivals is a more appropriate and pragmatic indicator to address why some militant groups launch a full-fledged insurgency—irrespective of whether they attain other strategic or ultimate objectives.

The following table outlines the main types of militant group relations in descending order, from the highest level of rival consolidation to the lowest: hegemonic takeover/umbrella structure (merger);[53] strategic alliance;[54] destructive competition/competitive escalation.[55] Table 3 includes key attributes for each type of rival relation and expected outcome, from the perspective of the leading group in a wider militant movement. The more rival consolidation a dominant group achieves, the more likely it will wage a full-blown insurgency.

Table 3: Rival Relations and Expected Likelihood of Sustained Insurgency Onset

| Rival Relations                                         | Attributes                                                                                                                                                                            | Implications                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Sustained Insurgency: Expected Likelihood |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| <b>Hegemonic Consolidation/ Umbrella Structure</b>      | Single hegemonic group or common command and control among constituent rivals led by dominant group; rivals are consolidated; pooled resources/fighters                               | Dominant group more prepared to overcome organizational hurdles, shift focus to combatting regime; subordinate groups too weak to challenge dominant group; prospect for counterproductive violence is minimized | Most Likely                               |
| <b>Strategic Alliance</b>                               | A coalition of groups maintaining independent chains of command; pooled resources/fighters among constituent rivals, more focus on targeting regime                                   | Dominant group maintains leadership, but challenging groups could disrupt alliance through counterproductive forms of violence                                                                                   | More Likely                               |
| <b>Destructive Competition / Competitive Escalation</b> | Groups battling each other for resources and dominance, targeting rivals and/or constituent civilians to coerce support; groups may target the regime as part of competitive dynamics | Violent infighting; chain-ganging or outbidding may occur; counterproductive to strategic gains as groups mainly focused on internal fights                                                                      | Unlikely                                  |

### ***Case Studies: Consolidating Rivals on the Road to War***

In my dissertation, I test my argument against other major explanations via case studies, using process-tracing techniques to identify causal mechanisms largely consistent with my theoretical expectations. The nascent trajectories of the Lebanese Hezbollah (1982–1991) and the PKK in Turkey (1976–1984)—from group formation to sustained armed conflict onset—are briefly outlined below. These two well-known groups are selected as *typical* cases (where both the main factor and outcome of interest are present) to assess the explanatory power of my theory.[56] My theoretical framework and case studies are explored in greater detail in my Ph.D. dissertation and forthcoming publications.

By successfully outbidding and eliminating its competitors, Iran-backed Hezbollah was able to siphon resources from its rivals, solidify territorial control in southern Lebanon, build its organization, and prepare for a sustained guerrilla war against Israel. Though initially seeking to derail Hezbollah, the Syrian government joined Iran to throw its full weight behind the militant organization only after it emerged as the hegemonic Shi'a militant organization in 1990.[57] Hezbollah was then able to shift its efforts from primarily internal fights to waging a sustained campaign of attrition against Israel's military presence in southern Lebanon.

Similarly, the PKK successfully outbid its more established Kurdish rivals through the strategic use of violence during its early years. By targeting landowning elite and leaders involved in tribal feuds, the PKK integrated itself among a rural base of support and gained notoriety as a credible militant organization willing to conduct risky operations for the Kurdish nationalist cause.[58] The PKK emerged as one of the only viable options for Kurds who did not want to side with an increasingly ruthless regime.[59] Syrian state support was critical for the PKK's early survival. But the Assad regime hosted many other anti-Turkey groups at the time and considerably limited the PKK's freedom of action. While failing to solidify a strategic alliance with weaker rivals, a hegemonic PKK was powerful enough to shift its attention from internal fights to waging an insurgency.

In 1983, the PKK relied on its hegemonic status to negotiate an agreement with Iraq-based Kurdish militants and secure a critical safe haven along a mountainous border region.[60] From its new base of operations, relatively safe from Turkish military reprisals, the PKK launched a sustained armed conflict which solidified its dominance over the Kurdish constituency in Turkey.[61] The PKK's leadership would have likely delayed or halted its decision to launch an insurgency had its main Kurdish rivals persisted to challenge the organization for dominance of the constituency.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB), on the other hand, is a type of deviant case that my quantitative model incorrectly expected to sustain an armed conflict. This "negative" case offers both support for my argument and exposes key theoretical limitations, since the MB's failure can be attributed to several causes. While the Assad regime's unrestrained counterinsurgency approach would have likely crushed the nascent insurrection regardless, the MB's failure to consolidate its rivals is a critical part of the story leading to its demise as a militant threat.

In 1979, the Combatant Vanguard, a radical faction turned splinter group, escalated attacks against the Assad regime which pressured the MB to join the fight or risk being sidelined.[62] In essence, the MB was chain-ganged into a war it was not ready to wage. Despite the establishment of a strategic alliance between the MB and its rivals, ideological and personal differences constantly disrupted any meaningful cooperation. Because of constant infighting within the Islamist movement, the Brotherhood also failed to overcome principal-agent problems as fighters in the field lacked direction and coordination at key turning points of the conflict.[63] As a result, the Syrian MB failed to secure sufficient sources of external support and failed to withstand the Syrian regime's onslaught culminating in the 1982 Hama massacre.

### ***Rival Relations and Rival Explanations: Implications for Theory***

By pitting my theory against rival explanations, this study poses important implications for theory and scholarship. Rival consolidation theory offers a stronger account of why the PKK and Hezbollah engaged in a sustained armed conflict (and why the Syrian MB failed) against more powerful states than other explanations that rely on largely static factors or remain incomplete. The temporal nature of my theory also better explains the timing of sustained armed conflict onset than rival explanations. Grievances, ultimate goals, and group ideology remained largely constant during each group's nascent stages. Both the PKK and Hezbollah's organizational structure and military capacity to wage guerrilla war expanded as they consolidated their main rivals. Both groups only secured critical forms of outside support and solidified access to a robust safe haven after they emerged as the hegemonic militant group among their respective constituencies. Without viable competitors and counterproductive violence minimized, Hezbollah and the PKK mobilized resources and shifted their focus to fighting Israel and Turkey respectively, in sustained campaigns of attrition.

The Syrian MB's leadership, however, remained distracted with internal fights which proved destabilizing during Syria's nascent Islamist insurrection. The MB's failure to consolidate rivals inhibited the group's ability to mobilize sufficient resources and support to sustain an insurgency.

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### ***Policy Implications and Future Directions for Research***

My findings also pose important implications for policy. Counterinsurgency analysts and practitioners tend to assess insurgent threats based on observable group capabilities, like territorial control or weapon stockpiles, but should divert more attention to analyzing the primary nature of rival relations in the nascent stages of a potential insurgency. It should be easier for analysts to monitor and assess the consequences of different rival relations than to try measuring more complex and clandestine indicators in real time, such as an organization's prewar social ties or the relative power distribution within a wider movement.

The period between rival consolidation and insurgency onset is itself an overlooked indicator which may reflect a relative calm before the storm. In both the Hezbollah and PKK cases, violence temporarily dropped after each group sufficiently consolidated their rivals and emerged as the hegemons of their respective constituencies. Without viable competitors, both groups' leaderships increasingly focused on absorbing new resources, solidifying safe havens, and preparing for an insurgency against their target states. Both Israel and Turkey, to different extents, underestimated the nascent militant threats they faced and paid a heavy price as a result. While neither militant group achieved its ultimate objectives, they are enduring and resilient organizations that continue to pose threats to their enemies.

Analysis of nascent rival relations should be incorporated in government foresight exercises and intelligence assessments focused on identifying plausible insurgent-related trends or futures. If a dominant militant group is preoccupied with fighting and competing with constituent rivals, then it is unlikely to be in a strong position to shift its attention and capabilities toward launching a sustained insurgency against a target state. If, however, a group successfully consolidates rivals, to the point that counterproductive intra-movement violence ceases, then the likelihood of sustained insurgency onset increases. However, more research is needed before specific policy recommendations can be prescribed.

As part of my broader research program, I am working on projects using new data to evaluate why some insurgent organizations escalate their level of violence to higher-intensity armed conflicts or civil war. One co-authored study (forthcoming in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*) emphasizes the importance of insurgent alliances in fueling armed conflicts to new heights.[64] Out-of-sample case studies from diverse regions will also expand our understanding of proto-insurgency development. For the sake of parsimony in this study, I am fairly agnostic on how militant groups consolidate their rivals to explain insurgency onset. But why do some groups mainly destroy their rivals during stages of infighting while others consolidate by merging under an umbrella structure? What are the implications for diverse consolidation processes on insurgent trajectories? Future research can dig deeper into my findings to enhance our understanding of insurgency onset, given that rival relations play a critical role in explaining why some militant groups pose insurgent challenges to the states they fight.

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**Disclaimer:** The views expressed here are strictly those of the author and do not reflect endorsement by the Government of Canada.

## Notes

[1] Bruce Hoffman, “The Modern Terrorist Mindset”; in: Russell D. Howard and Reid L. Sawyer (Eds.), *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment*, (Gilford, CT: McGraw Hill, 2002), 84. Dugan (2012) finds that 74 percent of the militant groups in the Global Terrorism Database between 1970 and 2007 ceased to operate within their first year. See Laura Dugan, “The Making of the Global Terrorism Database and Its Applicability to Studying the Life Cycles of Terrorist Organizations”; in: David Gadd, Susanne Karstedt, and Steven F. Messner (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012). Brian Phillips, however, examines the most prominent data sets on militant group longevity and finds that—depending on the sample—25–74 percent of groups do not survive past their first year. See Brian J. Phillips, “Do 90 Percent of Terrorist Groups Last Less than a Year? Updating the Conventional Wisdom,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 6 (2017): 1255–1265.

[2] The 246 prominent militant groups are identified in Joshua Kilberg, “Organizing for Destruction: How Organizational Structure Affects Terrorist Group Behaviour” (Ph.D. diss., Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, 2011).

[3] Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010); Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, “Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization* 63 (2009): 67–106; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, “Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (2006): 429–447; Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[4] Sarah E. Parkinson and Sherry Zaks, “Militant and Rebel Organization(s),” *Comparative Politics*, 50, no. 4 (2018): 271–293.

[5] One notable exception is Janet Lewis’s (2012) dissertation, which tackles a similar puzzle concerning why some nascent rebel groups in Uganda evolve into viable threats. See Janet I. Lewis, “How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2012).

[6] Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 80–81.

[7] The probability of militant group collapse is highest at the early stages of an insurgency; groups significantly improve their chances of survival over time. See Navin A. Bapat, “Insurgency and the Opening of Peace Processes,” *Journal of Peace Research* 42 no. 6 (2005): 699–717.

[8] Once an insurgency survives its most incipient and vulnerable stages, the likelihood that the armed opposition will either achieve its objective or secure a negotiated agreement increases considerably. See David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, “It Takes Two: A Dyadic Analysis of Civil War Duration and Outcome,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 4 (2009): 570–597, 574.

[9] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

[10] Luis De La Calle and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, “How Armed Groups Fight: Territorial Control and Violent Tactics,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 10 (2015): 795–813.

[11] Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001; David B. Carter, “A Blessing or a Curse? State Support for Terrorist Groups,” *International Organization* 66, no. 1 (2012): 129–151.

[12] Henning Tamm, “Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 599–610.

[13] Daniel Byman, “Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165–200.

[14] This argument is developed in greater detail in this author’s Ph.D. dissertation’s theory-building chapter. See Michael Shkolnik, “Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections: Why Some Militant Groups Wage Sustained Insurgencies,” (PhD diss., Carleton University, 2020). I was inspired by Peter Krause’s (2017) recent work on national movement effectiveness in formulating the logic of my argument: Peter Krause, *Rebel Power: Why National Movements Compete, Fight, and Win* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017). I am exceptionally grateful for his comments on my thesis.

[15] Brian Phillips refers to this type of rivalry as “intra-field” rivalries, as opposed to “inter-field” rivals that have considerably different ideologies or represent different ethnic or religious groups. Brian J. Phillips, “Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 11 (2018): 997–1019.

[16] Examining the early stages of the Sri Lankan Civil War, Lilja and Hultman (2011) show that rebels target co-ethnic rivals to consolidate dominance over their constituency and target co-ethnic civilians to ensure cooperation against the government. In the pre-armed conflict phase, militants “try to establish social control over a population to become an efficient fighting unit” capable of

challenging the regime. See Jannie Lilja and Lisa Hultman, "Intraethnic Dominance and Control: Violence Against Co-Ethnics in the Early Sri Lankan Civil War," *Security Studies*, 20, no. 2 (2011): 171–197, 175.

[17] See Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and The Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); Mark I. Lichbach, *The Rebel's Dilemma*, (University of Michigan Press, 1998). On militant organizations and principal-agent problems, see Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013) and Scott Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance: The Micro-foundations of Rebellion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 111–130. Organizational and strategic goals are often at odds as militant groups face considerable trade-offs between organizational security and effectiveness.

[18] Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee J. M. Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (2012): 265–283.

[19] For more insight on agency issues facing militant groups fighting in civil wars, see Peter Schram, "Managing Insurgency" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2017).

[20] This author's first chapter of the dissertation reviews definitions of terrorism and insurgency to explore different ways of conceptualizing armed non-state actors who pursue political objectives. Most prominent militant groups rely on nonviolent methods as well. However, my baseline definition binds my unit of analysis to organized oppositional groups that engage in political violence to help achieve their objectives.

[21] The GTD's broad definition of *terrorism* is appropriate for this project's conception of militant violence. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Global Terrorism Database (GTD) Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables*, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>, 9. While there is no universal definition, many definitions specifically reference that targets of *terrorism* are primarily soft targets or civilians. A major aspect of most terrorism definitions relates to whether the attack was intended to send a psychological message to a wider audience beyond the immediate victim of the violence. See Alex P. Schmid, "Frameworks for Conceptualizing Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (2004): 197–221. It is important to clarify that the GTD's definition may encompass incidents that might not be traditionally viewed as terrorist attacks by some, including civil war–related violence and classic guerrilla hit-and-run attacks targeting military convoys for example. Since most prominent militant groups tend to include both civilian and military targets within their attack profiles, this broad definition is appropriate for the present analysis.

[22] Following a similar logic, De la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca (2012) dismiss groups that conduct over 95 percent of their attacks beyond their host state. See Luis De la Calle and Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca, "Rebels without a Territory: An Analysis of Nonterritorial Conflicts in the World, 1970–1997," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 4 (2012): 580–603, 585.

[23] Some have referred to al-Qaeda (AQ) as a global insurgency, posing unique threats which require new understandings of insurgency. Yet territorial control and violent escalations in local theaters remain core objectives for Islamic State and AQ affiliates. See David Kilcullen, "Counter-insurgency Redux," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 48, no. 4 (2006): 111–130.

[24] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), *Definition of Armed Conflict*, 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/>

[25] According to one prominent study, the average length of an insurgency is approximately 10 years. See Connable & Libicki, "How Insurgencies End," 27. After presenting my quantitative analysis at various scholarly conferences, the discussants agreed that the five-year mark is an appropriate threshold for this research puzzle. Additional thresholds and extensions can be explored in future iterations of this research.

[26] Only 13 (five percent) of the militant groups in this author's sample ended by achieving victory.

[27] Cronin (2006) outlines how terrorist groups might end, including transformation toward insurgency, but stops short of analyzing this transition. Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 7–48.

[28] Stephen L. Morgan and Christopher Winship, "Regression Estimators of Causal Effects," in *Counterfactuals and Causal Inference: Methods and Principles for Social Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 188–225.

[29] Jason Seawright, *Multi-Method Social Science: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Tools, Strategies for Social Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 55.

[30] James Mahoney, "Strategies of Causal Inference in Small-N Analysis," *Sociological Methods & Research* 28, no. 4 (2000): 387–424.

[31] For more on methodological debates about "selecting on the DV," see Barbara Geddes, "How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics," *Political Analysis* 2 (1990): 131–150; David Collier and James Mahoney, "Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research," *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 56–91.

- [32] Seawright, *Multi-Method Social Science: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Tools*.
- [33] Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Causal Case Study Methods: Foundations and Guidelines for Comparing, Matching, and Tracing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).
- [34] James Mahoney, Erin Kimball, and Kendra L. Koivu, "The Logic of Historical Explanation in the Social Science," *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 114–146.
- [35] Beach and Pederson, *Causal Case Study Methods*.
- [36] James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, "The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Comparative Research," *The American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004): 653–669.
- [37] Charles W. Mahoney, "More Data, New Problems: Audiences, Ahistoricity, and Selection Bias in Terrorism and Insurgency Research," *International Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (2018): 589–614.
- [38] Michael Shkolnik, "Organizational Capacity and Constituency Dominance: Why Some Militant Groups Wage Sustained Insurgencies," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 5 (2020): 103–116.
- [39] In a study of 648 terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006, Jones and Libicki (2008) find that no religious group, which ceased to operate during that time period, achieved victory. See Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*, xiv.
- [40] Hoffman, Bruce, *Inside Terrorism*; Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2009); Monica Duffy Toft, "Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War," *International Security* 31, no. 4 (2007): 97–131.
- [41] Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 142–177.
- [42] Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast: Organizational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 437–449; Connable, Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*.
- [43] Evan S. Lieberman, "Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005): 435–452.
- [44] Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- [45] Daniel Byman, "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165–200.
- [46] *Top Dog* status can also be viewed as a potentially tautological cause since elements of the outcome of interest (sustained insurgency) may include attributes of the cause. The *Top Dog* proxy is a function of a particular militant group's attack profile and whether the group commits the highest number of attacks against either civilian or military targets, or both. The outcome of interest, sustained insurgency engagement, is derived from a threshold based on annual battle-related deaths (among all belligerents) during an armed conflict. As best as possible, I classify the *Top Dog* variable prior to the onset of an armed conflict. However, due to data limitations described in chapter 3 of the dissertation, many prominent militant groups begin appearing in the Global Terrorism Database only after crossing UCDP's 25 battle-related deaths threshold for armed conflict.
- [47] My quantitative model correctly classified or closely predicted most (7/10) of the MENA insurgent organizations explored here. The three incorrectly predicted groups are Hamas, AQIM, and MEK.
- [48] Charles W. Mahoney, "Hearts and Minds or Blood and Guts? Strategy, Terrorism, and the Growth of Proto-Insurgencies" (PhD diss., University of California, 2011); See Janet I. Lewis, "How Rebellion Begins: Insurgent Group Formation and Viability in Uganda" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2012); Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).
- [49] For example, Fearon (2017) identifies a jump from three civil wars in MENA in 2002 to 12 ongoing civil wars in 2014. See James D. Fearon, "Civil War & the Current International System," *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (2017): 18–32.
- [50] Institute for Economics and Peace (2018), Global Terrorism Index 2018: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Retrieved from <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018.pdf>.
- [51] Fearon, "Civil War & the Current International System."
- [52] Peter Krause, "The Structure of Success: How the Internal Distribution of Power Drives Armed Group Behavior and National Movement Effectiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (2013/14): 72–116, 77; Krause, *Rebel Power*.
- [53] Assaf Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[54] Moghadam, *Nexus of Global Jihad*; Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

[55] Clint Watts, "Deciphering Competition Between al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State," *Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) Sentinel* 9, no. 7 (2016): 1–7; Lilja and Hultman, "Intraethnic Dominance and Control;" Pischedda, "Wars Within Wars;" Bloom, "Public Support, Market Share, and Outbidding."

[56] I provide additional justification for this study's case selection based on my quantitative model and qualitative comparative findings in my Ph.D. dissertation.

[57] Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007); Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York, NY: Random House, 2011); Eitan Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 11 (2013): 899–916.

[58] David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[59] Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Violence and Nationalist Mobilization: The Onset of the Kurdish Insurgency in Turkey," *Nationalities Papers* 43, no. 2 (2015): 248–266. violence is counterproductive and undermines the ability of a movement to achieve mass support. At the same time, studies of ethnic insurgencies suggest that violence is the only available method of mobilization in political systems characterized by entrenched ethnic hierarchies. Engaging with these arguments, this article addresses a historical puzzle: What factors explain the timing and ability of the PKK's (Partiye KarkerÃn Kurdistan

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# The Terrorism Recidivism Study (TRS): An Update on Data Collection and Results

by Omi Hodwitz

## Abstract

*The Terrorist Recidivism Study (TRS) database, first created in 2018, records individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses in the United States post-9/11. The TRS is a longitudinal database, tracking offenders' pre- and post-release behavior over time. This article presents results from the most recent update to the database. Specifically, it examines recidivism rates for offenders prosecuted between 2001 and 2020 (N=629). Results indicate that 20 individuals recidivated during the study, including both pre- and post-release. Of the 354 who were released, 11 or approximately 3.1 percent re-offended. Although this is a higher rate than reported in the original 2018 data (1.6 percent), it is still significantly lower than rates found among conventional or apolitical offenders. The results support the proposition that recidivism among extremists is notably low, even with an extended period of observation, indicating that extremists may have a low propensity for re-offending.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, recidivism, database, policy

## Introduction

On January 6, 2021, in response to the results of a contentious presidential election, citizen insurrectionists stormed the State Capitol building in Washington, DC. The attack resulted in extensive property damage, injuries, and even deaths. Over the next several months, legal authorities charged hundreds of people with terrorism-related offenses, including destruction of government property, assault on police officers, and conspiracy.[1] At the time of writing this article, these charges are still pending for several hundred defendants, many of whom were returned to the community on conditional release. The public return of alleged extremists raises concerns for legal authorities and the public alike, since the Capitol insurrectionists pose a continued threat, potentially primed to re-engage in political violence.[2]

Apprehensions about extremist recidivism are not new but instead reflect a growing concern in legislative and enforcement discussions. Following the attacks in September of 2001 (9/11) and the implementation of the USA PATRIOT Act, the United States experienced a significant increase in the arrest and prosecution of individuals for terrorism-related offenses.[3] In October of 2015, the Bureau of Prisons reported that there were approximately 350 inmates with ties to international terrorist organizations incarcerated in federal facilities.[4] This number, however, did not include those with domestic affiliations. A federal audit later revealed that the number of convicted inmates with ties to both domestic and international terrorism was much higher, exceeding 500 as of March of 2018.[5] To date, more than a few of these individuals have been released or are in the process of being released, leaving legal authorities scrambling to respond. As these offenders return to the community, their ability to reintegrate successfully is a source of concern.

Historically, the empirical evidence providing direction on the frequency and severity of extremist recidivism has been limited.[6] In addition, much of the research on this topic focused on individual case studies or program outcomes, which had limited utility when preparing for the release of aggregate numbers, many of which are without the benefit of deradicalization programs.[7] In response to the lack of data and, thus, clear evidence-driven policy prescriptions, two opposing sets of responses arose. At one end of the spectrum, legislators and practitioners advocated, in the name of public safety and security, for strict release protocols, including information sharing among agencies and enhanced supervision upon release.[8] At the other end, academics and civil experts supported an approach comparable to apolitical offenders, without enhanced security measures, citing concerns regarding civil rights and backlash effects.[9] Within the context of this legislative tension and the ongoing release of convicted extremists, the need for data addressing terrorist

recidivism became a matter of utmost importance.

In recent years, the research community has responded to the deficit in information, engaging in efforts designed to explore aggregate relationships between extremism and recidivism. These projects involve the creation and maintenance of large databases that track individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses, recording and reporting incidents of re-offending behavior. The results from these various preliminary endeavors have been surprising, yet relatively consistent, regardless of the country of study, the type of offender, or the period of examination.[10]

Researchers in Europe, for example, studied a sample of 189 individuals released in the Netherlands, tracking incidents of re-offending between 2012 and 2018.[11] Just under six percent re-offended over the period of study, which contrasted sharply with apolitical offenders who reported a recidivism rate of approximately 50 percent. Similar results were replicated in Belgium with a sample of 557 jihadist-related extremists.[12] Researchers found that, between 1990 and 2019, 2.3 percent of the sample recidivated, although this number nearly doubled when suspected re-engagement was included in the analysis. Reinares and colleagues carried out a similar study in Spain, examining recidivism rates of jihadists between 2004 and 2018.[13] Approximately seven percent re-engaged with terrorism while incarcerated or after release.

Government data align with the European findings. Of 453 extremist offenders released in Northern Ireland in 1998, only five percent were rearrested within the first 13 years of release.[14] In the United States, the Director of National Intelligence reported that, as of 2019, 729 Guantanamo detainees had been released.[15] Approximately 17 percent had re-engaged with terrorist groups and activities, although this number increased to approximately 30 percent if the definition was broadened to include suspected re-engagement. In the United Kingdom, the House of Lords reported that six of 196 released extremists were reconvicted of additional terrorism-related offenses between 2013 and 2019.[16]

Overall, the collective results provide clear indications regarding recidivism rates among extremist samples in Western contexts. Although exact numbers vary, the pool of data suggests that reported recidivism is in the low single or double digits. These preliminary findings belie expectations when compared to apolitical offenders or individuals convicted for non-terrorism-related offenses, who tend to report recidivism rates between 30 and 60 percent within the first three to five years of release.[17] The discrepancy between political and apolitical re-offence rates raises important questions. Are extremist offenders simply more adept at hiding their recidivism than their apolitical counterparts? Do they have a longer period of dormancy before reengaging in crime and, thus, require a longer period of analysis to detect re-offending? Or are they simply less likely to re-offend? Determining answers to these questions can aid legislators and practitioners alike in drafting and executing policies designed to respond to extremists returning to the community. Therefore, in addition to initiating new recidivism-related data collection projects and keeping existing ones updated, it would behoove researchers to begin to delve deeper into the factors that underlie the recidivism anomaly.

Given the need for continued assessment, this author has two goals: 1) to present an update on a large data-collection project that examines extremist recidivism and 2) to examine factors that may facilitate the low re-offending rates reported in the growing body of literature on terrorist activities post-release. Specifically, this article reports findings from the Terrorist Recidivism Study (TRS), a database created at the University of Idaho that records re-offending among a sample of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses in the United States following the attacks on 9/11. Preliminary analysis conducted in 2018 indicated that recidivism rates were surprising low, thus lending support for the collective findings of other major data projects in Western countries.[18] However, recidivism is not a static concept best captured with cross-sectional analysis; instead, it unfolds over time, requiring continued monitoring. Therefore, this article presents the results of a second wave of data collection conducted in the summer of 2020, two years after the first wave of data collection. In keeping with the two goals listed above, this second wave of analysis serves to update readers on overall recidivism rates while also examining factors that might drive these rates, including the possibility that extremists are slower to re-offend or are potentially less prone to recidivism.

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### **Data Collection and Coding**

The first wave of TRS data collection was presented in detail in an article titled “The Terrorism Recidivism Study (TRS): Examining recidivism rates for post-9/11 offenders” but will be briefly recapped here.[19] Early TRS data collection included individuals that had been arrested and/or convicted of terrorism-related offenses between September 11, 2001, and March 6, 2018, in the United States. Cases were identified through the examination of offender and event data sets, media sources, arrest and court records, and Department of Justice records. This resulted in 848 cases that were further whittled down to 561 cases once exclusion criteria were applied. Cases were excluded if: the individual was charged with terrorism-related offenses but was convicted of a nonpolitical crime, the charges were dropped, or the offender was deported or passed away following court proceedings. In addition, each individual case required validation from a minimum of two credible outside sources, usually in the form of court records and media reports.

The 2020 TRS update followed a similar process. Records, media sources, and existing data sets were examined for new cases and additional information.[20] Data collection and coding occurred in two rounds. The first round supplemented the database with more recent cases, filling the gap between March 6, 2018 and December 31, 2019. The second round reviewed all existing cases in the database with the focus on refining variables and identifying new incidents of recidivism; recidivism was assessed through to June 30, 2020. The results of each round are described in greater detail below.

### **Sample Description**

After applying the exclusion criteria, an additional 68 cases were added to the TRS, bringing the total number to 629 individuals. As described in Table 1, each new case was coded on a variety of variables grouped into five thematic categories, including demographic characteristics, event description, criminal justice proceeding variables, release information, and recidivism details. The original TRS included 58 variables; however, for the sake of a more detailed and informative analysis, the decision was made to add variables and refine several existing variables while updating the database. All cases, both new and old, were recoded to reflect these changes. New racial categories were added (*Middle Eastern and Arab*, *European White*), further refining the *White* and *Asian* categories and ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the role of race and ethnicity in criminal justice proceedings.[21] While recoding these variables, a concerted effort was made to prioritize personal offender accounts of racial identity over court records, resulting in what is believed to be a more accurate rendition of this demographic characteristic. A new set of variables was added that reported whether the terrorist-related crime was violent, non-violent and financially oriented, or non-violent and non-financially oriented.[22] Due to the great diversity of the convictions included in the TRS, examining sentencing and recidivism outcomes based on offense type is difficult (imagine attempting to assess the relationship between sentencing and dozens of variations of ‘*Providing Material Support*’). These new variables allow for a superficial but informative assessment of the role of offense type on different outcome variables. One variable was excluded; the original TRS included both *Probation* and *Supervised Release* as sentencing variables but, given the similarity in these two outcomes, they were collapsed into a single *Supervised Release* variable. These changes resulted in a final count of 70 variables distributed across the five thematic clusters.

The first set of thematically grouped variables consists of demographic and prior criminal record characteristics. The sample is majority male (92 percent) with an average age of 33.3 years at time of conviction. Nearly all the sample falls into four main racial categories, including Middle Eastern and Arab (29.8 percent), European White (27.5 percent), Afro-American (23.8 percent), and Asian (17 percent). Thirty-two of the TRS offenders had prior criminal convictions at the time of arrest, most of which were apolitical in nature. Four had previous records that could be tied to political activity, while the remaining 28 had been convicted of a mix of drug offenses, weapons offenses, assaults, gang activity, and financial crimes. Females are relatively scarce in the TRS (only 52 cases), but their racial and age characteristics are similar to their male counterparts, although females tend to be a little older (35.2 years).[23] It is interesting to note that none of the females had a prior criminal record.

Table 1: Variables Included in the TRS Database

| Demographic Characteristics                 | Event Description                                | Arrest, Conviction, and Sentencing Information                                 | Release Information                            | Recidivism Information                  |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Name and aliases                            | Event summary                                    | Arrest date and charges                                                        | Released (y/n) and release date                | Record of recidivism (y/n)              |
| Age at time of conviction                   | Organizational affiliation (y/n) and description | Location of court proceedings                                                  | Supervised release (y/n) and length of release | Record of post-release recidivism (y/n) |
| Gender                                      |                                                  | Specific convictions, general category of convictions, and date of convictions | Probation (y/n) and length of probation        | Recidivism summary                      |
| Race                                        |                                                  | Disposition plea                                                               | Fine (y/n) and amount of fine                  |                                         |
| Prior criminal record (y/n) and description |                                                  | Sentencing date                                                                | Deportation (exclusionary criteria, y/n)       |                                         |
|                                             |                                                  | Imprisonment (y/n) and length of imprisonment                                  |                                                |                                         |
|                                             |                                                  | Correctional institution name, location, and level of security                 |                                                |                                         |

The next set of variables relates to event description, including the location of the offense, the types of activities the offender engaged in, and whether the offender is affiliated with a known terrorist organization. Incidents occurred in 38 states and the District of Colombia, with many clustered in New York (22.8 percent), Virginia (8.4 percent), Florida (7.6 percent), Michigan and California (6.9 percent each), and Texas (6.3 percent). The majority of the sample had ties to terrorist organizations; only 17.8 percent were unaffiliated at the time of arrest or were missing a group claim of responsibility at a later date.[24] A sizeable portion of the affiliated individuals were connected to more than one terrorist group, making descriptive statistics difficult. However, for those who had only one affiliation, most were tied to Al Qaeda (20.3 percent), the Islamic State (19.8 percent), Hezbollah (9.3 percent), and Al-Shabaab and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) (4.7 percent each).

The majority of the TRS variables were included in the criminal justice proceedings cluster, including arrest, conviction, and sentencing information. The sample was split relatively evenly across arrest and conviction offense types; approximately one-third of the sample was arrested and convicted of violent offenses (34.4 percent), non-violent financial offenses (37.5 percent), and non-violent and non-financial offenses (27.9 percent). For violent offenses, TRS cases clustered in the *Providing Material Support* category, specifically for engaging in extremist-related training in weaponry and explosives, either overseas or domestically. Non-violent financial offenses tended to cluster around *Fraud* and, once again, *Providing Material Support*; both sets of offenses were related to making direct or indirect donations or fundraising through fraudulent means. Non-violent and non-financial offenses were associated with *Making False Statements* and *Providing Material Support*; these tended to be tied to misleading authorities and immigration violations.

Regarding dispositions and sentencing, 26 cases are still awaiting trial and three outcomes are unknown, so these were excluded from descriptive reports. Of the remaining 600 cases, 76.6 percent pleaded guilty and 23.4 percent were found guilty by a judge or jury. The majority of the sample was incarcerated (88.3 percent) with an average sentence length of 12.5 years. It is important to note that 29 individuals were sentenced to

life imprisonment and, as such, needed to be assigned a quantitative score that may not accurately reflect the duration of their sentence. Following in the footsteps of similar sentencing analyses, a score of 30 years was assigned for life imprisonment.[25] Approximately three-quarters (78.1 percent) of TRS offenders were sentenced to some form of supervised release, with an average of approximately 7.7 years. Of those sentenced to supervised release, 54 received lifetime supervision, once again making quantitative descriptions difficult. Similar to incarceration length, these individuals were assigned a score of 30 years. Lastly, 138 offenders were charged a fine or some form of restitution. The collective total of these fines equaled more than \$77 million, averaging out to approximately \$567,750 per person.[26] This impressive average was driven, in part, by a dozen or so cases with individual fines in the millions.

Of the whole sample, release information for 13 individuals could not be confirmed so those persons were removed from the analysis. From the remaining 616 cases, 354 or 56 percent have been released and are currently back in the community. The sample was split relatively evenly in release decades; 183 were released between 2001 and 2010 and 158 were released between 2011 and 2020. On average, approximately 17 TRS cases are released each year, with slight clustering in the tail ends of the two-decade timeline, around 2002 and 2018/19.

### ***Recidivism***

As the name suggests, the primary purpose of the TRS is to assess recidivism rates among convicted extremists in the United States. For the purposes of this analysis, recidivism is defined as any criminal activity, either political or apolitical, that requires the intervention of the criminal justice system. The analysis of the 2018 data set demonstrated that recidivism is quite low among political offenders; nine individuals or approximately 1.6 percent of the full sample re-offended by the spring of 2018. In addition, only four of those nine recidivated upon release; the remainder re-offended while still in prison. Of the 247 offenders released in the 2018 data, this resulted in a consistent recidivism rate of 1.6 percent. These findings are particularly stark when compared to a non-extremist or apolitical sample of offenders. The Department of Justice, for example, examined a state sample of released offenders, reporting a 44 percent re-arrest rate within the first year and a 68 percent arrest rate in the first three years.[27]

The results from the 2018 data may be explained in one of three different ways: 1) political offenders are better at masking their recidivism a second time around, 2) they may take longer to recidivate and numbers will increase over time, or 3) political offenders are simply less likely to recidivate once processed by the criminal justice system. Although the first explanation is certainly of concern and worthy of follow-up, it is beyond the parameters or capabilities of the TRS to address it. However, the second and third explanations for low recidivism rates can be tested with regularly updated data and analysis. Therefore, the goals of this assessment of TRS recidivism are two-fold: 1) to assess if 2018 recidivism rates are replicated with the 2020 data and 2) to determine if early releasees, when given two additional years to re-offend, have increased their rates of recidivism. The first goal allows us to test the hypothesis that political offenders are simply less likely to recidivate; if re-offense rates remain low, this supports the supposition that they are not prone to recidivate. The second goal allows us to examine the hypothesis that political offenders take longer to recidivate than apolitical offenders. If, after two additional years, early releasees have increased their recidivism rates, this suggests that they do have a slow-release re-offending pattern.

Looking first at general recidivism rates, these remain low in the 2020 data. As depicted in Table 2, out of 629 offenders included in the TRS, only 20 recidivated over the two decades of analysis, or 3.1 percent between 2001 and 2020. Of the recidivists, the majority was male (90 percent) with an average age of 31.9 years. Six were Middle Eastern and Arab, five European White, five Black, three Asian, and one recidivist was Hispanic/Latinx. Eight were convicted of violent offenses, eight of non-violent financial offenses, and the remainder fell in the non-violent and non-financial category. Their specific offenses did not differ considerably from the full TRS sample; the majority was convicted of providing material support, followed by a mix of other offenses, including fraud, firearm violations, attempting to use weapons of mass destruction, and immigration violations.

All of the recidivists were incarcerated as part of their conviction, averaging 15 years in prison, although it is important to note that this includes two ‘lifers’ whose sentences have been coded for 30 years. Fifteen were sentenced to supervised release averaging 4.9 years.[28] Seventeen were affiliated with an organized terrorist group, the majority of which were aligned with Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State.

**Table 2: Rates of Imprisonment and Recidivism**

|                         | Recidivism | No Recidivism<br>(As of June 30, 2020) | Total (%)  |
|-------------------------|------------|----------------------------------------|------------|
| Total Sample            | 20         | 609                                    | 629 (3.1%) |
| Never Incarcerated      | 0          | 96                                     | 96 (0%)    |
| During Incarceration    | 9          | 524                                    | 533 (1.7%) |
| Following Incarceration | 11         | 343                                    | 354 (3.1%) |

Of the 20 that recidivated, 11 re-offended following release and the remaining nine re-offended while still incarcerated. It is interesting to note that recidivism rates do not change when assessing the full sample (629) or the sample of releasees (354); 3.1 percent re-offended in both samples. When comparing the two groups, there are a number of expected differences. Those who offended while in prison were more likely to have committed violent offenses and received longer sentences. One observation of interest stems from previous criminal records; four of the recidivists had a criminal record prior to engaging in extremist-related behavior and three of these were in the releasee group.

At this point, there is value in returning to the first goal: examining whether recidivism rates remain low between the 2018 and 2020 TRS samples. In keeping with the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Prisons methods of assessing recidivism, the focus for the remainder of the analysis will be on *released* recidivists. As described previously, the 2018 data reported a recidivism rate of 1.6 percent while the 2020 data reports a recidivism rate of 3.1 percent. This suggests a near doubling of recidivism among the released population in the TRS, a notable finding in any analysis. However, interpretation of the difference in rates must proceed with some caution. Although the rate doubled in two years, it is still in the low single digits, represents only a handful of individuals, and remains significantly different from apolitical samples, such as those reported by the Sentencing Commission or Department of Justice.[29] Therefore, it would be wise to examine where these differences lie.

Between 2018 and 2020, seven individuals were added to the recidivist list. Although this is a significant increase in numbers, it does not necessarily reflect an expansion of recidivism but, in several cases, increased access to information for TRS coding. One recidivist, for example, fled the country years earlier while on probation and was only recently returned and processed, reflecting a delay in court recognition of recidivism. Another offender stole groceries some years ago, but her municipality only recently began providing online accounts of local criminal activity. A third recidivist has a long history of domestic abuse that predates his terrorist-related activities, but the abuse was only recently reported by his intimate partner. In other words, these incidents suggest that, although there is an increase in reported recidivism, this is due in part to reporting practices and not necessarily a more motivated recidivist element inherent in the political offender population. In other words, a careful look at the recidivist sample suggests that the increase in numbers does not necessarily support the conclusion that political offenders are more prone to recidivism than originally indicated by the 2018 data.

This shifts attention to our second goal: the examination of the hypothesis that political offenders may simply take longer than apolitical offenders and, given more time, recidivism will increase. Assessing this hypothesis entails a targeted examination of the relationship between recidivism and time of release. The appropriate method of analysis would involve comparing the TRS sample to an apolitical sample. Unfortunately, due to

the small number of TRS individuals and recidivists, this is not a viable option. An influential Department of Justice (DOJ) assessment of recidivism, for example, follows offenders released in 2005 and records recidivism rates for the nine years following release. In order to best match the TRS sample to the DOJ sample, the focus should be on political offenders released in the same or a comparable year, examining their behaviors for the next nine years. However, only 17 TRS offenders were released in 2005 and this reflects the annual average throughout the TRS. In addition, only one person recidivated in this small annual sample, making quantitative analysis impossible. Therefore, although the alternative is less than ideal, the next best option is simply to examine the overall trends of recidivism among the TRS sample and draw parallels between it and what is known about apolitical recidivism.

Table 3 provides a brief overview of the year of release, the year of recidivism, and the duration of time between these two dates for all released re-offenders. The first thing to note is that the distribution is skewed to the right; four out of the 11 recidivists re-offended within the first year. This skew is similar to an apolitical sample, although the prominence of recidivism in the political sample is lower.[30] Second, the average length of time for recidivism to occur was 5.3 years, suggesting a longer period of dormancy than would be expected from a typical group of offenders; however, this is a difficult metric to gauge given that the follow-up period is not uniform across all TRS offenders.[31] This would support the conclusion that political offenders do require a lengthy period of time to re-offend, but it is important to note that the distribution and average were driven in large part by two outliers; individuals released in 2002 who did not recidivate for 15 and 16 years respectively. In addition, as mentioned previously, the 16-year recidivist had been engaging in domestic violence for years, even predating his extremist activities, but the behavior was not reported by his intimate partner until recently, casting some doubt on his veracity as an outlier.

**Table 3: Post-Release Recidivism**

| Offender    | Year of Release | Year of Recidivism | Duration between Release and Recidivism | Type of Recidivism                           |
|-------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Offender 1  | 2002            | 2018               | 16 years                                | Domestic violence                            |
| Offender 2  | 2002            | 2017               | 15 years                                | Minor theft                                  |
| Offender 3  | 2003            | 2014               | 11 years                                | Human trafficking                            |
| Offender 4  | 2005            | 2005               | 1 year                                  | Forgery                                      |
| Offender 5  | 2006            | 2010               | 4 years                                 | Counterfeiting                               |
| Offender 6  | 2007            | 2007               | 1 year                                  | Fleeing the country                          |
| Offender 7  | 2008            | 2012               | 4 years                                 | Illegal use of food stamps                   |
| Offender 8  | 2011            | 2018               | 7 years                                 | Drugs                                        |
| Offender 9  | 2015            | 2017               | 2 years                                 | Drugs                                        |
| Offender 10 | 2018            | 2018               | 1 year                                  | Use of a computer (parole violation)         |
| Offender 11 | 2019            | 2019               | 1 year                                  | Driving without a license (parole violation) |

The type of recidivism is also important; many of the questions around terrorist recidivism are rooted in the concern that, upon release, they will re-engage in political violence. Herein lies a particularly interesting outcome. Apart from one individual, the recidivists did not return to extremist activities following release. Instead, releasees engaged in apolitical activities, including parole violations, minor theft and fraud for personal gain, drugs, and domestic violence. The one exception has a tenuous connection to political activity, at best. This offender was originally convicted of human trafficking for profit, including smuggling members of Hezbollah. He resumed his old ways upon release, reengaging with a smuggling ring. Although his involvement was driven by profit, it is possible that he continued to do business with extremist organizations although this is not documented in his second set of convictions. Thus, crediting him with continued terrorist-related activities is generous and unconfirmed. Regardless, the data provide a clear picture of apolitical recidivism. This does not exclude the possibility that future releasees will re-engage with political violence, but this expectation is not borne out in the TRS sample.

Therefore, the recidivist data suggest several conclusions. First, political offenders have significantly lower recidivism rates when compared to apolitical offenders. Second, political offenders are more likely to re-offend within the first year than in later years, comparable to an apolitical sample. Third, the distribution of recidivism is heavily skewed, reflecting a longer duration in later offending, although this appears to be driven in part by outliers. Lastly, when political offenders do recidivate, they engage in apolitical and personally motivated activities. These conclusions should be interpreted with some caution considering the small size of the recidivist sample but are, nonetheless, informative for discussions pertaining to policies designed to address recidivism.

### ***Policy Implications***

The creation of the TRS began in response to a noted deficit in the literature regarding terrorist recidivism in the United States. The first wave of data collection in 2018 demonstrated surprisingly low recidivism rates of less than two percent. The second wave of data collection carried out in 2020 produced recidivism rates of approximately three percent. Although larger, these latter rates are still exceptionally low and provide a stark contrast to apolitical samples that report recidivism rates of 30, 50, or 80 percent, depending on the period of follow-up.[32] This begs the question: what facilitates these low recorded rates?

As mentioned previously, it is possible that political offenders are more adept at being discreet in their post-release illegal activities than are apolitical offenders. Unfortunately, examining this explanation is outside the purview of this study. However, given the increased scrutiny under which political releasees are placed, this is an unlikely explanation for their recorded low rates of recidivism. Consider, for example, that many of the recidivists included in the TRS were caught for minor parole violations, including using a computer, driving a car, engaging in drug use, and the sale of fraudulent food stamps. These outcomes are a testament to the level of supervision to which political releasees are currently subjected, suggesting that deviance would likely be detected.

Two alternate explanations, however, are within the parameters of this article: a) political offenders are not prone to recidivate or b) political offenders take longer to recidivate than apolitical offenders. Regarding the first explanation, if political offenders are unlikely to recidivate, severe policy measures are an unnecessary infringement on freedoms and liberties. In addition, strict supervision and tracking could be an economic burden on the government and taxpayer. Although the population of political releasees is relatively small, additional supervision would require infrastructure, additional staff, and maintenance, suggesting a drain on already-limited criminal justice resources. If, however, political offenders are prone to recidivate, restrictive measures may be warranted in order to ensure the safety of the citizenry. The data support the former: these measures appear unnecessary and are likely a poor use of resources. Although recidivism rates increased between the two waves of data collection, the overall recidivism rates remain low, belying conventional expectations of re-offending patterns. In a sample of more than 600 offenders and more than 300 releasees, only 20 recidivated in total and only 11 recidivated post-release, suggesting that this is a unique group of offenders that falls outside the parameters of the existing criminological literature addressing recidivism. In

simple terms, the evidence suggests that political offenders are very unlikely to recidivate and, therefore, strict conditions upon release are unwarranted. In addition, as mentioned previously, many incidents of recidivism were minor parole violations, suggesting released extremists are already subjected to adequate scrutiny, primed to catch any criminal indiscretion. Therefore, policies and practices concerning political offenders may be effective in their current state, requiring no further revision or supplementation.

Regarding the second explanation, if political offenders experience a lag in recidivism, this may justify policy measures that consist of long-term supervision. In light of the expense in resources and human liberties that long-term supervision entails, this concession should be paired with a caveat: if recidivism is of a minor nature (e.g., parole violations), this kind of policy measure is subject to criticism since the expense of long-term supervision would likely outweigh the benefit of impeding minor offenses. The data offer limited support for a delay in recidivism but, given the minor nature of most of the offenses, do not lend credence to the argument that long-term supervision is justified. Specifically, there was an increase in recidivism rates between the two waves of data collection, suggesting that recidivism may be a delayed response in the political sample. However, the distribution of recidivism is similar to an apolitical sample; the majority recidivate within the first year and the remainder is spread out over the following decade or more. In addition, the rate remains small as does the sample size, allowing outliers to have a strong influence on results. Lastly, as mentioned previously, recidivism type tends toward minor offenses and parole violations. Therefore, although the data indicate a longer period of recidivism, the type of offenses political offenders engage in do not necessarily warrant increased or strict supervision.

Although the data do not support severe policy measures, this does not negate the need to continue data collection on this unique group of offenders. As more convicted extremists are reintegrated into the community, evidence-based predictions of their likelihood of a successful transition become more pressing. Collection of the TRS data will continue to focus on political offenders processed by the criminal justice system in the United States. If recidivism rates remain low and no significant lag in serious recidivism is uncovered, this will lend support for the position that extreme supervision measures are unnecessary.

Although the TRS is ideal for examining aggregate recidivism, it can also be applied to several additional important research questions. Offender matching and comparison is one area that warrants further study. For example, there is value in assessing the difference between political conformists and political recidivists; what factors separate these two groups and how do they compare to apolitical conformists and recidivists? In addition, what differentiates non-violent and violent political offenders and recidivists, other than their behaviors? The TRS data can also support innovative qualitative analysis, particularly in relation to questions of gender, race, and ethnicity. The female experience is notably missing from a great deal of terrorism research and it would be revealing to assess the factors that facilitate female offending among an extremist sample. Along similar lines, the role of ethnicity and race in criminal justice response to political offenders is understudied; an examination of potential bias would offer an important addition to discussions revolving around institutionalized racism in the United States. Therefore, the TRS data inform discussions concerning aggregate recidivism rates but can also contribute to other conversations regarding extremism in the United States.

In conclusion, the results of both waves of data collection are clear. Political offenders do recidivate, but their rates of recidivism are low when compared to an apolitical population. In addition, when they do re-offend, it tends to be for minor and personally motivated crimes or parole violations. Therefore, extreme policy measures at the federal and state level appear unwarranted, unnecessarily intrusive, and uneconomical. Continued collection of the TRS data will provide additional guidance to policy makers and practitioners but, at this time, results offer the same reassurances that the large collection of literature supplies: extremist recidivism is limited in frequency and severity.

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## Notes

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- [8] In 2017, Congressperson Rutherford introduced H.R. 2471, the Terrorist Release Announcements to Counter Extremist Recidivism Act (TRACER Act). Likened to a sex offender registry, the TRACER Act stipulates that the Department of Homeland Security notify fusion centers and state and local authorities when individuals convicted of federal terrorism-related offenses are released from incarceration. GovTrack (2020, March). S. 3467. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-116s3467is/pdf/BILLS-116s3467is.pdf>. Duggan, J. (2019, January 3). "US terrorists to be named on sex offender-style registries in bid to prevent attacks." *The Express*. URL: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1066815/us-terrorists-sex-offender-type-registry-prisoners>. Although the TRACER Act is the most visible response to this dilemma, it is not the only one. On the state level, Missouri, Florida, and Louisiana have proposed similar legislation, including registries and increased interagency communication. In addition, Richard Clarke, the chief advisor for the National Security Council during the Bush Administration, proposed a system of "specially trained parole officers" for this unique group of offenders. J. Duggan, "US terrorists to be named on sex offender-style registries in bid to prevent attacks." Beavers, O. (2018, September 14). "US faces new challenge with pending release of terror convicts." *The Hill*. URL: <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/406631-us-faces-new-challenge-with-pending-release-of-terror-convicts>.
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[20] Data sets that proved particularly helpful in case identification included the *Global Terrorism Database* from the University of Maryland, the *Intercept’s Trial and Terror* data set, and Kurzman’s *Muslim-American Extremism* data set.

[21] This variable was not added to further a narrative that terrorists are Middle Eastern and/or Arab in descent; instead, it was added in recognition that it would be a valuable variable to include when examining racially and ethnically motivated sentencing disparities across the United States.

[22] A violent offense, for example, involved the possession of weapons, an offender traveling with the intention of carrying out an attack, or actively engaging in training with the intention of carrying out an attack. A non-violent financial crime involved spending or contributing money in furtherance of extremist-oriented goals. This often included making donations or raising funds, paying for the travel of others, and selling or buying items for a terrorist organization. A non-violent non-financial crime included everything that did not fit in the first two categories, such as immigration violations, lying to authorities, and destroying evidence or obstruction. If an individual committed multiple and diverse offenses, they were coded for the most severe of those offenses, in the following order: violent, non-violent financial, and non-violent and non-financial.

[23] Although the focus in this article is on providing the overall outcomes of all offenders included in the updated TRS, this article will be followed by another that examines female extremists in detail. Due to their small numbers, this population is often overlooked in the literature and this likely hinders our ability to understand both terrorist activity and recidivism.

[24] The original version of the TRS reported a much smaller set of group affiliations. While updating the data set in 2020, we engaged in a deep dive into terrorist websites with the intention of locating later claims of responsibility that were not included in the early media reports or court records used to code the original TRS. This increased the number of affiliations reported in the updated TRS. In addition, we were able to eliminate several competing claims of responsibility.

[25] In the event that a score of 30 years artificially deflated the quantitative quality of a life sentence, the average was also assessed excluding the ‘lifers,’ with a life sentence value of 40 years, and again with a life sentence value of 50 years. This resulted in averages of 11.5 years, 13 years, and 13.6 years respectively.

[26] In order to offer a more refined analysis, cases were omitted that included reported financial administrative fees (these ranged between \$100 and \$200). In the 2018 data, these cases were coded as fines.

[27] Department of Justice, “2018 update on prisoner recidivism: A 9-year follow-up period (2005–2014).”

[28] The five not subject to supervised release included the ‘lifers,’ one unknown outcome, one individual sentenced to 27.5 years of incarceration, and one individual sentenced to 2 months of incarceration.

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[30] As noted previously, the Department of Justice found that approximately 44 percent of state releasees re-offended in their first year. Department of Justice, “2018 update on prisoner recidivism: A 9-year follow-up period (2005–2014).”

[31] Government statistics do not often report on the average number of years required for recidivism to occur given that this is a dynamic figure that changes, depending on the period of observation. This makes comparisons between a political and apolitical sample difficult and subject to criticism. Therefore, the average length presented in this article should be interpreted as an interesting characteristic of the TRS sample and not as a point of comparison to an apolitical sample.

[32] See, for example, Department of Justice, “2018 update on prisoner recidivism: A 9-year follow-up period (2005–2014).”

# The Dead Drops of Online Terrorism: How Jihadists Use Anonymous Online Platforms

by Gabriel Weimann and Asia Vellante

## Abstract

*The proliferation on terrorist online postings and their documented impact on recruitment of fighters and activation of lone-wolf operations caused governments and security agencies to launch various countermeasures. These measures—such as “deplatforming” or removal of terrorist online content, suspension of social media accounts, and pressuring social media companies to remove terrorist propaganda—have led terrorists to seek new alternatives. One of the more sophisticated ways extremists and terrorists are recently communicating is through the use of virtual dead drops. The dead drop, a term taken from the espionage terminology, was used to secretly pass information items using a clandestine location. Recently, the physical dead drop has been transformed to a digital one mainly in the form of anonymous sharing portals and cloud services. This study reveals the various platforms used by terrorist groups like the Islamic State, al Qaeda and al Shabaab to store and disseminate material on online dead drops. Scanning these dead drops led to a database containing all links used for directing to the virtual dead drops and the content posted herein, including texts, photos, videos, news broadcasts, weapon manuals (‘cook books’) and infographics. The database was subjected to a systematic content analysis, using a codebook with a list of criteria such as the platforms used for the dead drops, date of publication, type of content posted, a brief description of the content and extra links included in the posts, audience reaction (comments, likes, retweeting). The findings reveal that Jihadists are using the dead drops with growing sophistication, relying on more outlets and more links to the same content. Some groups are systematically using several anonymous platforms to publish their daily report, providing their followers with multiple ways to access and download propaganda content. This method allows them to reach larger audiences, to maintain their online presence for a longer time and to avoid total removal of their postings. The findings lead to several implications regarding the dialectic nature of the struggle between online terrorism and counter terrorism and the required preemptive measures.*

**Keywords:** Online terrorism, anonymous platforms, cloud-share platforms, Internet, social media, terrorist propaganda

## Introduction

The documented connection between the growing spread of violent extremist and terrorist content on the Internet and social media, and the increase of terrorist attacks and successful recruitment of foreign fighters, caused governments and security agencies to launch various countermeasures.[1,2,3,4,5] These measures include removal of online terrorist content, suspension of social media accounts, hacking websites and pressuring social media companies to remove terrorist propaganda as well as monitor the “chatter” for intelligence purposes (with the added value of Big Data analysis). Attempting to adapt to these countermeasures and maintain their online campaigns, groups like ISIS had to diversify their communication campaigns by moving from mainstream online platforms to fringe platforms.[6] Indeed, they have substituted popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube with encrypted platforms like Telegram, Signal, and WhatsApp, as well as with anonymous sharing portals. As Stern and Modi (2010) argued, “terrorists respond to changes in their environments by changing their mission and changing their shape. What is important in such events is that information logistics is essential in disseminating messages of terror.”[7]

As revealed by a report by Fisher, Prucha and Winterbotham on “Mapping the Jihadist Information Ecosystem”[8], terrorists are innovative in responding to disruption efforts by authorities and counter terrorism agencies and find new ways to distribute content. As their study reveals, “While previously online jihadi activity was focused on posting content directly on major platforms, the research shows major platforms are now often

used to share URLs instead to facilitate access to content stored elsewhere. The major platforms are therefore being used as ‘beacons’ directing users to the material.” Several studies revealed how the public digital storage Internet Archive is used by terrorists and extremists.[9] In June 2021, The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) reported that their researchers discovered a large cache of explosive manuals on the Internet Archive, finding 37 different manuals totaling more than 1,000 pages. The collection had been online for five years and received more than 10,000 views before it was removed by the Internet Archive. These manuals were made by various sources, including ISIS supporters and a weapons research group affiliated with the al-Nusra Front.[10]

One of the more sophisticated ways extremists and terrorists are using online communication to avoid detection is the use of virtual dead drops. The dead drop, a term taken from the espionage terminology, was used to secretly pass information items using a clandestine location for interim storage. Recently, the physical dead drop has been transformed to a digital one mainly in the form of anonymous sharing portals. Anonymous sharing portals are a catch-all name for online sites that are openly available, have no login requirement and thus provide anonymity and allow for sharing links of which content is to be collected, shared and mass distributed. Thus, these portals and sites act as a way to build in redundancy and protect against widespread content loss due to deplatforming. As such, they actually are the “Black Boxes” of cyber communication, being opaque from the outside. Consequently, anonymous sharing portals such as *JustPaste.it*, *Sendvid.com*, and *Dump.to* have become some of the most-used sites by ISIS and other terrorist and extremist groups. These websites can be used as supplementary sites in addition to YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. In Shehabat and Mitew’s study ‘Black-boxing the Black Flag: Anonymous Sharing Platforms and ISIS Content Distribution Tactics’, the authors explore anonymous sharing portals and how ISIS uses them.[11]

### ***The Dead Drops Platforms***

There are several anonymous sharing platforms. The most popular is *JustPaste.it*, a Polish-made site that does not require registration, is not open to search engines and specific contents are accessible only by a given or shared link. This site also offers advanced features such as formatting and exporting to PDF, pasting text directly from a word processor or a web page, importing and pasting of images, secure content publishing and password-protected access. More important, from the terrorist point of view, is the ability to protect the contents from automated searches by web crawlers and algorithms by allowing the use of encrypt tags. The site received international attention after it became clear that ISIS supporters and operatives used it to post and disseminate information. ISIS used this site for disseminating video clips, images of executions and beheadings, texts promoting its radical ideology, and its online magazine Dabiq and its later editions. As reported by Stalinsky and Sosnow (2016), “*JustPaste.it* has been the most important content-sharing website for jihadis.”[9] Very often, as reported by Shehabat and Mitew (2018), links to items uploaded on *JustPaste.it* have been shared on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, and other social media platforms to aid in exposure.[13]

Well-known cases of using *JustPaste.it* by ISIS include the posting of a threat to Twitter employees who shut down ISIS accounts and publishing the names and addresses of American armed forces personnel (i.e., doxing). The posting on *JustPaste.it* was presented as a reaction to Twitter’s censorship causing the suspension of 20,000 accounts suspected of ISIS association in February 2015. Fishwick (2015) noted that “JustPaste.it’s role in Islamic State’s propaganda machine has largely gone unnoticed,”[14] while Silverman (2014) argued that “jihadists discovered it as well, and the site soon became one of the favored tools of the Islamic State for sharing news, official communiques, and graphic propaganda.”[15] Interestingly, most of these postings should have been deleted by JustPaste.it according to the platform’s Terms of Service stating that “Any content that may spread hate or cause harm will be removed instantly.” The site is owned and operated by Mariusz Żurawek, a Polish entrepreneur from Wrocław. He maintains the site independently and argues: “It’s not my choice that ISIS has selected my site ... As long as I’m cooperating with the police, removing content, not allowing ISIS to make propaganda, I think it’s good for the site that many people will know about it.”[16] In 2014, *JustPaste.it* removed some graphic postings that were calling ISIS operatives to launch their own content-sharing pages. In response, new sharing sites emerged, including *Manbar.me* in 2014, *nasher.me* in 2015, and *Alors.ninja* in

July 2015. These sites enabled ISIS to post and share propaganda material such as photos of attacks, battles and raids. Later, ISIS introduced *PasteMaker* and *Share Text*, which mirror the encrypted messages of *JustPaste.it*. Despite using these platforms occasionally, ISIS kept using *JustPaste.it*. [17]

Another online dead-drop site is *Sendvid.com*, providing a platform for anonymous video sharing thus substituting YouTube and Dailymotion. The potential was noted by various illegal groups including terrorists. ISIS, for example, posted its high-quality videos such as *Flames of War 1 and 2*, *Message Covered with Blood*, and *Healing of the Hearts* on *Sendvid.com*. As noted by Shehabat and Mitew (2018), “Sendvid is a crucial element of ISIS’s information logistics as videos linked to Sendvid can also be shared via other social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, archive.org, Tumblr, Telegram, dump.to and email, or can be stored in users’ Google Drive or Dropbox for future retrieval.” [18] Dump.to is an alternative to *JustPaste.it* and was used by ISIS to “share, upload and converge links from similar sharing sites such as *JustPaste.it* and *sendvid.com* where all types of data can be stored and shared via a link to ISIS’s affiliate networks.” [19] ISIS uses *Dump.to* for “documents, video, voice messages, and music to be stored and shared, which in turn allows ISIS affiliates to aggregate, edit, curate, reclassify, and republish jihadi propaganda content.” [20]

Terrorists and extremists are also migrating to cloud-sharing services. One such new platform is Telegram’s blogging platform called *Telegraph*. This is an anonymous blog that offers the opportunity to share content with others without the need to own a Telegram account. Although Telegram did remove some Islamic State content and profiles from their platform, on Telegram’s app *Telegraph*, terrorist groups—especially the Islamic State—have been posting, sharing and spreading their messages. [21] ISIS and its supporters are also using the Internet Archive platform to upload their content and thus frustrate efforts to delete their online propaganda. Internet Archive is used by ISIS by taking a screenshot of a page and then sharing the links to an Internet Archive location so if the content is taken down online it will be available on the web archive. The Internet Archive, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization committed to preserving the Internet and all of its content, became a useful platform for extremists and terrorists. In his report on “The Dark Side of Internet Archive”, Fisher-Birch (2018) notes that “The site is rife with videos that offer instructions on making explosives as well as propaganda and recruitment videos made by terrorist and extremist groups.” [22] The report reveals that a variety of terrorist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the banned British neo-Nazi group National Action are storing on Internet Archive instructions like bomb-making videos, beheading clips, seductive calls to commit terrorist attacks, and attempts to recruit new members and followers. In her report “Digital Decay: Tracing Change Over Time Among English-Language Islamic State Sympathizers on Twitter”, Alexander (2017) presents findings from the data set of tweets by ISIS sympathizers. [23] The report noted the Internet Archive was one of the top file-sharing services that was referenced in links within the tweets. In 2017 14.3 percent of all the ISIS-related material that was shared online was done so through *archive.org* compared with 6.9 percent on YouTube and 0.8 percent on Twitter. [24]

An additional platform used is Amazon Drive: Designed for storing and sharing videos, images, text and other content, it has been adopted by several terrorist and extremist groups. They found it to be a stable and reliable platform for disseminating their content. First, they upload the content and then share the links with followers and sympathizers, primarily through social media. According to Amazon’s website, “All photos, videos and other files you upload to Amazon Drive are securely and privately stored in your Files and your Amazon Photos library.” While Amazon has guidelines for its many platforms, including specific bans on terrorism, bigotry, hatred, or illegal discrimination, it has not been very active in removing terrorist content.

A study conducted by Ayad, Amarasingam and Alexander (2021) attempted to reveal the “Cloud Caliphate”, the online repositories of Islamic State materials seemingly managed by sympathizers of the Islamic State. [25] The scan retrieved more than 90,000 items of propaganda content stored online. Using the initial links to a non-password-protected version of the cache promoted by pro-Islamic State accounts on Twitter, researchers gained access to what seemed to be the full extent of the 2.2-terabyte repository. This “Cloud Caliphate” is functioning as the archive of choice for a series of Islamic State websites and serves as a means to keep the memory of the “caliphate” alive. The study ends with the call “to identify, document, and study accessible

repositories and take stock of the methods used to build, promote, and maintain such resources”in order to really understand the propaganda dynamics and the options for countering this new challenge.[26]

The present article is an attempt to reveal the various platforms used by terrorist groups like the Islamic State, al Qaeda and al Shabaab to store and disseminate material on a variety of virtual dead drops like anonymous platforms and cloud services. We attempt to answer several research questions:

*RQ1: What are the platforms used by terrorist groups as their virtual dead drops?*

*RQ2: Who are the terrorist groups using the dead drops?*

*RQ3: What type of information is stored in these dead drops?*

*RQ4: Are there differences in the use of dead drops across terrorist groups?*

*RQ5: Are there changes over time in the use of these dead drops?*

## **Method**

To examine the use of online dead drops by terrorist groups, we applied several stages of data collection and analysis. The first step involved creating a content database based on several basic criteria: we selected any terrorist content that included material designed for intimidation, radicalization, recruitment, online guidance to use weapons and explosives, calls for attacks and, in addition, materials published either on an anonymous sharing platform or available to download from a cloud-share platform. It should be noted that anonymous platforms such as *JustPaste.it* and *Telegra.ph* don't have a home page and it is possible to access the content only if one has the direct link. Therefore, to create the database we had to search for the links. We searched Twitter for any links to anonymous platforms and cloud sharing: Twitter was chosen since Stalinsky and Sosnow already noted the “use of Twitter and other services to share links to extensive content that they post on content-sharing web services such as JustPaste.it is well documented.”[12] On Twitter, we searched for terrorist postings containing the following keywords, all associated with anonymous and cloud-share platforms: *JustPaste.it*, *Telegra.ph*, *dump.to*, *Noteshare.id*, *pastethis.at*, *manbar.me*, *nasher.me*, *files.fm*, *pixeldrain*, *OneDrive*, *Nextcloud*, *cloud drive*, *Top4top*, *Yandex.Disk*, *MixDrop*, *4shared*, *Cloudmail*, *Archive.today*, *PCloud*, *UsersDrive*, and *Dropapk.to*. For example, on *Archive.today*, a cloud-sharing platform popular among terrorists, we searched daily for terrorist content by looking into all the screenshots saved on the web archive under the host *JustPaste.it*, *telegra.ph*, *noteshare.id*, *pastethis.at*, *manbar.me*, *nasher.me*, and *dump.to*. In addition, we followed @takedownterror account's initiative to keep track of the most frequently anonymous sharing platforms used by terrorists and added those to the dead drop data. In the third stage we analyzed the database of the content accumulating after both stages of our search. The database includes the links used for directing to the virtual dead drops and the content posted there, including text, photos, videos, news broadcasts, weapon manuals ('cook books'), and infographics.

The database, composed by this inductive process, was subjected to a systematic content analysis, using a codebook with a list of criteria such as the platform used for the dead drops, date of publication, type of content posted, a brief description of the content, extra links included in the posts and audience reaction (comments, likes, retweeting). We chose content analysis since, as highlighted by Krippendorff [28], content analysis not only gives the chance to the researcher to highlight trends and patterns from a large body of data but also provides an objective method of research. In fact, we created and analyzed two databases, one for the anonymous platforms and one for the cloud-share platforms. Our six-month scan (December 2020 to May 2021) revealed numerous postings on the dead-drop sites, as described in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Postings by Terrorists on Dead Drops (December 2020—May 2021)

| Name of the Platform                                                                                                                                                                     | Number of Items Analyzed                                                                                   | Type of Content                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Justpaste.it</i>                                                                                                                                                                      | 43                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily report</li> <li>• Al Naba magazine issue</li> <li>• Propaganda video</li> <li>• Photo report</li> <li>• Infographic</li> <li>• Telegram and hoop messenger accounts</li> <li>• List of extra links</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>Telegra.ph</i>                                                                                                                                                                        | 27                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily report</li> <li>• Al Naba magazine issue</li> <li>• Propaganda video</li> <li>• Photo report</li> <li>• Infographic</li> <li>• Telegram and hoop messenger accounts</li> <li>• List of extra links</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>Files.fm</i>                                                                                                                                                                          | 118                                                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mp4 file news report video</li> <li>• Mp4 file propaganda video</li> <li>• PDF/Word file transcription of propaganda video</li> <li>• Zip file Al Naba magazine</li> <li>• Video file Al Naba newspaper</li> <li>• PDF file propaganda book</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>Pixeldrain</i>                                                                                                                                                                        | 60                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mp4 file propaganda video</li> <li>• PDF file Al Naba magazine</li> <li>• Zip file Al Naba magazine</li> <li>• Zip file infographics</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Mediafire</i>                                                                                                                                                                         | 60                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mp4 file propaganda video</li> <li>• PDF file Al Naba magazine</li> <li>• Zip file Al Naba magazine</li> <li>• Zip file infographic</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Onedrive                                                                                                                                                                                 | 12                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mp4 file audio speech</li> <li>• Mp4 file propaganda video</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <i>Nextcloud</i>                                                                                                                                                                         | 40                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mp4 file propaganda video</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>Top4top</i>                                                                                                                                                                           | 44                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PDF/Word file transcription of a speech</li> <li>• PDF/Word file transcription of a propaganda video</li> <li>• PDF file propaganda documents</li> <li>• Mp4 file propaganda video</li> <li>• PDF file Al Naba magazine</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Extra anonymous platforms                                                                                                                                                                | Total : 34                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Dump.to</i></li> <li>• <i>Noteshare.id</i></li> <li>• <i>Pastethis.at</i></li> <li>• <i>Manbar.me</i></li> <li>• <i>Nasher.me</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11</li> <li>• 2</li> <li>• 8</li> <li>• 8</li> <li>• 5</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Al Naba magazine issue (<i>dump.to</i>)</li> <li>• Single article (<i>noteshare.id</i>, <i>pastethis</i>, <i>manbar.me</i>)</li> <li>• Propaganda video (<i>pastethis.at</i>)</li> <li>• Photo report (<i>nasher.me</i>, <i>manbar.me</i>, <i>pastethis.at</i>, <i>dump.to</i>)</li> <li>• List of extra links (<i>dump.to</i>, <i>manbar.me</i>, <i>pastethis.at</i>, <i>noteshare.id</i>)</li> </ul> |

## Analysis

Our analysis is based on the five Research Questions we outlined. First we examine the various platforms used for the dead drops (RQ1), the terrorist groups using them (RQ2), the content posted using the dead drops (RQ3), the differences across groups (RQ4); and finally, the changes over time in the patterns of use and content posted (RQ5). For the sake of clarity, in the first part of the analysis we will present each platform used, the groups using them, illustrative examples of the content available on this platform and differences across

groups. In the second part of the analysis, we will present the evolution over time in the use of online dead drops. Answering our first three Research Questions (the platforms, the users and the content) is the following descriptive analysis, differentiating between two types of platforms: a. anonymous posting platforms and b. cloud hosting platforms.

### ***Anonymous Posting Platforms***

#### *JustPaste.it*

The most frequently used platform of anonymous posting by terrorist groups is *JustPaste.it*. Terrorist groups using Paste.it usually direct their audiences to *JustPaste.it* by posting links on Twitter, in other posts published on other anonymous platforms or on the site *archive.is* (titled 'Archive Today' on its website), a platform that allows for storing screenshots of web pages. Terrorists can use this site by snapshotting it and then sharing the links, directing the users to the dead drop on *JustPaste.it*. This way there is a possibility that the link will not be available on the *JustPaste.it* site itself but it will be online and archived on *Archive.today*.

Our analysis reveals that the Islamic State—including its factions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, West and Central Africa, as well as Al Shabaab, the jihadist fundamentalist group based in East Africa and Yemen and the Taliban (The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan)—is using the most frequently *JustPaste.it*. During our search period we found that the Islamic State has published at least one daily post on this dead drop. We also found that *JustPaste.it* is used more by terrorist groups and less by individuals supporters of these groups.

The Islamic State has been using *JustPaste.it* as one of the main anonymous platforms in combination with *Telegra.ph* (the anonymous platform created by Telegram) to share their content after other platforms such as *nasher.me* and *manbar.me* were taken down. Unlike other terrorist groups, the Islamic State uses *JustPaste.it* more frequently to spread terrorist content by including multiple links to other JustPaste/Telegraph posts, including various radical and extreme contents. Our database reveals that the Islamic State and its news agencies are using *JustPaste.it* for multiple purposes. First, the Islamic State is providing a daily update of the Islamic State action through a detailed news report including the number of people they either injured, killed or kidnapped, the number of weapons seized, and the number of villages destroyed or raided. Sometimes these daily posts are just updated with the latest news while in other cases a new report is created and posted. Every day the Islamic State presents in its daily report news items such as descriptions of the Mujahiddin actions in Iraq, Syria, Africa and other theaters of Jihad. Additionally, the Islamic State uses *JustPaste.it* to share photographic reports of its actions and screenshots of the latest issue of its current magazine (Al Naba magazine). For example, one of the photo reports from March 2021 shows the "Caliphate's Soldiers" attacking two Congolese army barracks. A detailed description of the Islamic State actions is attached to the photo report mentioning that during the attack against the barracks of the Congolese Army in a few villages of the Ronzuri area in Beni, the Islamic State affiliate did not only kill a few members of the Congolese army but also seized various weapons and ammunition. Another photo report included shows the Islamic State soldiers kidnapping and killing a member of the Egyptian army near Rafah, a Palestinian city in the Gaza Strip.

*JustPaste.it*, as mentioned before, is also used as a way to provide extra links to other extreme and radical content. In fact, each daily report post includes several links to other cloud-sharing platforms in case of removal of the original posting as well as links to previous daily reports, the latest issue of their magazine, video versions of the daily reports, propaganda videos, PDF books, infographics and video and radio transcripts in multiple languages. During Ramadan, several infographics included in the reports are dedicated to the principles and the rules of Ramadan especially how to fast, when to pray as well as the value of offering food to those in need. The material posted offers two-way communication for interactive platforms like Telegram official accounts and bot accounts. Other than the daily reports, the Islamic State publishes frequently special posts on *JustPaste.it* highlighting specific occasions such as the appearance of a new propaganda video, the publication of a new issue of Al Naba, or new infographics. In these instances, the posts are completely different from the daily reports since they are shorter and focus on a single topic but provide a long list of links to multiple sharing

platforms. Finally, the Islamic State uses *JustPaste.it* to post analyses of documents (e.g., the analysis in English of Zawahiri's letter to Zarqawi).

Another active actor on *JustPaste.it* is al Shabaab, whose presence on this platform increased significantly since we started our data collection in February 2021. Yet, their use of this platform differs from that of the Islamic State. First, their use is not as frequent as that of the Islamic State since they are not publishing a daily report but they are using the platform sporadically to share propaganda content. Yet, similarly to the Islamic State, al Shabaab postings come mostly Al Kata'ib, the group's media outlet. The links to *JustPaste.it* posts are available either on an archive platform or shared on Twitter by some of Al Shabaab's supporters. Unlike other terrorist postings on *JustPaste.it*, al Shabaab seems to follow the "traditional" postings on anonymous platforms by publishing single-topic posts. From the data collected, al Shabaab used the platform mostly as a venue for spreading their propaganda videos. These posts are rather simple and include the title of the video, the poster of the video and a list of links to cloud-sharing platforms to access the streaming, download of the content with different video resolutions as well as the transcript of it in English with multiple file option (PDF and DOC). As other terrorist groups, al Shabaab uses *JustPaste.it* for sharing its propaganda on a more secure platform that will not be tracked by counter terrorism.

The Taliban (or the Islamic Emirate) is also using *JustPaste.it* but as our analysis reveals, its presence on this platform is more sporadic and also mostly conducted by individual supporters. Similarly, the Taliban and its supporters use the platform for multiple purposes: to repost Taliban statements concerning multiple topics (e.g., accusing CIA agents for killing women and children or highlighting the need to punish the Americans for their intervention in Afghanistan) and to provide links to their official website and blogs.

### *Telegraph*

Telegram is a freeware, cross-platform, cloud-based instant messaging (IM) software and application service. Telegram provides end-to-end encrypted voice and video calls and optional end-to-end encrypted "secret" chats. Users can send text and voice messages, animation, make voice and video calls, and share an unlimited number of images, documents, video clips, contacts, and audio files. In January 2021, Telegram surpassed 500 million monthly active users. It was one of the most downloaded apps worldwide in January 2021. Other than providing a secure messaging app, Telegram also launched an anonymous blogging platform named *Telegraph*. *Telegraph* is an anonymous platform with a minimalist interface that allows users to publish articles anonymously as well as posting videos, pictures, and more. The anonymity provided by *Telegraph* attracted several terrorist groups and their followers. From the data we collected, it was evident that the Islamic State uses *Telegraph* frequently.

The Islamic State has been using *Telegraph* for a long time and in a very consistent way. Our data reveals that like in the case of *JustPaste.it*, the main benefit of the platform in combination with cloud-share platform is to remain anonymous and under the radar of countermeasures applied by the authorities or the social media operators. *Telegraph* is used by the Islamic State for multiple purposes. The first type of content shared on *Telegraph* is the daily report. These reports are very similar to those posted on *JustPaste.it* and contain the news from the Islamic State's news agency, covering events in Iraq, Central and West Africa, Sinai and the Levant. The news, according to the Islamic State, revolves mainly around the group's actions and military successes. It is clear that the Islamic State, following its heavy losses in Syria and Iraq, is trying to regenerate its image by providing evidence to its ongoing fighting, conquests and the victimization of the enemies and tributes to their martyrs. An example of the information provided from March 2021: the conquest of Palma in Mozambique and the killing of more than 55 soldiers. Here as well, these daily posts often include the online publication of Al Naba magazine, links to the previous Islamic State's reports, propaganda video clips, daily reports in video format, religious books and publications. To encourage interaction, they also post the official accounts of the Islamic State's news agency as well as official Hoop Messenger accounts. Some of the posts include links to access material posted on other cloud-sharing platforms. Finally, some posts on *Telegraph* are used as databases with lists of multiple links to all forms of propaganda material: videos, audio recordings, books and

other items. Some of the links to the group's postings on *Telegraph* were found on *archive.is* but mostly in other *JustPaste.it* posts, highlighting how the Islamic State is trying to connect its audiences and followers to various dead drops and increase exposure.

### **Cloud-sharing Platforms**

Cloud-sharing is a system in which the user is allotted storage space on a server, providing end users with the ability to access files with any Internet-capable device from any location. At its simplest, it is a secure virtual space that any user can access via his/her browser or a desktop application. The actual location of the stored files is usually in a data center somewhere, in a server, on a hard drive or solid-state drive. Usually, the users have the ability to grant access privileges to other users as they see fit. Terrorist organizations use these cloud-sharing platforms in combination with anonymous platforms to share propaganda online without being flagged and consequently their content stays online longer. As our study revealed, terrorists use multiple cloud-sharing platforms. The most commonly used are *files.fm*, *Pixeldrain*, *Mediafire*, *OneDrive*, *CloudShare*, *Nextcloud*, *Cloudflare*, *Yandex.Disk*, *Mixdrop*, *4shared*, *Cloudmail*, *Top4top*, *pCloud*, *UsersDrive*, and *Dropapk.to*. The links terrorists post to direct their audiences to these cloud platforms are in their posts on anonymous-share platforms or directly on Twitter. Our scan of these cloud-sharing platforms reveals that terrorists provide multiple links to identical content they stored on various clouds in order to protect these materials from being completely removed. Moreover, the material is available in multiple format and language options, resolutions, and the option in certain cases to stream the content. The content that terrorists share on cloud-share platforms is not only about propaganda and news reports; it is broader and more varied, including, for example directions on how IS members should deal with COVID-19 or how to defend themselves from hackers, religious books and more. We also noted in our scan that terrorists do not use the option to publish password-protected links on cloud-sharing platforms, maybe in order to increase the reach and exposure of their material. In one exceptional case, when the posting included sensitive information concerning Mossad agents's identities, the cloud-sharing links were published on *manbar.me* and the password itself was included in the anonymous platform post. The terrorists using the cloud-sharing platforms, as our data show, are mainly the Islamic State and its affiliated groups as well as al Shabaab, al Qaeda and its affiliated groups and the Taliban. While terrorists are using numerous cloud services, the following section will review the most popular platforms.

#### *Files.fm*

The most frequently used cloud service used by terrorists is *Files.fm*, a cloud-storage platform that is private and encrypted, offering to stream the content before downloading it and the options to comment and if desired, to set up a password for accessing the material stored. The platform offers multiple plans; with the free one it offers storage up to 20 GB and upload up to 5 GB, messaging and an encrypted data channel. While the free plan offers only a few features, the pro plan offers the option to create password-protected links, direct download links, disable downloads (view only) and unlimited P2P traffic. The latest version is the business plan that offers unlimited-size files, and 2FA security service (2FA is the Two-Factor Authentication feature, when the clients' accounts on *Files.fm* are more secure and protected from unauthorized access due to the fact that they require an additional code when signing in).

*Files.fm* cloud-sharing platform has been used by several terrorist groups and as our scan reveals, mostly by the Islamic State especially for storing propaganda content. We noted that very often the links to the *Files.fm* files were posted on several social media (especially *JustPaste.it*) thus attempting to attract a broader audience and to avoid removal of a single guiding link. For example, we found that three links to the Islamic State's files stored on *Files.fm* were mostly added to the daily report post on *JustPaste.it*, directing to the stored Arabic video version of the daily report. Other than the daily report the Islamic State uses this cloud-sharing platform for other types of content, including the latest issue of Al Naba online magazine, infographics, propaganda videos such as the documentary published by Hadm al Aswar, a pro-Islamic State media outlet, entitled "Preparing Lions to Slaughter the Jews". Furthermore, the Islamic State uses this specific cloud-sharing service to enable its followers to download PDF files of Jihadi religious books such as the book of the Ummah or the Thalaathat-ul-

Usool (The Three Principle and Their Proof). The links directing to these *Files.fm* files are often included in the daily posts published on *JustPaste.it* and *Telegraph*. These multiple links provide various sizes and file options, different video resolutions and various video formats.

Another group using this cloud sharing is al Shabaab. Like the Islamic State, al Shabaab, uses *Files.fm* cloud mainly for propaganda purposes and in a similar method, posts the links guiding to the cloud files. The content stored by al Shabaab on *Files.fm* includes video clips created by the Harakat Al Shabaab Al Kataib Media such as the one entitled “From the Frontiers of Glory”. The video includes footage of Al Shabaab Mujahiddin fighting against Somali and Burundian soldiers, dead Somali soldiers and the mujahiddin seizing weapons and destroying the enemy outposts. The content stored by al Shabaab on *Files.fm* includes video clips of their messages, such as the message to the people of Djibouti by the group’s spokesperson Sheik Abu Ubdeyda Ahmad Omar. Al Shabaab also relies on the use of multiple links directing to the cloud file, using platforms and providing their followers with various file types and sizes. Thus, for example, the Sheik Abu Ubdeyda Ahmad Omar’s message is available on *Files.fm* in multiple video resolutions as well as transcriptions of the speech in PDF and Word formats. Al Qaeda is also using *Files.fm*. Yet, al Qaeda uses *Files.fm* sporadically and it is not one of their most-used cloud platforms. Moreover, the majority of the links directing to the cloud files are published on Twitter and not on anonymous platforms. Al-Hurr, one of al Qaeda’s Media outlets, has been using this cloud-share platform to share propaganda videos such as the one focusing on al Qaeda’s messages to the Muslims of Kashmir.

#### *Pixeldrain*

Another cloud platform used by terrorist groups is *Pixeldrain*. This platform does not require registration and is free of charge. The free version allows advertisers to get the user’s IP address and browser fingerprint while the premium version can be paid with bitcoin and preserves the user’s anonymity. *Pixeldrain* also offers different paid options to prolong the storage time, allowing the option of up to 1,920 days with the so-called infinity plan. Our scan revealed that this platform is used mostly by the Islamic State and its affiliates. *Pixeldrain* is one of the cloud-sharing platforms used by the Islamic State to store and present the issues of Al Naba magazine and infographics, sometimes with the zip file option. Like in other platforms, the Islamic State uses *Pixeldrain* as an additional outlet to share propaganda video clips with multiple video resolutions (e.g., Islamic State of Sinai’s video entitled “The Epic Makers”). Consequently, for each propaganda video, there are at least five *Pixeldrain* links so that the followers have the option to download the file with 1080p, 720p, 480p, 360p and 240p. Most of the *Pixeldrain* postings revealed by our scan have a close expiring date, indicating that the Islamic State’s operatives are using mostly free accounts and not the premium accounts offering longer periods.

Although Al Shabaab is not using cloud-share platforms in the same extensive way as the Islamic State, it uses *Pixeldrain* to store and share its propaganda video clips such as the video message to the people of Djibouti by Sheikh Abu Ubeydah Ahmad Omar. The link to *Pixeldrain* appears with other links on a *JustPaste* post. The directing links also lead to *Pixeldrain* which presents the English transcript (PDF or DOC file) of the Al Shabaab spokesperson’s message. Like the Islamic State, Al Shabaab uses multiple *Pixeldrain* files to provide its followers with the option to download the file in different resolutions and consequently different size files (e.g., the propaganda video published by Al-Kataib Media entitled “Verily Our Soldiers Will Be the Victors”).

#### *Mediafire*

*Mediafire* is a file-hosting, file-synchronization and cloud-storage platform that offers the user up to 50 GB of free space, no download limit with ad-supported downloads. Using the business and premium plan one can have ad-free sharing and downloads, no captcha codes, password-protected files and one-time links. *Mediafire* has been used in combination with other platforms as a way to spread terrorist content and especially propaganda videos such as the one published by the Islamic State’s al Khayr media foundation entitled “The State of Islam Will Remain”. This video includes footage of Mujahidin’s fighting to conquer a city or to maintain their outposts. The links to the *Mediafire* cloud storage of such videos are included in *JustPaste.it* postings

posts devoted to the recent release of propaganda videos highlighting the Islamic State's success and resilience, despite territorial losses. *Mediafire* is also used by the Islamic State for storing and sharing its new releases of online magazines as well as infographics. Here as well, different *Mediafire* links are posted to provide users the options to download the file in different sizes and video resolutions. From the data we collected there has been no case where the Islamic State shared *Mediafire* links to on social media such as Twitter or Facebook as they prefer posting these links on *JustPaste.it* or *Telegraph*.

### *OneDrive*

*OneDrive* is a personal cloud storage platform that offers the option to upload multimedia from mobile devices with a user-friendly interface. Its links are not designed as anonymous. However, there is an option to generate anonymous guest links. *OneDrive* is used by terrorist groups to keep the flow of terrorist content online and provide safer storage and dissemination.

*OneDrive* is a cloud-share platform that has been rarely used by the Islamic State but, as our scan revealed, this platform is used to share content that is different than other Islamic State's cloud-sharing platforms. For example, the Al Furqan Foundation, one of the Islamic State's media production units, used a *OneDrive* link to share the audiotope of the speech of the official spokesman of the Islamic State Sheikh Al-Muhajir Abu Hamza Al-Qurashi titled "Tell Stories So That They May Reflect".

Unlike the Islamic State, Al Shabaab uses this cloud-sharing platform more frequently, especially to share propaganda videos through anonymous platforms. An example of the use of *OneDrive* by Al Shabaab is the propaganda video created by the official outlet Al-Kataib Media, titled "The Blessed Manda Bay Raid". The video included drone footage from when Al Shabaab attacked the US airfield and base at Manda Bay Airfield in Kenya. The links to the *OneDrive* contents were included in a *JustPaste.it* article and the links to the *JustPaste.it* article were found on Twitter.

### *Nextcloud*

*Nextcloud* is a cloud-sharing platform that works similarly to Dropbox and Google Drive and provides a cloud platform based on Open Standards and Free Software. Thanks to the easy web and mobile interfaces, it allows the users to share files with others, create and send password-protected public links and upload files to the cloud. *Nextcloud* provides the option to let users upload and edit files anonymously. Similar to their use of cloud-share platforms, Islamic State operatives use *Nextcloud* to share propaganda videos by adding *Nextcloud* links to several *JustPaste.it* articles. For example, one of the propaganda videos the Islamic State shared when using *Nextcloud* was produced by the Al Furqan media outlet, and titled "They Answered the Call". This video includes footage of fighting as well as of the combatants' daily life in training camps plus highlights of their social activities such as helping people in need by donating money and food. Like with other cloud-share platforms, the Islamic State included for each new release of a propaganda video at least five *Nextcloud* links, one for each video resolution.

### *Top4top.io*

*Top4top.io* is an Arab cloud-based storage system for uploading and downloading images, audio and video files of large sizes. *Top4top* is very popular in the Middle East and it is one of the favorite cloud service of the Islamic State. The Islamic State includes *Top4top* links in their *JustPaste.it* and *Telegraph* postings thus sharing PDF copies of the newest issue of Al Naba and propaganda videos. An example of the terrorist content shared with a *Top4top* link is the propaganda video created by the Al Battar media foundation, titled "the Muslim Prisoners of Patience". This video includes footage of Jihadi prisoners' daily lives as well as footage of martyrs dying in battle and gruesome footage of beheadings. The links to *Top4top*'s Al Battar video were posted on *JustPaste.it*. Al Qaeda has also used this platform in numerous cases to share propaganda videos and PDF documents of their spokespersons' speeches. Through its Al Sahaab (meaning: "the cloud") news media agency, Al Qaeda is

promoting the exposure to content by offering *Top4top* links to download propaganda documents in English such as the one titled “If You Repeat the Crime We Shall Repeat the Punishment”. Another group, al Shabaab, also relies on *Top4top* to share its propaganda campaigns. For example, links to *Top4top* have been included in a *JustPaste.it* posting, to share Al Shabaab Al Kataib media outlet videos and English transcription of texts. An example of such video is one titled “Punish Them Severely to Disperse Those Who are Behind Them”. This video includes footage of a few Al Shabaab terrorist attacks more specifically destroying Somali army tanks and trucks with rocket launchers.

Our scan of terrorist use of cloud-sharing revealed a vast range of platforms. In addition to those presented above, we found also *Yandex.Disk*, *MixDrop*, *4shared*, *CloudMail*, *pCloud*, *UsersDrive*, and *Dropapk.to*. On all of these platforms we found terrorist materials and especially that of Jihadi groups. For example, on *Mixdrop* the Islamic State stores its video titled “Spirits in the Mountain”, produced by the Turjuman al Asawirti, an Islamic State media production outlet. This video includes beheading footage of Islamic State prisoners, two speeches by former US presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump about the heavy prices of fighting the Islamic State, and the commitment of the Islamic State to destroy its enemies and establish a global Islamic State. Another example is the propaganda video of al Qaeda titled “The Wound of the Rohingya is the Wound of the Ummah”. Looking more like a brief documentary, this video includes audio clips of Sheikh Ayman al Zawahiri and real footage of Myanmar soldiers’ atrocities against civilians while showing support for al Qaeda from the Rohingya community. On *CloudMail*, the Islamic State shares a video created by Hadm Alaswar media production, a sublevel pro Islamic State media outlet, entitled “Time to Pay”. This video focuses on depicting the Islamic State martyrs as victims of the West, presenting real footage of Muslim orphan children and calling other Mujahidin to substitute the martyrs and bring about victory and justice. On *UsersDrive*, for example, Al Furqan, Islamic State media outlet, presents the “Trample of War”, a propaganda video shot in Africa by the Islamic State–affiliated group Talea al-Ansar. This video provides footage of the Mujahidin fighting in the Sahel and a segment from an interview with French President Emmanuel Macron.

### ***Evolution over Time***

Our study has allowed us to track certain changes in the use of virtual dead drops by terrorist actors and thus answer our Research Question 5 about possible evolution in the use of dead drops. It is clear that they migrated from “older” anonymous platforms such as *nasher.me*, *Manbar.me*, *NoteShare* or *PasteThis* to newer platforms such as *Just.Paste.it* and *Telegraph*. The content changed as well: before moving to newer platforms, the Islamic State used to publish posts dedicated to a single topic with just a few links while presently—except for sporadic cases like the launching of a new Islamic State propaganda campaign or the release of a new issue of Al Naba magazine—they create multi-topic posts. Moreover, some of the groups, especially the Islamic State, have added new features to their online propaganda in the form of daily reports that include news items from multiple countries, as well a list of links connecting the reader to various types of content. This ultimately serves to promote a broader range of propaganda content (e.g., books, magazines, audio and video clips).

The changing content included a change in the content from positive items to more negative items. For example, when scanning “older” postings on *nasher* and *Manbar*, we found photo reports of the livestock and poultry market in an Islamic State–conquered city Hawija in the Kirkuk Province of Iraq, photo reports of streets and public toilet repairs or photo reports of the distribution of food baskets to the poor. Such positive items are no longer featured in newer platforms like *JustPaste.it* and *Telegraph*, where violent, aggressive, threatening texts and visuals are the dominant themes. Before moving to *JustPaste.it* and *Telegraph*, the Islamic State was using specific platforms for specific types of content (e.g., using *Dump.to* to publish photo reports) while more recently those photo reports are included in the daily reports or in any dead-drop postings that have become multimedia platforms. These changes are also reflecting changes in terrorist propaganda strategy. For example, it is clear from our database that newer postings are clearly including more text while postings on the former anonymous platforms like *Manbar*, *nasher*, *PasteThis* and *NoteShare* focused on visual content (e.g., infographics, photo reports). Today the Islamic State is presenting longer news reports, combining texts with visuals. We also noted a significant decrease in the reactions of users to the content posted on most of the used

anonymous platforms. Thus, photo reports published in the past by the Islamic State on *Dump.to* received multiple comments while now the majority of the articles published on JustPaste or *Telegraph* do not receive any kind of comments from the users.

The new use of dead drops relies on more outlets and more links to the same content. Some terrorist groups are using systematically several anonymous platforms to publish day after day their latest report, providing their followers with multiple ways to access and download propaganda content. This method allows them to reach larger audiences, maintain their online presence for a longer time and avoid total removal of their postings. Another major change is that many of the newer dead drops are not posted by the group itself as was the case in the past, but by supporters, followers and sympathizers. Our scan also reveals an impressive increase in the use of dead drops, either in the forms of anonymous platforms or cloud sharing. For example, the Islamic State added to its anonymous daily posts another messaging app called *Hoop Messenger* to provide an additional option for contacting the group and also to give another venue to share propaganda. *Hoop Messenger* was included in few posts in December 2020 and January 2021 but then abandoned until April 2021, giving more space to *Telegram* accounts. We also noted an increasing number of link postings on social media directing to content stored in cloud-sharing platforms. For example, the Islamic State increased its postings of links to cloud sites on platforms like *Files.fm*. These links directed the users to a variety of propaganda content (such as daily-report videos, transcription of videos in other languages, PDF books, infographics and newest magazine issues).

## Conclusions

In the short time that the Internet has been publicly available (since the early 1990s) and the even shorter time that it has been widely used (since the late 1990s), it has revolutionized, for better or for worse, multiple aspects of lives in all corners of the world: politics, commerce, communications, education and entertainment. Couple the Internet's ubiquitous and extensive influence with the unprecedented rate of development in Internet technology, and there is little doubt that the medium will continue to evolve and affect the world's populations. One of the emerging threats is the free online flow of hate speech, incitement and violent extremism. Terrorists have used online services for more than two decades and have become more sophisticated in doing so. As terrorist use of the new media became more intensive, sophisticated, and alarming, so did the various countermeasures launched by governments, military, and counter-terrorist agencies. But the never-ending dialectic struggle between cyber-savvy terrorists and counter-terrorism professionals requires new thinking, preemptive measures and future-oriented policies.

This study has several limitations: our sampling relied on a search based on content and keywords (looking for any terrorist content that included material designed for radicalization, recruitment, online guidance to use weapons and explosives, calls for attacks, etc.) We searched on anonymous sharing platforms or cloud-sharing platforms. This means that our sample is far from being representative of the entire population of dead drops. Moreover, our data collection covered six months, and thus does not reflect changes or dynamics over a longer time frame.

As this study reveals, terrorist groups are reacting to countermeasures of deplatforming, removal of content, blocking access and pressuring social media companies to regulate their services. The use of dead drops in the form of using anonymous platforms and cloud sharing poses a real challenge to countering online terrorism and extremism. From a theoretical perspective, our findings should be interpreted within the framework of the new terrorist and extremist online ecosystem. As Fisher, Prucha, and Winterbotham suggested [8], the new online ecosystem is a large and complex network, connecting a vast array of platforms across the surface and dark web. Thus, the use of dead drops by jihadist movements joins other changes in their operating environment online and exploits a sophisticated online ecosystem characterized by speed of distribution, agility, and resilience of the network structure. This online struggle for survival and relevance creates an evolutionary process involving constant innovations and modifications.

From a practical perspective, our findings show that despite the efforts made by the *Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism* (GIFCT) and *Tech Against Terrorism* to enforce regulations and removal of terrorist online content, the cyber-savvy terrorists are moving to new forms of online presence. In 2018 the *JustPaste.it* owner and founder decided to join the *Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism* (GIFCT) and specifically to use the GIFCT hash-sharing database to locate terrorist content on his platform. *JustPaste.it* informed *Tech Against Terrorism* that thanks to the database, *JustPaste.it* “has been able to remove 10–12,000 articles including terrorist content.”[24] It is indeed a promising way to empower smaller platforms with the tools to track down terrorist content on their platforms. Yet, the GIFCT forum’s limited potency should be noted: the companies or the platforms are not required to report the content brought up by the database nor take down the terrorist content found. As our findings reveal, *JustPaste.it* and other platforms are still hosting terrorist postings and material on a daily basis, suggesting that even if the GIFCT database is used, its effectiveness is rather limited.

By posting their content on anonymous platforms and directing users to them and to other platforms, terrorists make their online existence harder to detect and remove. Although all these abused platforms and services are privately owned, it is largely in the hands of states and governments to react to abuses by extremists and terrorists. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are widely seen as a necessity to combat terrorist use of the Internet in general and certainly more so in the case of new unregulated and anonymity-providing platforms. PPPs have been defined as collaboration between a public sector (government) entity and a private sector (for-profit) entity to achieve a specific goal or set of objectives. These partnerships have been discussed in narrow ways in the scholarly literature with regard to online security, new platforms and regulating privately owned platforms. In light of the challenges that PPPs face, the public and private sectors would be well served by showing why government-business partnerships are necessary and how their existence benefits online security. PPPs are more likely to achieve concrete objectives when both government and business immediately benefit from the collaboration.

To conclude, our findings suggest that counter-terrorism agencies should consider specific measures for dealing with anonymous and cloud-share platforms. The strategy has to be based on each platform’s specific characteristics; for example, in the case of anonymous platforms the fact that the URLs posted to direct audiences to the dead drops do not include any sort of keywords or information but just random numbers and letters. In addition, countering online terrorist propaganda should take into consideration the dynamic nature of the dead-drop technique. Terrorists are not only exploiting the advantages of these anonymous services, namely anonymity, freedom of speech, lack of regulation and free access, but they also change their strategies, methods and propaganda dynamics, making it harder to track them down.

Finally, so far the war on online terrorism has been mainly responsive and reactive. Counter-terrorism agencies have been monitoring online terrorism and attempted to respond with various measures. This resulted in a cat-and-mouse dialectic struggle. Instead, as this study may suggest, we should look forward and consider future platforms and challenges. Preemptive thinking should focus on emerging trends on the next generation of platforms and online services. There are numerous incentives that can be offered to the planners, designers and developers of the future for considering counter-terrorism measures in their plans and design. Governmental support and rewards are certainly some of the promising incentives.

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# Connecting, Competing, and Trolling: “User Types” in Digital Gamified Radicalization Processes

by Linda Schlegel

## Abstract

*The concept of gamification is increasingly applied as a framework to understand extremist online subcultures and communications. Although a number of studies have been conducted, the theoretical and empirical basis to understand the role of gamification in extremist contexts remains weak. This article seeks to contribute to the development of a gamification of radicalization theory by exploring how Marczewski’s HEXAD, a user typology for gamified applications, may facilitate our understanding of individual variations in engagement with gamified extremist content. Five user types, named after their core motivational drivers for engagement, are discussed: Socializers, Competitors, Achievers, Meaning Seekers, and Disruptors. This typology may support future studies by providing a preliminary understanding of how different game elements may appeal to different users and increase their engagement with and susceptibility to extremist content in cyberspace.*

**Keywords:** Radicalization, gamification, user types, extremism

## Introduction

The ‘gamification of terror’ made headlines for the first time shortly after the livestreamed right-wing extremist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand (15 March 2019) and has influenced the framing of subsequent attacks, including in El Paso and Halle.[1] While video games have been part of the extremists’ ‘toolbox’ for decades [2], the concept of gamification—understood as the application of game elements outside of (video) games—has only been added to the research discourse on extremism very recently but has gained some degree of acceptance for the analysis of digital extremist communities.[3] Gamification, it is argued, may facilitate digital radicalization processes as it can make extremist content more appealing, ‘cool’, or ‘fun’ for users since it utilizes psychological mechanisms such as rewarding desired behavior through positive reinforcement. This may motivate users to continue their engagement with gamified extremist propaganda.

However, both the theoretical and empirical basis for a theory of the gamification of radicalization is meager and largely anecdotal. While initial efforts have been made to understand how the psychological appeal of gamification may influence digitally mediated radicalization processes [4], much is still unexplored and therefore unknown. This article seeks to make a theoretical contribution to the academic discourse by exploring the concept of user types in the context of digital radicalization. If people have different motivational drives to engage in gamified applications generally, an exploration of user types may contribute to a deeper understanding of what draws individuals to gamified extremist content in the online sphere, motivates them to stay engaged, and thereby potentially increases the risk of becoming radicalized. This article explores whether Marczewski’s HEXAD could facilitate our understanding of how extremists’ gamified applications appeal to various types of users and how digital trajectories toward radicalization may be influenced by particular game elements. Although radicalization research has already come forward with different radicalization typologies, a framework specifically designed for gamified contexts could complement accounts of a variety of pathways to radicalization in the digital world while also recognizing the unique characteristics of gamified environments. Due to the extremely limited empirical evidence pertaining to the gamification of radicalization currently available, this article ought to be understood as an exploratory, theoretical, and deductively derived contribution to the discourse. The framework presented will have to be tested and possibly refined by future empirical research.

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## ***Gamification of Extremism: What We Know So Far***

The gamification of extremism is part of a larger discussion on digitally mediated radicalization processes or online radicalization.[5] A kaleidoscope of factors [6] has been suggested as potentially facilitating both online and offline radicalization processes, including, most prominently, loss of significance and identity-based factors leading individuals to seek groups high in entitativity and with clear values and norms.[7] It is widely acknowledged that extremists of various *couleurs* are often early adopters of new technological tools and are increasingly communicating and disseminating propaganda material via the Internet.[8] Although the establishment of a clear and direct link between extremist attitudes and extremist behavior remains elusive [9], research findings so far suggest that both cognitively and behaviorally radicalized individuals consume extremist content distributed online and that exposure to such material may potentially increase susceptibility to radicalization processes.[10] In order to draw individuals toward propagandistic online content, it is often sophisticatedly produced and features appealing themes and visual aesthetics from pop culture, including from movies and video games.[11] Gamification is one of the tools used in recent years to make digital, extremist content more attractive to potential audiences.

A variety of topics pertaining to extremism and gaming-related phenomena have been discussed, including the use of gaming language and memes [12], use of video-game aesthetics in propaganda [13], the presence of extremist actors on gaming platforms such as Discord and Steam [14], the use of original video games [15], the modification of existing games [16], livestreaming attacks akin to ‘let’s play’ videos of first-person shooter games [17], and gamification, that is, the use of game elements such as points, leaderboards, or quests.[18] The focus here is placed on the latter. Gamification can be defined as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” [19]; specifically, the transfer of rewards such as points or badges, leaderboards and rankings, quests, and missions embedded in a storyline giving ‘epic meaning’ [20] to non-game contexts. Non-game contexts are all contexts that are not normally associated with play, i.e., everything that is not specifically denoted as a game. Gamification as understood here does therefore not refer directly to video games or gaming platforms.

Gamification has received some attention in the study of digital radicalization processes. In a previous study, the present author distinguished between top-down gamification—“the strategic use of gamification by extremist organizations” [21]—and bottom-up gamification, which emerges organically in digital communities or among groups of online friends. Both processes have been observed on social media platforms, on gaming (-adjacent) platforms, but also in private chats. There are also initial theoretical accounts of the potential mechanisms by which gamification may influence radicalization processes online.[22] For instance, game elements make engaging with digital content more ‘fun’, provide positive reinforcement, opportunities for collaboration or competition with others, as well as other enjoyable elements. An enjoyable user experience may lead to a higher likelihood of prolonged engagement, which, in turn, may lead to a normalization of the extremist content, and could, ultimately, increase susceptibility to radicalization.

However, while many people may enjoy elements of play, not everyone will enjoy the same game features to the same extent. Engagement with and effects of gamified content may partially depend on individual preferences. What is missing from the theoretical underpinnings of the gamification of radicalization so far is a framework that accounts for individual differences and acknowledges that different user types enjoy and are motivated by different game components.

### ***User Types***

Player types are a well-known concept in the study of video gaming.[23] Similarly, research on gamification uncovered that different user types<sup>1</sup> are motivated by, and react differently, to distinct gamified features.[24] Because typologies devised for video games are not applicable to non-game contexts, Marczewski developed the HEXAD [25], a framework explicitly created and widely used for the analysis of user types in gamification settings.[26] He distinguishes six user types: *Socializers*, motivated by relatedness; *Free Spirits*, motivated by self-

<sup>1</sup> In gamification research, the term ‘player’ is replaced by ‘user’, because one does not actually ‘play’ in a gamified application.

expression and creativity; *Achievers*, motivated by a chance to gain new skills and knowledge; *Philanthropists*, motivated by a feeling of purpose and meaning derived from helping others in the gamified application; *Disruptors*, motivated by upsetting others; and *Players*, motivated by extrinsic rewards such as points. These are ideal types which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Each user will be motivated by more than one driver; types merely indicate the primary motivation and are not necessarily indicative of every single behavior exhibited by users.

For instance, a Socializer can collect points and feel good about leading the scoreboard while his/her primary motivation for engagement is being connected with others online. User types may also evolve over time, e.g., an individual could join a gamified application to collect points and 'win' (Player) but then be motivated to log on regularly as he/she comes to enjoy communicating with other users (Socializer), as has been observed in other gaming contexts too.[27] In other words, game elements that drive initial engagement are not necessarily the game elements that make users stay. It is, however, the main motivational driver at a certain point in time that characterizes the user as belonging to one or the other type. With this framework, one may analyze which game elements are appealing to which users and which users are most likely to engage in the gamified application in a certain way. This helps designers to develop gamified applications that a variety of users will perceive as appealing. Good gamified applications will engage multiple user types, whereas applications missing some elements will be unable to draw the attention of certain users.

Building on the rudimentary distinction between socially driven users and users motivated by competition, which this author made in a previous article [28], use of the HEXAD framework is made to discuss a user typology that could support future empirical research on the gamification of radicalization. Not discussed here is Marczewski's Free Spirit user type, who is mainly driven by the wish to be creative as, to the author's knowledge, creativity has not been discussed in the literature on radicalization as a driving factor, whereas the other user types relate to known drivers of radicalization. Should future studies find a connection between the wish to be creative and radicalization processes, the Free Spirit type could be added again to the proposed framework. The present author has also re-labeled Marczewski's Player type as a Competitor and his Philanthropist as a Meaning Seeker, as will be explained below.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the user types, their motivations, and the game elements they are likely to find most appealing. In the following, each user type is discussed.

**Figure 1: User Type Driver of Radicalization**

| User Type      | Driver of Radicalization                         | Motivational Driver                                                | Game Elements                                          |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Socializer     | Identity seeker, belonging                       | relatedness, connection                                            | guilds/teams, networks/forums, collaboration           |
| Competitor     | Status seeker, significance relative to in-group | extrinsic rewards, in-group comparison                             | competition, points, leaderboards, achievements/badges |
| Achiever       | Need for certainty about the world               | exploration, mastery, new skills, new knowledge, personal progress | quests, certificates, knowledge sharing, progress bars |
| Meaning Seeker | Need for meaning/purpose                         | purpose, meaning                                                   | epic story, sharing items/knowledge                    |
| Disruptor      | Thrill seeker, adventure, confrontation          | challenging others/the system, making themselves heard             | rewards for disruption, tools to make themselves heard |

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### ***Socializer***

Socializers ask, “How can I connect to others?” and “How can I collaborate?” and enjoy cooperative tasks as well as a group to belong to and communicate with.[29] They are driven by the wish for social connection and the feeling of being part of a community. Social relatedness, the promise of belonging, and a search for identity are prominent factors discussed in relation to radicalization processes, especially in the ‘homegrown’ context.[30] In his seminal study on foreign fighters joining Al-Qaeda (2010), Venhaus found in his data set that identity seeking is the most common driver for young people to join the group.[31] A number of subsequent studies have shown that (lack of) identity and the need to belong are often key factors in radicalization.[32] Additionally, it has been shown that the higher a group’s perceived entitativity, the more appealing it is for those seeking a highly secure and homogenous social identity.[33]

Gamified elements that facilitate sharing of experiences and building a community with others, e.g., by receiving points for commenting on other group members’ posts, chat functions, collaborative ‘quests’, or mechanisms of social approval such as ‘like’ or ‘thank you’ buttons can increase the appeal of the gamified application for socially driven users seeking belonging. Rankings may also include special acknowledgment of those willing to help others or those with the most comments, e.g., “community hero”. If those rankings are publicly visible, Socializers may perceive them as acknowledgment of their contribution to the collective and be motivated to keep engagement high. High engagement may then transfer into a normalization of the extremist content they are engaging with and a potential susceptibility to radicalization. Socializers may also enjoy the social cues gamification provides. By knowing who collected which amount of points, who fulfilled which quests, etc., Socializers may be able to deduce current group norms of engagement and adjust their behavior accordingly. If social norms move toward more extreme attitudes and behaviors, Socializers may be swayed to follow the norm, increasing their potential to become radicalized.[34]

In large groups, Socializers may enjoy becoming part of guilds or other forms of smaller teams they can connect to more easily than a collective of thousands of users. Socializers may also enjoy the possibility of connecting physically to members of their virtual in-group. The app Patriot Peer, for instance, was supposed to include a ‘Patriot Radar’, which would have enabled Socializers to directly connect to like-minded individuals near them.[35] This may also occur in a bottom-up manner. Kevin McDonald, for instance, reports that a group of friends from Rochdale (UK) radicalized together in part due to their continuous gamified communication on WhatsApp. They constructed an alternate reality game by imagining themselves as a guild raiding a sorcerer’s dungeon to steal black magic objects, while in reality breaking into the house of a Shia Muslim to steal a book.[36] Socializers may be prone to such small-group influence as they seek belonging and identification with a collective and may be swayed by their guild/team/peer-group toward more radical thinking and action.

### ***Competitor***

Marczewski’s Player type is motivated by extrinsic rewards and asks, “What’s in it for me?” and “How do I win?”[37] Building on previous work, this author replaced Marczewski’s Player, who is driven by collecting extrinsic rewards with a Competitor type, for whom extrinsic rewards signify ‘winning’ against others, i.e., gaining social status and a position of significance relative to the in-group that leading a competition can entail. As argued previously [38], it is the social challenge that drives status seekers to engage with gamified propaganda and motivates the desire to lead the scoreboard. Competitors enjoy points, scoreboards, and visible achievements such as badges. Gamified elements provide Competitors with visible measures of how well they are doing compared to others and how many points they need in order to reach the next level or a higher place on the scoreboard—i.e., gamification provides clear indicators of success.

Kruglanski and colleagues [39] traced radicalization in its various forms to a single factor: lack of significance. Those on a Quest for Significance (QfS) want to ‘be someone’, to matter, and to feel that they can achieve something in their lives. Both social exclusion and loss or lack of social status may facilitate a QfS and the corresponding longing to find a way to enhance one’s status [40], which can sometimes lead to a higher susceptibility to radicalization into groups promising such a status elevation. Competitive game elements

that signify social status elevation may therefore be appealing to those on a QfS. Gamification may help Competitors feel significant by providing them with the opportunity to establish themselves visibly at the higher end of the in-group social ladder, i.e., achieve the social status they seek.[41] Points, badges, and one's place on the leaderboard carry prestige and are visible and quantifiable indicators of status within the group. They can be influenced directly by the users' actions, i.e., an individual can directly influence their social status by putting in greater effort to collect points or badges, fulfill quests or other tasks, and move up in the social hierarchy. This increases perceived agency and the feeling that they can (re-)gain significance by adjusting their behavior accordingly. Competitors may therefore be motivated to engage more often and more intensely than other users with the extremist community and its content in order to gain points and reap the visible virtual rewards of their effort when placing high on the scoreboard. This may facilitate radicalization processes and the willingness to take more far-reaching actions in order to collect more points.

When acting outside of an organized group, Competitors may develop their own measures for success that can signify higher social status. The Halle attacker [42], for instance, detailed various "achievements" in his manifesto that he wanted to carry out to feel that his attack was a success, gain recognition within the online community he felt part of, and be placed on the virtual scoreboards on *4Chan* or other discussion boards. The achievements included various forms of killing one or multiple Jews, people of color, communists, or a "ZOG-bot"<sup>2</sup>, i.e., a police officer [43], as well as burning down a mosque—an achievement he named "crusty kebab". [44] All achievements were named in accordance with the memefication, dark irony, and 'lulz' found in Alt-Right *chan* culture [45], indicating that this was the in-group he sought to impress with his achievements and elevate his social status relative to others who would understand such codes.

### ***Achiever***

Achievers ask, "How can I learn new skills?"[46] They are interested in their own personal progress, gaining new knowledge or skills, and feeling a sense of mastery. Whereas Competitors seek to progress within the gamified application and lead the scoreboard, Achievers want to develop mastery outside of the immediate digital environment: they want to feel they understand how the world works. In both right-wing and jihadist radicalization processes, but also in the context of adherence to conspiracy theories, the prospect of belonging to a select elite, the chosen people, or the only ones who know the 'truth' is an important pull factor toward such groups.[47] Finally overcoming the uncertainty of existence, the perception that one is one of the chosen few who knows who is pulling the strings and what is happening behind the scenes can be a motivational driver for engagement with nonmainstream content.[48]

Achievers may be especially motivated by the prospect of 'solving the puzzle' and tracking their personal progress toward reaching the 'true' understanding of events unfolding in society. Gamification can support such motivational drivers. In the context of QAnon, for instance, supporters were presented with hints and bread crumbs, but also encouraged to 'do their own research' and put the puzzle pieces together as they saw fit.[49] This empowered users of the Achiever type to construct their own reality by "connecting the dots" and gain a sense of mastery after putting the pieces together and finally understanding what is going on in the world. They are on a 'quest' for "the truth". In addition, QAnon encouraged supporters to add onto each other's theories, discuss them, and thereby broaden their understanding of the connections between various aspects. [50] This too is appealing to Achievers because they can share their own knowledge, collaborate with others on their quest for the truth, and learn from others to make progress. Individuals motivated by truth seeking, uncertainty reduction, and knowledge expansion may therefore be drawn to gamified extremist content as this provides them with the opportunity to satisfy their 'quest for truth' and personal agency.

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<sup>2</sup> ZOG (Zionist Occupation Government), referring to a conspiracy theory popular in right-wing extremist subcultures postulating that a global Jewish elite runs the world.

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### ***Meaning Seeker***

Philanthropists ask, “How can I improve the experience of others?” and “How can I help?”[51] In the framework of this article, Marczewski’s Philanthropist was substituted by Meaning Seeker. This is not to suggest that radicalization is never motivated by a desire to help others. However, in Markewski’s framework, the Philanthropist is motivated to help other users within the gamified application, e.g., by sharing knowledge or items he/she collected.[52] In extremist communities, however, seeking purpose and meaning is likely to extend far beyond the context of the gamified application. The Meaning Seeker, like the Philanthropist, wants to feel part of something big and important, but rather than deriving meaning from the immediate context of the ‘game’, the Meaning Seeker derives it from the larger narrative that gives meaning to the gamified context online. Seeking meaning and purpose has been suggested as potentially driving radicalization processes.[53] For instance, Dawson and Amarasingam [54] found lack of purpose and meaning to be one of the major motivational drivers for certain foreign fighters. Humanitarian concerns were reported as motivational drivers by foreign fighters joining ISIS, suggesting the wish to help and experience a sense of purpose.[55] Extremist propaganda seeks to appeal to those seeking meaning, i.e., it has been found to be perceived as providing a ‘competitive system of meaning’,[56] and using eudaimonic entertainment content to convey feelings associated with the meaning of life.[57]

The Meaning Seeker type can, for instance, be motivated by the appeal of an epic narrative often underlying ideological content produced by extremist groups and the wish to feel one’s own actions have a special purpose. Providing an epic narrative, an overarching story to guide the user through and help the user make sense of the gamified system and its tasks is an important aspect of gamification.[58] Simply collecting points or badges might be meaningless and bore some users rather fast. If, however, collecting points helps to defeat a dragon, build a castle, or save a princess, users are motivated by the overarching narrative to fulfill even the most mundane tasks. Similarly, points alone would quickly lose their appeal in extremist communities without a narrative providing a framework. Embedding posting troll comments and other small actions within an epic “Good vs. Evil” narrative—for example, trolls versus ‘snowflakes’—may be appealing to Meaning Seekers. If motivated by jihadist ideology, Meaning Seekers may thrive on the recognition of online mujahideen playing an important part in the battle to save the world and derive meaning from the belief in gaining heavenly rewards for their actions.[59] For instance, in a famous tweet, lead ISIS propagandist Junaid Hussein alluded to taking the epic battle from the realm of games to reality: “You can sit at home and play Call of Duty or you can come and respond to the real call of duty...the choice is yours.”[60] Gamification that includes an epic narrative can embed small actions such as commenting on or sharing propaganda into a meaning-providing overarching story, which may provide Meaning Seekers with additional motivation for engagement, i.e., they feel their actions have purpose.

### ***Disruptor***

According to Marczewski, users of the Disruptor type ask, “What can I break?,” “Who can I upset?,” and “How can I be heard?”[61] They thrive on challenging and upsetting other users and/or the system and want to be noticed for their destructive behavior. In the context of radicalization, Disruptors may seek thrill and adventure [62], and may ask “Whom can I upset?,” for instance, with troll comments, doxing, dark-humored memes, and affronts against political correctness.[63] This may go hand in hand with satisfying the wish to be heard, as disruptive actions may spark positive in-group and negative out-group reactions. For instance, trolling under a Facebook post may provoke backlash and heated discussions with upset users, satisfying the Disruptor’s need to challenge others. Simultaneously, Disruptors’ upsetting actions may be validated and celebrated by the in-group, increasing chances to feel noticed and heard.

Game elements may provide additional rewards for Disruptors. Disruption itself could be gamified, e.g., with a ‘quest’ to troll certain accounts in a coordinated effort. This has been observed, for instance, on the far-right Discord server Reconquista Germanica, whose members coordinated troll attacks or comment shitstorms. [64] In addition, Disruptors could be rewarded through a gamified system—e.g., collect points or ‘level up’

for a certain number of troll comments. On the Reconquista Germanica server, members could apply for promotions and rise up in the ranks after actively contributing to the trolling 'raids' and writing many negative comments.[65] Through such measures, Disruptors can visibly rise in social status and receive recognition for the disruptive actions they are intrinsically drawn to. Gamification can therefore encourage prolonged and active engagement in the online community for Disruptors, who not only satisfy their need for thrill and challenge but also feel socially validated for their disruptive actions.

### ***Limitations of Framework***

As discussed, current empirical evidence for the role of gamification in digitally mediated radicalization processes must still be regarded as extremely limited and largely anecdotal. We simply do not yet have sufficient empirical findings or a strong theoretical basis to understand the proliferation of gamification and its implications in digital extremist subcultures. Research claims on the gamification of radicalization processes should therefore be treated with some caution. The framework suggested in this article and its conclusions should be considered an exploratory, theoretical contribution to an emerging discourse. The user typology presented here is a work in progress and the first step toward an analysis of how individual differences shape engagement with gamified extremist content. It will need to be tested in and recalibrated by empirical research, e.g., by determining whether indeed all five user types are present in extremist online communities, whether additional (sub-) types are needed, how prevalent each type is, and whether one may be able to relate user types to other roles. It may be fruitful to ask if a certain user type is more likely than other types to bring destructive behavior into the real world. In addition, one of the issues empirical research will have to address is that the main motivational driver for any given user to engage in a gamified application may not be immediately evident from overtly observable behavior. How can researchers assess, for example, the prevalence of Competitors versus Socializers in any given extremist community utilizing gamified propaganda if they can only judge individual users based on their overt online posting behavior? Future research will need to find ways to operationalize the user type framework in situations where only limited information is available about what may drive an individual user. On a broader level, the importance of gamification as a potential facilitating factor of digital radicalization processes relative to other factors needs to be examined as well as how 'effectively' it is used within extremist online communities—i.e., how many radicalization processes are actually influenced by gamified content.

### ***Conclusion***

It is likely that gamification will become more prominent in the coming years. Some even argue we are entering a 'ludic century', characterized by the proliferation of play in all areas of life.[66] Gamification, therefore, is here to stay and is likely to continue to influence extremist communities and digitally mediated radicalization processes for years to come. This necessitates a serious engagement with gamification, its appeals, psychological underpinnings, and individual effects by the research community focused on (digital) extremism.

While the concept of gamification is increasingly included in research efforts, there are currently more questions than answers pertaining to its potential role in radicalization processes. Building upon the preliminary research available, this article has tried to make a theoretical contribution to the discourse. It highlights individual differences and preferences in the engagement with gamified extremist content and communities by applying Marczewski's HEXAD user typology to the context of extremism and potential drivers of radicalization. While HEXAD is an established framework, its application to the extremist context is preliminary and will need to be refined by empirical research. Deductively, the framework suggests five user types, including Socializers motivated by connection to others, Competitors seeking to compare themselves to their peers, Achievers driven by the desire to understand the world, Meaning Seekers wishing to engage in meaningful action that can provide them with a sense of purpose, and Disruptors who enjoy upsetting others. Understanding which game elements may be appealing to which users, and which users may not be drawn to the gamified application when certain elements are missing, can facilitate our understanding of individual variations in engagement with gamified extremist content and, therefore, support a more holistic analysis of contemporary digital communities.

More research is needed to expand the theoretical and empirical basis for understanding the potential role of gamification in radicalization processes and its function in extremist community interactions. This may include:

- a) discussions on a better differentiation between the various game-related ‘tools’ used by extremists such as actual video games, gaming-adjacent platforms such as Discord, the use of gaming aesthetics in propaganda, and gamification,
- b) empirical work analyzing the use of gaming elements in extremist settings and validating the theoretical basis developed so far, and
- c) a discussion of the potential application of gamification in P/CVE.

Recent years have already seen an encouraging growth in research efforts utilizing the gamification concept. If the trend continues, the research community may have the rare chance to not just play catch-up with new features of extremist communication and community organization but to explore and analyze extremists’ use of gamification while it is still unfolding.

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## International Links and the Role of the Islamic State in the Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks in 2017

by Carlos Igualada

### Abstract

*Barcelona and Cambrils were the latest Spanish cities hit by jihadist terrorism. The attacks that occurred on August 17 and 18, 2017 have been brought back to the spotlight with the start of the trial at the end of 2020 and the judgment published in May 2021 on the three surviving members linked to the Ripoll cell. The purpose of this article is twofold. On one hand, it addresses the purpose behind the foreign trips made by members of the terrorist group in the cell formation process and planning phase of the attacks. In order to examine this issue, this study is basing itself on the court documents and the monitoring of thirty-two sessions held in the trial related to these attacks. On the other hand, the degree of proximity between the Islamic State and the terrorist cell that perpetrated the attacks will be analyzed, with special emphasis on the evidence gathered in Alcanar and the study of the propaganda subsequently issued by the Islamic State.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, jihadism, Barcelona, Cambrils, Ripoll cell, Spain, Islamic State

### Introduction: The Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks

Until August 2017, Spain had managed to escape the wave of terrorist attacks experienced by other countries in Western Europe that began two years earlier. The attack on the headquarters of the French magazine Charlie Hebdo carried out by the Kouachi brothers and claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in January 2015 was the first of many more to come. A year earlier, the impact of the network formed by Abdelhamid Abaaoud, linked to perpetrators of other attacks such as the one on the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014, committed by Mehdi Nemmouche, could already be felt. Since then, European cities, including Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Manchester have been the scene of terrorist attacks committed by Islamic State cells or by individuals without any direct links to IS but inspired by its ideology.

In this context, and regardless of the fact that Spain has been one of the most active European countries in the fight against jihadist terrorism in recent years [1], it seemed to be only a matter of time before the country would also be successfully targeted. Specifically, the city of Barcelona had been a target of various terrorist plots in previous years. One of the most revealing examples was the dismantlement in Barcelona and Girona in January 2003 of a terrorist cell linked to Al-Qaeda that was preparing a chemical attack. Later, in January 2008, eleven members of a cell directly linked to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan who had been planning to commit an attack on the Barcelona metro system had been arrested.[2] In April 2015 another anti-terrorist operation carried out by the Mossos d'Esquadra (Catalonian police) dismantled in Barcelona and Tarragona an eight-member-strong terrorist cell that was inspired by the Islamic State and aimed to carry out attacks in several locations of Barcelona including the Montjuic Olympic Stadium and the Parliament of Catalonia.

It should not be forgotten that in recent years, the Islamic State urged Muslims in Europe to commit attacks in their countries of residence, given the increased difficulties of them to move to the so-called caliphate established in Iraq and Syria. For this reason, Spain was directly mentioned in jihadist propaganda broadcasts, both by official channels of the Islamic State and by other outlets created by IS sympathizers.[3]

While in Western Europe some of the attack plots began to unfold, in Spain, an imam with extremist ideas named Abdelbaki Es Satty, who had already been convicted of drug trafficking in 2010, began to form a terrorist cell after indoctrinating and radicalizing a group of young people in the town of Ripoll, in the province of Girona. Prior to his time in prison, Es Satty had already been known for having connections with other jihadists, as evidenced in various Spanish police reports. Es Satty had links to Belgacem Bellil, an Algerian

suicide bomber who attacked the Italian military base in Nasiriya, Iraq, in November 2003, killing 28 people. Es Satty and Bellil had shared an apartment in the summer of 2003, after both met in Vilanova i la Geltrú (Barcelona).[4] Es Satty's name also appeared in the summary of a police operation known as *Operación Chacal* in January 2006, in which Spanish security forces managed to dismantle an Al-Qaeda network in charge of sending fighters to Iraq. However, Es Satty's role was, after investigation, considered irrelevant in this particular AQ network and it was decided not to proceed with his arrest.[5] In any case, Es Satty's long association with jihadism is of no surprise, since "people who acted as entrepreneurs in Europe during the 2000s and even the 1990s have reappeared in plots by Islamic State since 2014." [6] Likewise, Es Satty's connection with drug trafficking highlights a relationship that has previously been observed between several European jihadists and persons linked to organized crime, as manifested in the cases of Khalid Masood, Mohamed Lamsalak, and Khalid Zerkani.[7]

After leaving prison in 2014, Es Satty settled in Ripoll, where he managed to get a job as an imam at the *El-Fath* mosque. During the four months in which he served in this mosque as imam, Es Satty made contact with some young Muslims who would end up forming what later became known as the Ripoll cell. After a brief stay in Belgium between late 2015 and early 2016, Es Satty decided to return to Spain in mid-2016, having been offered the position of imam in the newly created mosque of *Annour*, also located in Ripoll. It was at this point that the imam took advantage of his position of authority and intensified the indoctrination of three older brothers of the Abboyaqoub, Hichamy, and Allaa families, who, in turn, would progressively introduce their younger brothers and friends into the cell that was beginning to take shape.[8] In this particular case, Marc Sageman's theory about terrorist cell formation seems to apply, since the radicalization process seems to have started from within the community without any help from outside.[9]

Es Satty's sermons were considered moderate and he managed to conceal the relationship he had with those young Muslims he was in the process of indoctrinating. However, in private circles, Es Satty showed his true face, radicalizing young Muslims based on his extremist postulates and accompanying his discourse with Islamic State propaganda material that he distributed to them with the help of a shared tablet. Es Satty's house and van were some of the most frequented places during the radicalization process of the emerging extremist cell, which soon began to take preventive measures to avoid arousing suspicion and being monitored by Spanish security forces.

The terrorist cell was fully structured by the first half of 2016, having a pyramidal structure in which Es Satty was the leader who was giving direct instructions to the three older brothers: Younes Abouyaaqoub, Youssef Allaa, and Mohamed Hichamy. The base of the Ripoll cell was formed by their younger brothers and some friends with whom these brothers had grown up together since childhood in Ripoll. Between June and July 2016, and coinciding with the month of Ramadan, the indoctrination process was completed. The members of the cell decided to begin preparations to carry out terrorist attacks.

By that time, members of the cell had begun to live in an uninhabited house owned by a bank in the town of Alcanar, in Tarragona, transforming this property into a safe house to isolate themselves and begin the manufacturing of TATP explosives.[10] Between July and mid-August 2016, members of the cell acquired the necessary precursor materials from a dozen supply centers in the provinces of Girona, Barcelona, Tarragona, and Castellón, acquiring in total 345 liters of hydrogen peroxide, 500 liters of acetone, twenty bottles filled with butane, 400 containers for mixing substances, and various electrical and laboratory equipment.[11] Such quantities of material would have allowed them to manufacture between eighty and 120 kilograms of TATP. [12] Thus, by mid-August, the Ripoll cell had practically everything ready to carry out attacks. These were originally planned for August 20, 2017, as evidenced by a manuscript attributed to Es Satty and found in Alcanar [13] (see below). Taking into account that the suitcases used in the Brussels airport attacks contained fewer than twenty kilograms of TATP explosives, had the original plan of the Ripoll cell materialized, it would have been of a "great magnitude" [14] and the number of victims would have been notably higher.[15]

According to the Spanish police investigation, the terrorist plan aimed to pack the explosives into three vans, strategically placing them in three neuralgic centers with a high presence of tourists. The selected targets were

the Sagrada Familia Cathedral, the Camp Nou stadium (where a league match was scheduled that day), both in Barcelona, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris.[16] In addition, an explosive vest was found at the Alcanar location, ready to be used, along with nineteen homemade hand grenades.[17] From this, one could conclude that the terrorists might have decided to create panic by strolling through the streets or placing these grenades in different parts of Barcelona.

However, during the night of August 16, and apparently while Es Satty and Said Allaa were moving the explosives from one room to another, the TATP was accidentally activated, causing a large explosion that killed both of them. The only survivor was Mohamed Houli, who was taken to the hospital. Thus, the original plan of the Ripoll cell had collapsed and the presumed mastermind of the planned attacks was dead.

It took more than twelve hours for the members of the Ripoll cell to learn that the house in Alcanar had exploded. One of them, Younes Abouyaaqoub, learned the news while he was on a highway driving a rented van to Alcanar. Faced with the impossibility of carrying out the original plan, he decided to act on his own, changing direction and heading toward Barcelona. Once there, he drove the vehicle into the well-known pedestrian street of Las Ramblas and ran over everyone in his path, zigzagging with the van.[18] At the moment the van stopped, the terrorist fled the scene of the attack in which fourteen people had been killed. Minutes later, another young man, Pau Pérez, was fatally stabbed by Younes Abouyaaqoub near the university area while he was stealing a vehicle for escape. For four days, a major police operation was set up to find him. He was finally found and killed on August 21 in Subirats, thirty kilometers away from the place where the car he had stolen on the day of the attack was found.

While Younes Abouyaaqoub was fleeing from the city center after the attack at Las Ramblas, five other terrorists in the cell, three of them minors, met to outline an alternative attack plan. Finally, they decided to head toward Cambrils, a town frequented by tourists during the summer months, and drove a car alongside the seafront promenade, running over pedestrians. Subsequently, they got out of the vehicle and tried to stab other pedestrians with bladed weapons they had acquired hours earlier in a bazaar, murdering a woman before they were shot by security forces.

The investigations carried out in Alcanar during the hours following the explosion on the night of August 16 pointed to the existence of a drug laboratory or a space used for the purchase and sale of butane gas canisters. Mohamed Houli, the only survivor of the apartment explosion, asserted that in his first statement taken in the hospital by government investigators. These hypotheses remained valid until a second explosion occurred the following day in the same house in Alcanar during the rubble removal. Between this second explosion and the moment in which the terrorist cell members in Barcelona drove their vehicle into the Las Ramblas passage, there was only a time difference of a few minutes. The key fact to establish a link between the two events was that Houli's passport was found in the van in Las Ramblas, which facilitated the work of connecting the dots and proceeding to his arrest at the hospital.

While the security deployment known as *Operación Jaula* was being set up to find the terrorist who had fled the scene of the crime at Las Ramblas, the security forces simultaneously began a search for a second van that had also been rented by the members of the cell together with the one used in this first attack. Rapid police action allowed for this van to be found in a parking area in Vic, a place close to Barcelona.[19] Three hours after the attack in Las Ramblas, a second member of the cell, Driss Oukabir, was arrested in Ripoll, after it had been discovered that the van used in the Las Ramblas attack had been rented in his name.[20]

After the terrorist who had fled from Las Ramblas was killed on August 21, the Ripoll cell was completely dismantled. Since then, the investigation that lasted more than two years managed to reconstruct the structure and functioning of the cell, the work carried out by each of its members, the radicalization process of the young Muslims, and their preparations for the attacks, among many other aspects. However, there are still some questions that have not been answered and there are also lessons to be learned, especially regarding the need for Spain to have more effective collaboration and communication between various police forces.[21]

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### ***Questions without Answers***

Did Es Satty receive instructions from abroad or was he capable of elaborating the plan for the attacks on his own? How can the numerous trips to Europe and Morocco made by the terrorists in the months prior to the attacks be explained? Did the Ripoll cell have any international connections? Was there another terrorist cell in France that was going to carry out the attack on the Eiffel Tower? How did Younes Abouyaaqoub manage to flee Barcelona with security forces surrounding the city and travel for four days without anyone finding him? What was the role of the Islamic State in the attacks on Barcelona and Cambrils?

There were great expectations that some of these questions would be answered when the trial of the members of the Ripoll cell began in November 2020. However, from the very beginning, Judge Félix Alfonso Guevara made clear that the primary purpose of the trial was to determine the degree of responsibility and involvement of the three defendants Mohamed Houli, Driss Oukabir, and Said Ben Iazza.[22][23] Therefore, to find answers to the other questions, it becomes necessary to make use of the original sources and court documents that detail the development of the police investigation.

Given that, the purpose of this article will be focused on two major known unknowns surrounding the attacks. On the one hand, the focus is on the trips abroad made by members of the Ripoll cell. It is plausible to assume that several of these trips had a logistical purpose for the preparation of the attacks on the originally envisioned targets. On the other hand, this study is looking for evidence pointing to a link, at least in terms of ideological inspiration, between the Islamic State and the Ripoll cell. Addressing both questions becomes a necessity in order to find out whether the Ripoll cell acted exclusively under the influence of a single imam with extremist ideas or whether other individuals and external factors played a role planning and preparing the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks.

### ***The International Dimension Issue***

Court and police documents related to this case reveal intense travel activities across Europe and Morocco by members of the terrorist cell from the moment they decided to prepare their plot. While it is true that it has not been possible to find out what the real purpose of some of these trips was and whether or not they were related somehow to the preparations for the attacks, in cases similar to this one it has been known that such travel activity had a logistical function directly related to the objective of carrying out attacks. Likewise, based on the documentation available until now, it is worth pondering whether the terrorists in Barcelona and Cambrils had connections with other European jihadists who might have influenced the radicalization process of Es Satty or contributed to the planning of the attack.

The first of these trips was undertaken by Abdelbaki Es Satty, mastermind and leader of the Ripoll cell, who after leaving his position as imam at the *El-Fath* mosque in Ripoll moved to Belgium, staying there from October 2015 to April 2016. His destination was Vilvoorde, a town north of Brussels that at the beginning of the last decade had become, along with Molenbeek, one of the two major hot spots of radicalism and Islamic extremism in Belgium. In fact, between 2011 and 2013, twenty-eight of the town's nearly 40,000 inhabitants decided to travel and fight in Syria, providing proof of the presence of extremism in Vilvoorde.[24] Although mobilization to jihadist extremism has since then been curbed thanks to the involvement of local authorities and leaders of the local Muslim population, violent Salafist discourse continues to be found in Vilvoorde. Upon his arrival there, Es Satty tried to find a job at the Diegem mosque where he performed various functions on a trial basis for the first few months. However, when Suleyman Akaychouch, president of the *Diegem* mosque, tried to hire him and asked him to present his criminal record, Es Satty refused and was eventually forced to quit his job at the mosque.

Es Satty's last weeks in Belgium coincided with the country's March 2016 attacks on the Brussels airport and the downtown metro network, in which thirty-five people died. However, there is no evidence to link Es Satty to these attacks. Despite the fact that there is little information on the activities carried out by Es Satty beyond his work inside the *Diegem* mosque, there is still a possibility that during the half year he lived in Belgium he

was in contact with individuals linked to jihadist circles. During his stay he could have, for instance, learned how to make explosive vests.[25] In any case, once Es Satty returned to Spain, he went to Ripoll, where he was hired as imam of the new mosque of *Annour* in May 2016 without first having to disclose his criminal record. It is from this moment that the process of radicalization of the members of the Ripoll cell whom he had already met before his trip to Belgium speeded up. At the time he returned to Spain, Es Satty might already have conceived the idea of carrying out terrorist attacks.

By the end of 2016, the Ripoll cell intensified efforts to manufacture explosives. There is evidence that during the last months of that year there were numerous Internet searches carried out on a number of electronic devices belonging to members of the group. For instance, it was found that from Es Satty's computer, a manual with the title "The manufacture of explosives for beginners, from scratch" was accessed.[26] In December 2016, the traveling of some cell members became increasingly frenetic. Younes Abouyaaqoub, Youssef Allaa, and Mohamed Hichamy, the three older brothers closest to Es Satty, began a four-day trip. The first stop was made on December 26 in Paris, where they stayed only a few hours before moving on to Brussels, arriving in the Belgian capital the next day. The following morning, they returned to Spain.

Although the investigation has been unable to determine whether these trips were made for any specific purpose, for a variety of reasons it can be ruled out that this was a leisure trip of three young men. First, as the judicial investigation concluded, the Eiffel Tower was going to be one of the targets for a terrorist attack. In other words, this first trip to Paris could be linked to this objective. Moreover, the existence of Mohamed Boumansour, a contact of the Ripoll cell residing in France (see below), suggests that this trip could have had the purpose of (re-)establishing contact with him. Secondly, the radicalization process of the terrorists was so intense by the end of 2016 that some of them had begun isolating themselves from family and friends [27], relocating from Ripoll to Alcanar. For this reason, it is difficult to believe that the trips to France and Belgium were made merely for tourist purposes, given the growing emotional involvement of the cell members in attack preparations. Thirdly, it is known that the members of the Ripoll cell took many precautions to avoid attracting attention by the security forces. Therefore, it would be illogical to claim that, in the midst of searching for materials to manufacture explosives, some of the terrorists decided to make a trip crossing several European countries simply for pleasure.

In February 2017, Mohamed Houli decided to travel to Antwerp, where his uncle lived. This trip raises the least suspicion in terms of a possible association with logistical tasks during the preparation of the attacks. Houli could have traveled with the goal of finding work in Belgium, as his uncle stated, who saw him leaving his home in the mornings with several resumes in hand to deliver to different companies.[28] However, Houli did not manage to find a job and returned to Spain a month later.

A few days after Houli's return to Spain, another member of the cell traveled abroad. In this case, Es Satty, the mastermind behind the attacks, was the one who also traveled to Belgium between March 26 and 29 2017. The only known activity from this trip is that on the last day before flying back to Spain, he visited the mosque of Diegem, where the year before he had tried to become its imam. According to some people who were with him that day, the short trip of the imam to Belgium served the purpose of buying books in Arabic, since "it was cheaper to pay for the trip and buy the books in Belgium than to do it in Barcelona." [29]

A few days after returning from Belgium, Es Satty traveled again, this time to Morocco, where he spent practically the whole month of April, visiting his wife and children. The police investigation found that, while in Morocco, the cell leader continued to act as such, maintaining continuous contacts with the other members of the Ripoll cell. Most of these communications were made by using prepaid cards acquired under false names and without using his personal phone.[30] Likewise, during his stay in Morocco, he also continued to search for ways to manufacture explosives on the Internet from his own computer and cell phone.[31] This was only four months before the planned attacks. During this period there was a significant increase in the number of phone calls made between the members of the Ripoll cell.

Es Satty returned to Morocco sometime between mid-July and mid-August. However, there is no information indicating a possible link with the upcoming attacks. Given that his return to Spain took place on August 12,

this trip could be interpreted as Es Satty's goodbye visit to his family, given that at that time he already knew that the attacks were scheduled for August 20 while his disciples were, during those days, manufacturing the explosives in the house in Alcanar.

While Es Satty was in Morocco, Driss Oukabir also visited this country, staying in Tangier [32] and nearby towns between August 2 and 13. After being arrested, Oukabir justified this trip as a kind of spiritual retreat (*jalwa*) [33] to put an end to his previous life of excesses with drugs, alcohol, and other un-Islamic activities. However, this trip also fulfilled a logistical function with respect to the preparation of the attacks. As demonstrated by one of the conversations he had with his younger brother, also a member of the Ripoll cell, during his days in Morocco he had managed to fix several damaged cell phones that had been previously used by the terrorists and acquire new ones for a very affordable price. He also carried out searches with his cell phone that could be tied to attack preparations, as numerous Internet searches he made during this period were related to heavy vehicles [34] as well as firearms and various types of knives and axes.[35]

One piece of information that has been confirmed is that immediately after Driss's return to Spain, he gave his younger brother a phone number related to Mohamed Boumansour, considered to be the French contact of the Oukabir brothers, instructing him to call him "urgently".[36] It is known that Boumansour was in Ripoll a few days before the attacks and, due to this, he was subsequently arrested in France. However, the lack of convincing evidence to prove his involvement or having had knowledge of the plans for the attacks led to his release nine months after his arrest.

One of the last trips undertaken by members of the Ripoll terrorist cell abroad can, without a doubt, be directly associated with a mission related to the preparatory work for the attacks. Younes Abouyaaqoub and Omar Hichamy traveled to Paris between August 11 and 12 in the same vehicle that would be used only a week later in the Cambrils attack. Once there, they bought a camera and two cell-phone cards. One of these they activated and used immediately. The camera was used to take photos and recordings of the Eiffel Tower. While this behavior could also be understood as typical for any tourist, the analysis of several photos and videos taken of the occasion showed clearly that the focus of interest was not the monument itself, but strategic points around it [37], particularly access points for vehicles, unloading areas, and the specific positions of security forces close to the Eiffel Tower. During their return, the two cell members slept near Villejuif, a city where just a few weeks after the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils a laboratory for the manufacture of TATP explosives was discovered.[38] Gérard Collomb, the French Interior Minister, said it was possible that those arrested in France as a result of this operation had some connection with another cell, including the one in Ripoll. According to one of the statements made by Houli after his arrest, Es Satty sent the two members of the cell to Paris "for some reason still unknown to him." [39]

What emerges from the analysis of the trips abroad made by these travelers is that most of them took place once the Ripoll cell had been fully established and preparations for the attacks were underway. Even if some of these trips do not appear to have a direct link with the attacks, it is revealing that there is a direct connection between the trips carried out during the weeks and days prior to the attacks and the logistical tasks linked to the plot. Furthermore, it is likely—but not proven—that the Ripoll cell members used these trips to establish or reinforce contacts with other individuals connected with jihadism in Europe. In this context, the role played by Mohamed Boumansour and the contact who might have taught Es Satty how to make an explosive vest during his stay in Belgium is likely to be a key confirmation of the hypothesis of an international link with other jihadist networks.

### ***The Islamic State Nexus***

One of the most important questions in the investigations of the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks has centered on the relationship between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State (IS). The appearance of the name of IS in a text claiming responsibility for the attacks, as well as the various press releases issued by the Islamic State in relation to the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks, suggests there was a direct relationship. However, it is important to analyze each of these elements in detail to determine exactly what role the Islamic State may have played in

these attacks.

At around 9:00 p.m. on the night of August 17, 2017, the Islamic State published a message through its news agency *Amaq News* that read: “*the perpetrators of the attack in Barcelona are Islamic State soldiers and carried out the operation on command on Khilafah of targeting coalition countries.*” This release could be considered a standard message used by the Islamic State to claim responsibility for attacks abroad, given that the vocabulary used and the lack of more precise information provided are its distinctive features. This was similar to other attacks claimed in the years before, such as the claim published after the Nice attack which read: “*One of our soldiers carried out Thursday night’s attack in response to calls to target nations of coalition states that are fighting Islamic State.*” However, the most distinctive feature of the claim of responsibility for the Las Ramblas attack is the speed and promptness with which it was published. Barely four hours had elapsed between the attack and the *Amaq* media release [40], making this the attack claimed most rapidly by the Islamic State when compared with all other attacks attributed or linked to IS in Europe between 2015 and 2017.[41]

Two days later, there was a second media release claiming responsibility for the attacks, this time including the Cambrils attack. On this occasion, the news channel chosen was not *Amaq* but *Nashir News*, a production company that creates content specifically for dissemination on social networks and publishes mainly in Arabic and English, but also in other languages such as German and Spanish. The release read:

*“With the support of Allah, several mujahidin set out synchronously in 2 covert units targeting gatherings of Crusaders in Spain on the last Thursday. The first group of mujahidin targeting a gathering of Crusaders with bus in Las Ramblas in Barcelona. They also ran over 2 policemen at a police checkpoint. After that, they stormed a “bar” (restaurant) with their light weapons near Las Ramblas square, torturing and killing the Crusaders and Jews inside. Meanwhile, the other group ran over several Crusaders with a van in the coastal town of Cambrils. The blessed attack resulted in killing and wounding more than 120 of the Crusader Coalition citizens....”*[42]

As will be noticed, this second news release contains several errors and inaccuracies about the events: the use of a bus in the Las Ramblas attack and a van in Cambrils, a simultaneous double attack that in reality did not exist, and the taking of hostages at a restaurant in Las Ramblas that also had no basis in reality. All these errors are a consequence of the several pieces of misinformation that circulated on social networks, especially Twitter, moments after the Barcelona attack. The fact that *Nashir News* published all this as if these were true facts and without providing any new information means that the Islamic State was in all likelihood unaware of the attacks, or at least of the improvised plan B that emerged after the first explosion in Alcanar.[43]

On August 23, the Islamic State mentioned the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks for the third time. Under the heading “*The first rain: The raid of Barcelona*”, the *Al Khayr* production company, based in the Syrian province of Deir-ez-Zor, released a video based on images recorded by Spanish media after the attacks. This video was accompanied by the testimony of two jihadists speaking in Spanish. One of them, well known to the Spanish intelligence services, Mohamed Yassin Ahram Pérez [44], stated: “*To the Spanish Christians, do not forget the spilled blood of the Muslims of the Spanish Inquisition. We will avenge your massacre, the one you are doing currently with the Islamic State*” and “*if you cannot make the Hegira to the Islamic State, jihad has no borders; make jihad wherever you are.*” It is most likely that this fragment in which “El Cordobés” [Cordoba] appears was recorded prior to the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils because there is no mention of these. That was not the case with the second individual who appeared in another fragment of the video with his face covered. He also threatened: “*May Allah accept the sacrifices of our brothers in Barcelona. Our war with you will last until the end of the world.*” This Spanish-speaking jihadist was introduced in the video under the name of Abu Salman Al Andalusi.

Two days later, issue 95 of the Arabic news bulletin *Al Naba*, a propaganda pamphlet of the Islamic State, echoed the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils through an infographic with the silhouette of Barcelona’s Sagrada Familia. In this publication, the same errors and inaccuracies of the previously mentioned *Nashir News* release were repeated. This is significant because such errors reveal the feedback loops that exist between various official news outlets of the Islamic State.

On September 9, Issue 13 of IS's *Rumiyah* magazine dedicated several of its sections to the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils (front cover, back cover, two articles comparing these attacks with those of 11 March 2004 in Atocha, and an infographic with the Sagrada Familia). This was noteworthy, since only the Paris attacks in November 2015 had managed to generate more media content within a single Islamic State publication. From the analysis of the information published in this particular issue of *Rumiyah*, it can be concluded that the information exposed is a compilation of everything that was already publicly known, but repeating errors of previous IS publications, while also propagating additional falsehoods. One of the most obvious errors was the statement that Spain was forced to raise the antiterrorist alert to level 4 (out of 5), whereas this decision had actually already taken place in June 2015.

There was interest in knowing what kind of content *Rumiyah* was going to publish in its upcoming issue in order to find out, as happened with the attacks in Paris and Brussels, whether new information would appear that could reveal a direct link between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State. However, in issue 13 of *Rumiyah* there were no biographies of the perpetrators of the attacks nor any other new information.

Finally, the production company *Al Furat Media Center* made reference to these attacks in Catalonia in two of its publications in its series "*Knights of the lone Jihad*".[45] In the first one, a call was made to Muslims to carry out new attacks on the West "following the example of the Barcelona and Cambrils group." In the second publication, although no explicit mention is made, an image was shown with the Barcelona skyline next to a hand covered with blood.

Regarding the influence exerted by the Islamic State on the members of the Ripoll cell, there are also several elements that require attention. The most important of these was a manuscript found among the ruins of the house in Alcanar, which was authored by Es Satty [46], according to the investigation carried out by the Mossos d'Esquadra. The manuscript fragment found corresponds to the heading of a release and reads as follows (translated from Arabic): "*In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate. Brief letter from the soldiers of the Islamic State in the land of Al-Andalus to the crusaders, the hateful, the sinners, the unjust, the corrupters.*"[47] The date of this document translated from the Islamic calendar would coincide with August 20, 2017, the day on which the terrorists were supposed to carry out their attacks on the Sagrada Familia, the Camp Nou stadium, and the Eiffel Tower. Likewise, the police in Alcanar also recovered other—but apparently unconnected to this case—manuscript fragments in which there were repeated allusions to the Islamic State ("*The Islamic State and its soldiers in every corner of the planet*" and "*The Islamic State through the descendants of Youssef*") and in which inflammatory rhetoric was used ("*Since the fall of Andalus in the hands of the envious crusaders*" or "*Western countries want to corrupt Muslims*").

On the other hand, among the rubble in Alcanar an electronic device with a video of great importance was discovered. This video had been recorded by Mohamed Houli days before the explosion in Alcanar. In this video, three of the terrorists appear manufacturing the explosives while issuing threats in Arabic and Spanish with statements such as: "*Look how you are going to suffer*", "*This is for you to know that the Muslim has dignity and strength with the power of God*", and "*Allah has chosen us among millions of men to make you cry blood.*" In another fragment of this video, Younes Abouyaaqoub, perpetrator of the Las Ramblas attack, is seen wearing an explosives vest and making the *tawhid* gesture.

It is difficult to determine what the usefulness of this video could have been. Taking into account the many security measures taken by the Ripoll cell in order not to be detected by Spanish security forces, it would not make sense to expose themselves this way with a homemade video before committing the attack since the video could have ended up in the wrong hands. Therefore, it is likely that this video recorded by the terrorists was meant to be sent to an intermediary who would have contacted the Islamic State or that it was meant to be published in other channels. It seems unlikely that the members of the Ripoll cell had a direct link with IS. Therefore, the video, together with the manuscript of Es Satty, could conceivably have been used as evidence to claim responsibility for the attacks in the name of the Islamic State.[48]

Another example of how the Islamic State and its propaganda had deeply influenced the Ripoll cell can be seen in what happened in the town of Riudecanyes. There, the five cell members who would commit the

Cambrils attack hours later decided to burn all their identification documents in a bonfire. This ritual, which renounces their identity as individuals along with their previous life, was a clear sign of their total commitment to the Islamic State and marked the beginning of a path of no return. Probably they decided to perform this ceremonial act inspired by many of the foreign fighters who had traveled to Syria and Iraq in recent years who had acted in the same way. An example was published by the Al Hayat media outlet in late 2014 when several French foreign fighters were seen burning their passports in a video.

Finally, one of the many pillowcases found in the Alcanar house during the investigation after the explosion [49] had an Islamic State flag drawn on it, being yet another sign of how the Ripoll cell had adopted as its own the symbology of IS.

The evidence that has surfaced so far does not allow us to affirm that the Ripoll cell had a direct connection with members of the Islamic State nor that cell members had received instructions from IS. However, there is strong evidence to assert that the Ripoll cell members were radicalized and decided to commit terrorist attacks under the influence of the propaganda and ideology of the Islamic State. This is demonstrated by the adoption of the symbols and narrative discourse of the Islamic State as their own and a text found among the rubble in Alcanar where they call themselves *“soldiers of the Islamic State in the land of Al-Andalus.”*

## Conclusions

Four years after the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, there are still two fundamental questions that need to be answered. On one hand, it is important to figure out whether the terrorists had logistical support abroad from other individuals linked to the European jihadist movement during any of their foreign trips. On the other hand, it is pivotal to determine the degree of closeness between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State.

In the first place, we can conclude that various trips undertaken by members of the Ripoll cell during the months, weeks, and days leading up to the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils must have served a logistical purpose related to the preparations of the attacks. Nevertheless, the fact that they obtained support or instructions from someone outside the cell while carrying out logistical tasks abroad could not be demonstrated clearly. However, the relationship of members of the cell with Mohamed Boumansour regarding preparations for the attack on the Eiffel Tower, as well as the discovery who taught Es Satty to make an explosives vest in Brussels, may be crucial for the existence of an international connection.

Regarding the degree of closeness between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State, there is sufficient evidence to affirm that the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks were inspired by the ideology, symbolism, and narrative of this terrorist organization. This is demonstrated by the numerous propaganda videos made by the Islamic State found in electronic devices of some of the members of the Ripoll cell, the manuscripts claiming responsibility for the attack found in Alcanar, the video recorded by the terrorists themselves, the ritual performed in Riudecanyes by the five perpetrators of the Cambrils attack where they burned their identification documents, and the drawing of the flag of the Islamic State on a pillowcase found in Alcanar.

All these pieces of evidence lead us to believe that the Ripoll cell had planned to carry out its original plan and claim the attack in the name of the Islamic State, using the manuscript of Es Satty and the video in which three of the terrorists threatened Spain and the West while manufacturing the explosives. Both of these would almost certainly have been published later in media related to the Islamic State or even directly by an official producer of IS, thus following the same procedure by which the Islamic State had claimed responsibility for other recent terrorist actions in Europe.

To be on the safe side, given the currently publicly available evidence, it can only be asserted that the Islamic State was a model of inspiration for the Ripoll cell. However, in this author's opinion, it might still be possible to discover international links with other terrorist individuals or cells in the future—links revealing that these attacks have not only been inspired, but also guided by someone else close to the Islamic State.

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## Notes

- [1] According to official data from the Ministry of the Interior, since the Madrid bombings in 2004, 875 individuals linked to jihadist activity have been arrested in Spain in a total of 315 operations.
- [2] Fernando Reinares, Carola García-Calvo, "Spaniards, You Are Going to Suffer': The inside story of the August 2017 attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, no. 1 (January 2018).
- [3] As an example, the video published in September 2016 by the Islamic State's communication agency in the Al-Jair province under the heading "The Caliphate Generation" called for the recovery of Al-Andalus while illustrating the statement with images of the Alhambra in Granada.
- [4] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 21/2006, pp. 1276–1278.
- [5] Ibid., pp. 1283–1285.
- [6] Petter Nesser, "Military Interventions, Jihadi Networks, and Terrorist Entrepreneurs: How the Islamic State terror wave rose so high in Europe," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 3 (March 2019).
- [7] Rajan Basra, Peter Neumann, "Crime as Jihad: Developments in the crime-terror nexus in Europe," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 10, no. 9 (October 2017). José Luis Gil Valero, "Sicarios y Yihad: ¿Es posible la convergencia?" *Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo (RIET)*, no. 3 (August 2021).
- [8] The Ripoll terrorist cell was characterized by the existence of strong intrafamilial links between many of its members. There were four pairs of siblings and two of these pairs were cousins. These kinship ties helped to avoid arousing suspicion and strengthened the cohesion of the group as a whole.
- [9] TATP is a type of explosive formed from acetone triperoxide. It had previously been used for the Brussels bombings on 22 March 2016, and the Manchester bombing on 22 May 2017. Despite being highly unstable, TATP is relatively simple to make from easily accessible compounds. The Islamic State has been the terrorist organization that has made the most use of this explosive in recent years. Several of its partner producers have issued manuals that have circulated through jihadist forums and social networks providing instructions on how to make it. The Ripoll cell had several of these manuals in its possession, as emerged from the analysis of computer devices belonging to the group.
- [10] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018, p. 33.
- [11] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- [12] Audiencia Nacional, Diligencias Previas 60/2017: p. 1.
- [13] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018, p. 22.
- [14] Audiencia Nacional, Diligencias Previas 60/2017: p. 3.
- [15] Carlos Igualada, "Los atentados de Cataluña un año después. Reconstrucción de los acontecimientos, interrogantes y lecciones por aprender." *Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo*, 2018.
- [16] The analysis of the terrorists' electronic devices also found numerous searches for other targets that could have been considered for the attacks but were later discarded by the terrorists themselves. Among these alternative targets figured the headquarters of the National High Court in Madrid, the Alhambra in Granada, the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, the Port Aventura Park, and several clubs on the Mediterranean coast.
- [17] National High Court, Summary 5/2018, p. 20.
- [18] Francisco J. Girao, "Atentado en Barcelona del 17-A. La calificación institucional y periodística de los hechos en las primeras horas en Twitter." *Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo (RIET)*, no. 2 (April 2021), pp. 18–42.
- [19] The intended use of this van is unknown. However, it is possible that this was the vehicle that the terrorists were planning to use to transport the explosives to Paris.
- [20] Driss Oukabir has always professed his innocence, claiming that other members of the cell asked him to rent the van for a move and that he was not part of the group. However, the investigation points to the fact that he was aware at all times of the planning of the attacks, being a component of the terrorist cell. However, he backed down at the last moment.
- [21] Rogelio Alonso, Jesús Castán, "The Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks: A case study of the impact of political decentralization and separatism on counter terrorism policing," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (October 3, 2020).
- [22] Ben Iazza was arrested in September 2018 when the investigation discovered that he had carried out logistical work for the terrorist cell and had visited Alcanar in August 2017—an indication that he must have been aware of the planning of the attacks.

- [23] On May 27, 2021, the sentence on the three defendants was published. Mohamed Houli was sentenced to 53 years in prison, Driss Oukabir's sentence was 46 years, while Said Ben Iazza was given a sentence of 8 years in prison. Ben Iazza was the only one of the three who was convicted of the crime of collaboration, while Houli and Oukabir were convicted of belonging to a terrorist organization while their attempt was judged to be terrorist in nature.
- [24] Leo Cendrowicz, "Vilvoorde: The Brussels district fighting radicalisation with kindness," *The Independent* (December 30, 2015).
- [25] A protected witness who testified in one of the trial sessions pointed this out. Nor should we forget that among the belongings found in the Alcanar house was an explosive vest ready for use. According to a statement by Mohamed Houli, the person it was meant to be used by would have been Es Satty.
- [26] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018, p. 5.
- [27] Ibid., p. 32.
- [28] Anna Teixidor, Los silencios del 17-A, Dieresis, 2020: 205.
- [29] Ibid., p. 210.
- [30] The police investigation found that the cell members acquired at least nineteen "conspirativos" telephone numbers meant for calls exclusively between the members of the group.
- [31] One of the Internet searches conducted during those days, and later documented by the investigation, was "explosives manufacturing for beginners."
- [32] Tangier is considered to be one of the main centers of radicalization in northern Morocco, along with the cities of Tetouan and Castillejos. Since the rise of the Islamic State, it is estimated that several hundred people from these three towns traveled to the jihadist caliphate in Syria and Iraq.
- [33] The *jalwa* is a spiritual journey that some Muslims make in order to purify their souls and start new lives away from bad behaviors that lead away from the faith.
- [34] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 60/2017: pp. 370–371.
- [35] Ibid., pp. 160–179.
- [36] This conversation was detected by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which revealed that the Oukabir brothers were at that very moment talking about the preparation of the attacks in a Facebook conversation.
- [37] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018: p. 17.
- [38] *La Vanguardia*, "Un tercer arrestado por el laboratorio de explosivos hallado junto a París" (Spanish edition) (September 7, 2017).
- [39] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 60/2017, p. 267.
- [40] It is important to note that the claim of an attack by the Islamic State does not necessarily imply the direct participation of the group, as has been shown on different occasions in which the role of the Islamic State has been reduced to the one of an ideological inspiration. On some other occasions, these claims have turned out to be false, as was the case with the attack in June 2017 on a casino in Manila or in October of the same year in Las Vegas.
- [41] To compare, the Islamic State claimed the Paris attacks by noon the following day, while in the case of the Brussels attacks it took seven hours after the explosions before the first statement was issued by Amaq.
- [42] Although the date of the headline would coincide with August 18, 2017, its publication occurred one day later.
- [43] In contrast, after the Paris attacks in November 2015, during the days and weeks that followed, the Islamic State released various pieces of information about the preparations for the attacks, as well as information about the perpetrators that had previously been unknown and had not appeared in the media. This hints that the Islamic State was aware of the plans for the attacks.
- [44] Also known as Abu Lais Al Qurdubi ("El Cordobés"), he is one of the sons of Tomasa Pérez, a Spanish woman married to Abdel Ahram, who has been serving a sentence for terrorism in Morocco since 2011. Tomasa decided to travel with all her children from Spain to the jihadist caliphate in 2014, following the Islamic State's call for "hijra".
- [45] This series of publications stands out because a large portion of its issues is aimed at followers of the Islamic State. It gives instructions and advice on how to commit terrorist attacks in the West.
- [46] The defense of the accused Said Ben Iazza criticized during the trial that the authorship of the manuscript was attributed to Es Satty without the presentation of handwriting reports to prove it.
- [47] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018, p. 22.
- [48] The Berlin attack in December 2016 is an example of how the Islamic State claims an attack based on the publication of a video in which the perpetrator previously pledges allegiance to the organization.
- [49] The pillowcases were to be used by the terrorists to store the explosives. This would have made it easier to transfer the TATP into the vans that were to be used to commit the attacks.

# Evidence to Explain Violent Extremist Communication: A Systematic Review of Individual-Level Empirical Studies

by Phillip Conrad De Bruyn

## Abstract

*Advances in computational approaches to detect violent extremists have made it possible to reliably identify these individuals through their communication, with accuracy ranging from 87 to 92% (95% CI), depending on the model used. Of interest is whether various facets of their communication can be explained through existing empirical research, whose findings may point to opportunities for intervention. To explore the possibility of explanatory evidence, this study conducted a systematic review of studies that presented original data and findings at the individual level of extremism. Samples of the qualifying studies ( $n = 272$ ) over the last 20 years were disaggregated by individual type (e.g., lone-actor terrorist, online extremist), which included affiliations with a range of extremist groups, organizations, and ideological classifications. Using a series of linguistic dimensions observed in extremist communication as an organizing framework, the findings of these studies were grouped together as possible factors behind the various fine-grained manifestations of extremist ideology observed by high-performing models capable of extremist detection ( $n = 28$ ). The work serves practitioners interested in an organizing framework for extremist communication studied as big data or those who merely seek a state-of-the-art systematic review of Islamic-based extremism. Comparatively, this study is the largest of such reviews to date, as an exploratory effort to offer possible explanations for ideological communication by extremists, and draws on samples from multiple populations of empirical studies on fundamentalism, Islamism, jihadism, and radicalization into terrorism.*

**Keywords:** Communication, Extremism, Radicalization, Systematic Review, Terrorism

## Introduction

The state of empirical evidence on the link between the Internet and radicalization into enacting or supporting violence remains limited and inconclusive.[1] However, this limited pool of empirical studies does provide tentative evidence that exposure to violent extremist communication is associated with extremist attitudes both on- and offline and that active seekers of such communication are at higher risk of engaging in violence. The role of the Internet in radicalization can therefore be seen as that of decision-shaping with respect to extremist stimuli,[2] which, in association with offline factors, can motivate the decision-making of an individual into action.[3]

Recent work on individual differences among left-wing, right-wing, and Islamic-based violent extremists[4] found that online radicalization features much more prominently in the latter group.[5] Thus, while it is known from the evidence that the Internet can act as a facilitator in the processes of radicalization, the mechanisms underlying this remain less clear.[6] An area that may provide some insight is a small but growing collection of computational approaches which accurately identify individuals with violent extremist views in online contexts to empirically detect signs of their radicalization.[7] Though work in this field is primarily concerned with the efficiency of the detection methods,[8] an understanding of why extremists communicate their beliefs online is helpful as advancements in their detection open the possibility of interventions in their trajectories.[9]

What remains unexplored is whether evidence exists that potentially explains the reliance these individuals place on the various linguistic manifestations of their beliefs online, which classification studies use to predict their degrees of association with extremist ideology. This is equally important, as it may offer explanations for their behavior that are rooted in factors not easily observed in their communication. To shed light on this area, this study will delineate the fine-grained expressions of ideology observed in classification studies into a series of dimensions that may be used to organize extremist communication. This is useful as it may reveal patterns of constructs that are used to influence would-be extremists and maintain the ideology of established extremists.

An understanding of why different populations of extremists share their ideology in this way needs to be explored, as those who become radicalized or commit terrorism have generally been exposed to the content of extremist communication.[10] Furthermore, earlier work found that changes in the linguistic expressions of ideology among those who adopt violent extremism could predict the future occurrence of their violent acts.[11] Therefore, using the dimensions as an organizing framework, this study will conduct a systematic review of literature to understand the factors that may explain the communication observed among extremists within the boundaries of the framework. Beyond the review, such a framework is also of benefit to researchers who wish to undertake wider analyses of extremist communication, which necessarily require clear organizing principles for working with vast amounts of data.[12]

### ***Systematic Reviews of Extremism, Radicalization, and Terrorism***

Previous systematic reviews conducted within the last five years included reviews of the most prevalent constructs, factors, and hypotheses in radicalization (n = 57),[13] as well as radicalization into violent extremism (n = 148),[14] and suicide terrorism (n = 45).[15] Another group of reviews focused on the disengagement from violent extremism (n = 114),[16] risk and protective factors against radicalization and extremism (n = 57),[17] and methodological quality of the instruments developed to identify risk factors (n = 37).[18] Other relevant reviews considered the role of the Internet in radicalization processes (n = 88)[19] and the state of primary research on extremist organizational propaganda online (n = 23).[20] Only a single systematic review focused specifically on the pathways and processes associated with radicalization and extremism among Muslims in Western societies (n = 17),[21] while the other reviews all included studies from predominantly Western left- or right-wing political extremism in their work.

It is clear what remains lacking in the study of violent extremist communication is a connection between two growing areas built on empirical evidence: high-performance computational classification approaches to identify and detect communication marked by the content of violent extremism, radicalization, and terrorism and the more traditional research approaches in these areas that may provide possible explanatory factors for the communication being observed. To the end of building such a bridge, the present study is the first interdisciplinary attempt to bring together these two empirical areas of research to shed light on individual-level extremist communication in this way.

### ***Toward a Practical Framework for Extremists Constructs***

Recent work on extremist communication found that all the classification studies reviewed had models which relied on variations of words and phrases used by extremists in their discussions and could be placed into a schema of four linguistic dimensions: conflict, emotion, religion, and role. Through an analysis of the terms with strong predictive potential which were identified across these studies, it was possible for the study to group individuals' communication together thematically. These dimensions encompassed information exchanges about various conflict behaviors, emotive experiences, religious knowledge, and the functions assumed by individuals in various social roles.[22]

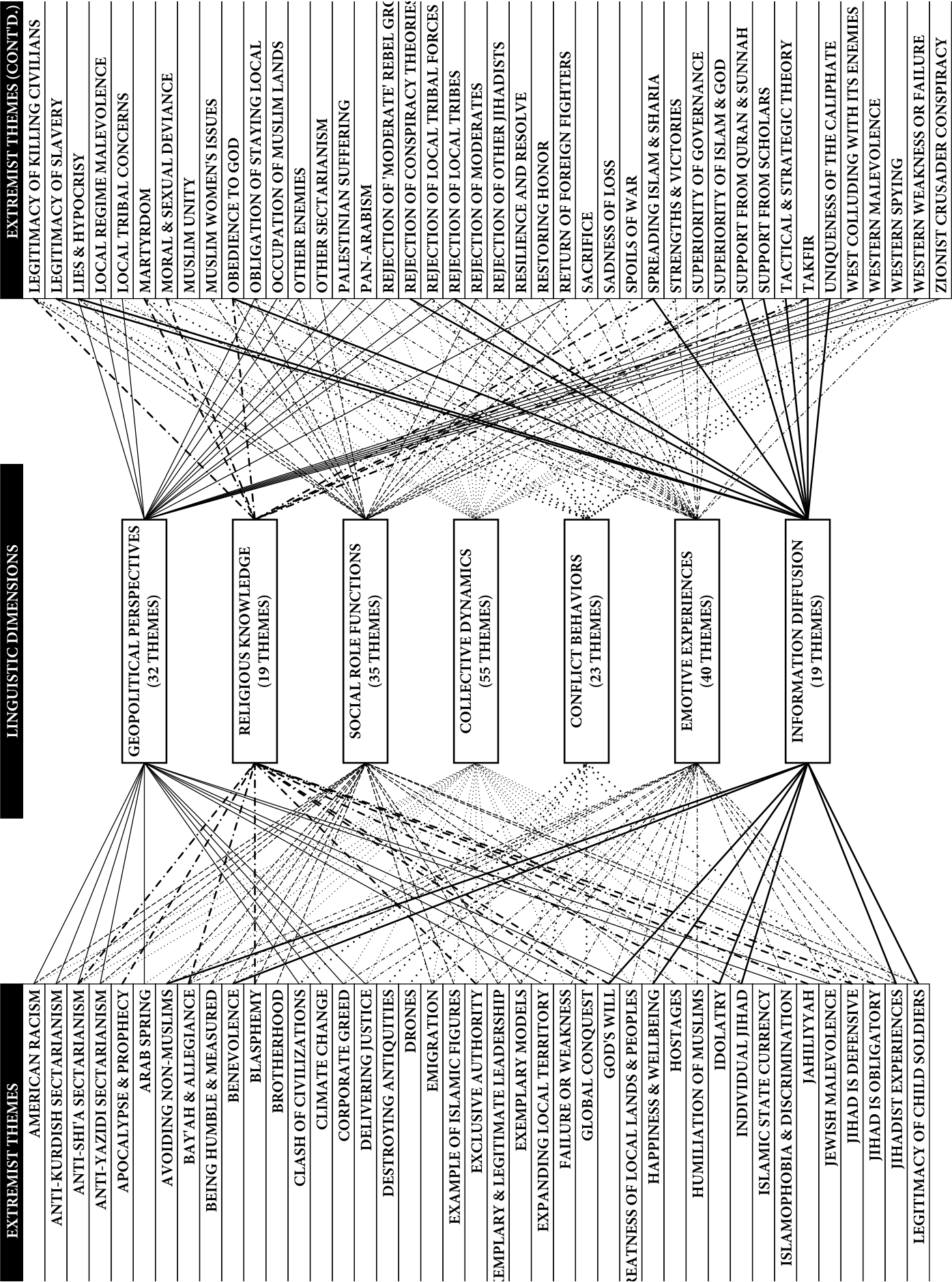
The terms themselves were used by extremists to express many common themes found in their communication and broader collective consciousness, which were summarized by Droogan and Peattie[23] from their review of the literature and their grounded theory approach to coding ideological communication. Further analysis found that 98.8% of these themes included at least one dimension of conflict, emotion, religion, or role, or one of the following additional dimensions: an extremist's geopolitical perspectives, their involvement with collectives, or how they spread information. As shown in Figure 1, each identified theme contained 2.7 of these dimensions on average. Table 1 defines each of the seven dimensions and further estimates their prevalence in extremist classification studies, based on the actual terms included in the models (n = 28) they developed. As can be seen from these analyses, the dimensions are well-represented in both the fine-grained terms and broader themes that extremists use to communicate.

**Table 1:** Linguistic dimension definitions and prevalence in extremist classification studies.

| <b>Dimension</b> | <b>Definition</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Prevalence (%)</b> |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Geopolitic       | Views of geographic or political factors that characterize or influence a country or region. Includes constructs that refer to nations, territories, cities, towns, or villages in a general or specific sense.                                    | 78.6                  |
| Religion         | Exemplifies awareness of religious faith, practice, or experience. Included are references to religious concepts, customs, laws, texts, as well as events, or places of religious significance.                                                    | 75                    |
| Collective       | Signified by references to various groups or organizations of people. The range of constructs include collectives characterized by their ideological, military, or political properties, as well as on ethnic or religious grounds.                | 71.4                  |
| Role             | Designated by social relations that involve two or more persons who occupy similar or different social roles. Roles can be denoted by social positions of closeness, religion, named or unnamed authority, or conflict relative to others.         | 71.4                  |
| Conflict         | Actions in or reactions to a battle, fight, or struggle. Indicates behavior which involves physical force intended to damage, hurt, or kill someone or something, as well as support for conflict among or within different individuals or groups. | 67.9                  |
| Emotion          | Instances of observing, encountering, or undergoing emotions or feelings. Includes a wide range of basic or more complex social emotions that involve moral, personal, or sympathetic factors.                                                     | 46.4                  |
| Diffusion        | Attempts to create, validate, or spread information designed to influence belief or behavior. These attempts can include references to various sources or purported knowledge that deems an issue as correct or incorrect.                         | 46.4                  |

Prevalence = percentage of classification studies (n = 28) that included terms with predictive properties from a respective dimension.

Figure 1: Linguistic dimensions found in extremist communication themes (n = 83).



To illustrate how the dimensions can be used to organize extremist communication with a practical example, the following is a statement from a classification data set that was translated from Arabic and made by a sympathizer of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on June 6, 2015, via Twitter.

“We announce (with pleasure) the news of brother Abu Anas Warqa’s (the migrant) martyrdom, a soldier among the soldiers of the Islamic State, and his martyrdom occurred in the battles of east Al-Raqqah Province.”[24]

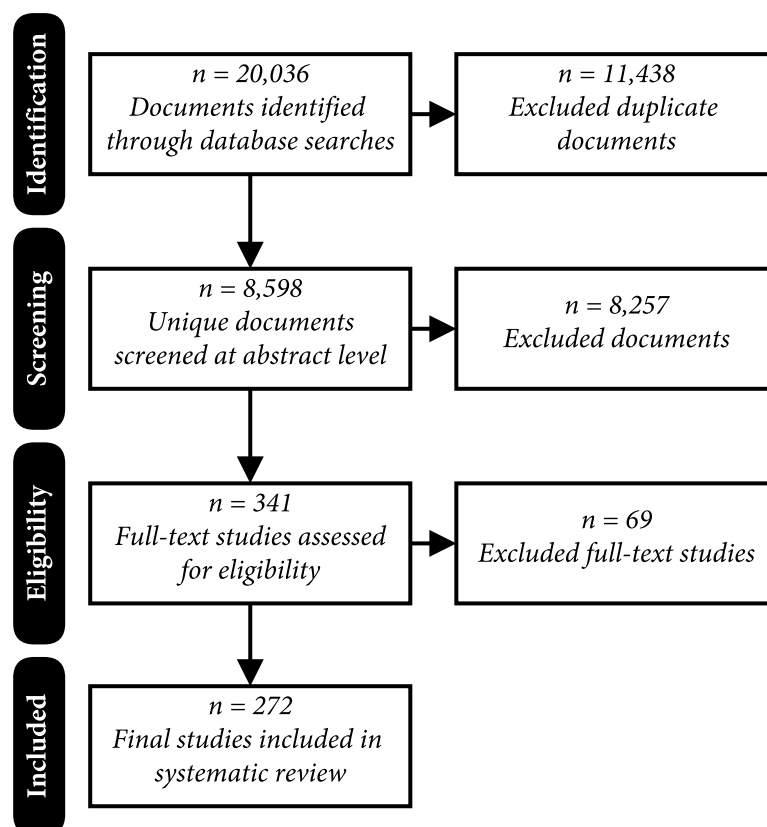
The terms in the statement include the role played by an individual: “Abu Anas Warqa” who held enough positive authority to make him worthy of being named. He was presented in a sense of closeness as a fraternal “brother,” occupied a positive fighting role as a “soldier,” and a positive faithful role as “the migrant.” These positive notions of social role were presented with the emotional sentiment of “pleasure.” The concept of “martyrdom” was also mentioned, which holds significance from a religious perspective. The state of conflict that resulted in his death, “the battles,” was given as well. Furthermore, the statement contains an event of political significance which took place in “east Al-Raqqah Province,” the presentation of an extremist organization, ISIS, as a positive in-group, and the words the author used to “announce” the “news” which adds a sense of journalistic credibility to their propaganda efforts designed to influence others.

When these terms are placed next to similar analyses of communication across tens of thousands of extremists and non-extremists, their occurrences become instrumental to the prediction of whether an individual communicated information indicative of a radicalized state. By using the dimensions in the way demonstrated, it is clear they are potentially useful as thematic categories to identify and group the expressions of various constructs used by extremists in their communication of ideology. The sections that follow will operationalize these dimensions as an organizing framework for the systematic review of empirical evidence, which may explain the observation of various forms of ideological communication among extremists.

## Methods

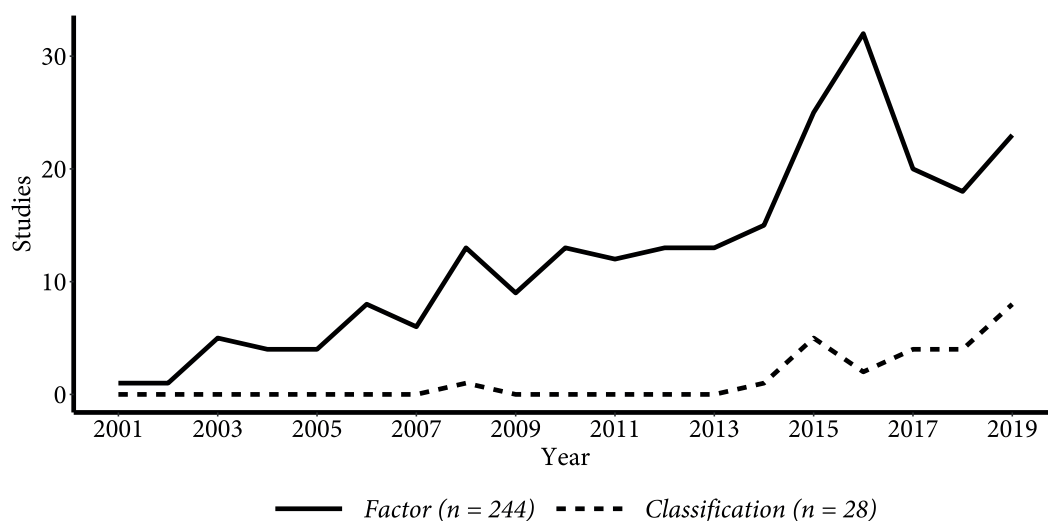
A systematic review of literature was conducted to identify individual-level factors associated with susceptibility to, and participation in, Islamic-based violent extremism. It is proposed that these factors can offer explanations for the communication observed among extremists, specifically in online contexts. Accordingly, the literature review was limited to empirical studies of individuals who (1) were attracted to, or showed support for, violent extremist ideologies, (2) were at risk of radicalization or had been radicalized into violent extremism, or (3) engaged, or had engaged, in terrorism. The factors were reviewed for their potential to explain the manifestation of ideology observed in extremist communication, which has become a useful means to identify and differentiate signs of radicalization.

Data sources for the review were the ProQuest, Scopus, and Web of Science bibliographic databases. Documents were limited to (1) scholarly journal articles, (2) books, (3) technical reports, and (4) conference proceedings. The preliminary search was restricted to the following search terms (search results were upper- and lowercase-insensitive): (*extremi\** OR *radicali\** OR *terrori\**) AND (*islam\** OR *jiḥad\** OR *muslim\** OR *salafi\** OR *wahhabi\**). After duplicates were filtered from the search results, a total of 8,598 documents were retained for further evaluation. Initial screening included the titles and abstracts of these documents to determine whether it was likely to be an empirical study. This was done by an evaluation of whether the abstract mentioned or inferred the use of data that involved individuals, which resulted in 341 documents. The full text of each of these documents was examined and the final set of literature was restricted to studies that presented findings at the individual level based on primary research and original data of samples that included extremists. A total of 272 (3.2%) studies met the criteria and were included in the final review (see Figure 2 for the systematic search process). Twenty-eight of these included studies formed part of the extremist classification work.

**Figure 2:** Results of systematic literature search.

## Results

Most studies included in the systematic review were published between 2010-2020 (80.5%), while a smaller percentage were from 1980-2009 (19.5%) (see Figure 3). The majority of these studies either developed collections of individual cases from primary sources, including official and court documents (47.8%), or used questionnaires as their primary research instrument (27.9%). The remaining studies conducted interviews (22.1%), and a small number relied on mixed methods research based on these instruments (2.2%). Not all the studies collected unique data; 16 samples were reused across 43 studies, predominantly in research on online extremists (31.8%), which relied on a few core social media data sets.

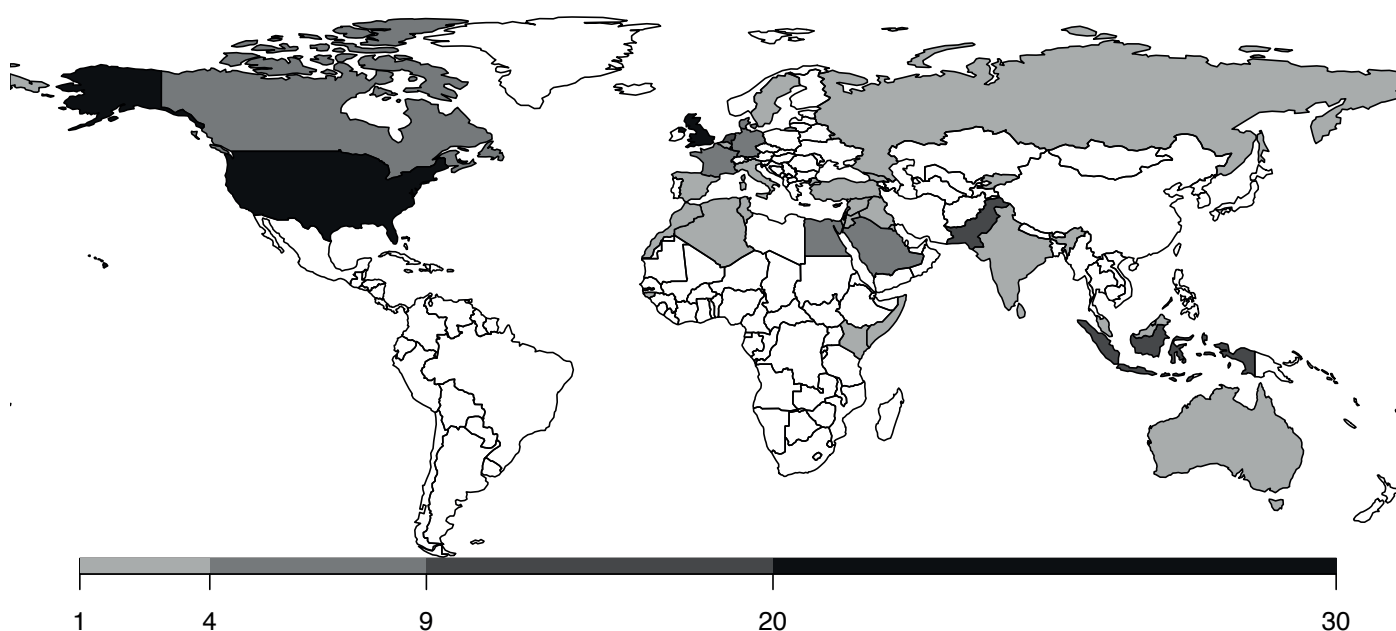
**Figure 3:** Distribution of included empirical studies over time (number of studies per year).

A total of 50 unique ideological, political, and military groups and organizations were identified in the samples used by the studies. These extremist ideological classifications were determined through an investigation of designated terrorist group lists and primary source documents produced by the groups and organizations. Identified ideologies broadly ranged from Salafi and Shi'a jihadism, Deobandi fundamentalism, Islamism, and pro-Palestinian and Pakistani militancy (see Table 2).

Individual types were disaggregated based on information presented about the sample in each study. The types ranged from comparatively rich data about individuals, such as group- and lone-actor terrorists, suicide bombers, foreign fighters, and online extremists, to more general sample information, such as convicts, youth, and population-based samples upon whom theories of extremism could be tested. Others included unspecified general violent individuals (e.g., Islamists, jihadists, and homegrown terrorists) and at-risk, or radicalized, individuals.

The countries of residence reported or discerned for the majority of individuals in these samples spanned 36 states, with >70% being drawn from 10 countries: United States of America (14.4%), United Kingdom (13.4%), Indonesia (8.1%), Pakistan (6.7%), Palestine (6.7%), Netherlands (5.7%), France (4.3%), Lebanon (4.3%), Denmark (3.3%), and Germany (3.3%). Figure 4 details the distribution of the samples for all the studies included in the review, excluding online extremists since their countries of residence could not be reliably identified.

**Figure 4:** Countries of residence (n = 36) for >50% of a respective sample across 244 studies. Darker shades indicate more studies with samples drawn from a specific country.



**Table 2:** Groups and organizations in individual level studies, ideological classifications, and sample statistics (mean and standard deviation).

| Group/organization                           | Ideology                  | Studies ( $\mu$ , $\sigma$ ) |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Abu Nidal Organisation                       | pro-Palestinian militancy | 1 (5)                        |
| Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade                      | pro-Palestinian militancy | 1 (39)                       |
| Al-Badr                                      | pro-Pakistani militancy   | 2 (54)                       |
| Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya                       | Salafi jihadism           | 3 (10, 5)                    |
| Al-Muhajiroun                                | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (30)                       |
| Al-Nusrah Front                              | Salafi jihadism           | 2 (190)                      |
| Al-Qa'ida (unspecified)                      | Salafi jihadism           | 12 (375.3, 504.1)            |
| Al-Qa'ida in Iraq                            | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (1,404)                    |
| Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula           | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (77)                       |
| Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb             | Salafi jihadism           | 2 (49.5, 27.5)               |
| Al-Shabaab                                   | Salafi jihadism           | 7 (47.83, 47.7)              |
| Darul Islam                                  | Islamism                  | 1 (9)                        |
| Democratic Front f/t Liberation of Palestine | pro-Palestinian militancy | 2 (9.33, 3.4)                |
| Egyptian Islamic Jihad                       | Salafi jihadism           | 2 (10, 5)                    |
| Fatah                                        | pro-Palestinian militancy | 4 (21.75, 25.3)              |
| Hamas                                        | pro-Palestinian militancy | 10 (223.7, 431.3)            |
| Harkat-ul-Mujahideen                         | Deobandi fundamentalism   | 2 (18)                       |
| Hizb ut-Tahrir                               | Islamism                  | 1 (3)                        |
| Hizb-ul-Mujahideen                           | pro-Pakistani militancy   | 3 (367, 340)                 |
| Hizballah                                    | Shi'a jihadism            | 5 (227.8, 217.4)             |
| Hofstad Network                              | Salafi jihadism           | 2 (40)                       |
| Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba                       | Islamism                  | 1 (40)                       |
| Islamic Action Front                         | Islamism                  | 1 (654)                      |
| Islamic Defender Front                       | Islamism                  | 1 (3)                        |
| Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine          | pro-Palestinian militancy | 6 (37.6, 61.7)               |
| Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan               | Islamism                  | 2 (92.5, 15.5)               |
| Islamic State of Iraq and Syria              | Salafi jihadism           | 14 (133.8, 212.3)            |
| Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades                | pro-Palestinian militancy | 2 (43, 22)                   |
| Jaish-e-Mohammed                             | Deobandi fundamentalism   | 3 (12.5, 6.5)                |
| Jam'iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh                 | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (30)                       |
| Jama'at al-Muslimin                          | Salafi jihadism           | 3 (34)                       |
| Jamaat Ansar al-Sunnah                       | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (1,404)                    |
| Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid                       | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (9)                        |
| Jemaah Islamiyah                             | Salafi jihadism           | 10 (65.2, 81)                |
| Lashkar-e-Jhangvi                            | Deobandi fundamentalism   | 1 (181)                      |
| Lashkar-e-Taiba                              | Salafi jihadism           | 6 (196.4, 360.9)             |
| Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group             | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (77)                       |
| Mujahedeen Kayamany                          | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (2)                        |
| Mujahedeen KOMPAK                            | Salafi jihadism           | 4 (23, 16.6)                 |
| Mujahedeen Tanah Runtuh                      | Salafi jihadism           | 1 (12)                       |
| Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt                  | Islamism                  | 2 (10, 5)                    |
| Muttahida Jihad Council                      | pro-Pakistani militancy   | 2 (2)                        |
| Palestine Liberation Organisation            | pro-Palestinian militancy | 2 (28.67, 26.2)              |
| Palestinian Liberation Front                 | pro-Palestinian militancy | 1 (65)                       |
| Popular Front f/t Liberation of Palestine    | pro-Palestinian militancy | 3 (28, 21.7)                 |
| Taliban                                      | Deobandi fundamentalism   | 1 (304, 123)                 |
| Tanzim                                       | pro-Palestinian militancy | 1 (39)                       |
| Tehreek-e-Jihad                              | Deobandi fundamentalism   | 2 (1)                        |
| Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi        | Deobandi fundamentalism   | 2 (9)                        |
| Tehrik-ul-Mujahideen                         | Islamism                  | 2 (5)                        |

Most studies that built custom collections of individual cases examined online extremists ( $n = 54$ ) and group-actor terrorists ( $n = 32$ ). Group-actor terrorists also formed most of the samples for studies that conducted interviews ( $n = 24$ ). Surprisingly, many studies tested extremist-related questions on general population-based samples ( $n = 54$ ), most of which used questionnaire instruments. Table 3 provides summary statistics on the number of studies identified per individual type and the mean and standard deviation of sample sizes used in the studies.

**Table 3:** Individual types and instrument statistics of 272 included studies (number of studies, mean of  $n$  sample sizes, and standard deviation of  $n$  sample sizes).

| Individual Type       | Case              | Questionnaire     | Interview       |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Extremist (online)    | 54 (1.8e4, 4.6e4) |                   | 2 (16.5, 1.5)   |
| Foreign fighter       | 10 (2.9e3, 8.1e3) |                   | 6 (34.7, 26.5)  |
| Group-actor terrorist | 32 (479.8, 871.4) | 10 (192.5, 199.1) | 24 (35.9, 29.6) |
| Lone-actor terrorist  | 8 (89.8, 71.6)    |                   |                 |
| Suicide bomber        | 6 (748.7, 891.2)  |                   | 2 (51)          |
| Convict               | 7 (128.2, 118.2)  | 2 (126, 101)      | 11 (48.1, 39.5) |
| Population (general)  |                   | 54 (3.3e3, 6.3e3) | 8 (71, 79.1)    |
| Unspecified (at-risk) |                   |                   | 12 (18.2, 13.3) |
| Unspecified (violent) | 17 (187.8, 214.7) |                   |                 |
| Youth                 |                   | 15 (163.1, 126.1) | 3 (121.7, 68.8) |

The sections that follow present the findings of these studies in the context of extremist factors identified in the individuals studied. It will use these findings to explore possible explanations for the communication observed among extremists. It is important to note that overlap exists in the findings of these studies, and as a result, findings were restricted to unique factors that contributed to the overall schema of what is known.

### ***Geopolitical Perspectives***

The inclusion of geopolitical terms in models that attempt to identify extremists has consistently produced accurate models (95% CI, 87.2 to 92.7%;  $n = 22$ ). The presence of these terms in their communication may be explained by various perceptions in extremist and at-risk populations of relationships among countries, and subsequently their belief systems, as well as grievances held by these individuals that they directed at foreign and domestic entities.

The perceived invasion of sovereign countries by the West, as a whole, was found in the reasoning of several militants involved in group-actor terrorism.[25] The perception of a schism between Islam and the West, or that Islam was under attack, also existed in the cases of would-be and successful homegrown terrorists,[26], convicted terrorists[27], as well as in population-based samples.[28] Furthermore, anti-Western sentiment was readily found in the reasoning of jihadist militants and their relatives,[29] and in the content written by members of extremist networks on social media.[30] Another study found that individuals who specifically used online forums for political expression were more likely to express support for group-actor terrorism than those who engaged in conventional political activity, such as attending political meetings or protests.[31]

Unsurprisingly, observations of online extremists showed grievances were actively used in attempts to motivate others to action.[32] Grievances that blamed Western nations for geopolitical events, such as human rights violations resulting from the global war on terrorism, were present in population-based samples from the Arab[33] and non-Arab world,[34] foreign fighters,[35] and group-[36] and lone-actor terrorists,[37] where grievances were identified as prime drivers for their participation in violent jihadism. Studies of group-actor militants and suicide bombers found that motivation for their activities stemmed from responses to state aggression[38] or involved nationalistic goals.[39] Geopolitical involvement by individuals was evidenced by studies on foreign fighters from both developed and developing nations, with variations in the conflict theaters

chosen by these jihadists.[40]

As the findings of these studies suggest, geopolitical perspectives, particularly comparative perceptions of the West and Islam, form a core part of extremist ideology. Manifesting linguistic expressions of this nature will rely on the use of specific countries and demonyms in geopolitical statements, which are basic identifiable constructs that are connected to more complex ideas such as grievances. Specific terms found in the geopolitical perspectives of extremists have identified them through an inclusion of these expressions in high-performing classification models. Examples include references to the establishment of an Islamic khilafah hostile to un-Islamic nations,[41] the use of names for places preferred by extremist groups and organizations (e.g., ISIS's name for the city of Kobani, Ein Islam),[42] and communication about events in various countries (e.g., Iraq),[43] as well as at lower territorial levels such as in different wilayat or territories[44] (see Table 4).

**Table 4:** Terms observed in communication on geopolitical perspectives and included in predictive models (n = 22).

| Accuracy                   | Example Terms                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 87.2 to 92.7%<br>(95% CI). | aleppo,[45] ein islam,[46] gaza,[47] (islamic) caliphate/khilafah,[48] (islamic) country,[49] levant,[50] mosul,[51] palestinian,[52] palmyra,[53] province/territory,[54] ramadi,[55] syria,[56] the west,[57] united states,[58] wilayah,[59] ... |

### ***Religious Knowledge***

The use of specific terms that carry religious significance in classification models has proven fruitful in the accurate separation of extremists and their content from their non-extremist counterparts (95% CI, 85.5 to 91.6%; n = 21). Unsurprisingly, individuals' understanding of cultural systems, such as practices, sacred texts, and holy places also emerged as inalienable features in studies of extremists, which may explain the predictive success of these terms.

Studies found that some jihadists adhered to rigoristic religious beliefs[60] and that both on-[61] and offline[62] environments were used to establish credibility, defend a way of practicing religion, and engage in extremist activism. Others found that extremist organizations focused on the production of a jihadist culture well-versed in their interpretations of Islamic moral principles[63] or recruited individuals on whom they could impress their own religious knowledge.[64] For example, a study of the Islamic Action Front found the organization's active members were far more educated generally than their national population-based counterparts.[65] Similarly, suicide attackers from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad were found to be better educated than their non-suicide counterparts in these organizations.[66] Indeed, an interest in Islamic studies was found in a range of extremist group-actor samples,[67] where the formal study of Islam represented a significant part of their tertiary educational background,[68] and included madrasa and religious seminary attendance.[69] Other studies, such as some focusing on group-actor extremists from Jemaah Islamiyah[70] and suicide attackers,[71] supported this finding and observed a strong association between terrorist activity and radical madrasa or religious school exposure.

In addition to finding support among group-actor samples for the notion that violent actions were divinely ordained,[72] or that the promise of an attractive afterlife for those who die as martyrs was a motivation for would-be suicide attackers,[73] support for violent jihad was also found in population-based samples.[74] Some studies identified religiosity as a relatively strong factor in the radicalization of individuals,[75] such as religious motivations by perpetrators for their acts[76] and religious legitimacy arguments for fighting by information disseminators in jihadist networks,[77] which relied on a certain level of interpretation.[78] Such interpretation was not necessarily sophisticated and could be superficial, as was found in a group-actor sample of ISIS members,[79] or relied on ideas that were influenced by earlier forms of Islamist political ideology.[80] Another study of extremist views in a population-based sample found those at risk of depression experienced protection against depression from a strong religious identity, but that religion, although protective, also served

to legitimize and ultimately determine targets of violence after radicalization had occurred.[81]

Some studies found that individuals at risk of radicalization sought to develop an identity[82] and that an oppositional identity rooted in ideology formed in individuals who became radicalized,[83] which may provide some explanation for these individuals being absolutist.[84] Indoctrination was found to use ideas and images of a bipolar struggle between Islam and the West,[85] where the world was divided into 'us' and 'them' experiences,[86] and relied on the use of Islamic religious vocabularies.[87] Another study found the excommunication practice of takfir was used by jihadists to dichotomize their worldview and denounce other Muslims as kuffar, or unbelievers, to justify acts against them.[88] A negative view of those who offended Islam was also found to be a significant predictor for the support of violence[89] in population-based samples, including support for specific groups like ISIS among those who favored the implementation of absolutist rules under Shari'a law and clerical rule.[90] Further evidence for a dichotomous cognitive process was found at the neurocognitive level in the form of diminished activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, inferior frontal gyrus, and parietal cortex (regions implicated in calculating costs and consequences), when group-actor supporters of Lashkar-e-Taiba conveyed their willingness to fight and die for 'sacred' versus 'non-sacred' values.[91]

Given the prominence of religious and related constructs in determining support for, and engagement with, ideological extremism, these constructs will likely find expression as distinct linguistic terms in communication. The use of such terminology signals an awareness of religious faith, practice, and experience, regardless of how the knowledge was developed or how aligned it is with mainstream interpretations. Many such terms have been observed in communication among extremists of their religious knowledge and were included in high-performing extremist classification models. Examples include concepts such as Jannah or the final abode of righteous Islamic believers,[92] jihad or striving in the path of Allah,[93] important events like Ramadan,[94] different masjids or places of worship,[95] and practices such as takfir derived from interpretations of texts[96] (see Table 5).

**Table 5:** Terms observed in communication on religious knowledge and included in predictive models (n = 21).

| Accuracy                   | Example Terms                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 85.5 to 91.6%<br>(95% CI). | allah/god,[97] hadith,[98] islam,[99] jannah,[100] jihad,[101] kufr,[102]<br>madrassa,[103] masjid,[104] quran,[105] ramadan,[106] remembrance,[107]<br>sharia,[108] shirk,[109] taghut,[110] takfir,[111] ... |

### ***Social Role Functions***

Outside of their use in classification models (95% CI, 86.7 to 92.9%; n = 20), the many roles that were referred to in extremist communication signified that extremists recognized a complex social structure in their discussions. Indeed, the social and behavioral attributes of individuals formed part of the analysis of a range of studies and as a result, a number of recurring relations and interactions with others were identified.

Studies of group-actor terrorists and Islamist women involved in political conflict found that women played a near equivalent role in these organizations, but exhibited distinct role involvement mechanisms compared to their male counterparts,[112] such as occupying caring, support, and ideological roles. Other studies that explored these roles among extremist women in the online context found that pro-ISIS networks contained a number of discernible female roles that fostered notions of belonging,[113] including baqiya members (a newer term adopted by female ISIS supporters to mean those who persisted against efforts to suspend their accounts and were accepted into the virtual ISIS 'family'),[114] muhajirat (female migrants with 'success' stories in propaganda),[115] and so-called fangirls (enthusiastic young females).[116] Indeed, a population-based study found women were significantly more likely to support a sectarian group with a female outreach wing than one without such efforts.[117]

Relatively high levels of marriage among jihadists indicated that social relationships were important in these

populations.[118] Social bonds were a prominent driver to all major entry points to jihadist organizations,[119] and familial pressure was identified as a persistent force in the lifespan of ideological engagement for group-actor jihadists.[120] Studies that examined bombings in foreign fighters,[121] homegrown-, [122] group-, [123] and suicide attacker[124] samples found evidence of preexisting familial bonds and concentric circles that facilitated their recruitment processes. Other studies stressed the importance of family, friend, and peer networks due to their consistent presence in individuals who embedded themselves[125] or traveled to engage in[126] or support terrorist activity.[127] Social mechanisms within these networks such as reciprocal peer influence and immersion were identified as driving forces in the radicalization of homegrown jihadists,[128] where the role of friendship became increasingly concentrated inside the organization for those already involved.[129]

A number of studies found that potential recruits were exposed to leaders with experience,[130] knowledge,[131] and charisma.[132] Such exposure occurred both on- and offline, in a wide range of convict,[133] group-actor,[134] and youth samples,[135] and resulted in a desire by individuals to socially emulate their role models. Both foreign and domestic fighters often experienced contact with a veteran,[136] with relationships often being formed with prominent Islamist leaders.[137] Others also echoed this finding in the form of mentorship,[138] and one study concluded that foreign fighters sought spiritual authority in individuals for inspiration and guidance.[139] Searches for meaning,[140] identity,[141] and significance[142] were also present in individuals, including youth,[143] who were in the direct environment of those who became foreign fighters and suicide attackers. For example, in the cases of homegrown[144] and group-actor[145] radicalization, evidence was found of identity exploitation by those in leadership roles to influence, control, and guide individuals, which capitalized on the interplay between individuals and their environment.[146]

Those who partake in the social structure around an individual inherently occupy a type of social role relative to that person. Since roles organize behavior and give structure to positions in an individual's local network,[147] it is expected that linguistic references to these relationships will manifest as descriptions of the roles that can be played by individuals, such as those who occupy roles involved in conflict, are close to each other, offer guidance or instruction, and so on. Roles may also be referred to by an individual without direct or indirect connection to the role itself, which signifies recognition of its status. Specific examples of social roles referred to in extremist communication that have been successfully exploited for their predictive properties include named and unnamed roles of authority (e.g., Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,[148] commander[149]), closeness (e.g., brother),[150] conflict (e.g., crusader),[151] and religion (e.g., hanif or true believer)[152] (see Table 6).

**Table 6:** Terms observed in communication on social role functions and included in predictive models (n = 20).

| Accuracy                   | Example Terms                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 86.7 to 92.9%<br>(95% CI). | abu musab al-zarqawi,[153] al-abu al-baid/al-qarib/enemy,[154] assad,[155]<br>brother,[156] commander,[157] crusader,[158] (imam) anwar al-awlaki,[159]<br>jihadi/mujahid,[160] khalifah,[161] kuffar/infidel,[162] muslim,[163] prisoner,[164]<br>prophet,[165] sheikh,[166] soldier,[167] ... |

### ***Collective Dynamics***

Classification approaches have found that models performed well if they accounted for references to relationships between individual extremists and different forms of collectives, such as groups or organizations that were viewed as friendly or adversarial (95% CI, 86.5 to 92.5%; n = 20). The persistence with which these relationships were discussed in their communication may be explained by the importance of inter- and intra-group dynamics in extremist populations, as well as the various behaviors and psychological processes encouraged and elicited through these dynamics.

A number of questionnaire research studies investigated dynamics between and within groups of at-risk Muslim youth, and found a prevalence of shared ideology,[168] perceptions of inter-group threat,[169] and in-group superiority,[170] where collective and social identity salience were present. These group dynamics

were observed in experimental research on anti-semitism[171] and Sunni-Shi'a differences,[172] where strong adherence to the in-group predicted aggression against the out-group, such as approval of attacks and suicide bombing. Other studies found that justification for suicide bombing and political violence were more likely if respondents were highly disconnected, disordered,[173] or lacked a sense of belonging.[174]

A study found that when compared to foreign-born Muslims, Western-born Muslims were more vulnerable to the impact of perceived group-based relative deprivation and scored higher on extremism scales as a result.[175] Studies of foreign fighters found that the drive to help those who were perceived as mistreated by other groups was so strong in these individuals that it developed into a sense of obligation to act in defense of their in-group.[176] This phenomenon was noted in experimental research on the psychology of Islamism, which found a positive association between Islamist affinities and a preoccupation with group-based dominance and submission.[177] Others found that extremists attempted to distinguish between those who are 'true' or 'false' to Islam in their interpretations of the world.[178] Interestingly, a study of group-actor militants found that while this dichotomous thinking played a role in the reason they joined the group, the same separation of true and false Islam contributed toward their ultimate disillusionment with the group.[179]

Perceived discrimination is common among Muslim diaspora populations and was found to be positively associated with support for anti-Western political violence.[180] Support for this perception was also observed in at-risk Muslim youth,[181] jihadist converts,[182] and ISIS-affiliated online extremists.[183] Studies on religious leaders[184] and members of Muslim communities stopped and searched under terrorism acts[185] found a perception of institutional racism directed at Muslims. A study of al-Muhajiroun members, for example, showed that experiences of perceived racism intensified their attraction to the group's message and leadership.[186] A study that examined geo-referenced data on the behavior of online extremists found that local level measures of anti-Muslim animosity correlated significantly with indicators of online radicalization, including posting messages in support of groups like ISIS.[187] To this point, individuals who became radicalized and joined ISIS as foreign fighters reported that they attempted to close the gap between an 'un-Islamic' past and a better, redeemed future.[188] Indeed, the sizable undercurrent of ideological sympathy and support for specific groups, such as al-Qa'ida and ISIS, in respondents from both Muslim-majority countries and Western Muslim diasporas was found to be held together by the Internet.[189]

Feelings of injustice and prejudice were echoed in samples of Muslim youth,[190] lone-actor terrorists,[191] and incarcerated group-actor terrorists.[192] The need for justice as a response to perceived injustice was identified as part of a radicalization pathway in Muslim youth, including educated youth,[193] who were radicalized.[194] Other studies identified the presence of environments of moral and intellectual encouragement[195] for the actions of individuals, created and supported by established extremist organizations.[196] This phenomenon was also found in pro-ISIS online aggregates that grew through nuanced mechanisms of homophily,[197] and supported the trajectories of individual followers with information, who passed through numerous groups,[198] from relatively small to large networks.[199]

The prevalence of ideology, perceptions of prejudice, and subsequent drives toward justice found in these studies speak to the complex dynamics of extremism that lie between different collectives and within individuals' identification with particular collectives. Elements of these dynamics have been identified in extremist communication and exploited by classification models. Examples include linguistic expressions that reference specific collectives (and their adversaries) from smaller groups such as specific rebel groups like the Army of Islam,[200] larger organizations, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,[201] to entire communities of faith drawn on for ideological purposes, such as ummat al-Islam[202] (see Table 7).

**Table 7:** Terms observed in communication on collective dynamics and included in predictive models (n = 20).

| Accuracy                   | Example Terms                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 86.5 to 92.5%<br>(95% CI). | al-nusra front,[203] al-qaeda,[204] army/militia (of),[205] civilians/people,[206] feb<br>17,[207] hamas,[208] hizb,[209] isis/islamic state,[210] khawarij,[211] pashtun,[212]<br>rabia adawiyya,[213] sahwat,[214] (the) jews,[215] (the) shia,[216] ummah,[217] ... |

## Conflict Behaviors

The often-intertwined relationships extremists share with conflict are well-established in the literature, both as external friction and as internal struggle, which may offer explanations for why the inclusion of conflict terms in extremist classification models have produced accurate results (95% CI, 85.8 to 91.9%;  $n = 19$ ).

Studies found that those with fundamentalist religious beliefs were more likely to be supportive of the use of violence to defend their faith across population-based samples from developed[218] and developing[219] nations, while sympathy for violence and terrorism was also found to be positively associated with psychosocial adversity, such as internal strife linked to anxiety, depression, and adverse life events.[220] For example, where followers believed jihad supported the use of violence, a strong association existed with the view that terrorists had valid grievances.[221] Training for violence was common among a number of populations of novice and experienced extremists,[222] such as overseas training,[223] firearms and bomb construction training,[224] or simply accessing technical training material online.[225] Jihadist leadership figures, in particular, tended to exhibit substantial battlefield experience,[226] while both group- and lone-actor[227] samples commonly identified with violence in their decision-making processes.[228] Interestingly, a significant minority of convicted jihadists remained welded to a militant mindset and are therefore more likely to reoffend upon release.[229]

A number of studies identified abuse[230] and traumatic events[231] suffered by individuals as contributory factors in their respective radicalization. A few studies found increased levels of popular support[232] for suicide attacks when a political reasoning or an attachment to political Islam was present.[233] Motivations to conduct martyrdom operations in group-actor samples were found to be based on the interests of their community and religion, despite the presence of suicidal tendencies in a number of potential suicide attackers.[234] Reminders of death (i.e., mortality salience) were also prevalent among online extremists[235] and have been found to increase an interest in martyrdom operations in youth samples,[236], as well as Islamic fundamentalism[237] and politically or religiously extreme views.[238]

Other studies found evidence that the environments which cultivated support for martyrdom operations relied on existing cultural schemata built into the popular imagination of how Islamic combatants engaged enemies of faith,[239] and that such environments acted to normalize[240] and socialize[241] violent jihad. Different drivers were observed and noted in a number of samples where individuals attempted to address issues that stemmed from a lack of existential meaning[242] and the perceived misrecognition of a Muslim identity in society.[243] Such actions included displays of resistance[244] and power,[245] overt rebellion,[246] and attempts to strengthen[247], maintain,[248] and defend a newfound sense of identity as 'true' Muslims.[249]

The presence of the many forms of ideologically driven conflict and struggle in the cognitive domains of extremists holds the potential to find expression in linguistic terms. These in turn identify not only violence and support thereof, but also the destructive actions directed at individuals outside of conflicts, such as abusive actions that result in the trauma they experience. Conflict behavior terms found in extremist communication that have contributed to accurate classification results include constructs that span the means and ends of war and weaponry (e.g., execution of suicide attacks,[250] the charge of Ansar executed by ISIS[251]) and the death and harm suffered as a result of these actions[252] (see Table 8).

**Table 8:** Terms observed in communication on conflict behaviors and included in predictive models ( $n = 19$ ).

| Accuracy                   | Example Terms                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 85.8 to 91.9%<br>(95% CI). | airstrike,[253] bomb/explosive,[254] charge of ansar,[255] crusade,[256] death,[257] destroy,[258] harm,[259] (khud-kush/suicide) attack,[260] kill/murder/slaughter,[261] rape,[262] terrorism,[263] threat,[264] under fire,[265] war,[266] wound,[267] ... |

## *Emotive Experiences*

The basic and social emotions that underpin ideological communication have served to improve the accuracy attained by classification models that incorporate these types of terms (95% CI, 84.2 to 92.5%;  $n = 13$ ). The performance of these terms may be explained by the range of conscious experiences that was identified in the study of extremists, based on their own thoughts and feelings, or those of others with whom they interacted.

Anxiety, fear, and hesitation were common experiences in would-be[268] and successful[269] suicide attackers prior to the execution of their mission, as well as among the online supporters of terrorist organizations.[270] Experiences of humiliation were found to be common among those who eventually committed suicide attacks for these organizations.[271] Anger and stress from significant hardship were also identified as contributory to the acts of homegrown jihadists,[272] Islamists,[273] and foreign fighters.[274] A study that examined the relationship between culture and terrorism found that population-based samples who were angry, hopeless, and experienced suffering showed more tolerance of terrorism.[275]

A number of extremist[276] and population[277] samples reported a deep sense of moral dissatisfaction based on a perceived decadence of modern institutions. Other socially complex experiences such as a need for commitment[278], emotional meaningfulness,[279] and a sense of a profound duty to enact revenge were identified in individuals who supported[280] or attempted to join[281] extremist organizations and in suicide attackers,[282] respectively. Research consistently found evidence of adverse life events,[283] identity issues,[284] and crises[285] in the backgrounds of group-actor samples and in convicted jihadists.[286] Personal uncertainty was an important determinant of a radical belief system[287] and obsessive ideological passion was often found to be anchored in a strong but insecure sense of identity.[288]

Whilst negative affective experiences featured prominently from a wide spectrum of anger (e.g., frustration,[289] hatred,[290] outrage[291]), sadness (e.g., humiliation,[292] neglect,[293] shame,[294] sympathy[295]), and fear (e.g., anxiety,[296] distress[297]), positive affective experiences such as ideological passion that underlie political or religious commitment[298] and excitement[299] were also present in the findings of studies. Studies identified a complex web of positive experiences that sought status through recognition[300] and esteem from others,[301] provided outlets for endured experiences,[302] and served altruistic goals.[303] However, negative experiences were also viewed positively, such as the perception of suicide attacks as noble.[304] An analysis of several online extremist samples found evidence that these individuals were more likely to express negative affects tied to perceived discrimination within and criticism of Western society, and positive affects in support of jihad, than average users of these publicly accessible social media.[305]

The wide and contrasting range of basic emotions present in the experiences of extremists make their identification as linguistic expressions a possibility. These expressions of basic emotions are also closely linked to more complex social emotions, such as those feelings that involve moral, personal, and sympathetic expressions about issues important to extremists. Specific examples of terms used in extremist classification models to identify signs of radicalization include descriptions of basic emotional states, such as feeling angry,[306] anxious, or stressed,[307] but also expressions of social emotions in the form of condemnation of,[308] or support for,[309] a particular matter that captures the attention of extremists (see Table 9).

**Table 9:** Terms observed in communication on emotive experiences and included in predictive models ( $n = 13$ ).

| Accuracy                   | Example Terms                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 84.2 to 92.5%<br>(95% CI). | anger/rage,[310] anxiety/stress,[311] condemnation,[312] disgust,[313]<br>(dis)trust,[314] fear,[315] forgiveness,[316] hatred,[317] joy/elation,[318]<br>malevolence,[319] regret,[320] sadness,[321] shame,[322] support,[323]<br>surprise,[324] ... |

## Information Diffusion

Many classification studies have included what they consider persuasive terms used by extremists in their models, which have produced accurate results in the identification of content indicative of radicalization (95% CI, 85.4 to 92.1%;  $n = 13$ ). The use of these terms may be explained by a range of studies that have observed the particular ways in which extremist information was created and transmitted to and from individuals in order to influence their beliefs and behaviors.

Studies have noted that extremist ideology influenced individuals through persuasion[325] and that extremists who possessed vast knowledge of Islam were attractive to recruits.[326] Research showed that such authority could be used to successfully manipulate normative beliefs about aggression toward others.[327] Other studies found that messages exchanged in radicalization processes attempted to disguise their true ideological intent[328] or were amplified and combined with jihadist interpretations of verses from the Qur'an.[329] Others, in turn, were found to develop a desire to be influenced by their chosen ideology[330] and spread the word given to them, known as *dawah*, either in-person[331] or online.[332]

Among those who sought interpretations of the Qur'an and sunnah, second and third generation immigrant Muslims were found to seek more literal interpretations of narratives.[333] Among population-based samples, support for scriptural literalism was found to coincide with support for religious violence.[334] A literalist religious outlook was also found to generate positive views of a specific violent group, such as al-Qa'ida.[335] Experimental research that investigated the relationship between persuasive narratives and costly actions, such as martyrdom operations, found that individuals who were high-perspective takers and experienced more physiological arousal from the narrative were more likely to engage in costly behavior.[336]

Narratives such as those found in the online environment often include tales of exploits by foreign fighters and individuals who joined extremist organizations as a means to enhance the persuasiveness of the narrative and project onto themselves a romanticized version of Islamic history, as was found by a study that examined individuals who joined ISIS.[337] Studies that examined the role of the Internet in the radicalization processes of extremists concluded that these individuals used the Internet as an echo chamber to find support for their ideas that were echoed by like-minded individuals in their communication with each other.[338] Studies of a youth sample deemed likely targets for radicalization by ISIS found that exposure to the group's online propaganda elicited support for, and trust in, the messaging, as well as a desire to exchange information and seek further interaction to get answers to their questions.[339] Furthermore, recent experimental research on ISIS found that exposure to counter-narratives against violent extremism resulted in increased support for the organization among individuals at greater risk of radicalization.[340]

Given that the processes of ideological persuasion and interpretation rely on both the effective construction and communication of ideas, the identification of these processes would likely include references to the specific means and modes of information diffusion, accompanied by linguistic expressions of verses, books, media, speeches, and so on. Examples of nuanced information diffusion embedded in the communication among extremists include references to media outlets that appear credible but produce propaganda such as the ISIS-affiliated Amaq News Agency,[341] claims of truth or untruth[342] often through the citation of various sources,[343] and requests to perpetuate the so-called knowledge or information derived from these sources[344] (see Table 10).

**Table 10:** Terms observed in communication on information diffusion and included in predictive models ( $n = 13$ ).

| Accuracy                   | Example Terms                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 85.4 to 92.1%<br>(95% CI). | according to,[345] al-furqan foundation,[346] amaq,[347] confess,[348] dabiq,[349] despite the disbelief,[350] falsehood,[351] information/news,[352] islam post,[353] know/truth,[354] knowledge,[355] media/video,[356] reply/retweet,[357] speech,[358] spread,[359] ... |

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## **Discussion**

The present study used a series of dimensions as a framework to organize the factors that may explain the communication observed among extremists. These were geopolitical perspectives, religious knowledge, social role functions, collective dynamics, conflict behaviors, emotive experiences, and information diffusion. These dimensions were chosen for their potential as thematic categories to group various constructs that these individuals used to express their ideology, which a small body of computational approaches have exploited to accurately identify extremists and signs of their radicalization ( $n = 28$ ). The search for possible explanatory factors behind their communication was informed by the empirical findings of a systematic review of literature, which produced a limited number of studies with such factors at the individual level of extremism ( $n = 244$ ). These studies used cases, questionnaires, and interviews as data-collection instruments. The important position of communication as a necessary precursory element in a large amount of violent action means an organizing framework to better understand and potentially explain such communication through empirical evidence is a useful contribution to the study of conflict. To the best of the author's knowledge, the systematic review conducted in this study is the largest open-access resource of its kind to date.

However, the work completed here is not without limitations. The evidence provided by the review as possible explanations for the communication observed among extremists was derived from the findings of studies that analyzed various samples from different populations. While it has been established that those susceptible to Islamic-based extremism who went on to commit violent acts were generally exposed to extremist communication,[360] future work should consider whether the dimensions are present in the communication that each of these different populations engage in across on- and offline mediums. Attempts to further distinguish different populations on cultural and demographic factors that can be reasonably delineated would also be beneficial. However, such inquiry may be limited by suggestions that various parts of individual factors such as those within a person's sociodemographic characteristics, criminal history, work and education, personal experiences, attitudes and beliefs, relationships, and mental health cannot easily be identified in their communication, despite potentially influencing their attraction to specific forms of ideology.[361] The full complexity of what an individual's psychopathological and psychological makeup deems important may be near impossible to capture in written content. As such these dimensions, whilst broad, cannot organize every factor which motivates extremist communication. However, the dimensions do appeal to a sociability bias of language,[362] which would be problematic in the search for extremist personality traits,[363] but from a communication perspective, such a bias sheds light on the language developed within and among extremists to facilitate their socialization.

A linguistic approach to extremism that can organize some of its communication, as well as the behavioral, cognitive, and emotive factors that may influence expressions of the extremist mindset, while imperfect, is a useful step toward fine-grained and practical research on dangerous ideology. Such an approach, it is hoped, will help unlock new frontiers in the use of text data in conflict research,[364] so that the harmful trajectories individuals embark on may be identified and prevented before acts of violence from their side can come to fruition. While it is clear that existing classification approaches to extremism achieve impressive performance results, emerging deep-learning artificial intelligence algorithms offer entirely new paradigms that will undoubtedly be applied to the problems of extremism. These newer approaches can achieve even higher levels of performance, scale to unprecedented amounts of big data, and learn from both the communication and the relations between individuals and their peers to make predictions.[365] Given the potential power of these approaches, it is more important than ever to look through the window opened by communication and attempt to find the point where extremist speech acts turn into acts of violence. The study of violent extremist communication in an organized way, using frameworks such as the one presented here, opens avenues to sophisticated computational approaches that can use these structures developed from more traditional subject matter expertise to better learn from, and understand, the extremist phenomena the algorithms are expected to predict. Building this bridge between old and new approaches will assist research efforts to ultimately delineate different forms of violent and nonviolent extremism.[366] This, in turn, may curtail undue surveillance and potential misuses[367] and develop more affordable, effective, and ethical ways to counter extremism.[368]

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## Notes

Notes marked with letters indicate studies included in the systematic review. The first letter signifies the sample type (c = convict, f = foreign fighter, g = group-actor terrorist, l = lone-actor terrorist, o = online extremist, p = population, s = suicide bomber, u = unspecified at-risk/violent, y = youth). If applicable, the second two letters signify the ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 code of the country of residence reported or discerned for the majority of individuals in the study sample. If the majority could not be discerned on a per country basis, m+ indicates the sample is from Muslim majority countries, m- signifies non-Muslim majority countries, and +- means both country types were present.

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# Frictional Security Governance: Policing the Crime-Terror Nexus in Denmark

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## Abstract

*This article examines policy responses to crime and terror as cases through which to illuminate the transformations of contemporary security governance in Denmark. The policies reveal how particular events have triggered a process of security escalation in which conflated notions of threat have called for new policing measures and organizations. We focus on three critical events linked to 'foreign fighters', 'gangs', and 'crossovers' as cases of escalating threat through which to analyze the expansion and conflation of security domains. Policy responses to the crime-terror nexus, we argue, merge reactive and proactive policing measures and formerly distinct domains of securitization and risk management, highlighting the frictional characteristics of security governance. While the Danish Model—informed by a networked-based and multiagency approach to preventing and countering radicalization and extremism—is often referred to as a model of best practice—we propose that future research needs to explore in greater detail how the expansion and conflation of security domains impact security actors who are mandated to implement the operational response to crime and terror.*

**Keywords:** Crime-terror nexus, Denmark, escalation, friction, policing, security governance

## Introduction

Since the attacks of 9/11, new insider threats have challenged and changed national security constellations around the world. These threats have emerged from a context of increasingly intertwined societal challenges, with overlapping—and often amalgamated—issues of terrorism, organized crime, and immigration. This has changed the scale of public anxiety and the nature of policing practices and policy interventions.[1] Incidents like the train bombings in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005, as well as the shootings in Paris and Copenhagen in 2015, are cases that demonstrate how the entanglement of recurring tropes of crime and violence function as a mechanism of threat escalation.[2] Transgressive, diffuse, and border crossing in nature, these threats have transcended fixed boundaries of categorization, affecting the logic, organization, and practices of national and global security governance. As one of the most acute expressions of this development, the “crime-terror nexus”—characterized by the interplay between transnational organized crime and terrorist organizations—demonstrates that such intersections conjure up a complex field of security interventions.[3]

Research has documented how the hybrid nature of the crime-terror nexus has inspired novel types of expanded forms of policing and led to an increasing entanglement of policy domains.[4] While existing studies have privileged critical perspectives on the impacts on policed populations, little work has been done on how the crime-terror nexus stimulates the crafting of security policies and shapes security governance. Defining security governance as the “management and regulation of issues by multiple and separate authorities” across public and private domains, “structured by discourse and norms, and purposefully directed toward particular policy outcomes,”[5] we ask in this article: What kind of national legislative policies and action plans have become key to current policing strategies targeting the crime-terror nexus, and how do these policies merge previously distinct security logics, organizations, and outcomes of policing?

Significant insights can be gained from existing policy research on organized crime, terrorism, and violent extremism, for instance on the impact of securitization on social policy.[6] Yet, these domains have predominantly been studied separately. Literature on the crime-terror nexus, however, has been concerned with the ‘mutation’ of these domains, the operational and organizational similarities, and how converging threats may affect policy responses,[7] but is lacking insight into actual policy content. This article seeks to fill this knowledge gap by merging policy analysis with the crime-terror nexus as it explores the conflation of

central distinctions in policies on organized crime and violent extremism. It discusses how seemingly different policy interventions engage and coproduce an emerging transformation of Danish security governance. In the following, we analyze how they are brought together in the aftermath of particular ‘critical events’.[8]

We focus on three critical events, which have triggered a process of intense politization of issues relating to the crime-terror nexus: the emergence of Danish foreign fighters in 2012, the gang conflict in 2017, and the 2015 Copenhagen shootings. The selected events provide an opening to study general trends at the heart of security policy development. Furthermore, they constitute an empirical prism through which to explore policy dynamics in an acute and visible way—as a paradigmatic case [9] of how moments of escalating threat have produced immediate policy responses and instituted new forms of action. By exploring the policies in this light, we see how they tap into each other’s domains, and therefore, how they can only be fully understood if they are viewed together.

Critical events differ from regular events in that they have a wide political, economic, and societal impact and can be approached as catalysts to processes of social change.[10] In this article, we combine Veena Das’s notion of critical events (1995) with Sewell’s (1996) work on transformation.[11] Sewell conceptualizes “events” as a sequence of occurrences that result in a transformation of structures and practices. These sequences begin with an initial *rupture*—a “surprising break with routine practice”—after which some events become neutralized and reabsorbed into preexisting structures, while others turn into historical events that “touch[es] off a chain of occurrences that durably transforms previous structures and practices.”[12] We propose that the notion of critical events can be employed as a way to understand the extraordinary nature of such “ruptures” in the security field and how they relate to “sequences of occurrences” that constitute a particular process of intense politization. As Das’s work shows, critical events must be understood in terms of their historical and political trajectories and embeddedness.[13] In this way, we see how gang wars, terrorist incidents, and the issue of foreign fighters unfold at different paces—some over a period of time, some as instant moments—but what concerns us here is how they stimulate particular processes of politization.

Conceptually we engage in debates about the expansion of the security field, which is discussed in theories of securitization [14] and risk management [15] and in processes such as escalation.[16] Central to these debates is the interplay between potential and realized threats, and the relationship between reactive and proactive measures that is subject to change when the security field expands. According to Højer et al.,[17] “escalation” implies a process of accelerated change, in which “phenomena of growth not only produce more of the same but also produce differences in kind.”[18] This means that accelerating change “may not only imply that a process is speeded up and geographically expanding, but also that the growth—and its conditions—may turn into something entirely different in the process.”[19] While building on this conceptualization of accelerated change in our analysis, we seek to develop it further through the notion of friction as a lens through which to highlight the conflictual engagements between different policy interventions across the crime-terror nexus. Introduced by Tsing to capture “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference,”[20] the notion brings attention to the encounter between a range of actors, institutions, and security logics, and helps to capture how the increasing entanglement of proactive and reactive interventions targeting organizing crime and violent extremism serve as a catalyst for changing security governance.

Our intention here is to indicate a set of policy interventions, which exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship because of their hybrid nature. Inspired by recent discussions of the linkages between ‘hybridity’ and ‘friction’ which have shown the fluidity, relativity, and blending of different actors, orders, and forms of authority,[21] we aim to move beyond neat institutionalist accounts of policy intervention, adopting instead a focus on the conflicts, conflations, and coproductions of different domains. When different policy domains intersect, we propose that the intersection itself creates new assemblages of professional groups as well as target groups. The latter, we will show, is indicated by the rise of new policy figures, such as, for instance, the “crossovers”. In the case of the crime-terror nexus, this process has led to a crucial acceleration of interventions and also led to an intersection of changing security logics.

Methodologically, we follow the line of interpretive policy studies, approaching the formulation of policy

problems as a process of discourse and argumentation that is politically produced rather than a preexisting given. We focus on the ways in which the problem is represented and how this shapes policy responses.[22] We therefore employ policy analysis as a methodological tool to generate an understanding of political rationalities, values, interests, and contexts underpinning policy responses.[23] Drawing on insights from the anthropology of policy that approach policies as “an organizing principle of society” and as a “vehicle for change”,[24] we highlight the productive and transformative characteristics of policy, and regard policies as assemblages “in which actors, agents, concepts and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance.”[25] In order to do so, we have selected, for Denmark, the most central, national policy documents related to developments within the domains of radicalization, organized crime, and terrorism during the last decade. These are open-source materials consisting of a combination between national action plans, legislative acts, defense agreements, government evaluations, and research-examining initiatives across the policy domains. These materials have been coded and analyzed with a focus on the meaning ascribed to specific (critical) events and how they are rhetorically connected to new trends and approaches. Subsequently, the Danish policy documents have been cross-coded for crime-terror nexus terminology, references, and key concepts, with specific attention to trends and developments in legislative initiatives and emerging approaches and technologies applied in new government initiatives.

The article is structured in three parts. First, we trace the trajectories of expanded policing in Danish security governance back to three critical events, reading them as political moments that are paradigmatic of the linkages between different policy domains. Then we show how such policy responses to radicalization, terrorism, and organized crime are based on a general move that merges distinctions between securitization and risk management, between reactive and proactive policing, and between prevention and punishment. This development, we argue, is not a linear process with one type of intervention replacing another. Rather it should be understood as an intertwining and overlapping process in which diverse interventions and logics oscillate and exist simultaneously—sometimes in frictional ways. In conclusion, we propose that expanded policing, in the form of multiagency collaboration in the Danish Model, needs to be further examined at the level of operational practice to generate a better understanding of how those actors involved in the implementation of such policies navigate the frictional character of contemporary security governance.

### ***Expanded Policing in Danish Security Governance: Three Critical Events***

During the last decades, Danish security governance has evolved around a number of policy interventions and institutional arrangements that respond to emerging developments within the fields of organized crime, radicalization, and violent extremism. These interventions must be understood in the context of global security transformations and the transnational exchange of models and technologies aimed at combatting a variety of threats and vulnerabilities. Yet at the same time, these interventions and arrangements have indeed been developed and implemented in response to critical *local* events that have captured public and political attention. Below, we shed light on three such events linked to foreign fighters, gangs, and crossovers, considering them as cases through which to examine the process of security escalation and how, and with what consequences, this escalation merges previously distinct security logics, organizations, and outcomes of policing. To examine the transformation of security governance, we take our empirical point of departure in national policy making between 2009 when the government issued its first action plan against radicalization and extremism and its first package of anti-gang initiatives and 2019 when a ‘safety-package’ addressing violence in public spaces was introduced.

#### **Foreign Fighters: Policies Targeting Radicalization and Violent Extremism**

*The first Danish foreign fighter: in early spring 2012, young Victor Kristensen decided to leave Denmark to take up arms and fight with the Islamic State in the pre-civil war battles in Syria and Iraq. On 13 March 2013, he wrote a letter to his family, explaining that he had not been forcibly recruited, but had voluntarily decided to leave Denmark having chosen the path of Islam. Following his arrival in Syria, he joined the Islamic State and subsequently became involved in the planning of an attack on Iraqi government forces.*

*On 26 November 2013, Victor died in combat north of Baghdad, wearing a suicide jacket.[26] An ethnic Danish convert from Denmark's second-largest city, Aarhus, Victor was the first of over one hundred Danish citizens to travel to Syria to fight the Assad regime or promote revivalist religious organizations in the Middle East. Some of these foreign fighters were well-known to the authorities because of their alleged links to local criminal groups or because they were well-established in the local urban criminal milieu. [27] When they left Denmark, most of these people left friends and relatives behind, but leaving them with no information about their relations or whereabouts in Syria, causing a number of families and citizens to call the Danish authorities worried about the survival of their children, spouses, siblings, or friends. New relationships and alliances were established between police officers and civilians in the social milieus affected. Collaboration between the police and local community organizations was intensified to prevent further travels to the conflict zone.[28]*

The emergence of Danish foreign fighters presented a turning point in the development of national government policy in the 2010s. While the 2000s introduced “soft” welfare approaches—such as education—to counter violent extremism, the 2010s proved to be a decade of changing security paradigms that moved the crime preventive scheme from education and welfare to penalties and criminalization. The government adopted its first counter-terrorist legislation in 2002, in the aftermath of 9/11, and introduced several legislative regulations in 2006 as a consequence of the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005). One central outcome of these events was a new focus on insider threats and homegrown terrorism, connecting foreign and domestic counter-terrorist policies, as well as domestic issues of immigration, integration, crime prevention, and welfare provisions. In 2009, the government issued its first national action plan against radicalization and extremism, called “A Common and Safe Future”. The scope was widespread, with no less than 22 preventive initiatives being added to existing intervention efforts in “vulnerable residential areas”.[29]

The 2009 action plan was inspired by the municipal social services and police forces in Aarhus and Copenhagen, as these were in the process of designing and preparing counter-radicalization measures. The action plan emphasized that radicalization was a threat posed by forces who challenged social cohesion and fundamental values, such as democratic freedom and equal opportunities.[30] It suggested that new fundamentalist Muslim organizations raised anti-democratic voices which could sever the links between the young generation and the future of the nation. In this way, it pointed to the young migrant generation's sense of belonging to Danish society as a primary means of prevention. The preventive efforts included democracy teaching, dialogue-based interventions in targeted communities, capacity building in associational settings, the training of prison staff in risk-behavior detection coupled with other special prison initiatives, as well as multiagency collaboration and partnerships between the police, municipalities, and the Muslim diaspora.[31]

The government launched a revised action plan in 2014, when the traffic of foreign fighters to the Syrian civil war was peaking and the public hotline to the police was increasingly busy as families and frontline social workers voiced their concerns about ongoing radicalization.[32] The 2014 national action plan brought several important changes. First, it emphasizes that the government takes a hard line against extremism, with the implementation of stricter measures to stop recruitment for participation in armed conflicts abroad.[33] The notion of the *foreign fighter* appears as a key policy subject, described as an urgent threat to national security, requiring deterrence, punishment, and consequence-based action. Hence, the revision of the 2014 action plan refers directly to the foreign fighter situation going back to the first incidents in 2012 and the increased travel of Danish citizens to foreign war zones. Importantly, the action plan postulated a link to criminal groups. A subsection of the action plan points out that it has become a trend among criminals and gang members to have close links with extremist circles.[34] Against this background, the new policy aimed to target both criminal and extremist social milieus by means of exceptional legislative changes of the Passport Act, Aliens Act, and Criminal Code.[35] Concrete suggestions are made to allow the police to issue travel bans and to revoke the passport of any individual who is suspected of planning to join an armed conflict abroad. Legal consequences are introduced for aliens residing in Denmark who join an armed conflict abroad. Furthermore, changes were made in the Criminal Code in order to provide sufficient scope for discouraging recruitment to, and participation in, armed conflicts like those in Syria and Iraq.

A new suggestion was to propose the introduction of new offenses to discourage potential recruits.[36] Simultaneously, we see a persistent urge to introduce welfare governance. Here, an elaborate list of outreach initiatives is presented with the aim of mobilizing civil society and expanding the existing early-warning system by enrolling parents' networks, local associations, and professionals in positions of trust for surveillance, reporting, and preventive efforts. This is a crucial turning point in Danish preventive policy as welfare and education initiatives are run in parallel with increasing penalties, surveillance, and criminalization.[37]

In June 2016, a new law came into effect. It banned Danes from supporting warring forces abroad and criminalized journeys to conflict zones where terrorist organizations were known to operate.[38] This move was a major step toward stricter security governance. Since the new law paved the way for the immediate arrest of foreign fighters upon their return to Denmark—with up to five years of prison or expulsion of non-Danish citizens from the country awaiting them—it seemed rather counter-productive to the police's efforts to convince foreign fighters to return to Denmark in order to engage in a de-radicalization program. Instead, the action plan introduced a stronger partnership between police forces and prison services, and called for stricter measures to prevent radicalization in prisons and in criminal milieus outside prison.[39] These initiatives were backed by an expansion of prevention measures aimed at the population as a whole, for instance, by extending democracy teaching to children down to 1–2 years of age in day-care centers and by extending de-radicalization programs to include adults over 18 years of age, as well as specific groups in vulnerable residential areas.

### **Gangs: Policies Targeting Organized Crime**

*The 2017 gang conflict: mobilization of police patrols, zones of visitation, buzzing of surveillance helicopters. The effects of a conflict between two rival gangs, Loyal to Familia and Brothas, left a clear and visible mark, resulting in increased measures of law enforcement in Copenhagen during the summer of 2017. The conflict had been lurking since the release of a prominent gang leader from prison in early spring. During the summer, the conflict escalated into a struggle for power and domination over the expansion of territory, recruits, and criminal markets, initially manifested in the capital before spreading to other parts of the country. The dispute triggered an unprecedented number of shootings and violent clashes in the streets. Not only did gang members target and kill each other; police officers and police cars were targeted, and stray bullets hit and wounded civilians and random passersby. To a much greater extent than in previous conflicts, the almost-daily episodes of shootings were characterized as both highly unpredictable in their nature and as assaults with the intention to kill.[40]*

Since 2009, five national policies have been indicative of the direction of governance related to organized crime, consisting of three extensive anti-gang packages passed in 2009, 2014, and 2017,[41] and two safety packages passed in 2017 and 2019.[42] Consistent in these policies is that they are responding to periods of gang conflicts,[43] significant disturbances, and incidents of excessive violence [44] including bomb explosions. [45] Concerns about public safety were therefore highlighted as critical in the preventive initiatives taken at the time. Episodes in the streets, where “law-abiding citizens [are] at risk of getting in the line of fire,”[46] “endangering the lives of ordinary Danes,”[47] were seen as particularly problematic and “totally unacceptable.” [48] The policies further underline the link between the behavior of gangs and individual gang members and the insecurity this produces in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens.[49] Yet, as we shall see, the focus on public safety is closely linked to issues of national security, for instance when bomb explosions originating from organized crime milieus were becoming an object of national anti-terrorist legislation.

Examining policy interventions, two main aspects stand out: tighter legislation and increased punishment on the one hand, and enhanced investigation tools and surveillance technologies on the other. The focus on increased punishment is strongly emphasized as the principal method of intervention in the three legislative anti-gang packages. This is manifested in anti-gang package I from 2009, which established a gang provision, § 81 a in the Criminal Code, providing legal authority to sentence double penalty for offenses related to organized crime during an ongoing conflict.[50] In the following two anti-gang packages in 2014 and 2017, this was expanded and made easier to apply by including crimes in emerging conflicts and crimes qualified to trigger

conflicts.[51] Increased punishment also includes possession of illegal firearms,[52] significant restrictions on parole,[53] the banning of gang members from entering and residing in specific areas upon their release from prison,[54] and deportation of gang members without Danish citizenship, to name a few measures initiated.

The agenda for preventing organized crime, aligned with action plans against radicalization and extremism, linked security concerns with issues of integration and targeted vulnerable residential areas through rules of exception and increased police visibility. As each policy built on and addressed new forms of restrictions, punitive measures likewise became harsher. While the policies consist of a combination of preventive and punitive measures, they should primarily be understood as a form of deterrence and not as “early prevention”. The 2017 gang conflict provides a turning point in this development as subsequent policies more clearly linked public safety with national security. As the conflict drained police resources and personnel, the 2017 safety package responded directly to the conflict by outsourcing police tasks to the armed forces [55], as we will elaborate on below. Notably, the 2019 safety package underlined that bomb explosions in public places related to organized crime are to be regarded as an attack on the state, and that conviction would therefore be in accordance with the so-called ‘terror paragraph’ in Denmark’s criminal code.[56] In this way, the terrorist threat was introduced in policy responses to organized crime in the aftermath of the 2017 gang conflict.

The other significant aspect in the evolving policies is the strengthening of investigation tools and surveillance measures to assist the police in preventing and solving cases of organized crime. Investigation tools include initiatives relating to collaboration between the police and the Danish Tax Agency,[57] increased authorization to exchange information relating to suspects,[58] and increased operational capacity for specialized analysis. [59] Particularly in the 2017 and 2019 safety packages, surveillance was prioritized through the increased use of cameras and drones and through granting greater authority to engage in wiretapping.[60] The prioritization of increased investigation capacity and new technology for the police is—on a smaller scale—mirroring the investments made to improve the intelligence services’ responses to new threats.

Looking at policy responses to organized crime, it becomes clear that the 2017 gang conflict was a turning point. While there had been a handful of very serious gang wars between biker gangs and streets gangs in Denmark since the late 1970s, the policy response to organized crime intensified significantly after the gang conflict in 2017. This is not solely manifested in the far-reaching initiatives focusing on punitive measures and investigations that build on existing legislation. Organizationally, the police are expanding and training more personnel to counter the new threats. As a new development, the policies targeting organized crime are now directly linking public safety with issues of national security.

### **‘Crossovers’: Policies at the Intersection between Violent Extremism and Organized Crime**

*The Copenhagen shootings: In the afternoon on 14 February 2015, Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein attempted to enter the back entrance of ‘Krudttønden’—a cultural center in Copenhagen where the event ‘Art, Blasphemy and Freedom of Expression’ was taking place. As the door was locked, he made his way further toward the main entrance, armed with an M95 assault rifle. In the minutes that followed, Omar fired 27 rounds through the front of the building, injuring two officers, while one shot killed film director Finn Nørgaard. The event was organized by the Lars Vilks Committee and featured a panel discussion about the limitations of artistic expression and freedom of speech in the wake of the 7 January massacre at the Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris. The following night, on 15 February, patrol officers noticed a man walking around in the inner city. They thought he was drunk, and he continued on foot toward the Great Synagogue on Krystalgade, where he passed two other police officers who were responsible for guarding the synagogue. The man—later identified as Omar—then headed directly toward the main entrance, where he shot and killed Dan Utzon, a civilian guard. The two police officers approached him, but were both hit by shots and fell to the ground. In the early morning of 15 February, Omar was observed on CCTV and subsequently located near an apartment building in Copenhagen’s Nørrebro district. In an exchange of gunfire, Omar was shot and killed by the police.[61]*

The Copenhagen shootings led to one of the most extensive policing efforts in recent times—an effort that is

still ongoing, expanding existing security partnerships in novel ways. The terror incidents also led to a critical internal evaluation of the effects of existing preventive measures and to the introduction of a number of new policy measures, action plans, and laws aimed at strengthening Denmark's response to terrorism and the preservation of public safety and security. One principal characteristic of these measures is the increasing governmental focus on the crime-terror nexus, and the growing policy concern relating to the emerging threat of 'crossovers' to national security and societal values.

In an immediate response to the Copenhagen shootings, and informed by the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, the Danish government presented a plan for 12 new anti-terrorism initiatives on 19 February 2015—a plan funded with approximately EUR 130 million (DKK 970 million) over four years.[62] The plan notes that the terrorist threat in Denmark has recently changed character, firstly as a consequence of the return of foreign fighters from Syria, and, secondly, due to increasingly aggressive extremist social media propaganda inspiring people to commit solo attacks with the help of easily accessible weapons.[63]

According to the government, terrorist actions carried out by solo terrorists present a number of distinctive challenges, as planning preparations leave little or no trace, making them increasingly difficult for intelligence services to detect. Furthermore, the use of new communication and encryption technology poses a growing challenge to prevention.[64] Against the background of this assessment, the government sought to expand Denmark's protection against terrorism through a number of new initiatives. To a large extent, the focus of these initiatives is increasing the capacity of the Danish Security Intelligence Service (PET) to monitor criminal individuals and milieus and to analyze and process the intelligence obtained. Resources are allocated for an advanced IT system enabling the sharing and processing of large amounts of data. At the same time, the government aims to strengthen the response of the Danish Defense Intelligence Service (DDIS) to the threat of foreign fighters through legislative amendments, enabling the DDIS to trace and monitor Danes traveling from Denmark to Syria or Iraq to participate in combat operations of the Islamic State, and to strengthen initiatives aimed at preventing radicalization in Danish prisons.

The new focus on expanding surveillance measures ought to be understood against the background of the evaluation and critique of the ways in which the police and intelligence services responded to the Copenhagen shooting, and in particular in relation to the failure to prevent this incident. Omar, a 22-year-old man who grew up in Denmark, was not only known to the police due to his affiliation with the gang known as Brothas, but had also been arrested on several occasions, sentenced for violence, possession of drugs, and possession of an illegal weapon. Most recently, he had been arrested in January 2014 and imprisoned for a knife attack. Even though the prison authorities had reported their concerns about Omar's signs of radicalization, he was released on 30 January 2015—just two weeks before the Copenhagen shootings. In an internal evaluation conducted by the National Police, the need to strengthen interagency collaboration and coordinate intelligence and police efforts at the intersection of gang crime and terrorism was highlighted.[65] According to the police, the Copenhagen shootings demonstrated that crossover environments between gangs and militant Islamist groups were becoming a new breeding ground for radicalized extremism, and that individuals who were simultaneously influenced by militant Islamist propaganda, as well as extremely violent milieus, are a growing security concern.[66]

The emerging threat of this crossover phenomenon was also highlighted in the 2016 national action plan for preventing and countering extremism and radicalization. The aim of this action plan was to further enhance preventive efforts with a range of new initiatives, ranging from "a hard line against foreign fighters," over "stricter measures against radicalization in prisons," to "targeted intervention in criminal groups." [67] As part of these targeted interventions, a more consistent intervention against "regular crimes committed in radicalized groups" was to be envisaged, for instance through closer collaboration between PET and the police.[68] The action plan also held that overlaps between criminal and extremist milieus require swift interventions when prisoners show signs of radicalization.[69]

As part of these anti-radicalization efforts, collaboration has been strengthened even further between the Prison and Probation Service, PET, the prosecution service, and the municipalities, and new institutions and units

have been introduced. One of these institutions is the armed forces. Instead of being tasked mainly with the provision of external security as part of international missions, the armed forces are increasingly being engaged in providing internal security and safety in Denmark. Against the background of the 2017 gang conflict in Copenhagen, combined with growing concerns about terrorist threats, the government asked the Chief of Police and the Chief of Defense how the armed forces could provide additional support and resources for the police. On September 2017, based on their recommendations, the Ministry of Justice presented the decision that the military should release police resources for local safety measures by guarding selected locations and performing border-control activities. Under the direction of the police, soldiers should be deployed in the streets. Instead of providing only ad hoc support, the armed forces now have a visible, permanent presence at the border and in the streets, where they are tasked with providing internal security by guarding and patrolling key sites, including the Great Synagogue and other potential terrorist targets.

The Danish Defense Agreement 2018–2023 added further substance to this change, stating that the armed forces will play an increasing role in contributing to the internal security of the Danish population. The armed forces' ability to support the police will be strengthened considerably in a number of areas, including guard duties, a permanent helicopter response in support of the police's counter-terrorist preparedness, units on high readiness to assist the police in case of terrorist attacks, and additional conscripts and special-forces patrols to provide the police with special assistance when required.[70] The ability of the armed forces to contribute to national security, with a particular emphasis on a counter-terrorism response, was formally codified into legislation in 2018.[71]

### ***Governing the Crime-Terror Nexus***

The study of the last decades of policy development aimed at the crime-terror nexus reveals that certain critical events have led to the formation of new partnerships that blur the boundaries between internal/national and external/international security, as well as between public and private safety and security. Under the Danish approach, policy interventions aimed at countering and preventing violent extremism are structured by comprehensive multiagency collaboration and coordination. While the Danish approach builds on, and is incorporated into, existing crime preventive structures and agencies,[72] policy responses to waves of gang wars have led to the incorporation of additional actors and stakeholders. Most recently, and in particular as a response to the increased focus on the threat of crossover environments, the intelligence agencies and armed forces have gained a prominent role in these partnerships.

As shown by the policy interventions described above, the governance of the crime-terror nexus is characterized by the involvement and interaction of multiple agencies. It is composed of different modalities, rationalities, and technologies of governance, such as welfare governance and security governance. In this way, formerly distinct domains of securitization and risk management are becoming increasingly entangled. Whereas securitization is based on a modality of governance, calling for exceptional measures to counter a concrete threat, risk management is aimed at intervening before the threat has fully emerged.[73] However, the logics of securitization and risk management are not mutually exclusive.[74] In this way, it can be argued that neat conceptualizations such as 'the comprehensive approach' can capture the merging of these security logics. Yet, rather than representing opposite ends of the same continuum that tie neatly together, they "rub against each other,"[75] producing friction that pulls in different directions and creates new messy and hybrid arrangements. It is these messy and ambiguous interventionist processes that have transformed the field of Danish security governance.

### ***Between Preventive and Punitive Measures***

The first form of friction within and between the three policy fields is the relationship between preventive and punitive measures. In this area, there has been a general move toward stricter and more punitive legislation, described by some researchers as a paradigm shift.[76] This development culminated in a series of legislative changes in the third anti-gang package in 2017 and in the revision of the action plan against violent extremism

the year before. We see this development as a frictional move between two kinds of responses to societal challenges, one of which is a traditional Nordic welfare response involving education and social reform, while the other represents a turn to punishment.

The frictional coexistence of preventive and punitive measures has transformed Danish security governance in two significant ways. First of all, the welfare state—with its municipal organizations and institutions—has become a security agency in itself, with employment centers, social services, and the public child and youth sector as key stakeholders in crime prevention. Social workers work alongside police officers as providers of public safety, and the early-prevention approach has increasingly included childcare institutions and schools in this collaboration and monitoring facility. This development resembles what Randi Gressgård (2019) has defined as the normalization of exceptional politics in the Swedish case,[77] and a welfarization of security on a general level. Secondly, there has been a weakening of the welfare state and its presence in the new strategies to counter gangs and terrorism. Instead, the turn to punitive measures and harsher legislation has extended preventive interventions and policing activities into national defense activities. These are carried out by a range of new security stakeholders such as the Prison and Probation Service, PET, police units, and the armed forces. In these partnerships, the welfare state can be used in an outreach function by the police; and the responsibility for method development, knowledge enhancement, policy development, and partly also the allocation of resources, has been centralized within PET, the Danish national police, and the Ministry of Immigration and Integration.

### ***Between Proactive and Reactive Interventions***

Another form of friction within and between the three policy fields is that between proactive and reactive interventions. The material presented above shows a trajectory of reactive policymaking which responds to critical events by combining security strategies. Each revision of action plans has been carried out by different government administrations. These have responded to critical events in an increasingly defensive mode, pointing to the crime-terror nexus as a primary reason for the escalation of insider threats. In other words, the policies are a response not only to critical events within their own scope of intervention, but also to events within each other's political realms.

Positioning the Danish state and society in a defensive role against amalgamated insider threats, government policies have highlighted an image of the Other (foreign fighters, gangs, and crossovers) as a fundamental threat to the Danish way of life,[78] as well as a safety threat to public everyday life. While this kind of policy construction is inherently reactive, so are a number of interventions within each policy document cited above. Existing reactive tactics, such as routine patrols in vulnerable residential areas, are strengthened by extralegal measures and rules of exception. In this way, some of the policy objectives have been steered toward reactive, law-enforcing policing activities with various tasks and objectives. The reactive approach, however, does not replace, but works in conjunction with community policing activities, strengthened prevention, and proactive interventions aimed at preempting crime and violence. The proactive approach surfaces in several ways in the policies, one of which is the explicit urge to detect and avert attacks and conflicts before they happen by making major investments in surveillance and intelligence. This strategy resulted in the Danish intelligence services gaining a more prominent role in the prevention of extremism.

This development shows the current coexistence of processes of securitization and risk management in security governance, in which proactive strategies such as early prevention extend into sectors of the municipality, while strategic police investigations extend into the intelligence services. Furthermore, the unpredictable nature of the new insider threats has led to an increase in lateral surveillance techniques, engaging citizens and civil communities in proactive risk management. Police-civilian partnerships are also constitutive of proactive tactics against drug dealing, organized crime, and gang conflicts without the existence of any immediate victim to mobilize the police, and with the police relying on informants, covert surveillance, and undercover investigations rather than waiting on calls for police assistance.

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## ***Conclusion***

The authors of this article argue that intersecting policy fields targeting the crime-terror nexus offer a privileged empirical prism through which to analyze the escalation and transformation of security governance in Denmark. Examining the last two decades of policy development by focusing on foreign fighters, gangs, and crossovers, we have sought to demonstrate that Danish counter-extremism, counter-terrorism, and gang crime prevention exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship that conjures up a dynamic field of escalating interventions. When analyzing the three policy fields together, it becomes clear that policy revisions have resulted in a frictional form of security governance, in which interventions oscillate between different logics and approaches.

The coexistence of, and oscillation between, proactive and reactive governance measures is one of several examples of how a mix of intervention styles and logics emerges from the intersection of policies targeting the crime-terror nexus. This development, we argue, cannot be understood as a linear movement from one modality of governance to another over time, or as a momentary paradigm shift. Instead, it ought to be approached as an unstable set of relations between reactive and proactive interventions, preventive and punitive measures, shaped by changing discourses of safety and security. Frictional security governance, thus, defines an ongoing process of accelerated change around the escalation of threat and expansion of corresponding interventions. The authors of this article hold that it is in the intersections—where we find the conflicts, confluences, and coproductions between different policy domains—that one can discover the deeper processes of change in security logics, practices, and constellations. This development is not unique to the Danish case. The same structures and logics are in particular underpinning security governance in other Nordic countries ranging from multiagency approaches, threat perceptions, and the understanding of what it means to provide security. [79] While responses to the changing threat environment are tailored to national contexts, the expanded and conflated security field is a general trend, which is, for instance, evident in the increasing domestic role of the armed forces in Europe and beyond.[80]

We have tried to show that this development has significant implications for the way in which policing is cross-institutionally organized and for the different rationales and logics that underpin new policing tasks and measures. Collaborations with municipalities, civic communities, and local institutions on the one hand, and armed forces, prison services, intelligence services, tax services, and immigration services on the other hand, show the scope of current partnership policing and point to novel demands on the police to manage a variety of security challenges. The Danish Model, with its multiagency approach, is widely described as a model of ‘best practice’,[81] based on the argument that to counter the complexity of international threat networks, we must employ an equally powerful response network.[82] However, little attention has been paid to the way in which security agents manage these rapidly changing conditions and how the expanding security network impacts those actors who are given the operational responsibilities to deal with crime and terrorism.[83] The authors believe that this is a significant knowledge gap that deserves further scholarly attention.

This article proposes to focus on certain problem fields in future explorations of policy implications on practice, such as how security actors seek to balance frictional interplays between preventive and punitive measures, reactive and proactive interventions, and securitization and risk management. Research focusing on how policing actors navigate the prevention of the crime-terror nexus at the operational level is crucial to identify the pitfalls of frictional security governance, but also to gain a better understanding of how the constitutive interrelationship between different policy domains might hold the potential for more flexible and timely policing efforts.

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# Tracing the Fate of Central Asian Fighters in Syria: Remainers, Repatriates, Returnees, and Relocators

by Nodirbek Soliev

## Abstract

*This article presents a preliminary set of empirical findings and observations on the current status of Central Asian fighters in Syria and Iraq, with a specific focus on the question of where and how they might be leaving the battlefield after concluding their active fighting roles. Drawing on data collected exclusively from local online sources as well as regional events covering the subject, the article develops common profiles of the known contingent and identifies overall patterns in their movements. In order to help with analysis, the entire contingent is grouped into four distinct categories, or the 4 “Rs”: “Remainers”, “Repatriates”, “Returnees”, and “Relocators”. This typological framework allows a closer study of the characteristics as well as the impact of each category, which could also be employed when looking at other FTF cohorts.*

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Syria, IS, HTS, KTJ, KIB, foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), remainers, repatriates, returnees, and relocators

## Introduction

Today, foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) represent a security concern for many countries and regions in the world, including the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. [1] Especially after the fall of Baghouz—the last holdout of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria—in March 2019, concerns have grown about potential threats associated with jihadists (including Central Asians) who might leave the Syrian battlefield for their home countries or a third country after concluding their experience as active foreign fighters.

Blowback from Central Asian foreign fighters has already been observed. From 2016 to 2020, there was an unprecedented surge in terrorist attacks committed by, or attributed to, Central Asians around the world. These attacks included the June 2016 airport attack in Istanbul (Turkey), [2] the August 2016 suicide car bomb attack at the Chinese embassy in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), the January 2017 nightclub shooting in Istanbul (Turkey), the April 2017 truck-ramming attack in Stockholm (Sweden), the April 2017 suicide bombing at a metro station in Saint Petersburg (Russia), the October 2017 vehicular attack in New York (US), the July 2018 car-and-knife attack in Khatlon (Tajikistan), and the April 2020 terror plot by a Tajik IS cell to attack US and NATO military bases in Germany, among others.

The perpetrators of the attacks listed above were either Syria-trained jihadists belonging to IS (cases in Turkey) [3] and Al Qaeda-linked groups (the incidents in Kyrgyzstan and in Russia) [4] or self-radicalized individuals inspired by IS (cases in Sweden, US, and Tajikistan). [5]

## Mobilization to Syria and Iraq

Most recent official estimates from Central Asia indicate that as many as 5,650 fighters and their dependents (wives and children) from the region went to Syria and Iraq to join various jihadist groups fighting there. [6] The distribution is uneven across the region, in part due to varying levels of reporting and differences in local radicalization patterns and factors. It is also worth noting that children born in Syria and Iraq to Central Asian citizens may not be reflected in the overall number. Of the total reported numbers, 2,000 are reported to be nationals of Tajikistan, [7] 2,000 of Uzbekistan, [8] 850 of Kyrgyzstan, [9] and 800 of Kazakhstan. [10] Although a number of foreign media reports and international NGOs have suggested the involvement of Turkmen citizens in the Syrian conflict, Turkmen authorities have abstained from officially commenting

on issues related to foreign terrorist fighters. They preferred to remain silent even when Syria's Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassun made a sensational claim in October 2013 that 360 Turkmen nationals might have been fighting alongside jihadist forces.[11]

Given the ferocity and scope of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, there is good reason to believe that many IS's adult fighters have been killed on the battlefield. According to authorities in Central Asia, at least 1,633 fighters (29 percent of the total) from the region—260 Kazakhs,[13] 200 Kyrgyz,[14] 1,000 Tajiks,[15] and 173 Uzbeks[16]—have been killed while fighting. Absence of up-to-date data for some relevant countries means that the actual number of cases of death might now be higher than reported. All of these figures are of course impossible to corroborate independently, but provide some idea of the scale of the problem that is faced in these countries.

Following IS's territorial collapse, at least 2,220 Central Asians (39 percent of the reported total), mostly women and children, have been captured (or surrendered) and placed in detention facilities across Syria and Iraq.

Furthermore, there are a considerable number of Central Asians who remain engaged in active fighting, particularly in the ranks of ethnically based Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Katibat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB) combat units. According to United Nations reports, operating under the umbrella of the Al Qaeda-linked Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) jihadist alliance, KIB and KTJ retain at least 720 fighters.[17]

While according to the above-mentioned figures there is a degree of certainty regarding the proportion of FTFs and their dependents who have died, been imprisoned, or remain engaged in active fighting in Syria (see Table 1), the size, fate, and location of those who departed from the Syrian conflict zone remain largely unknown. This is mostly due to the clandestine and cross-border nature of their movements, meaning that reporting on them is limited.

**Table 1:** An Overview of the Reported Status of Central Asian Fighters in Syria and Iraq.[12]

|              | <i>Traveled to Syria and Iraq</i> | <i>Killed on the battlefield</i> | <i>Detained in Syria and Iraq</i> |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Kazakhstan   | 800                               | 260                              | 607                               |
| Kyrgyzstan   | 850                               | 200                              | 400                               |
| Tajikistan   | 2,000                             | 1,000                            | 682                               |
| Turkmenistan | N.A.                              | N.A.                             | N.A.                              |
| Uzbekistan   | 2,000                             | 173                              | 531                               |
| TOTAL:       | 5,650 (100%)                      | 1,633 (29%)                      | 2,220 (39%)                       |

FTF is an old phenomenon, but conceptual studies on the foreign jihadi fighters started to evolve particularly with their unprecedented involvement in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts.[18] Cerwyn Moore, in his article entitled "Foreign Bodies: Transnational Activism, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus and Beyond" argues that the term "transnational activist" rather than foreign fighter better reflects the different roles foreign individuals take on within conflict zones. In contrast, David Malet has proposed the term "transnational jihadists", defining them as "non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict." [19]

Scholars and experts have attempted to assess the severity and scope of potential threats from returning FTFs and suggested response strategies. The 2015 study conducted by Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, based on a data set on FTF returnees in Western Europe, North America, and Australia from January 2011 to June 2015, concluded that the rate of attacks by returnees was 1 in 360, indicating higher risk of plots by homegrown terrorists than by returnees.[20] David Malet and Rachel Hayes, after examining profiles of 230 returnee fighters in the West, found that the median lag time between return and plot or arrest is less than six months for most returnees, and thus it is important to implement urgent security and resocialization measures within this critical six-month period to effectively prevent potential risks.[21] Others like Daniel Byman pointed out that returning FTFs may influence others to radicalize.[22]

There have also been debates how to deal with FTFs and those of their dependents who ended up in detention facilities or refugee camps in Syria and Iraq. Brian Jenkins's essay from 2019 explores the pros and cons of various options in dealing with those detainees.[23] An article published by Adam Hoffman and Marta Furlan in 2020 identified four main options in response to the issue and assessed potential implications of those options.[24] To date, a number of studies have explored various aspects of the involvement of Central Asian fighters in the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq. A substantial proportion of these studies have looked at the militant groups that Central Asian fighters have joined and their roles and networks on the ground as well as trying to assess security risks deriving from them.[25] In addition, there is an expanding range of scholarly work on Central Asian countries' policy approaches in dealing with detained IS fighters and their families who ended up in the Syrian and Iraqi detention facilities following the military defeat of IS in March 2019.[26]

However, due to data scarcity, certain aspects of the subject, especially the issue of returning and relocating Central Asian fighters, have received very little coverage in the existing literature. The article published by Thomas F. Lynch III and a group of other scholars in October 2016 was one of the earliest attempts to assess the prospect of Central Asian jihadists' exit from the conflict zone and its potential domestic and international implications. By looking at initial instances of such departures, that article came to some preliminary conclusions and suggested that, with "little evidence of Central Asian fighters returning in significant numbers," as of mid-2016, the risk was "not dramatic".[27]

A joint publication of *Russia Matters* and the *US-Russia Initiative to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism* that was published in December 2018 provides more recent and detailed coverage of Central Asian returning fighters in one of its relevant sections. In assessing what might be the next move of surviving militants, the authors of the article (Edward Lemon, Vera Mironova, and William Tobey) referred to a group-centric assessment method.[28] This method suggests that the fate of fighters on the ground largely depends on the ability of their affiliated groups to survive and hold territory. While admitting that it was excessively difficult to precisely forecast FTFs' future movements even through such a group-centric assessment approach, the authors have identified three general trajectories for those who manage to leave the battlefield: to migrate to other conflict zones (with Afghanistan being the likeliest destination); return home, which they thought did not seem to be appealing for many due to existing security constraints in their native countries; or move to a third country to settle down peacefully or continue militant activities.[29] As part of qualitative research to find out their motives for traveling to, remaining in, and exiting from Syria, the three authors have also used the data obtained through interviews with ex-fighters. They have also cited from some Russian-language online sources. However, there is not much reference to local Central Asian sources and the actual cases of returned fighters as data points.

A May 2021 report by a Kyrgyzstan-based Research Center for Religious Studies (RCRS) and the UAE's *Hedayah* is one of the latest studies on Kyrgyz FTF returnees.[30] Based on in-depth interviews with 38 imprisoned FTF returnees, 20 of their relatives, and eight more interviews with experts from various fields, the report contains a good qualitative analysis of the factors and causes for the radicalization and recruitment of Kyrgyz citizens to fight in Syria and Iraq and the return to their home country. The study conducts detailed examination of the reasons for the interviewed FTFs to return and the deradicalization approaches implemented by the Kyrgyz government to rehabilitate former FTFs. However, it does not discuss in any detail the process of their return and questions such as when and how they returned nor the state-organized repatriation of Kyrgyz children from Iraq.

Erlan Karin's book "Operation: Jusan: A Story of Rescue and Repatriation from Islamic State" from 2020 reviewed Kazakhstan's approaches to repatriating detained IS Kazakh fighters and their dependents from Syria. Drawing on the author's experience with interviewing repatriates, the book provides valuable insights into the motives of those individuals to migrate to the conflict zone and return home while also assessing potential risks associated with their return.

As part of ethnographic research for her book entitled *From Freedom Fighters to Jihadists: Human Resources of Non-State Armed Groups*, Vera Mironova conducted more than 600 interviews with members of various jihadist groups, including some IS- and HTS-affiliated Central Asian individuals. Her book examines in detail human

and financial resources, leadership issues, and the management of non-state actors as well as motivations for fighters to join or leave particular groups. However, there is not much discussion on the fate of FTFs after leaving the group.[31]

This article, while expanding on the scope of data with the most recent empirical evidence, sheds light on the current status of Central Asian FTFs in Syria and Iraq. The findings are generated largely from the data set collected and compiled by the author from local newspaper reports in Russian, Uzbek, and English as well as from expert discussions at events covering the subject. The research involves a thorough examination of the known FTFs contingent with the help of a typological framework that might also be employed when looking at other FTF contingents. Drawing on available information, this article sketches what has happened to Central Asians in Syria and Iraq, with a specific focus on the question of where and how Central Asians might be leaving the battlefield.

### ***The 4 “Rs” from the Battlefield***

For the purpose of this analysis, Central Asian fighters in and exiting from Syria are grouped into four distinct categories, or the 4 “Rs”: *Remainers*, *Repatriates*, *Returnees*, and *Relocators*. The first category, of course, has not exited the battlefield but provides a backdrop to account for the fighters still in Syria.

The idea of this framework is to categorize the contingent of FTFs to enable closer analysis and assess the impact of each group. The definitions are as follows:

*Remainers* are surviving fighters who are still at large in the conflict zone and continue pursuing active fighting roles.

*Repatriates* are those who were brought or sent back, or are in the process of transfer, to their home countries through government-managed programs exiting from prisons and displacement camps in Syria and Iraq. In the post-IS period, states and international organizations have widely used the term “repatriation” to describe such transfer initiatives. Numbers for these individuals are not specifically captured in the current data set as they are part of larger and publicly reported national contingents.

*Returnees* are FTFs who return from the conflict zone to their home countries by themselves. Independent return can be public or secretive.

*Relocators* are FTFs who fled the Syrian and Iraqi battlefield and moved to third countries, or other conflict zones, instead of returning to their countries of origin.

The categories of “returnees” and “relocators” have been borrowed from the United Nation’s CTED Trends Report, but the present author has offered his own definitions and subcategories to them.[32] The data set gathered by the author focuses on these two groups.

The author created his data set on returnee and relocating fighters using original information collected exclusively from newspaper and media reports in Russian and Uzbek. The data set includes profiles of 63 Central Asians—13 Kazakh, 23 Kyrgyz, 18 Tajik, and nine Uzbek citizens.

Classification between groups of relocators and returnees is not always clear-cut. For example, there are fighters who are known terrorist suspects and subject to a national or international arrest warrant. Such fighters often face detention upon their entry to a foreign country (at airports or any other border checkpoint) and are subsequently deported to their home countries. However, it is sometimes unclear whether they are seeking to enter that particular country to reside in it (temporarily or permanently) or just transiting on their way back to home from the conflict zone as there is often an absence of relevant details in both press and police reports. When it is impossible to establish the true intentions of such fighters, this article categorizes them as relocators.

Based on this criterion, 28 individuals (nearly half of them) fall into the category of returnees, while the remainder are relocators. As this data set only includes identifiable individuals, it is very unlikely to represent the entire extent of the movement of Central Asian FTFs.[33] However, it enables at least some preliminary

findings and observations to be drawn in terms of the patterns of movement of those who have left the battlefield behind.

By studying the profiles of listed individuals in detail, several observations can be made. At the time of their detection, two-thirds of the total contingent of returnees and relocators were in the 27–35 age bracket, although the overall age range spans from 21 to 45 years. The youngest individual featured in the data set is a Kyrgyz national, “Sh.Sh.”, who was arrested upon his return to Kyrgyzstan on 25 July 2018. Kyrgyz authorities revealed that, while in Syria, the fighter was trained for suicide bombing operations.[34] By contrast, the eldest combatant is 45-year-old Gulmurod Khalimov, Tajikistan’s former special operations colonel who defected to IS in May 2015. He had replaced Abu Omar al-Shishani (killed in July 2016) as the group’s “war minister”. Khalimov is now believed to be in Afghanistan.[35]

### ***Remainers***

Remainers are fighters who continue staying in the conflict zone for a variety of reasons. In Syria, Central Asian nationals have joined both IS and its rival HTS, a successor entity to al-Nusra Front. While many of IS’s Central Asian fighters were killed in action, some managed to survive and remain in Syria, biding their time to reorganize themselves. In contrast, a larger contingent of those Central Asian fighters who have aligned themselves with Al Qaeda–linked groups are still active on the battlefield, largely thanks to the support and protection provided by HTS.

Many of those who headed for Syria and Iraq believed that they were on a “one-way journey” and did not plan to return. A number of video clips have featured IS’s Central Asian militants burning their passports in a symbolic renunciation of their former national identities.[36]

There are also highly motivated fighters among them who are committed to fighting until the end. In November and December 2019, it came to be known that Kurdish forces had managed to capture three notorious IS militants from Tajikistan after a long fight in Afrin and Deir ez-Zor. They were put in jail. The three men, who are identified as Tojiddin Nazarov (a.k.a. Abu Osama Noraki), Kori Usmon, and Abu Ayub Kulobi, are suspected by Swedish authorities of being part of a Syria-based IS attack network that orchestrated the 2017 Stockholm truck attack.[37]

Some surviving IS combatants have switched allegiance to other groups or movements with different goals. For instance, a fighter from Turkmenistan, who identified himself as “Kakajan”, joined, together with other Turkmen fighters, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) after their attempts to return to Turkmenistan via Turkey had failed in July 2019.[38]

Al Qaeda–linked groups have been equally successful in attracting Central Asian recruits. A majority of these fighters are members of combat units, known as Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB). While operating under the auspices of HTS, KTJ and KIB are among the strongest foreign militant factions that have actively taken part in hostilities against Syrian government forces.

United Nations reports, which were issued respectively in July 2019 and January 2020, revealed that the two groups have at least 720 fighters, the majority being Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek nationals.[39] The northwest Idlib province has become a safe haven for these fighters and their dependents.

### ***Repatriates***

Following the demise of IS in Syria in March 2019, a cohort of 13,000 to 15,000 foreign fighters and their families ended up being caught and interned by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[40] Another 1,400 foreigners remained detained in Iraq.[41] Amongst those detainees in Syria and Iraq were more than 2,220 Central Asians, mostly women and children.

Countries in Central Asia, unlike many other states, have generally taken a proactive stance to tackle the

FTF issue. Since 2019, four Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—have separately brought back from the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq a total of 1,301 nationals including 607 Kazakhs,[42] 531 Uzbeks,[43] 84 Tajiks,[44] and 79 Kyrgyz[45] (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Number of Repatriates

|              | <i>Repatriates</i> |
|--------------|--------------------|
| Kazakhstan   | 607                |
| Kyrgyzstan   | 79                 |
| Tajikistan   | 84                 |
| Turkmenistan | N.A.               |
| Uzbekistan   | 531                |
| TOTAL:       | 1,301              |

In the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, these states only repatriated children. Beyond the groups reported so far, the authorities in Tajikistan have publicly committed themselves to bring back a remaining group of nearly 600 Tajik citizens still residing in Syria and Iraq.[46] According to Tajik authorities, however, the military situation on the ground in Syria and Iraq and the COVID-19 pandemic have complicated these repatriation plans.

Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have adopted similar approaches in managing repatriates. Each has framed these initiatives, mainly involving women and children, as “humanitarian rescue operations”. In their public messaging, authorities have highlighted the plight of women and children left in limbo in overcrowded makeshift camps and detention facilities in Syria.

Studies conducted by various local research centers, NGOs, and international organizations have shown nearly similar tendencies in terms of female radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization to and from Syria. A large proportion of Central Asian women claimed that they were duped by their husbands or other male family members under false pretexts to travel to the conflict zone.[47] While some natural skepticism around these claims is warranted, and some women have been incarcerated upon their return, it does seem that the experience of Central Asian women who went to live in Syria/Iraq was different to many women from Western countries. In Central Asian media and press, repatriated children have been described as innocent victims of the conflict, while women have been mostly regarded as being ‘misled’ or ‘misguided’. In contrast, many Western governments have looked at women departing from Europe as active participants and the children as innocents and consequently allowed humanitarian repatriation in fewer cases.

The Central Asian approach to women and children repatriations centers around preemptive security concerns. The involvement of women and children in jihadist networks can have an intergenerational impact. Women who adhere to IS’s ideology may seek to radicalize their children as well as others. Child recruits ensure a militant group’s long-term operational and ideological viability, given the fact that they are the potential fighters and leaders of tomorrow. In Central Asia, such security considerations are relevant, given suggestions that Al Qaeda–linked groups in Syria have expressed interest in taking over the guardianship of detainees held in Syria.

Post-repatriation individuals were put through a short “adaptation” process, during which they received medical and psychological assistance, legal and material support, and religious counseling. Upon completion of the short adaptation phase, they were sent to their hometowns to be reunited with their families and respective communities. As part of these reintegration programs, they have continued to receive socioeconomic and psychological support and religious counseling.

On the other hand, repatriated adult males have by and large faced immediate arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment. Some women returnees, regarded as a security threat, have also been convicted. For instance, in Kazakhstan, from a group of 55 repatriated adult returnees, all of the 37 repatriated men and 18 women were

subsequently sentenced to prison terms.[48]

Among the Uzbek repatriates, there was one adult male combatant, but his fate after arrival remains unknown. [49] It is likely that, as in Kazakhstan, the Uzbek adult fighter might have faced criminal sanctions. Although repatriated women were not imprisoned in Uzbekistan, court restrictions have been placed on their freedom of movement for a period of up to five years, depending on their roles and the length of their stay in Syria.[50] In all three countries, the process of resocialization is expected to last years and is closely monitored by local authorities and law enforcement officials.

## **Returnees**

FTFs return as battle-trained veterans, used to violence and experienced in the use of arms and explosives. While on the battlefield, they would have been exposed to and have embraced tactics like suicide bombings and beheadings. Finally, they are likely to have a strong international network of connections with like-minded militants from across the world. The mean age of identified returnees in the author's data set was 27.

### *Surrendering Returnees*

Surrendering returnees are a category of fighters who disengage from militant activities and return, or seek to return, home voluntarily and submit themselves to the appropriate authorities. The available data suggest that 11 out of the 28 identified cases involved voluntary returns—two in Kyrgyzstan, four in Kazakhstan, five in Tajikistan. While repentant FTFs have spent an average of 11 months in Syria, the median length of stay of secret returnees in Syria was four years. Turkey has served as an easy exit point from Syria for both returning and relocating Central Asian fighters, as suggested by its geographic proximity and the routes used by other FTF returnees.

There are pull and push factors that motivate surviving FTFs to give up fighting and return home. According to testimonies from surrendering fighters and their family members, some of them decided to flee the conflict and return after they had become disillusioned with the realities on the ground in Syria. Aziza Azmametova, a Kazakh national who came back from Syria with her husband and daughter in January 2014, described their life with an Al Qaeda-aligned group as “horror and chaos!”[51] Bobojon Qaraboev, a former fighter from Tajikistan who voluntarily returned home in 2016, said that he realized his “grave mistake” when he saw IS's atrocities against not only its enemies but also its own members.[52]

Pull factors include the initiatives that countries in the region have taken to encourage terrorist disengagement and return. For instance, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have offered conditional forgiveness to those who seek to return home on their own accord and genuinely repent having joined militant groups. Selection for forgiveness depends on factors such as commitment and sincerity, as well as an evaluation of their criminal histories during their association with terrorist groups. As a result of this initiative, by November 2018, 163 repentant individuals have returned and surrendered to authorities in Tajikistan.[53] As of January 2018, 125 fighters similarly returned to Kazakhstan; 57 of them were subsequently imprisoned.[54]

Out of the identified 28 returnees, as few as two (seven percent) are women. Both accompanied their husbands to Syria and Iraq and came back from there. The first case involved the above-mentioned Aziza Azmametova and her husband who voluntarily came back home from Syria with their child. Upon return, Aziza's husband was arrested and imprisoned, but she was allowed to remain free.[55] In the second case, a Tajik man and his wife who returned home with their two small children after spending a year and a half in IS-controlled territories in Iraq were granted conditional forgiveness by the state as they had voluntarily surrendered and convinced the authorities that they sincerely repented having traveled to the conflict zone and could credibly show that they did not participate in violence.[56]

### *Secret Returnees*

Secret returnees include those who return home to continue militant activities, by promoting jihadist ideologies, radicalizing and recruiting new members, raising funds, and even plotting terrorist attacks. In Central Asia,

most instances of clandestine returnees have been registered in Kyrgyzstan—15 out of a total of 17 cases. The other two included a Kazakh and an Uzbek citizen, both of whom were linked to IS.

Official statements suggest that most secret returnees in Kyrgyzstan came back tasked by their associated groups in Syria to plot attacks at home. Authorities have revealed only one secret returnee's organizational affiliation (in this case, the returnee was a member of KTJ),[57] but have left the other 14 individuals' state of affiliation unspecified. It is also important to point out that, although the allegation of returning to plot an attack was an essential element of criminal charges made against these returnees, it was often issued as part of pretrial criminal/investigation process. Thus, this specific accusation might not necessarily have been true in every relevant case, unless it has been robustly verified in a court of law. However, final verdicts of courts on these cases have not been publicly available.

Interviews that the aforementioned Research Center for Religious Studies (RCRS) conducted with imprisoned Kyrgyz FTFs suggest a lower rate of plots by returnees than reported by the media, with only two of the 38 FTF prisoners admitting returning home with the intention to carry out attacks. Both said that they were part of a death squad sent by Abu Saloh, KTJ's former commander in Syria, to assassinate the leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the southern province of Osh.[58] However, it is possible that there were some other plotters among the interviewed prisoners who might have chosen not to reveal their true intentions in the interviews.

Identity fraud is a common tactic used by FTFs to facilitate surreptitious movements on their way home. Credible fake documents enable them to hide their true identities while giving them a seemingly clean record to avoid detection and access potential target locations. At least two of the 16 identified cases of secret returns involved the use of fake passports. In February 2018, a court in Uzbekistan sentenced Akhror Kasymov, who operated as a recruiter for IS networks in Turkey, to 10 years of imprisonment. The court revealed that Kasymov was arrested when attempting to enter the country with a Russian passport given to Gadzhimurad Gaydarov. [59] This indicated that Kasymov was traveling under a false identity but with a real/valid passport, which he had apparently obtained illegally elsewhere and then altered the content and photo before heading home.

In the second case, which took place in February 2019, Kyrgyz authorities arrested a local militant who used a forged Kyrgyz passport for traveling to and from Syria.[60] Fraudulent Kyrgyz passports are found both in and out of Kyrgyzstan. Inside the country, such documents have been supplied on the black market mostly through existing local corruption schemes, which have reportedly involved government employees in charge of issuing passports to citizens.[61] There have also been several reports about the use of fake Kyrgyz passports by criminal and terrorist individuals abroad. The fact that Kyrgyz citizens are still using non-biometric passports for their international travel has made the counterfeiting process much easier. With the ongoing plans to issue biometric citizenship passports starting in 2021 and the recent introduction of stricter penalties for forging and using forged documents, the Kyrgyz government is hoping to reduce cases of document fraud and meet international standards for passport security.[62]

There is also a precedent for the use of fraudulent identity documentation by terrorist operatives to carry out an attack in Central Asia. Izzatillo Sattybaev, the Kyrgyz citizen who was sent by KTJ to organize the suicide car bomb attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, arrived from Turkey with a Tajik passport in the name of Firdavs Bobojonov and managed to leave the country safely after the attack with the same passport.[63]

## ***Relocators***

After departing from Syria, Central Asian FTFs have traveled to several regions and countries as far as Afghanistan; Germany, and Greece in Europe; and the Central African Republic, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, and the Sudan in Africa. FTFs who choose to relocate to a third country fall into three major categories: those who seek to hide or settle down in a third place; those who choose to move to other conflict zones; and those who relocate to plot attacks.

Turkey remains not only an accessible exit and transit point for foreign fighters looking to return home or pass

through to a third country—it is also a favorite destination for those who want to move somewhere else and set up a new home. The data set shows that 21 individuals, or 60 percent of the overall 35 relocators, moved to Turkey. This included one woman and five children—all of whom were Tajik citizens—who relocated to Turkey. [64] The female relocator, her Tajik husband, and her children were residing in Istanbul after allegedly arriving from Syria. In December 2017, the husband was arrested by Turkish authorities on charges of terrorism and his wife and children were sent to a refugee camp. However, the Tajik man denied the charges of fighting for IS in Syria.

Next to Turkey, the Ukraine has played a special role for Central Asian militants as it is both a transit and destination country. With reported cases involving four individuals, the country has been the second-most-common destination for Central Asia's relocating fighters. The ability to enter without visa and use of Russian as the common language have made Ukraine a practical choice for militants.

Another important factor that has made the Ukraine attractive for FTFs relates to the opportunity to acquire original and counterfeit Ukrainian passports through criminal schemes that are produced on the black market. [65] According to Ukrainian media, prices on the black market for such documents range from US \$2,000 to \$5,000. [66] A case in point is the disruption of an IS cell by Ukrainian security agencies in early 2015 in the city of Kharkiv. [67] The cell, being led by two Azeri citizens, was a critical part of IS's facilitation network that was in charge of organizing the journeys of many IS-linked Caucasian and Central Asian militants to, and from, Syria and Iraq through the Ukraine, providing them with temporary housing, financial assistance, and fake documents. For instance, in 2014, Dmitry Nikolayev, a Kazakh militant who was transiting through the Ukraine on his way back to Kazakhstan from Syria, met up with the Azeri cell members in Kharkiv and received money and fake documents before making his way to his home country. Soon after his arrival in Kazakhstan, Nikolayev was arrested and then jailed as the court found him and his Kyrgyz accomplice guilty of plotting attacks against a military base and a police station in the country. [68]

Another relevant case that made the headlines involved an unnamed Kazakh former-IS fighter who was arrested in the Ukraine in March 2019. The militant, while being on the Interpol's international wanted list, managed to obtain an ID card and Ukrainian citizenship by submitting fake documents that allowed him to move freely in that country. [69] At the time of his arrest, he was residing in the province of Odessa.

As many Central Asian FTFs leaving the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq may continue seeing Turkey and Ukraine as final-destination and transit countries, there is need for cross-border cooperation between them and Central Asian countries. It is important to collect biometric data of actual and potential fighters as a means to detect and disrupt their movements. Otherwise, some ex-fighters may be able to mask their true identities while pretending to be nonthreatening individuals.

A United Nations report issued on 20 January 2020 reported the departure of Central Asian fighters from Syria to African destinations, specifically to the Central African Republic, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, and the Sudan, apparently with the intention to lie low in any of these places. The UN report suggested that they might be transiting these countries to join IS affiliates in West Africa and the Sahel region. [70] However, this report provided no further details. It should be noted that parts of West Africa and the Sahel have recently seen a sharp rise in terrorist offensives involving local jihadist groups affiliated with both IS and Al Qaeda. [71] Central Asian militants might have been drawn into this new theater of jihad through the connections that they had formed in Syria.

There were also cases where some Central Asian IS core members have relocated to Afghanistan. Security authorities in Tajikistan assume that Gulmurod Khalimov and some of his associates had relocated to Afghanistan in early 2019. From there he might be planning to make incursions into southern Tajik provinces through the long-joined border. [72] Later in March, a Turkmen NGO claimed that some surviving Turkmen militants had migrated from Syria to Afghanistan following IS's territorial defeat in Baghouz. [73] However, it has been impossible to verify this from an official source.

Battle-hardened Central Asian militants have also traveled to Europe posing as refugees after fighting in Syria.

A case in point was the arrest of Mukhamadsaid Saidov, a Tajik citizen, by the German authorities in North Rhine Westphalia in June 2016.[74] Although Saidov, who had migrated from Syria to Germany, was not implicated in any specific attack plot in Germany, federal prosecutors considered him to be a close associate of Gulmurod Khalimov.[75] In July 2017, the Higher Regional Court of Düsseldorf sentenced Saidov to five years of imprisonment for fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria.[76] On 2 October 2018, Greek authorities extradited a 26-year-old Kazakh citizen, Dastan Khaisin, to his home country after arresting him under an international arrest warrant issued by Interpol in 2015 for his participation in militant activities in Syria.[77] However, no other details about his arrest and extradition were revealed by either Greek or Kazakh authorities. Similar arrests of other FTFs in Greece in the past have suggested that Dastan Khaisin probably entered this country through the well-functioning illegal refugee route from Turkey, by pretending to be an asylum seeker.[78]

In July 2020, Cypriot authorities reported to the United Nations that they had captured a Turkmenistani national amongst a group of individuals “linked to either ISIL- or Al-Qaida-affiliated groups”.[79] The arrests in Germany, Greece, and Cyprus, alongside recent terrorist attacks and disrupted plots by Central Asians in Europe, highlight the potential security risk that bogus Central Asian asylum seekers can pose in Europe.

This author’s data set also features at least three instances of the movement of citizens of one Central Asian country to another. As part of two separate counterterrorism operations conducted in 2013 and 2015, two Kazakh fighters had been arrested in Kyrgyzstan after their arrival from Syria, allegedly to plot attacks.[80] In 2015, Kazakh security agencies arrested a Kyrgyz citizen in the southern city of Shymkent; reportedly he had undergone bomb-making training in Syria.[81]

### ***Impact of FTF Mobilizations***

Instabilities in the Iraq-Syria and Afghanistan conflict theaters continue to provide conditions which FTFs can exploit. Central Asian militants who remain in the active conflict zone are likely to continue fighting to further the agendas of IS and HTS, since they are part of these militant extremist movements.

Surviving IS Central Asian fighters in Syria are likely to find a dwindling support network on the ground, leading them to scatter further or risk being captured or killed. Although IS had sent Central Asian operatives from Syria to carry out attacks outside the conflict zone, such as in Turkey, its ability to mobilize experienced fighters to execute attacks will likely be limited in the foreseeable future. Its military defeat in Syria and the change of leadership following the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019 have left IS with little external operational capabilities.[82] However, with IS Core calling for revenge attacks for the lost “caliphate”, it could seek to invest in “inspired-attacks”, particularly by self-radicalized individuals and a base of clandestine supporters and sympathizers (similar to the vehicular attacks in Sweden and the United States in 2017 and the car-and-knife attack in Tajikistan in 2018), with no experience from the battlefield, wherever and whenever possible.

As long as HTS survives, it is likely that KTJ and KIB will stay in Syria and fight to ensure their own survival. In this regard, it is unlikely that these militant groups will divert the focus of their activities from the core conflict zones to international operations in the near future. In their recent propaganda outreach, both groups have repeatedly called on their supporters and sympathizers to join them on the battlefield and raise funds for militant activities there. However, if HTS’s jihadist alliance loses territorial control over Idlib, facing overwhelming political and military pressure exerted by Syria and Russia, it could trigger a broader outflow of Central Asian fighters from Syria and also lead to new cohorts of detained fighters and their families in Syria, particularly among those who had aligned with KIB and KTJ.

The fate of the detained IS fighters and their families in Syria and Iraq will have far-reaching implications for the future trajectory of global counterterrorism efforts. There is a risk of re-radicalization of those who have been repatriated. Therefore, for the countries, which have already transferred large numbers of their citizens from Syria and Iraq, it is crucial to place the repatriated individuals in comprehensive deradicalization and social reintegration programs. Countries like Kyrgyzstan should remain committed to bringing back their

citizens who remain stranded in detention and displacement camps in Syria and Iraq.

As of now, Central Asian countries have seen no massive exodus of their fighters from the Syria-Iraqi theaters home. Most fighters do not seem willing to turn to domestic terrorist operations. However, as recent returnee cases in Kyrgyzstan have suggested, some fighters may come back with such missions and be found plotting. The Chinese Embassy bombing in Bishkek has shown that battle-hardened fighters can be dangerous operatives. The role of returnees and relocators is not confined to plotting attacks. They may also engage in radical preaching, recruitment, fundraising, and training activities.

There is no perfect mechanism of measurement to precisely assess how fighters will behave upon return, particularly in the long term. The risk of violence associated with secret returnees depends on a combination of organizational intent, the degree to which the returnee remains committed to his associated group, and the capacity of governments to timely detect and prevent violent activities of such former fighters. It is important to offer rehabilitation and social reintegration programs to both voluntary (if convicted, at prisons; if not, upon their reunion with the local society) and secret returnees (at prisons after their identification and imprisonment).

As available data indicate, those FTFs who do not want to return to their countries of origin but wish to migrate elsewhere will seek to go to places where they can find some contacts who will help them to settle down and survive in a new social environment. Traveling to totally unknown destinations brings considerable risks for them, as it involves crossing international borders, navigating unfamiliar territory, language barriers, and dealing with alien people. Without reliable contacts, relocating FTFs can easily and quickly get detected, arrested, and ultimately extradited to their home countries.

As such, foreign countries with Central Asian diaspora communities, especially Turkey and the Ukraine, and potentially some West and South European countries, may continue to serve as destination of choice for FTFs. One example of this pattern is provided by the arrest in Germany (in June 2016) of Mukhamadsaid Saidov, a Tajik fighter who fought with IS in Syria. In Europe, with about 5,600 Tajiks, Germany is among the top destination countries for Tajik migrants.[83] On the other hand, cases in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have demonstrated that some former fighters may choose to move to neighboring countries in Central Asia, as it is relatively easy for them to lie low and survive in such culturally similar communities.

There are facilitation networks (illegal refugee routes, fake documentation, and human smuggling channels), which serve as a mechanism connecting conflict zones and preferred destination countries. However, such service comes with considerable costs, which not many former fighters can afford. Therefore, only rich and well-connected former fighters may be able to relocate to countries such as the Ukraine.

As the January 2020 UN report has suggested, some Central Asian FTFs might have moved to some regions as distant as West Africa and the Sahel, in the hope to continue their fight in new theaters of jihadist conflicts. If such mobilization is actually taking place, it is very likely that Central Asians have been pulled into these conflicts through connections with local jihadists whom they met in Syria. Therefore, national counterterrorism agencies should have a very clear understanding of the network dynamics of militant groups appearing on their radars. Although some experts, including Edward Lemon, Vera Mironova, and William Tobey, have viewed Afghanistan as the “likeliest destination” for Central Asian militants to move on to pursue their combat operations, the scale of the movement from Syria to Afghanistan has so far been much lower. As such some Central Asian FTFs exiting Syria may choose to migrate not only to Afghanistan, but also to other conflict frontlines, including the above-mentioned regions and countries.

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## Notes

- [1] For the purposes of this analysis, the author uses “foreign fighters” and “foreign terrorist fighters” or “FTFs” interchangeably. He defines them as foreign individuals who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight for IS, Al Qaeda, and other militant groups.
- [2] While the local media did report a Central Asian was involved in the 2016 Istanbul airport attack, eventually this allegation was not proven to be true. See: ‘Trial begins over IS attack on Istanbul airport,’ *The Associated Press*, 13 November 2017, URL: <https://apnews.com/article/6a20adfa95cc46e0b7645cece42bb1d8>.
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# From Spandau to Guantanamo: Prisons as Propaganda Instruments for Extremists and Terrorists

by Nathan Thompson and Amber Hart

## Abstract

*Prisons have featured repeatedly in narratives of terrorist and other violent extremist groups. Such groups have exploited the imprisonment of their members as a propaganda tool aimed at eliciting support and attracting new members through discourses of struggle and oppression. This article examines three such cases, to isolate key elements that support the use of prisons as a symbol of the ideological struggle of violent militants. It encompasses cases of right-wing extremism as well as nationalist and religious terrorism. With an emphasis on illustrating how terrorist groups utilize prisons to achieve various aims, this article seeks to provide a preliminary understanding of the symbolic and iconic use of prisons across a variety of ideologies. Greater understanding of the factors that promote the choice of prisons as symbols of ideological legitimization could serve to support approaches to minimise the representation of prisons in legitimizing ideologically motivated violence.*

**Keywords:** Narratives, prisons, propaganda, symbols, terrorists, violent extremists

## Introduction

Prisons have featured repeatedly in the narratives of various terrorist and violent extremist groups. For example, violent right-wing ideologues have emphasized the incarceration of Adolf Hitler at Landsberg Prison in 1924, following his failed Beer Hall putsch. It was during this term of imprisonment that Hitler commenced his National-Socialist Party manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, and accordingly, Landsberg Prison became intrinsically embedded within the ideology of the Nazi regime, and after 1945, the neo-Nazi movement.[1] Contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon are also observed in Israel, where the widespread incarceration of Palestinians has become a potent source of identity and celebration as evidenced by the Palestinian Prisoners' Day on 17 April each year.[2] In each case, imprisonment has been exploited by the respective extremist and terrorist groups to serve as a symbol of their ideological struggle. Accordingly, when prison terms are transformed into a *quasi rite-of-passage* or viewed as a demonstration of one's commitment to an ideological cause, the prison potentially loses its intended deterrent effect and instead acts to reinforce the perceived legitimacy of the extremist group and its narrative.[3]

While Silke and Veldhuis comment on the "vast amount of scholarly and policy attention" that violent extremism in prisons has attracted, they also highlight significant gaps in the existing body of literature. Primarily, attention has been focused on the individual level, investigating aspects of prisoner radicalization and deradicalization.[4] However, enquiry into the role of prisons in the narratives at a collective or organizational level has been largely neglected.[5] With a focus on group narratives, this article goes some way to addressing this gap by articulating the nuanced way in which terrorist and other violent extremist groups capitalize on imprisonment and conditions of incarceration as a tool to promote their cause. Adopting an inductive approach, this article examines historical and current cases, namely the Spandau Prison in Germany, the HMP Maze in Northern Ireland, and the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in Cuba. The article sets out to identify the unique circumstances that have transformed these particular prisons from institutions of sanction to icons that can lend support to the perceived legitimacy of a violent ideology. Three key commonalities can be observed following an analysis of the cases examined: exclusivity of the prisons housing only terrorists (or those accused of terrorism), martyrdom, and infiltration of the mainstream media. It is argued that these three factors contribute to the efficacy of prisons as symbols of injustice in terrorist narratives and propaganda. Whilst acknowledging that there are other cases of terrorist imprisonment that have attracted negative media attention for human rights abuses—most notably Abu Ghraib in Iraq, and Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan

[6]—the three prisons analyzed here have become paradigmatic cases for the symbolic value of prisons for terrorist groups and their propaganda. Accordingly, the scope of this article is limited to Spandau Prison, HMP Maze, and Guantanamo.

### ***Background and Context***

Although terrorism has historically been perceived and punished as a criminal act, it differs from ordinary criminal offending and consequently requires a specific response of its own. A key factor distinguishing incarcerated terrorists and violent extremists from their ‘ordinary’ criminal peers is that of motive which can be broadly explained by contrasting instrumental and expressive offending.[7] Instrumental offenses are committed to attain a personal gain, such as material or financial benefits and status. Expressive offenses are primarily committed with the objective of furthering ideals, or in response to a perceived injustice against the group with whom the offender identifies. A further key difference is linked to the level of visibility. While instrumental offenders seek to avoid detection, expressive offenders generally seek to attract attention to their acts to gain maximum recognition for their cause.[8] This visibility is pertinent when considering violence through the lens of symbolism. For these reasons, terrorism and some other acts of violent extremism primarily fall within the scope of expressive offending.

Expressive offending is often further characterized by a perceived legitimization of the use of violence, inasmuch that advancing the ideological objective is meant to justify the means of attaining it. Documented examples include Adolf Hitler who, while addressing the court at his own trial, relied on such an altruistic justification as a defense in his proposition that “I alone bear the responsibility. But I am not a criminal because of that. Today I stand here as a revolutionary...”[9] Similarly, in Northern Ireland, interviews with former incarcerated IRA members found that “[t]here was no indication that they possessed criminal motivation or were motivated by personal gain. Emphasis was placed on support for republican ideals...”[10] This denial of the criminality of their acts of violence often translated into a perception that these offenders were being persecuted for their beliefs and as such, the prison was, for those who followed this line of reasoning, transformed into a symbol of persecution.[11] As Neumann noted, prisons have featured in such circumstances in a variety of terrorist and extremist group narratives, irrespective of the nature of their ideology:

“No matter how different their causes or backgrounds, Egyptian Islamists, German Marxists, and Irish Republicans have all regarded their comrades’ imprisonment as traumatic turning points in the histories of their movements. The prisoners and the ways they were treated came to be focal points for their groups’ campaigns, and they significantly influenced their supporters’ attitude towards violence and the state.”[12]

More specifically, terrorist groups have leveraged the imprisonment of their members as a propaganda mechanism, with the objective of publicizing their perceived persecution as a measure of the legitimacy of their cause.[13] To gain support for the cause, terrorism relies on both terroristic acts and graphic propaganda. A concept originally championed by Kropotkin, *propaganda of the deed* is the actual perpetration of violence to gain publicity that can serve to highlight political goals.[14] As terrorism is an expressive form of violence, visual propaganda comprises a core component of the strategy.[15] Effective propaganda is defined as “a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”[16] As we shall demonstrate, terrorist groups rely on the use of prisons as symbols in their propaganda to exacerbate the perception of grievances, justify violent action, and subsequently incite others to act on behalf of their violent ideology.

### ***Spandau Prison – Berlin***

Constructed in 1876 in Berlin, the link between Spandau Prison and the Nazi regime commenced around 1933 when it was utilized as a holding center for political prisoners and used by the Gestapo as a torture center. [17] Following the second World War, a number of high-ranking figures from the Nazi regime were tried for war crimes at Nuremberg. In July 1947, seven of those convicted were transferred from Nuremberg to serve

their sentences at Spandau Prison.[18] In preparation, the prison's existing population of approximately 600 convicted criminals was transferred to other penitentiary facilities. The 134-cell prison was redesignated *The International War Crimes Prison* and it served to exclusively accommodate seven senior-ranking members of the Nazi regime.[19]

Quadrupartite management of the prison comprised monthly rotations shared between Britain, France, Russia, and the United States, who were each responsible for staffing the prison during their rotation.[20] A strict regime prevented the prisoners from communicating with each other or with staff and the inmates were addressed only by their number (one through seven). However, over time these restrictions were relaxed, with the exception of the Russian rotations, when stringent adherence with the original prison regime was maintained.[21]

Despite various attempts by the prisoners to intimate that they had denounced their Nazi ideology, the majority of the inmates were observed to have maintained their extremist worldview during their incarceration and the prison became synonymous with Nazism.[22] By the early 1950s, the symbolic significance of the prison and its inmates was recognized. Following the discovery of inmate Rudolph Hess's shirt, which was stencilled with his iconic prison number and discarded in the prison rubbish, prison staff members were instructed by supervisors that no personal items from the prisoners were to leave the prison for fear that they would become prized memorabilia for Nazi sympathizers.[23]

By 1966, of the original seven prisoners only Rudolph Hess remained: the one-time deputy Führer.[24] As the last incarcerated Nazi, Hess was viewed as a hero by supporters of the nationalistic far right.[25] The prison's significance was elevated to that of a shrine, and Hess's birthday became the subject of an annual pilgrimage for neo-Nazis. Amassing at the prison gate, openly displaying forbidden symbols of Nazism such as the swastika, they glorified the third Reich narrative and demanded that Hess be released.[26]

Despite mounting pressure to concede the release of Hess, Russia resisted on the grounds that he "was the last living symbol of the Nazi regime...and would stay there until he died". Although contemplating his release, the British were equally concerned that Hess had not denounced his Nazi ideology and feared that his release could motivate a Nazi revival.[27] Consequently, Hess remained the sole prisoner at Spandau Prison until his suicide in 1987. His death in prison further reinforced a cult following within far-right circles and elevated his status to that of a martyr.[28]

Immediately following Hess's death, the four victor nations governing the prison regime agreed to demolish the prison to prevent it from continuing to serve as a Nazi shrine. The demolition was carried out under the eyes of armed guards, who were authorized to use lethal force against anyone attempting to remove souvenirs from the site. Despite the risks, Nazi sympathisers were reported to offer up to 100 German Marks for a single Spandau brick, ostensibly confirming the prison administration's concerns that the prison continued to represent an icon to neo-Nazis.[29] The rubble was pulverised before being disposed of at either a British airbase or at an undisclosed location in the North Sea. Evidently, these extreme measures had become necessary due to the symbolic significance that the prison had gained.[30]

This significance was derived not only from the prison's role as the International War Crimes Prison, but as the place where the final surviving member of the Nazi regime was housed and had died. Exacerbated by the fact that only high-ranking Nazis were incarcerated there, Spandau represented the final material link with pure National-Socialism for right-wing extremists. Some have argued that the decision to detain Hess until his death was a mistake and acted to further elevate the prison's symbolic status.[31] Subsequently, both Rudolph Hess and Spandau Prison became inseparable in the narratives of the German far-right and have been immortalized in neo-Nazi propaganda, including music festivals and annual commemorations. The reasoning behind Spandau's hasty destruction was arguably validated by the fact that Hess's grave in Wunsiedel became the new focus of the annual pilgrimages that formerly headed for Spandau.[32]

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**HMP Maze – Northern Ireland**

The symbolic significance of the Maze Prison to Irish republican militants encompassed three key elements. Firstly, the location of the permanent cellular prison on the existing site at Long Kesh signified a link with the former practices of internment and Special Category Status. The second element was the protests culminating in the 1981 hunger strikes, and the third factor was the mass escape of republican prisoners in 1983.

The origins of the Maze Prison go back to the introduction of internment in 1971, whereby individuals who were suspected or known to be involved in terrorist activity, or providing support to terrorist groups in Northern Ireland, were detained without charge or trial. Detainees were held in compounds at Long Kesh and separated, based on the paramilitary group that they were affiliated with. Following a hunger strike at Crumlin Road Prison in 1972, convicted terrorists secured for themselves a Special Category Status which afforded conditions comparable with those experienced by the detainees, including placement in the compounds at Long Kesh. In preparation for the reception of convicted terrorists, the facility was redesignated as *HM Prison Maze*. [33]

By 1976, Special Category Status was phased out and convicted terrorists were treated as ordinary criminals. A key element of this *Criminalization Policy* was the creation of a cellular prison in which terrorist prisoners were to be accommodated separately from other inmates. [34] The review chaired by Lord Gardiner cautioned against the construction of the new cellular prison at the existing Maze Prison site, asserting that to do so would associate the new prison with the site's history of detention and the previous Special Category Status. [35] Due to time constraints (amongst other reasons), the permanent cellular prison comprising eight H-Blocks was constructed alongside the compounds and designated *Maze-cellular*. It was later conceded by the British government that “we finished with the prison in the wrong place” and the new cellular prison became associated with the former practices of internment and Special Category Status. [36]

The government's move toward criminalization was met with resistance, primarily by incarcerated republicans. Commencing with the ‘blanket protest’, terrorist prisoners who were denied Special Category Status refused to wear the prison uniform as it was viewed to represent the status of a common criminal. This passive form of protest escalated to the ‘dirty protest’ where prisoners refused to wash and fouled their cells with excrement. This specific protest attracted significant attention both within the Catholic Church and across the wider community. Concerns were raised in relation to the prisoners’ living conditions despite the government arguing that the conditions were self-inflicted. [37] The protest action was further escalated in October 1980 with a hunger strike which lasted until December. The second hunger strike, which began in early 1981, was evidently more significant in cementing the link between republican terrorism and the Maze Prison, due primarily to the death of ten republican prisoners, who became martyrs within the republican narrative. [38] British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is remembered for her “Let them starve” rhetoric in response to the hunger strikes. [39] Not only did this result in an attempt on her life, but it consolidated the symbolism of maltreatment and oppression at the hands of an intransigent government regime. [40] Whilst further research is required to determine direct causality, increased IRA terrorist activity was observed the following year, with the number of deaths as a result of terrorism increasing from seventy-six to 101. [41]

The final element is the mass escape from Maze Prison in 1983, which involved thirty-eight republican terrorists successfully breaching all layers of the security measures at Britain's flagship supermax prison in Northern Ireland. Termed *Ealu Mor* (The Great Escape), the escape was profoundly significant in that it was perceived to represent a humiliating defeat of the British government and the prison administration who had served as their captors since 1976. [42] The symbolic value placed on this escape is evident in Sinn Féin's propaganda publication *An Phoblacht*, where ten years later it was described as “the greatest of all escapes”. The coverage of the tenth anniversary of the escape dominated a further six pages of that issue. [43] This illustrates that the use of prisons as a propaganda tool was a prominent feature throughout “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland. Weekly newspapers such as the aforementioned *An Phoblacht/Republican News* and the *Irish Liberation Press* were the propaganda organs through which the republican movement sought to influence public sentiment, attract financial support, and recruit new members. [44]

The republican propaganda campaign also focused on presenting a justification for the violence of the

Provisional IRA and portrayed its incarcerated members as victims of an oppressive and illegitimate British regime. The Provisional IRA utilized republican newspapers as its principal propaganda medium.[45] These newspapers presented republican perspectives of the conflict with a regular focus on “their” prisoners, to the point that it was conceded that the republican campaign was being fought as much in the H-Blocks as it was on the streets.[46] The IRA commercialized the prison protests and the subsequent deaths of the hunger strikers, seeking to exploit public sympathy to garner widespread community support.[47] The role and significance of propaganda became increasingly evident for the government, specifically in relation to the prison protests, and was manifested in frequent reports that “...the H-Block campaign was essentially a propaganda exercise for the benefit of the IRA” and that “...the H-Block issue is a major item in the propaganda of PIRA, PSF and the relatives’ action committee.”[48] The efficacy of the republican propaganda campaign was such that the British government moved to prohibit mainstream media coverage of terrorist activity. Further consideration was given to classifying the republican newspapers as ‘seditious publications’, with the intention of banning their publication and distribution, ostensibly to throttle the republican narrative and the support it was attracting for the incarcerated members.[49]

The outcomes experienced at Spandau were arguably replicated at Maze whereby concerns that it would become an icon of republican terrorism were realized. The redevelopment of the prison site following its closure in 2000 included a proposal to preserve several of the prison structures, including the prison infirmary where the hunger strikers died in 1981, as an *International Centre for Conflict Transformation*. [50] However the prison was considered “a potent symbol of the troubles”, and preservation of any of the prison infrastructure would “become a focus of republican pilgrimage” and a shrine to Bobby Sands and the other hunger strikers.[51]

Consistent with the outcomes at Spandau, the martyr status of key figures within the republican narrative became inseparably enmeshed with the prison. The physical infrastructure of Maze Prison became the symbolic embodiment of both the hunger strikers and arguably, though to a lesser extent, of those involved in the successful mass escape from prison in 1983. A fundamental cause of this symbolic transformation was the IRA’s normalisation of imprisonment, and through the promotion of the narrative that those who were imprisoned for terrorism offenses would be the subject of an amnesty and released as a condition of the peace process.[52]

### ***Guantanamo Bay - Cuba***

Authorities responsible for the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp (Guantanamo) did not capitalize on the knowledge gained from the experiences of Spandau and Maze prisons. In fact, a number of similarities can be observed with the other two cases. Guantanamo is a prison in Southeast Cuba renowned for practices tantamount to torture inflicted on some of those imprisoned there.[53] The prison was opened in 2002 by President George W. Bush in response to the emotively framed “War on Terror” and despite numerous calls for its decommission, it is still in operation as of mid-2021.[54] The prison itself is widely known for the images released a short time after its opening. The release of these images was described by then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as “unfortunate”. [55] The images depicted prisoners held in stress positions wearing the now-notorious orange overalls. As will be discussed below, these overalls have become synonymous with the grievance of oppression conveyed by the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in their media propaganda operations.

The legality of detentions in Guantanamo has been extensively contested. For the purposes of this article, it is helpful to understand its character as a “legal black hole”. [56] According to many Western constitutions and various international treaty instruments, those who have been arrested for crimes must be brought before a court of law and provided with a fair trial. This aligns with article 11 of the United Nations Charter of Human Rights.[57] However, a declaration of war does more than merely change the public perception of an out-group. Whilst a full review of international law is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that a declaration of war enables those fighting for an enemy state to be treated not as criminals, but as prisoners of war.[58] The conditions of treatment of prisoners of war is stipulated in the Geneva Convention of 1949.[59] However, the United States Supreme Court determined that those being held at Guantanamo were

neither criminals nor prisoners of war, but “enemy combatants”, thereby providing for the aforementioned legal loophole.[60] Evidence of inhumane treatment has surfaced from Guantanamo.[61]

The legal terminology used by the United States Supreme Court of “enemy combatants” serves to reinforce the notion that the prisoners detained there are *not* criminals. This contributes among parts of the public to a sense that, consistent with Spandau and Maze, those imprisoned at Guantanamo are merely imprisoned for their beliefs. This notion is further supported by the fact that numerous prisoners in Guantanamo have never been charged, never been before a court, and are indefinitely detained as per the powers conferred by the US Supreme Court.[62] Similarly to Spandau and HMP Maze, those imprisoned at Guantanamo are exclusively inmates suspected of perpetrating, or assisting others to carry out, terrorism offenses. Terrorist organizations like Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda (AQ), both of which have members incarcerated within Guantanamo, have capitalized on infringements of the human rights of those held there in their propaganda to bolster support for their respective narratives. The use of Guantanamo as a mechanism of justification for terrorist violence is demonstrated both overtly and subtly in a number of propaganda events released by AQ. For example, in February 2014, in a media release, the leader of AQ, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, intimated that the United States of America (USA) does not treat the prisoners at Guantanamo as humans.[63] This sentiment resonates with those who do not agree with the practices in Guantanamo and serves to justify acts of retaliation. In a more subtle manner, IS has utilized the symbol of the orange jumpsuits in a number of productions, the most infamous comprising the beheadings of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, and British humanitarian worker David Cawthorne Haines in 2014.[64]

The use of thematic imagery coupled with acts of violence portrayed in propaganda such as beheading videos serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it invokes an emotional response in the target audiences—both among those who support and those who denounce IS.[65] Secondly, the violent nature of the propaganda results in the infiltration of Western mainstream media, garnering wider attention also in the West.[66] A symbol such as Guantanamo’s orange overalls serves to underscore the perceived grievance, and has been depicted as a prominent example of a “transnational injustice symbol”.[67] The belief that those held in Guantanamo are being detained unlawfully and treated inhumanely is widespread though not uncontested. IS capitalizes on the doubts cast by those who denounce US policies in Guantanamo, and similarly to the IRA, the Islamic State capitalized on public sympathy by staging propaganda events featuring symbols reminiscent of Guantanamo.

The consequences of IS’s use of symbols are evident. Whilst not solely attributable to the symbolism of the orange overalls, jihadist media operations resulted in more than 40,000 foreign fighters being drawn to join IS in Syria and Iraq.[68] A number of terrorists who have been arrested for joining IS or AQ, or for having committed or preparing to commit an attack on their behalf, have been found to have consumed IS propaganda.[69] Further research could serve to quantify the extent of the importance of propaganda consumption for recruitment and the perpetration of attacks.

Although prisoner hunger strikes are often associated with HMP Maze, Guantanamo has also experienced this form of inmate protest. In 2005, more than 200 detainees participated in a hunger strike, and more than 100 inmates participated in a second hunger strike in 2013. On both occasions the prisoners were protesting against their indefinite detention and inhumane treatment.[70] Notably, the hunger strikes at Guantanamo have been compared to those at HMP Maze with authorities often expressing a desire to avoid “another Bobby Sands”.[71] Sands and the other nine Irish inmates who died as a result of hunger strikes in HMP Maze became martyrs: a sentiment exacerbated by Thatcher’s response, subsequently causing a noticeable increase in support for the IRA cause.[72] This is a scenario that the US government has been trying to avoid in Guantanamo.

Whilst the physical locations of both Spandau and Maze have been destroyed to prevent a tangible symbol which may serve to legitimize their respective ideologies and justify attacks, Guantanamo is still in operation as a detention camp. Accordingly, policy makers should consider the cases of Spandau and Maze when determining the outcome of Guantanamo both now and in the future to prevent it from also becoming a symbol of oppression and injustice which may in turn serve to support the terrorists’ justification for violence.

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## Discussion

As evident in the previous paragraphs, the utility of prisons as a symbol of oppression and struggle is not a novel concept. Notwithstanding, the efficacy of the use of prisons as symbols remains largely under-explored. Moreover, a full understanding of why these specific prisons have been utilized as symbols and not others remains elusive. In an attempt to reach a better understanding, a number of common elements evident across the three case studies are presented here.

Firstly, a key finding in each of these cases is that of exclusivity. Spandau Prison, while designated as the International War Crimes Prison, was far from it. As its sole function was to accommodate convicted members of the Nazi regime, its identity was symbolically linked to the Third Reich and to National Socialism.[73] Northern Ireland presents comparable findings. While Maze Prison accommodated both loyalist and republican prisoners, the significant majority of that prison population was republican. Accordingly, Maze Prison became synonymous with republican militants. This perception enhanced the ability for republican paramilitary groups to influence public sentiment and to utilize their imprisoned members as propaganda tools. The same is true for Guantanamo where the only prisoners housed there are suspected of terrorism yet designated enemy combatants. With Guantanamo's questionable record of justice and humane treatment, IS has tried and partly succeeded in exploiting Guantanamo as a symbol of injustice against all Muslims, thereby adding to the narrative that the West is at war with Islam.

Secondly, the role of martyrdom within the prison narratives has provided a mechanism which delegitimizes the purposes of imprisonment itself. The death of prisoners leading to a cult of martyrdom has been observed in many contexts throughout history. A famous example is Sayyid Qutb, a leading ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood's interpretation of Islam, who was sentenced to death for terrorist offenses. When Egypt's President Nasser realized the potential consequences of executing Qutb, he offered Qutb clemency if he confessed to his crimes.[74] Qutb declined, expecting that he would be viewed as a martyr upon his execution. The leader of AQ, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, later noted that Qutb's writings gained greater attention after his death.[75]

Equally, the decision to keep Hess incarcerated until death afforded him martyr status throughout the neo-Nazi movement. Subsequently, his perceived sacrifice continues to serve as a source of legitimacy for incarcerated neo-Nazis, many of whom consider a prison term as part of "the battle for the reestablishment of National Socialism." [76] More recently, researchers Ben Am and Weimann observed that right-wing extremists observe imprisonment to be a form of martyrdom, having made a sacrifice for the cause.[77] The historical role of Spandau Prison has created a perception of legitimacy for the narratives of neo-Nazis, and strengthened their belief in the existence of an ideological struggle against a corrupt government and the notion of a Jewish conspiracy.[78]

Similarly, in Northern Ireland, the assignment of Special Category Status at Maze Prison was "...regarded as a badge of respectability particularly amongst young prisoners...[and] the family attitude is almost invariably that they can hold up their heads in the local community if their son is with his paramilitary colleagues." [79] Such perceptions and attitudes were reinforced by republican propaganda which glamorized their imprisoned members by portraying them as brave, heroic, and victorious.[80] Such perceptions diminished the prison's ability to function as a legitimate sanction mechanism for those convicted of politically motivated violence. Instead, it offered an opportunity to paramilitary groups to leverage their imprisoned members to garner community support.[81] Furthermore, those who died while engaging in hunger strikes in Maze Prison also became viewed as martyrs for the cause.[82]

In contrast to both Spandau and Maze, those incarcerated in Guantanamo are often presented by terrorist organizations as innocent civilians who are victims of an oppressive, anti-Islamic regime. However, in Guantanamo, martyrdom has often been attempted but seldom achieved. In a similar manner to what was observed in Northern Ireland, many prisoners in Guantanamo have engaged in hunger strikes. Echoing the sentiments of Yuill, in response to the British experience with incarcerated republicans, Nieminen argues that hunger strikes are symbolic resistance to the state apparatus.[83] To prevent the hunger strikers from succeeding in martyrdom, they are being force-fed through nasogastric tubes, with some having not eaten food

voluntarily for more than a year.[84] This practice is widely discussed and debated, with Ibrahim and Howarth eloquently arguing that

“The aesthetic of the force-feeding chair as an instrument of torture and pain performs to the pornography of American hegemony marking out the body of the Other as not possessing the right to death and to be held within a liminal state of bare life (yet one not worthy of death).”[85]

Such sentiment echoes the earlier British experience of force-feeding hunger-striking IRA members. This practice was quickly abandoned in British prisons due to heated debates concerning its legality and descriptions of it as being the most offensive form of bodily assault that could be inflicted upon prisoners.[86]

Respect afforded to prisoners both alive and after death serves to reduce the perceived legitimacy of their incarceration. In the case of the Provisional IRA, the potential for release prior to serving their sentences in full also represented a potent source of influence, which the republicans traditionally exploited in their recruitment narratives.[87] By treating imprisonment not as a punishment but as a badge of honor, the efficacy of goals such as deterrence and punishment are significantly diminished. The use of propaganda to communicate with both those in the in-group, to provide instruction and encouragement of attacks and legitimacy of the potential outcomes (imprisonment or death), and the out-group, to justify and legitimize attacks, is an important feature of terrorist campaigns.

The expert use of technology and violence in propaganda has ensured successful dissemination to their target audiences. It is no coincidence that many high-quality video productions made by terrorists and their supporters are in English. This is one reason why these productions are picked up and distributed by mainstream media outlets. Mainstream media attention is the third and final consistency across the three cases. In the case of IS's propaganda campaign, a number of factors are at play. It has been argued that an effective social media campaign can infiltrate mainstream media.[88] The violence and brutality depicted in IS propaganda ensures that the mainstream media reports on, or further distributes at least part of the images as well as some ideological materials.[89] Finally, mainstream media is somewhat reliant upon terrorist propaganda outputs, as first-hand reporting in conflict theatres can be dangerous.[90] All of these factors have resulted in IS's propaganda, both subtly and overtly, becoming widely distributed across the West. Consequently, in the case of the Guantanamo prisoners, the visibility and relatability of both the prison and the prisoners as an icon of Islamic persecution have been amplified.

Such findings are in line with the experiences realized at Spandau and Maze. As Hess's imprisonment progressed, even some mainstream media portrayed him increasingly as a victim. Presented as an elderly man who was being unnecessarily kept in solitude, the crimes for which he was imprisoned and his violent ideological background became secondary. Framed as a victim, narratives of injustice proliferated throughout the neo-Nazi movement which served to cement his martyr status both prior to and following his death.[91]

In Northern Ireland, mainstream media served a comparable role, specifically in their reporting of the 1981 hunger strikes which became a daily feature in most Catholic print media. Consistent with the Spandau experience, media focus on human rights aspects of the hunger strike further acted to frame the republican prisoners as victims. This served to enhance community support and sympathy for the incarcerated terrorists among Catholics.[92] Arguably, and consistent with Hess's experience, the crimes for which they were incarcerated became a secondary issue. Subsequently, in 1988, the British government introduced a broadcasting ban which prohibited all mainstream media from broadcasting the voices of members of terrorist organizations. The effective abuse of the mainstream media to promote the republican narrative was conceded by the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, in his address to the House of Commons:

“The terrorists themselves draw support and sustenance from access to radio and television—from addressing their views more directly to the population at large than is possible through the press. The Government [has] decided that the time has come to deny this easy platform to those who use it to propagate terrorism.”[93]

This ban continued until 1994, ostensibly with the objective of throttling the republican narrative. It served to reduce publicity for calls for an amnesty for incarcerated members, which had become a major point of contention before the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. Accordingly, mainstream media features in all three cases examined in this article and are likely to continue to amplify terrorist narratives which portray prison as a symbol of injustice.

Despite existing practices of the promotion of prisons as symbols of oppression and persecution, many countries have opted to continue to separate their terrorist prisoners from ordinary criminals in their prison systems.[94] The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provides guidelines for incarcerating violent extremist offenders.[95] Two salient objectives emerge from these guidelines: (i) that the prisoners and staff are housed in a safe manner, and (ii) that radicalization of other prisoners or staff is avoided.[96] Whilst some scholars suggest that the separation may not be warranted [97], many governments and legislators around the world continue to emphasize the risk of terrorist prisoners radicalizing others.[98] Further research is required to determine the likelihood of terrorists radicalizing others in prison, although the level of risk is undoubtedly multifactorial.[99] Ultimately, the most appropriate method of detaining terrorist prisoners depends on both social-political context within which the imprisonment occurs, as well as on the risk tolerance of the government in power. In this context, the risk of prisons becoming symbols of injustice for terrorist organizations and their constituencies is an important consideration for policy makers to keep in mind.

## Conclusion

There are a number of factors which result in the effective use of prisons as symbols of injustice by terrorist organizations. Firstly, evident in IS's and AQ's extensive use of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp in their propaganda media, exclusivity provides terrorist groups specific prisons to focus on. This is exacerbated by the perception of terrorist prisoners as martyrs, coupled with the mainstream media reporting on, and disseminating, terrorist propaganda which frames prisons as symbols of injustice and persecution. Whilst incarceration as a mechanism of counter-terrorism generally aims to deter, punish and incapacitate terrorist offenders [100], it is evident that the efficacy of imprisonment is diminished when prisons become symbols which terrorist groups exploit in order to promote their ideological narrative. Consequently, certain counter-terrorism policies and strategies on occasion exacerbate the very problem they are designed to overcome.[101]

Although two of the main terrorist groups currently utilizing prisons as symbols in their propaganda war have largely been subdued, the challenges for governments and policy makers will remain relevant well into the future when considering the prison-terrorism nexus. To minimize the ability of terrorist groups to successfully portray prisons as symbols of injustice and persecution, policymakers should consider the factors which result in prisons becoming such symbols. Policies of exclusive use of designated prisons for terrorists only, should be reviewed and reconsidered, given the potential impact of terrorist prisoners being viewed as martyrs for the cause. Editors of mainstream media should be made aware that they could become involuntary instruments for the further dissemination of terrorist propaganda by allowing thoughtless reporting. However, reducing the efficacy of terrorist group narratives based on exploiting prison situations for propaganda purposes is first of all incumbent upon government officials, policy makers, and correctional administrators.

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## Counter-Terrorism Studies: A Glimpse at the Current State of Research (2020/2021)

*Results from a Questionnaire Sent to Scholars and (Former) CT Practitioners*

by Alex P. Schmid, James J. F. Forest, and Timothy Lowe

### Abstract

*This Research Note follows one presented by the same authors in the June 2021 issue of 'Perspectives on Terrorism' (Vol. XV, Issue 3), which addressed the state of research in the field of Terrorism Studies. The Research Note contains the results of a second questionnaire that asked how researchers assess the current state of research in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies. An appendix provides a sample of governmental, intergovernmental, and academic definitions of counter-terrorism. A supplementary bibliography lists the most important literature on the subject.*

**Keywords:** Counter-terrorism studies, research, literature

### Introduction

What is counter-terrorism? While much ink has been spilled on defining terrorism and on developing theories about terrorism, the same is not true for counter-terrorism.[1] Counter-terrorism, as a reactive phenomenon, it would seem, is not in need of much explanation. As a consequence, counterterrorism is, in the words of Daniel Byman, “under-theorized and under-researched.”[2] While there are hundreds of definitions of terrorism, there are far fewer on counter-terrorism.

Next to the term “counter-terrorism,” we also have the less frequently used term, ‘anti-terrorism’. It generally includes a variety of measures and tactics that complement the first of these five categories:

- **coercive** (based on the use of criminal justice and military force);
- **proactive** (based on intelligence preventive work);
- **persuasive** (based on discourse and counter-discourse);
- **defensive** (based on target hardening and societal resilience); and
- **long-term** (based on policies addressing the “root causes” of terrorism).[3]

While some authors use “anti-terrorism” as an umbrella term for all forms of dealing with terrorism, including counter-terrorism, others use it mainly for “defensive measures to prevent the occurrence of terrorism” while they use “counter-terrorism” for offensive measures that are “...designed to respond to a terrorist act.”[4] Yet scholars have also used the term counter-terrorism in a broad sense with its meaning stretched to cover both “soft power” and “hard power” approaches—anticipatory measures as well as reactive responses. The focus of this Research Note is on “counter-terrorism”.

The relationship between terrorism and counter-terrorism is one of an intricate interdependence.[5] In theory, one cannot define the one without the other. The broader one’s definition of terrorism, the broader the definition of counter-terrorism must be. The response problem is therefore also a definition problem.[6] There are academic definitions and there are official governmental and intergovernmental definitions of counter-terrorism. (for a brief selection, see Appendix). In both fields, there is no consensus. When it comes to national definitions, this has negative implications for international counter-terrorism cooperation.[7] When it comes to academic definitions, lack of consensus has negative consequences for the accumulation of knowledge, theory-building, and testing.

What then is the state of research in the field of counter-terrorism studies?

### **Questionnaire Overview**

The Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) developed two parallel questionnaires distributed to around 250 academics and professionals. The first of these two questionnaires invited responses on the state of research on terrorism, and the second asked about the state of research on counter-terrorism. The outcome of the first set of questions was published in *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Vol. XV, Issue 3, June 2021).[8] Today, the TRI would like to report on the outcome of the second set of questions. These were the 12 questions we asked members of the research community:

- B(1). What academic discipline(s) contribute(s) most to Counter-Terrorism Studies?
- B(2). Do you maintain a database of your own on Counter-Terrorism strategies, policies or some other related topic?
- B(3). If someone new to the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies asked you to recommend just one book that would provide the strongest introduction to the field, what would you suggest?
- B(4). Whose recent work on Counter-Terrorism Studies is, in your view, breaking new ground?
- B(5). Where do you see real progress/achievements in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies?
- B(6). In the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies: what are, in your view, the least understood factors contributing to failures to reduce terrorism?
- B(7). What are the greatest weaknesses/shortcomings in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies?
- B(8). What type of Counter-Terrorism Studies are, in your view, neglected/shunned for political, religious or other reasons?
- B(9). What can, in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies, be considered as positive/negative, “Lessons Learned”?
- B(10). If you were given sufficient time, money and opportunity: which aspect/topic of Counter-Terrorism would you wish to explore in depth?
- B(11). If you had drafted this questionnaire to assess the current state of research in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies: which question would you have included (and what would be your answer to that question)?
- B(12). If there is anything additional you would like to share about the current situation in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies, please do so below.

### **Demographics of Respondents**

Before discussing the results, here are a few remarks about the demographics of the respondents.

The response rate to our questionnaire was about 20 percent (which is low, but not unusually low for this type of questionnaire). Nevertheless, the 47 sets of answers (6 anonymous, 41 with names) we received reveal a glimpse of the current state of research in the field of Counter-Terrorism studies. Unfortunately, fewer respondents answered all the questions in the second questionnaire than in the first. Whether this was “questionnaire fatigue” or lesser interest in, or familiarity with, the subject of counter-terrorism compared to the subject of terrorism—or a combination thereof—we cannot tell.

Of the 47 respondents to this survey, 36 are men and 11 are women. 21 are from the Anglosphere (United

States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia). 16 respondents are from continental Europe (4 of them from [South] Eastern Europe), 5 from Asia, 3 from the Near East, and 2 from (North) Africa. Most of them are either current or former academics, and some have or had close ties to governments (e.g., via think-tanks or national defense universities). Roughly a third (15) of our respondents began researching terrorism before 9/11.

In terms of academic disciplines, a majority of the respondents reported a background in either Political Science, International Relations or Security Studies. A few have a background in Sociology or History. Not unexpectedly, these disciplinary affiliations are to some extent reflected in their responses about which academic disciplines contribute most to Terrorism Studies or Counter-Terrorism Studies:

When asked [Question B(1)]: “*What academic discipline(s) contribute(s) most to Counter-Terrorism Studies?*”, the majority of the respondents (53.2%) opted for Political Science, followed by Psychology (21.3%), Security Studies (14.9%), Legal Studies (14.9%), and Criminology and History (each 12.8%). All the other fields (Sociology, War Studies, Public Policy Studies) got ten percent or less (multiple answers were possible). However, several respondents stressed that counter-terrorism is interdisciplinary, therefore, many disciplines provide valuable contributions.

### Questionnaire Responses

In one of our first questions, we wanted to find out which are the seminal texts in the field of counter-terrorism. 36 of the 47 respondents answered this question:

B(3): “*If someone new to the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies asked you to recommend just one book that would provide the strongest introduction to the field, what would you suggest?*”

There was no consensus about the key works in the field. Only five works were mentioned more than once:

**Andrew Silke** (2019): *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge (8 mentions, 17%)

**Boaz Ganor** (2005): *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers (4 mentions, 8.5%)

**Martha Crenshaw and Gary LaFree** (2017): *Countering Terrorism*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. (3 mentions, 6.4%)

**Robert J. Art and Louise Richardson** (2007): *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the Past*. Washington DC, USIP Press. (3 mentions, 6.4%)

**James J. F. Forest** (2015): *Essentials of Counterterrorism*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. (2 mentions, 4.2%)

All the others, including well-regarded studies by Daniel Byman, Ronald Crelinsten, Richard English, John Horgan, Bruce Hoffman, Brian M. Jenkins, Clive Walker, and Paul Wilkinson, received only single mentions.

### Discussion and/or Comments

Since many authors (like Andrew Silke above) discuss terrorism and counter-terrorism together in the same volume, and the respondents had already answered a parallel question in the previous questionnaire that dealt with terrorism studies, the current top five list is perhaps not as representative as it would have been if the two questionnaires had not been distributed as one package.

When we asked:

B(4): “*Whose recent work on Counter-Terrorism Studies is, in your view, breaking new ground?*”, we received 38

responses. Two works got more than one response: Andrew Silke, the author of the work just cited, and Joana Cook, author of *A Woman's Place. US Counterterrorism since 9/11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Yet even Prof. Silke and Dr. Cook were mentioned only twice. Among the single responses reference was made, inter alia, to the works of Max Abrahms, J. M. Berger, Tore Bjørge, Julia Ebner, and Beatrice de Graaf—in addition to some of those already mentioned in answer to the previous question.

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Given the low responses and even lower consensus rate, no firm conclusions can be drawn about works breaking new ground. Given the size of the literature on counter-terrorism, our respondents might, however, have been unaware of some studies that in the view of the authors of this Research Note do break new ground, e.g.:

Richard J. Chasdi. *Counterterror Offensives for the Ghost War World. The Rudiments of Counterterrorism Policy*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010.

Teun van Dongen. *The Science of Fighting Terrorism: The Relation between Terrorist Actor Type and Counterterrorism Effectiveness*. Leiden: Leiden University Dissertation, 2014.

In recent years (2019–2021) a number of studies have been published which compare CT efforts of countries and which are characterized by academic rigor (see bibliography) that do break new ground. An example is:

Silvia D'Amato, *Cultures of Counterterrorism: French and Italian Responses*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019.

In answer to the related question [B(5)] “Where do you see real progress/achievements in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies?”, the following themes came out on top, based on 38 answers:

| Related to these themes                              | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Measuring impacts, effectiveness of counterterrorism | 6         | 12.8%      |
| Online intervention, understanding Internet activity | 4         | 8.5%       |
| Preventing or countering violent extremism efforts   | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Multidisciplinary approaches, engagement             | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Leadership decapitation, strategic targeting         | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Deradicalization                                     | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Research methodologies                               | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Data collection, availability of primary sources     | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Research collaboration                               | 2         | 4.3%       |
| None                                                 | 2         | 4.3%       |

Among the themes that received only a single mention figured: Synthesis between practice and theory; International co-operation; Connection with organized crime; Rise of non-“Western” focused research.

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Regarding the issue of data collection and availability, one of the deficiencies in the field of counter-terrorism is that there are hardly any publicly available databases on governmental counter-terrorist acts, while there are more than one hundred databases/data sets on terrorist incidents (ITERATE, GTD, etc.).[9]

However, in this regard, there seems to be some good news. We asked the question [B(2)]: “Do you maintain a database of your own on Counter-Terrorism strategies, policies or some other related topic?” We received 45 responses. 11 (24.4%) were affirmative and 34 (75.6%) negative. Yet most respondents who claimed to have a database/data set did not identify it. Among those who did, they usually referred to their own private collection

of interviews or documents, assembled during a recent or ongoing personal or collective research project.

There is still no database in the public domain on counter-terrorism comparable in size and authority with GTD. A very modest beginning has been made with a database with the acronym BAAD [Big Allied and Dangerous]. Yet one of its creators stressed, “The BAAD II has a variable on CT strategy directed at organizations—but it is VERY simple and we need the resources to disaggregate it a LOT more.”[10] One has to go outside the narrow field of counter-terrorism to find a publicly available data set on CT-related state repression. The *Political Terror Scale* (PTS) focuses, however, only on CT practices amounting to state terror and not on legitimate and legal governmental CT measures. It is based on sources like Human Rights Watch (HRW World Report), Amnesty International (AI annual surveys) and the US Department of State (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices). It is led by Prof. Mark Gibney and operated by a small group of professors and part-time researchers based at the University of North Carolina at Asheville and can be consulted at <<https://politicalterrorscale.org>>. We are still a very long way away from CT operations being covered as systematically as the acts of non-state terrorists.[11] One reason is lack of governmental funding, another is state secrecy.

In answer to the question [B(6)] “*In the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies: what are, in your view, the least understood factors contributing to failures to reduce terrorism?*” we received 52 responses (as some of the respondents mentioned more than one factor).

Here are the themes that received more than one mention:

| Themes related to:                                                  | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies, tactics              | 10        | 12.8%      |
| Understanding of extremism, radicalization                          | 5         | 10.6%      |
| The Internet                                                        | 4         | 8.5%       |
| Government policy or related                                        | 3         | 6.4%       |
| The role of religion and belief                                     | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Effectiveness of deradicalization and rehabilitation                | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Lack of empirical analysis of counter-terrorism cases               | 2         | 4.3%       |
| The role of geopolitics                                             | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Research methodologies, data collection                             | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Counter-terrorism institutions (structures, bias, responsibilities) | 2         | 4.3%       |

Among the single answers to this question regarding “the least understood factors contributing to failures to reduce terrorism” figured these: Conspiracy theories; Failure to understand or address root causes of terrorism; Working with communities that generate terrorism; Populist or short-sighted CT measures.

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Somewhat paradoxically, the most frequent answer to this question (referring to the “effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies, tactics”—10 mentions) stands in some contradiction to the most frequent answer to the previous question, where we asked about “real progress/achievements in the field of CT studies” (relating to “Measuring impacts, effectiveness of counterterrorism”—6 mentions). The question about effectiveness is indeed one of the most difficult subjects to understand and assess. When prevention is seen as part of counter-terrorism—which it should—the question arises of how and when to measure non-event outcomes as the success of anti-terrorist measures. The same goes for other CT measures like the effects of decapitation strikes against terrorist leadership. What might be a short-term success (e.g., in the form of a temporary decline in terrorist attacks) can yet turn out to be a medium- or long-term failure.[12]

In answer to the question [B(7)]: “*What are the greatest weaknesses/shortcomings in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies?*”, we received 45 answers (including multiple ones) from the respondents. Again, there were almost as many single answers as there were overlapping answers from our respondents.

| Themes related to                                               | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Research methodologies                                          | 6         | 12.8%      |
| Lack of comparative research or interdisciplinary collaboration | 5         | 10.6%      |
| Data collection, lack of primary sources                        | 4         | 8.5%       |
| “Fake” experts                                                  | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Limited research scope, “western-centric”                       | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Effectiveness of counter-terrorism measures                     | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Lack of holistic conceptualization                              | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Information and selection bias                                  | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Deradicalization and rehabilitation research                    | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Failure to address the root causes of terrorism                 | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Dominance of securitization                                     | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Research engagement                                             | 2         | 4.3%       |

Among the unique answers, respondents referred to: Influence of security services on research; Community and stakeholder engagement (e.g., religious leaders); Misunderstanding or rejection of societal factors; Events and politics-driven research, Policy-orientated or related; Lack of proactive research; “Hard approaches” (e.g., kinetic measures) are addressed more than “soft approaches” (e.g. reintegration, building resilient communities); Under-representation of “non-Western” scholars.

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Here the dominant concern is about research methodology. It is often forgotten that terrorism and counter-terrorism are some of the most difficult subjects to investigate for social scientists as well as others. To interview active terrorists is very dangerous (as many a journalist experienced). Underground organizations are not served by terrorism research and will not cooperate. To interview imprisoned terrorists might produce results that cannot be trusted. Police files, let alone those of intelligence agencies, are usually inaccessible until decades later. Court proceedings are often the closest we can get to understand terrorists and how they were caught. Research funding tends to go to pro-government researchers. While there is a group of researchers belonging to the “critical terrorism studies” camp, their critical attitude is mainly concentrating on what Western democratic governments do wrong in their eyes, while they are largely silent about the crimes of non-state terrorists. As one of the respondents put it: “...the sub-discipline of Critical Terrorism Studies needs to be challenged over its poor and jargon-laden writings on counter-terrorism.”

Counter-terrorism is less difficult to research than terrorism. However, funding is often harder to obtain, and access to data—except historical ones—remains a major problem in all but a few democratic countries. Yet when access to confidential and secret documents is possible, combined with interviews with past and present policy-makers and stakeholders, the results can be very useful, as exemplified by the award-winning doctoral dissertation by Thomas Renard, *20 Years of Counter-Terrorism in Belgium: Explaining Change in CT Policy-Making through the Evolution of the Belgian CT Doctrine and Practice since 2001* (Ghent University, 2021). Another example is the four-volume account of US CT policy developments by Dennis A. Pluchinsky (a senior intelligence analyst in the US Department of State from 1977 to 2005): *Anti-American Terrorism: From Eisenhower to Trump – A Chronicle of the Threat and Response* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2020).[13] Such volumes by former government officials tend to require a clearance process so that readers might not get the whole truth from a single source like that.

This issue leads us also to the next question we asked:

B(8) “*What type of Counter-Terrorism Studies are, in your view, neglected/shunned for political, religious or other reasons?*” Here we received 37 responses, with all but five of these unique responses that is, nonoverlapping answers—with “Don’t know” topping the shortlist.

| Themes related to                                  | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Don’t know                                         | 6         | 12.8%      |
| Criticism of counter-terrorism methods, approaches | 5         | 10.6%      |
| Role of religion                                   | 3         | 6.4%       |
| “Right-wing” terrorism                             | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Human and civil rights violations                  | 2         | 4.3%       |

Single mentions included: Root cause research; Neuroscience, neurological causes of terrorism; “Left-wing” terrorism; Eco-terrorism studies; Nationalist terrorism; “Soft” counter-terrorism approaches; Gender and terrorism; Negotiation as a method of counter-terrorism; State terrorism; Imprisonment and treatment of “terrorists” in custody; Israel and Israeli counter-terrorism operations; Law enforcement and civil society relations; “Non-Western” approaches to counter-terrorism; Interplay between cultural, religious, ethnic, economic, and other value systems in relation to counter-terrorism; Prison rehabilitation.

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Apart from “Don’t know” which scored highest, the next item mentioned was “Criticism of counter-terrorism methods, approaches.” Since funding for research is often directly, or indirectly, dependent on governments, criticism of government methods is often not welcome despite the fact that it might actually lead to improvements of governmental CT methods and approaches. Another obstacle is—next in line—religion. Researchers regularly are accused of either Islamophobia or Anti-Semitism, depending on the subject of their study. Hate mail and verbal threats against researchers and their families have become widespread, especially since the rise of social media which allows cyber-bullies to hide behind the anonymity of the Internet. This is not confined to sympathizers and supporters of religious extremism; right-wing extremists are also known to intimidate those who wish to study them.

With regard to question [B(9)]: “*What can, in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies, be considered as positive/negative, “Lessons Learned”?*” we received 41 responses. Among these were more than a dozen lessons that were only cited once by respondents. Only six “Lessons Learned” were shared by two to 10 respondents:

| Themes related to                                                | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Effectiveness of counter-terrorist measures, metrics             | 10        | 21.3%      |
| Importance of research collaboration                             | 5         | 10.6%      |
| Need for a holistic approach to countering terrorism             | 4         | 8.5%       |
| Effectiveness of short-term measures (e.g., strategic targeting) | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Limited effectiveness of deradicalization                        | 2         | 4.3%       |
| “Lone-wolf” actor                                                | 2         | 4.3%       |
| None                                                             | 2         | 4.3%       |

Among the “Lessons Learned” identified by only one respondent figured these: State interference in research; Importance of international counter-terrorism coalitions or related; Stronger understanding of religious terrorism; Comparative methods of countering terrorism in different countries; Importance of contextual re-

search; Priority of securitization; Creation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism; “Root cause” research; Effectiveness of detainment and release policies; Radicalization research; Development of “suspect communities”; Neglect of human rights and civil liberties as drivers of extremism.

### *Discussions and/or Comments*

For policy makers with a short attention span, “Lessons Learned” should be one of their favorites (next to “Best Practices”) when directly talking to researchers. One problem is that lessons from other countries or from the past or from a different type of terrorism might not or no longer apply. Terrorist methods and techniques change (e.g., use of drones, 3D printing of guns) and what was past is often no good indicator of what comes next.

With these caveats: what are some of the “Lessons Learned” suggested by our respondents? Here are some answers we received:

1. “Detach ourselves from power/administrations, and adopt a stance not as a consultant, but as an academic researcher”;
2. “Positive: Knowledge from comparative studies. Negative: Unclear criteria of effectiveness of counter-terrorist measures”;
3. “Nothing because none whatsoever seems to have persuaded the governments to calibrate their CT approaches consistent with academic recommendations”;
4. “This is difficult because the lesson, more often than not, must be learned by governments and policy makers more than academics. Often, academia knows the problem, but counter-terrorism stakeholders refuse to listen”;
5. “The whole field of deradicalization has produced only the most limited results at great expense. Many of the so-called “experts” are often from Islamist front groups”;
6. “How use of force is often not the solution (on its own) and can be even counter-productive”;
7. “Hard approaches to countering terrorism defeating human rights may not be really effective as it is seen. They only suppress and don’t really address the problem. This is a hard/negative lesson which is still not learned well”;
8. “Counter-Terrorism research is getting more aware of backfire-effects of counter-terrorism (e.g., losing hearts and minds due to civilian casualties by CT-operations”;
9. “A positive lesson is that resolving a conflict’s underlying root causes will support an effective counter-terrorism campaign. A negative lesson learned is that military measures by themselves may be insufficient to resolve a terrorism conflict when other factors are required to address the problems in a comprehensive manner”;
10. “Proactive approaches in CT-studies are increasing (i.e., soft/preventive approaches are getting increasing attention in recent times)”;
11. “Negative: The lack of synergy between CT and CVE studies and efforts. Positive: The emergence of counter-terrorism research centers throughout the world”;
12. “Security and liberty are not rival commodities; respect for human rights promotes security (both in the sense of security against the states, and in the sense of ensuring counter-terrorism legislation does not have counterproductive effects)”;
13. “The awareness, that it is not sufficient to create CT-measures but also to evaluate them carefully to spend resources efficiently and to avoid backfire-effects”;
14. “CT developments post-9/11 have held many important lessons for governments, especially in the West, for how not to counter terrorism. These include the importance of understanding and engaging the human geography of foreign sites in which CT and COIN operations are carried out,

the need for restraint in CT responses to avoid inadvertently fueling the narrative of extremists and terrorists and creating more recruits, the recognition that allies will not always see eye to eye when it comes to CT priorities and that unilateral (or no) action might sometimes be the more effective and efficient route. There is unfortunately no clear-cut way of successfully doing CT or COIN, and context heavily influences success or failure with there always being elements that are beyond the control or influence of governments. There are ways to mobilize non-state actors to help battle against terrorism however, and there is a growing recognition among most (at least in the West) that comprehensive approaches to countering terrorism are required.”

Regarding question [B (10)] “*If you were given sufficient time, money, and opportunity: which aspect/topic of Counter-Terrorism would you wish to explore in depth?*” we received 43 responses of which eight had between two and eight mentions:

| Themes related to                                                              | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Prevention strategies                                                          | 8         | 17%        |
| Artificial intelligence, digital counter-terrorism measures and communications | 7         | 14.9%      |
| History of counter-terrorism, long-term comparative studies (pre-9/11)         | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Primary interaction with “terrorists”, “extremists”                            | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Causes of terrorism                                                            | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Assessing measures of effectiveness in counter-terrorism                       | 2         | 4.3%       |
| Impact of counter-terrorism measures                                           | 2         | 4.3%       |

Unique responses referring to personal research desiderata covered topics like: Impact of counter-terrorism measures; Deradicalization programs; Strategic targeting, Leadership decapitation; Transnational counter-terrorism cooperation; Comparing the efforts of state and non-state actors to address counter-terrorism; Ideological ecosystems; Terrorism financing; Quantitative analysis; Subnational variation in counter-terrorism organizations and effectiveness; Counter-terrorism resource deployment; Ethics; Movement cooperation; Knowledge sharing; Ethnography; Improving the operational agility of counter-terrorism organizations; Colonial legacies and Islamophobia in Asia.

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Two research desiderata topics stand out: “Prevention strategies” (8 mentions) and “Artificial intelligence and digital counter-terrorism measures and communications” (7 mentions).

Regarding the first, there is a sizeable, but largely superficial, literature on prevention.[14] While there is finally a major English Handbook on Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness (The Hague: ICCT, 2021; online freely available at <https://www.icct.nl>), there is, unfortunately, no such equivalent when it comes to preventing state terrorism.[15]

Regarding the second research desideratum, Artificial Intelligence: there is a danger that artificial intelligence for CT is designed and applied by researchers who have no or little knowledge of the field of (counter-) terrorism studies. As Gian Maria Campedelli, the author of a ground-breaking dissertation *On Meta-Networks, Deep Learning, Time and Jihadism* (Milan: Catholic University of the Holy Heart, 2019), expressed it so well in a communication to the jury of the Terrorism Research Initiative:

*We are living in an extraordinary historical moment—for better or for worse—and we, as terrorist researchers, are facing the risks and opportunities that new contaminations from other fields are bringing to our doorstep. Terrorism research has always been a contaminated and diverse field, with researchers from psychology, sociology, political science, law, and economics contributing together in the attempt to answer*

*the same crucial questions. I myself am a criminologist, and I have always admired this inherently lively heterogeneity. In front of us, however, we have what could become the most important—and disruptive—contamination of the field so far. The contamination with computational sciences. Artificial Intelligence—in the declination of machine and deep learning—is all around us. Its industrial applications populate our daily lives, and its impact has already started to influence the social sciences. In fact, AI has already been employed in conflict research and—less frequently—to study terrorism. Screening the (scarce) existing literature at the intersection of terrorism and AI, however, it is worth noticing how these contributions very often come from scholars belonging to natural, physical, and mathematical sciences. More importantly, many of these contributors (those who Schuurman, in a recent article, calls “one-timers”) use terrorism as a free zone where to experiment fancy and sophisticated methods without paying any attention to the societal implications and conceptual cornerstones of their works. This process represents a twofold challenge for terrorism research. First, the hype and (over)claims around AI may lead to copious funding for studying terrorism through intelligent systems, excluding terrorism experts from the debate. Second, this methodologically oriented detour might generate real-world deployable models based on wrong assumptions, weak premises, and biased interpretations of what terrorism actually is. Terrorist researchers have a responsibility that goes well beyond publishing papers and books, at this time. Ignoring the potential consequences of this revolution can have tremendously negative effects on science and, ultimately, people. This is why the challenges terrorism research is facing are, to me, not only scientific but also ethical.*

*“On Meta-Networks, Deep Learning, Time and Jihadism” humbly tries to address these challenges. As naïve as it may seem, I have always worked on it intending to create something that, someday, could be useful to protect lives and peace.(...)As machine intelligence will help us all in the mission of understanding the causes and consequences of terrorism, this work testifies that methodology cannot bypass the need for grounded theory, reliable assumptions, solid interpretations. This work, in the end, calls for the renovated role of guardianship and innovation that terrorism researchers should assume, given the promises and the challenges of the field. First and foremost, to keep moving toward the heart of all those questions we cannot yet answer to.”[16]*

We could not have said it better than Dr. Campedelli.

Regarding [B (11)]: “If you had drafted this questionnaire to assess the current state of research in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies: which question would you have included (and what would be your answer to that question)?”, we received only 19 responses from the total of 47 respondents. For four “missing” questions there were more than one respondent (i.e., they proposed the same or a similar question).

| Responses related to                                                            | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Research impact                                                                 | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Research tools, methodology                                                     | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Meaning of counter-terrorism studies and the differences with terrorism studies | 3         | 6.4%       |
| Research scope, trajectory                                                      | 2         | 4.3%       |

#### *Discussion and/or Comments*

While some respondents thought that the questionnaire was reasonably complete (“this questionnaire is complete”; “it is all there”), others offered additional questions, with or without their personal answer to the question posed. Here are the main ones:

**Question:** “How did Islamist front groups do such an amazing job of infiltrating “deradicalization” programs and why do governments make the same decisions over and over again in this field?”

**Answer:** “Governments have been infiltrated by Islamist front groups, yet refuse to take a hard look at with whom they are working.”

**Question:** “Can terrorism and counter-terrorism studies be separated effectually?”

**Answer:** “No.”

**Question:** “How to strike a perfect balance so we do not over- or under-react?”

**Question:** “Do you know any studies that investigate in a scientific manner the effectiveness of counter-terrorism?”

**Question:** “How should academic research on counter-terrorism be connected with praxis?”

**Question:** “Why is our current research so short-sighted, and why is terrorism analysis always presented as such a novel, urgent, unheard-of threat?”

**Question:** “Do we better understand the drivers and sources of identity-based extremism and terrorism (Islamist, White, Buddhist, and Hindu)?”

**Answer:** “No, we do not, much more work is needed.”

**Question:** “What is the impact of counter-terrorism legislation on human rights?”

**Question:** “Which organizations/centers have contributed the most to counter-terrorism studies in recent years?!”

**Answer:** “START” [University of Maryland, seat of the Global Terrorism Database].

**Question:** “In your view, what principles should dictate whether terrorism should be treated according to the principles of criminal law or by the rules of war?”

**Answer:** “In my view, the main criterion is the effectiveness of law-enforcement institutions (police, courts of law). When terrorists are based outside the reach of law-enforcement institutions they must be treated by the rules of war.”

**Question:** “What software tools do you consider helpful in conducting counter-terrorism assessments?”

**Question:** “Has technology outstripped the need for HUMINT (human intelligence) in counter-terrorism studies?”

**Answer:** “The power of intuition. Gut instinct, loyalty, empathy, religious faith, synthesis, memory recall, cultural nuances, language inference, and human emotions cannot be disaggregated and codified accurately into even the most sophisticated counter-terrorism software. Put simply, human connection is invaluable.”

The three authors of this Research Note hope that someone in the research community picks up these questions and includes them in a new survey.

Our last question was not really a question but an invitation to make a suggestion [B(12)]: “If there is anything additional you would like to share about the current situation in the field of Counter-Terrorism Studies, please do so below.”

Only 7 of the 47 respondents volunteered a suggestion and only two respondents came up with one and the same suggestion, referring to the relationship between terrorism and counter-terrorism studies (one respondent wrote: “I don’t think one can engage in counter-terrorism studies without simultaneously engaging in terrorism studies,” while the other wrote: “Since I regard terrorism and counter-terrorism as inextricably linked, i.e., you cannot effectively counter terrorism until you properly understand it...”). Unique single answers referred, inter alia, to tensions between “critical”, “neutral”, and “applied” counter-terrorism studies and to ideological ecosystems (“There should be more study of the ideological ecosystems that promote White supremacist worldviews within Western government, law enforcement and militaries; ditto for Islamist, Buddhist, and

Hindu extremist cases”).

### *Discussion and/or Comments*

Unlike many other fields of study, the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies lacks a central national, regional, or global depository where bona fide researchers can access relevant open and grey literature without incurring high costs. One of our respondents therefore suggested that “The Counter Terrorism Research community should foster Open Science standards (e.g., open-access publishing, making their research data accessible to other researchers, wherever possible, preregister studies). This respondent therefore suggested that counter-terrorism research should have a field-specific literature database (as is common in other disciplines such as *PubMed* for Medicine and *PsycINFO* for psychology).

### **Conclusion**

The most striking result of this survey is the low degree of consensus among the respondents (which is partly linked to the low response rate). In only two of the 12 questions (questions six and nine), 10 of the 47 respondents could agree on one and the same answer. On the whole, counter-terrorism studies appear to be, as one respondent put it, “quite behind terrorism studies conceptually.” While the distance between academic research and government in-house research has diminished in recent years, the question “How to better improve cooperation between researchers, governments, tech companies, and the public at large” (as one respondent put it), is still very much a burning issue. It has been expressed in a question another respondent asked: “To what extent do you believe that the work of researchers/academics in the field of CT studies is actually incorporated into CT policy/practice?” It is the old issue of “speaking truth to power”. However, there are few uncontroversial truths in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies, although some of the “Lessons Learned” referred to above come, in the view of the authors of this Research Note, close to it.

While some governments and international organizations (like the European Commission) have been funding research quite generously, many well-funded multi-million research programs have produced few findings that have been identified by our respondents as ground-breaking. On the other hand, some research done on a shoestring budget (often in the form of doctoral dissertation research) has come up with new insights that have advanced the field of CT studies. In the view of the three authors of this Research Note, the field of CT studies is actually in better shape than one might conclude from the answers of many of the respondents of this questionnaire. We believe that most of those who care to study the books and articles listed in the bibliography below would agree.

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## Appendix:

### ***A Brief Chronology of Definitions/Descriptions of Counter-Terrorism***

#### **US Department of Defense (2003):**

***Antiterrorism:*** Defensive measures taken to reduce vulnerability to terrorist acts.

***Counterterrorism:*** Offensive measures taken to prevent (preempt), deter (disrupt), and respond to terrorism.

***Combating terrorism (CbT):*** Combating terrorism within the DOD encompasses all actions [including antiterrorism, counterterrorism, and terrorism consequence management] and intelligence support taken to oppose terrorism throughout the entire threat spectrum, including terrorist use of chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear materials, or high-yield explosive (CBRNE) devices.[17]

**UK Home Office (2006):** “Since early 2003, the United Kingdom has had a long-term strategy for countering international terrorism (known within Government as CONTEST). Its aim is to reduce the risk from international terrorism, so that people can go about their daily lives freely and with confidence. The strategy is divided into four principal strands: PREVENT, PURSUE, PROTECT, and PREPARE. (...) The PREVENT strand is concerned with tackling the radicalisation of individuals. (...) The PURSUE strand is concerned with reducing the terrorist threat to the UK and to UK interests overseas by disrupting terrorists and their operations. (...) The PROTECT strand is concerned with reducing the vulnerability of the UK and UK interests overseas. (...) The PREPARE strand is concerned with ensuring that the UK is as ready as it can be for the consequences of a terrorist attack.”[18]

**United Nations, General Assembly (2006):** Resolution A/RES/60/288 on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

UN Counter-Terrorism measures are divided into four categories:

- i. Measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism:* including prolonged unresolved conflicts, lack of rule of law and violations of human rights, ethnic, national, and religious discrimination, political exclusion, and socioeconomic marginalization.
- ii. Measures to prevent and combat terrorism:* in particular by denying terrorists access to the means to carry out their attacks, to their targets, and to the desired impact of their attacks.
- iii. Measures to build States’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism and to strengthen the role of the UN system in this regard:* recognizing that capacity-building in all States is a core element of the global counter-terrorism effort, and enhancing coordination and coherence within the UN system in promoting international cooperation in countering terrorism.
- iv. Measures to ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law as the fundamental basis of the fight against terrorism:* to reaffirm that the promotion and protection of human rights for all and the rule of law is essential to all components of the Strategy, and recognizing that effective counter-terrorism measures and the protection of human rights are not conflicting goals, but complementary and mutually

reinforcing.”[19]

**Richard J. Chasdi (2010):** “In its most basic form, the term ‘counterterrorism’ is used by many, but certainly not all scholars, to describe efforts to constrain or suppress terrorist assault practiced in most cases by non-state actors. Many specialists rely on general, open-ended definitions of counterterror that really do not distinguish between counterterror practices, war-making in general, and the all too frequent overlap between the spheres of counterterror practices, state terrorism, oppression, and ‘total war’. Clearly, some definitions of counterterrorism harp on obvious suppression or constraint elements, seemingly oblivious to the nuances and intricacies involved in defining what amounts to efforts against terrorism in the broader sense and thinking about the relationships and thresholds of that phenomenon with respect to other conflict modes.”[20]

**Alex P. Schmid (2011):** [Counter-Terrorism]: “A proactive effort to prevent, deter and combat politically motivated violence directed at civilian and non-combatant targets by the use of a broad spectrum of response measures – law enforcement, political, psychological, social, economic and (para-)military.”[21]

**Andrew Silke (2011):** “The policies, strategies and tactics that states use to combat terrorism and deal with its consequences are referred to as counter-terrorism.(...) Counter-terrorism can take a variety of forms. Some of the most common approaches are listed below and it is normal for a state to use a combination of different approaches rather than to rely on just one exclusively:

- Introduction of special counter-terrorism legislation.
- Creation of specialist counter-terrorism units in state services (incl. police and military).
- Use of repression.
- Use of military intervention and reprisals.
- Introduce Special Incarceration and Detention policies.
- Media management.
- Negotiated Settlement.”[22]

**Silvia D’Amato (2019):** “Counterterrorism has in fact been defined in a variety of ways. Usually, its definition is empirically grounded, and so literature has largely been indifferent with respect to the nuances between anti- and counterterrorism. It might nonetheless be suggested that while anti-terrorism usually refers to the policies and measures implemented to prevent terrorist attacks from taking place, the notion of counterterrorism implies a responsive interaction or the idea of an imperative to react to implemented forms of terrorism. To simplify, this study will employ “counterterrorism” to refer to the general decisions that states make across numerous policy areas to fight terrorism. Hence, counterterrorism is understood in a broader sense as a type of security policy addressing terrorism and encompassing a range of actions, both domestic and international.”[23]

**Thomas Renard (2021):** “...a state strategy that includes coercive and noncoercive instruments across a large range of policy areas, developed and implemented with the specific intention to prevent and respond to terrorism.”[24]

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## Notes

- [1] Lewis, Olivier, "Conceptualizing State Counterterrorism," in: Romaniuk, Scott N., Francis Grice, Daniela Irrera, Stewart Webb (Eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Counterterrorism Policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 5.
- [2] Byman, Daniel (2019): "Counterterrorism Strategies," in: Erica Chenoweth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas and Stathis N. Kalyvas (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 623.
- [3] Crelinsten, Ronald D. (2009). *Counterterrorism*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Ronald D. Crelinsten, R. "Conceptualising Counterterrorism"; in Andrew Silke. *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism*. London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 481–487; Thomas Renard. *20 Years of Counter-Terrorism in Belgium: Explaining Change in CT Policy-Making through the Evolution of the Belgian CT Doctrine and Practice since 2001*. Ghent University, 2021, pp. 23–24.- For a detailed listing of 140 CT measures, see: Appendix: "A Toolbox of Counterterrorism Measures"; in: Alex P. Schmid, "Towards Joint Political Strategies for De-legitimising the Use of Terrorism"; in: Alex P. Schmid (Ed.). *Countering Terrorism through International Cooperation*. Milan: ISPAC, 2001; pp. 266–273. This Toolbox groups responses to terrorism into eight categories: 1. Politics and Governance [15 measures], 2. Economic and Social [19 measures], 3. Psychological – Communicational – Educational [19 measures], 4. Military [20 measures], 5. Judicial and Legal [18 measures], 6. Police and Prison System [22 measures], 7. Intelligence and Secret Service [12 measures], and 8. Other [20 measures].
- [4] Nacos, Brigitte L. *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017 (5<sup>th</sup> edition), p. 288; Ekaterina Stepanova (2019) "Russia's Response to Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century"; in: Michael J. Boyle (Ed.) *Non-Western Responses to Terrorism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019, (note 13), pp. 51–52.
- [5] Crelinsten, Ronald D. *Terrorism, Democracy, and Human Security. A Communication Model*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.
- [6] Cf. Schmid, Alex P. "The Response Problem as a Definition Problem"; in: Alex P. Schmid & Ronald D. Crelinsten (Eds.), *Western Responses to Terrorism*. London: Frank Cass, 1993, pp. 7–13. In that chapter, the author argued in favor of a narrow definition, suggesting that "...Western policy-makers would do well to choose a restricted legal definition of terrorism as 'peacetime equivalent of war crimes'. Such a definition might exclude some forms of violence and coercion (such as attacks on the military, hijackings for escape and destruction of property) currently labelled 'terrorism' by some governments. However, a narrow and precise definition of terrorism is likely to find broader support than one that includes various forms of violent dissent and protest short of terrorist atrocities." – Ibid., p. 12.
- [7] Walter Laqueur observed in 1987: "The virtual impossibility of outlining a counter-terrorism policy of universal validity was pointed out by the US Vice-President Task Force on combating terrorism after lengthy deliberations in 1985: 'Because acts of terrorism vary so much in time and location, jurisdiction and motivation, consistent response is virtually impossible.'" - Walter Laqueur. *The Age of Terrorism*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1987, p. 312. Since then some progress has been made, especially after the mandatory UN Security Council Resolution 1373 was passed on 28 September 2001.
- [8] Schmid, Alex P., James J. F. Forest, and Timothy Lowe. "Terrorism Studies: A Glimpse at the Current State of Research (2020/2021)," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. XV, Issue 3, June 2021, pp. 142–152.
- [9] Cf. the four surveys of databases and data sets by Neil Bowie, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol XV, Issue 2 (April 2021) and earlier issues.
- [10] For information on BAAD, see URL: <https://start.umd.edu>.
- [11] For listings of 160 databases/data sets on terrorism, see Neil Bowie in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. XV, Issue 2 (April 2021) and earlier issues.

- [12] For a discussion, see: Schmid, Alex P. and Rashmi Singh. 2009. "Measuring Success and Failure in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism – U.S. Government Metrics and the Global War on Terror"; in: Alex P. Schmid and Garry F. Hindle (Eds.) *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism Strategy*. London: RUSI Books, 33–61. URL: <https://rusi.org/rusi-news/after-war-terror>
- [13] By mid-2021 two of the planned four volumes authored by Dennis A. Pluchinsky were published.
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## Counterterrorism Bookshelf: 5 Books on Terrorism & Counter-Terrorism-Related Subjects

Reviewed by Joshua Sinai

*So many books are published on terrorism- and counterterrorism-related subjects that it is difficult to catch up on a large backlog of monographs and volumes received for review. In order to deal with this backlog, this column consists of capsule reviews and tables of contents of five recently published books.*

Jeffrey Douglas Dailey and James Robert Phelps, ***Intelligence for Homeland Security: An Introduction*** (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2021), 275 pp., US \$ 95.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 35.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-6263-7964-0.

This is an excellent comprehensive introduction about the current nature, structures, roles, and missions of domestic intelligence at the federal level in the United States, such as the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Central Intelligence Agency. The text includes valuable case studies of significant domestic threats over the years, such as the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and al Qaida's attacks on 9/11, which also led to the reorganization of the U.S. domestic intelligence apparatus. It is also illustrated by valuable tables, such as types of terrorism (state-sponsored, dissident, religious, criminal, and international), the indicators of activities included in Suspicious Activity Reporting (SARs) reports, and the Federal Emergency Management's (FEMAs) disaster management cycle (preparation, response, recovery, and mitigation components). Jeffrey Douglas Dailey is Associate Professor in the Department of Security Studies and Criminal Justice at Angelo State University, Texas. James Robert Phelps is on the adjunct graduate faculty at Aurora University, Illinois, and NOVA Southeastern University, Florida.

*Table of Contents:* Protecting the Homeland; The Origins of the Homeland Security Enterprise; The Creation of the Department of Homeland Security; The Role of the Intelligence Community; The Role of Homeland Security Agencies; The Role of other Security Agencies; Counterintelligence Missions; Domestic Threats and National Security; Homeland vs. National vs. Practical Intelligence; Making the System Work; The Future of Intelligence in Homeland Security.

Ashraf Esmail, Lisa A. Eargle, and Brandon Hamann (Eds.), ***Terrorism Inside America's Borders*** (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2021), 290 pp., US \$ 90.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-7618-7100-2.

The contributors to this important edited volume apply a multidisciplinary approach from criminology, sociology, psychology, disaster research, and other disciplines to comprehensively analyze significant issues associated with domestic terrorism in the United States. Some of the issues discussed include the history and trends of terrorism in America, how terrorism is defined and differentiated from other types of criminal activities, the trajectory of terrorism and how to prevent it, the impact of terrorism on society, and how these issues are examined by a diversity of research methods and theoretical frameworks. Ashraf Esmail is Associate Professor of criminal justice, Barron Hill Criminal Justice Endowed Professor, and director of The Center for Racial Justice at Dillard University in New Orleans, LA; Lisa A. Eargle is Professor of Sociology and a Board of Trustees Research Scholar at Francis Marion University in Florence, SC; and Brandon Hamann is Adjunct Professor of Criminal Justice at Dillard University in New Orleans.

*Table of Contents:* Foreword; Preface; Hate Crime or Act of Terrorism? The 2015 Mass Shooting of the Emanuel A.M.E. Nine in Charleston, South Carolina; The Shifting Course of Terroristic Ideologies in United States History; The Domestic Terrorist Profile; History and Prevention of Domestic Terrorism Affecting the United States; If It Bleeds, It Leads: To What Extent Do the News Media Monger Fear in High-Profile Cases of Home-Grown Terrorism?; Police Militarization and Domestic Terrorism; History and Trends in Terrorism Affecting the U.S.; Sex Trafficking and Terrorism; Terrorism-Instigated Violence Event as Disaster (TIVEAD) Process Model; Policing and European-American Hatred: A Form of Terrorism against African-Americans in the United States; Terrorism in the US, 2005-2017: A State-Level Analysis; Need to Understand the Unpredictability of Terrorism to Increase Preparedness; Youth Belonging, Radical Extremism and Social Integration; Terrorism in the United States: Fighting Extremism, Terrorism, Drug Cartels, Gangs and Organized Crime Groups.

Boaz Ganor, *Israel's Counterterrorist Strategy: Origins to the Present* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021), 424 pp., US \$ 160.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 40.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-2311-9923-0.

This is an authoritative and detailed account of Israel's approach to counterterrorism from 1948 to 2019. Making this account unique is the author's access to Israeli political and security leaders involved in counterterrorism over the years, such as personal accounts by current and former prime ministers, defense ministers, and directors of Mossad and Shin Bet, which enables him to offer an insider's perspective of the decision-making processes that shaped the country's counterterrorism activities over the years. The Israeli experience in counterterrorism, the author points out, provides important lessons in terms of tools and methods for other countries facing terrorism challenges, which the author lists as "intelligence, offensive, defensive, deterrent, legislative, and punitive measures, as well as educational and information campaigns aimed at fostering resilience among the Israeli public" (p. 7). In the concluding chapter on "The Art of Israeli Counterterrorism," the author insightfully points out the importance of the need for "knowledge of the enemy's rationale," which is based on a "cost-benefit analysis by terrorist organizations and perpetrators," which "varies from one terrorist organization to another and fluctuates depending on circumstances and the changing interests of the organizations" (p. 333). Other issues that, according to the author, need to be considered include engagements by decision-makers with the public, and formulating solutions "to balance the need for an effective war on terror with the protection of the liberal democratic values of the state" (p. 334). Prof. Ganor concludes his excellent overview with eight tenets from Israeli counterterrorism that can serve as a guide for other countries facing terrorism challenges, such as the central role of intelligence, the need for an integrated approach by a country's agencies and security services, dealing with the terrorists' motives, and deploying proactive counterterrorist actions (pp. 338-342). Boaz Ganor is the founder and executive director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) the Ronald Lauder Chair for Counter-Terrorism, and former dean of the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy, and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel.

*Table of Contents:* Chronology: Prime Ministers of Israel and Timeline of Major Events, 1948–2018; Introduction; The Israeli Counterterrorism Strategy and Decision-Making Process Conceptual Models; The "Fedayeen Phenomenon": The David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett Administrations, 1948–63; Palestinian National Terrorism After the Six-Day War: The Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir Administrations, 1963–73; Cross-Border Terrorism After the Yom Kippur War: The Yitzhak Rabin Administration, 1974–76; Terrorism Against the Backdrop of the Lebanon War: The Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, and Shimon Peres Administrations, 1977–86; The First Intifada and Activities of the Palestinian Islamist Organizations: The Yitzhak Shamir Administration, 1987–91; Countering Terrorism During the Peace Process: The Yitzhak Rabin Administration, 1992–96; A Prime Minister's Assassination and Shifting Counterterrorism Strategies: The Benjamin Netanyahu Administration, 1996–99; Confronting the al-Aqsa Intifada: The Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon Administrations, 1999–2004; Disengagement from Gaza and its Ramifications: The End of the Sharon Administration and the Ehud Olmert Administration, 2005–2008; Changes in the Greater Middle East: The Netanyahu Administration, 2009–2018; Israel's Counterterrorism Policy from the Perspective of Israeli Decision Makers; Conclusion: The Art of Israeli Counterterrorism; Appendix: List of Interviewees and Selected Newspapers.

Hank Prunckun, *Methods of Inquiry for Intelligence Analysis* [Third Edition] (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 248 pp., US \$ 103.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 51.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-5381-2587-8.

Intelligence analysis forms a crucial part of counterterrorism assessments, so it is important for analysts to understand the various analytic methodologies that are relevant to studying terrorism and how to counter it. Dr. Prunckun's "Methods of Inquiry for Intelligence Analysis" is ideally suited for counterterrorism analysis, as it covers topics such as how to obtain data via covert and open source methods, qualitative and quantitative analytics, threat assessments, target profiles, vulnerability assessments, risk assessments, and formulating national security policy assessments. As a textbook, each chapter consists of figures and tables, side boxes, a discussion, key words and phrases, study questions, and a learning activity. Dr. Prunckun, has published numerous books on intelligence and counterterrorism, and is a research criminologist at the Australian Graduate School of Policing and Security, Charles Sturt University, Sydney.

*Table of Contents:* Foreword; Preface; Intelligence Theory; Intelligence Organizational Structures; The Intelligence Research Process; Clandestine and Covert Sources of Information; Open Sources of Information; Qualitative Analytics; Quantitative Analytics; Geointelligence; Target Profiles; Operational Assessments; Vehicle Route Security Report; Threat Assessments;

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Vulnerability Assessments; Risk Assessments; National Security Policy Assessments; Appendix -Critical Values of Chi-Square Distribution.

Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, *How Terror Evolves: The Emergence and Spread of Terrorist Techniques* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2020), 198 pp., US \$ 120.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-7866-0878-9.

This is a highly interesting and well-researched account of the role of innovation in the evolution of terroristic groups' warfare techniques, with a focus on aircraft hijackings from the 1930s through al Qaida's 9/11 attacks. Five primary evolutionary developments are identified: the emergence of aeroplane hijacking in Peru and Cuba, hijacking for transportation, the use of hijacking by Palestinians, criminal innovation, and the use of aeroplanes as weapons of destruction (p. 4). In the conclusion, the author observes that future terrorist innovations are likely to include "armed drones, vehicle ramming attacks, 3-D printed weapons, or the malevolent use of gene-editing technology" (p. 155). The author is Assistant Professor in the Institute of Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University, Netherlands.

*Table of Contents:* Preface; Introduction; An Evolutionary Approach to Terrorist Innovation; The Emergence of Aeroplane Hijacking; Hijacking for Transportation or 'Freedom Flights'; The Global Impact of Palestinian Hijackings; Criminal Innovations; Aeroplanes as Weapons of Destruction; Conclusion.

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## ***Bibliography: Terrorism by Country – United States***

Compiled and selected by Judith Tinnes

[Bibliographic Series of Perspectives on Terrorism – BSPT-JT-2021-4]

### ***Abstract***

*This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on terrorism affecting the United States. It covers terrorist activity by international and home-grown perpetrators regardless of their ideological affiliation. The compilation focuses on recent publications (up to July 2021) and should not be considered as exhaustive. The literature has been retrieved by manually browsing more than 200 core and periphery sources in the field of Terrorism Studies. Additionally, full-text and reference retrieval systems have been employed to broaden the search.*

**Keywords:** bibliography, resources, literature, terrorism, United States, USA, Northern America, international terrorism, home-grown terrorism, 9/11

NB: All websites were last visited on 19.07.2021. - See also Note for the Reader at the end of this literature list.

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## Note

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**About the Compiler:** Judith Tinnés, Ph.D., is a Professional Information Specialist. Since 2011, she works for the Leibniz Institute for Psychology (ZPID). Additionally, she serves as Information Resources Editor to 'Perspectives on Terrorism'. In her editorial role, she regularly compiles bibliographies and other resources for Terrorism

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*Research (for an inventory visit <https://archive.org/details/terrorism-research-bibliographies>). She wrote her doctoral thesis on Internet usage of Islamist terrorists and insurgents (focus: media-oriented hostage takings). E-mail: [j.tinnes@gmx.de](mailto:j.tinnes@gmx.de)*

## Bibliography: Hamas

Compiled and selected by David Teiner

### Abstract

*This bibliography contains books, edited volumes, journal articles, book chapters, theses, grey literature, and other resources on Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-ʿIslāmiyyah, also referred to in short as Hamas. The publications compiled in this bibliography primarily focus on Hamas' organizational evolution, its attacks, military successes and setbacks, recruitment efforts, ideology, and media outreach. Additionally, several studies examine Hamas' role in Palestinian politics and forms of local governance. Furthermore, many of the included publications assess PVE and CVE strategies to contain Hamas' political influence or evaluate the successes and shortcomings of peace and ceasefire negotiations with Hamas, as well as military and civilian campaigns against the organization.*

**Keywords:** Hamas; Palestine; Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Contested Statehood; Islamism

NB: All websites were last visited on 21.07.2021 – See also Note for the Reader at the end of this literature list.

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**Note for the Reader** Whenever retrievable, URLs for freely available versions of subscription-based publications have been provided. In some cases, articles may only be cited after obtaining permission by the author(s).

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## Recent Online Resources for the Analysis of Terrorism and Related Subjects

by Berto Jongman

Most of the clickable items included below became available online between July and August 2021. They are categorized under twelve headings (as well as sub-headings, not listed below):

1. Non-Religious Terrorism
2. Religious Terrorism
3. Terrorist Strategies and Tactics
4. Conflict, Crime and Political Violence other than Terrorism
5. Extremism, Radicalization
- 6 Counterterrorism - General
7. Counterterrorism: Specific Operations and/or Specific Policy Measures
8. Prevention, Preparedness and Resilience and Rehabilitation Studies
9. State Repression, Civil War and Clandestine Warfare
10. Intelligence Operations
11. Cyber Operations
12. Risk and Threat Assessments, Forecasts and Analytical Studies
13. Also Worth to Read/Listen/Watch

N.B. *Recent Online Resources for the Analysis of Terrorism and Related Subjects* is a regular feature in 'Perspectives on Terrorism'. For past listings, search under 'Archive' at <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/PoT>

### 1. Non-Religious Terrorism

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## 11. Cyber Operations

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### 13. Also Worth to Read/Listen/Watch

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URL: <https://www.amazon.com/Govern-Globe-Orders-Catastrophic-Change/dp/1642595780>

J. Mueller. War is on the Rocks. *War on the Rocks*, July 1, 2021. URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/war-is-on-the-rocks/>

T. Quiggin, R. Gill. *The new Order of Fear. The Great Reset Trilogy*. Independently Published. 2021, 561p.  
URL: <https://www.amazon.com/New-Order-Fear-Great-Trilogy/dp/B097SPK3Z4>

**About the Compiler:** **Berto Jongman** is Associate Editor of 'Perspectives on Terrorism'. He is a former senior Military Intelligence Analyst and currently serves as an International Consultant on CBRN issues. A sociologist by training, he previously worked for Swedish and Dutch civilian research institutes. Drs. Jongman was the recipient of the Golden Candle Award for his *World Conflict & Human Rights Maps*, published by PIOOM. He is editor of the volume 'Contemporary Genocides' (1996) and has also contributed to various editions of 'Political Terrorism', the award-winning handbook of terrorism research edited by Alex P. Schmid.

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## Announcements

### Finalists and Winners of the TRI Thesis Award Competition for Best Doctoral Dissertation on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, 2019 & 2020

The mission of the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) is to “Enhance Security through Collaborative Research”. To achieve this, TRI has organized national networks of Ph. D. thesis writers, and issued, since 2014, an annual, and later bi-annual, award for the ‘Best Doctoral Dissertation on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism’ by members of these networks as well as others who have recently completed their doctorate at an academic institution.

A jury of four scholars – Prof. Clark McCauley, Prof. James J.F. Forest, Prof. Edwin Bakker and Prof. em. Alex P. Schmid (Chairman) - assess and compare the submissions TRI receives. They do so on the basis of six criteria (including originality, in-depth research and novelty of findings) and select among these three finalists and a winner.

For the doctoral theses that were submitted and/or defended in 2019 and 2020, the jury identified, after several rounds of deliberations, the following authors and theses as finalists:

Dr. Michael Shkolnik: *Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections: Why Some Militant Groups Wage Sustained Insurgencies*. Ottawa, Canada: Carleton University, December 2019.

Dr. Thomas Renard: *20 Years of Counter-Terrorism in Belgium: Explaining Change in CT Policy-Making through the Evolution of the Belgian CT Doctrine and Practice since 2001*. Ghent, Belgium: Ghent University, November 2020.

Dr. Gian Maria Campedelli. *On Meta-Networks, Deep Learning, Time and Jihadism*. Milan, Italy: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, November 2019.

For the first time, the jury selected two equally excellent theses as winners – one dealing with insurgency-related terrorism and the other dealing with counter-terrorism. The third thesis among the three finalists, stood out because of its author’s cutting edge explorations of artificial intelligence for terrorism research.

All three finalists received in early August 2021 a Certificate of Achievement, signed by the four members of the jury. In addition, the winners - Michael Shkolnik and Thomas Renard - will each receive half of the prize money of US \$ 1,000.-. The two winners have also been invited to summarize (aspects of) their doctoral theses for the current issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

Here are a few words of praise about the dissertations of the finalists and winners, based on the assessment of members of the jury.

**Michael Shkolnik’s** thesis on *Rival Consolidation in Nascent Insurrections: Why Some Militant Groups Wage Sustained Insurgencies* impressed the jury by the way he used a novel quantitative regression methodology for the analysis of 246 prominent militant groups active between 1970 and 2007, of which 77 groups waged sustained insurgencies. He supplemented the quantitative analysis by a number of qualitative case studies, using process tracing as his second methodology. He rightfully stressed the need to recognize the nuanced and dynamic contexts in which groups make decisions - something that strictly quantitative terrorism researchers often overlook. The jury found this winning thesis to be sophisticated and carefully reasoned. The author’s finding that consolidation or suppression of rivals is, in many situations, the best predictor of an extended insurgency, is both persuasive and policy-relevant.

*Dr. Michael Shkolnik is a Policy Analyst with the Canadian government as well as a Fellow and Sessional Lecturer at Ottawa's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA – Carlton University). His Ph.D. thesis can be consulted at URL: <https://curve.carleton.ca/a1dc7fa6-b609-40a8-a8de-59b6905f8740>*

**Thomas Renard's** thesis on *20 Years of Counter-Terrorism in Belgium: Explaining Change in CT Policy-Making through the Evolution of the Belgian CT Doctrine and Practice since 2001*, demonstrates how national counter-terrorism policies are not only driven by events and interests but also by institutions and ideas. Given the under-theorized field of counter-terrorism, Renard's attempt to bring in selected elements from public policy theories to explain the evolution of national CT policies in a European context was judged by members of the jury as being very original and its author therefore became co-winner of the TRI Thesis Award. The jury was impressed by the degree of access the author managed to gain to Belgian and European CT practitioners and policy-makers and the feedback he received from many of them about his emerging findings. While assessing the effectiveness (and other outcomes) of counterterrorism remains a challenging field of study, the author made a laudable effort to push the frontiers here as well.

*Dr. Thomas Renard is a Senior Research Fellow at the Egmont Institute and Adjunct Professor at the Brussels School of Governance. He is also a Research Associate of the UNESCO-PREV Chair. His doctoral thesis can be consulted via URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-8701714>.*

**Gian Maria Campedelli's** thesis *On Meta-Networks, Deep Learning, Time and Jihadism* is method-wise the most ambitious of the three finalist doctoral theses. The author tried to bring together network science and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to uncover hidden patterns behind large amounts of data in an effort to design possible applications that can be useful for the prediction of terrorist targeting, weapon use and the combination thereof. The author demonstrates in sophisticated statistical analyses the potential of applying learning algorithms and graph theory to temporal chains of terrorist events. Noting that "The pervasiveness of artificial intelligence has contaminated a huge number of scientific fields", the author also offers a number of caveats why AI alone, without being grounded in sound social science, is likely to do more harm than good.

*Dr. Campedelli is a criminologist by training. He was a visiting research scholar at Carnegie Mellon University (Institute for Software Research - Center for Computational Analysis of Social and Organizational Systems), where his doctoral thesis was supervised by Prof. Kathleen M. Carley. Currently he is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow for computational criminology at the School of Sociology and Social Research - University of Trento (Italy).*

The full text of the thesis by Dr. Campedelli can be inspected at URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publications/339254207\\_On\\_Meta-Networks\\_Deep\\_Learning\\_Time\\_and\\_Jihadism](https://www.researchgate.net/publications/339254207_On_Meta-Networks_Deep_Learning_Time_and_Jihadism).

*The chairman and the jury members of the TRI Thesis Award congratulate these three scholars for their outstanding dissertations.*

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## New Members Appointed to the Editorial Board of Perspectives on Terrorism

Due to the growing number of submissions to our Open Access journal, the Editors of *Perspectives on Terrorism* have invited the following scholars to join the Editorial Board of our online journal:

**Dr. Anneli Botha**, Senior Lecturer at the Department Political Studies and Governance at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. In the period 2003 – 2016, she worked as a Senior Researcher on terrorism at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in Pretoria, South Africa.

**Dr. Annette Idler**, Visiting Scholar, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, Director of Studies, Changing Character of War Centre/ Senior Research Fellow, Dept. of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford.

**Dr. Neil Shortland**, Director, Center for Terrorism and Security Studies, University of Massachusetts Lowell. Associate Professor, School of Criminology and Justice Studies, University of Massachusetts Lowell.

We are very pleased to be able announce that they all accepted their appointments and welcome them in our midst.

### ***Departure of Associate Editor Greg Miller and Vacancy for Replacement***

One of our Associate Editors, Prof. Gregory D. Miller, has resigned from our Editorial Team due to the fact that he accepted the position of Department Chair of Spacepower at the US Air Command and Staff College. Greg served with great distinction for more than four years at *Perspectives on Terrorism*. We congratulate him to his new position.

As a consequence of his departure, the position of an Associate Editor has become vacant within the Editorial Team of our journal. Associate Editors are expected to supervise part of the external review process for articles submitted to our journal for a period of six weeks every year. We invite candidates interested in this (unremunerated) position to submit their CV and publication list, together with a motivational letter addressed to the editor-in-chief [ < [apschmid@gmail.com](mailto:apschmid@gmail.com) >] and the co-editor [ < [jfforest@gmail.com](mailto:jfforest@gmail.com) >].

## Conference Monitor/Calendar of Events

(August 2021 and beyond)

Compiled by Olivia Kearney

The Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI), in its mission to provide a platform for academics and practitioners in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism, compiles an online calendar, listing recent and upcoming academic and professional conferences, symposia and similar events that are directly or indirectly relevant to the readers of *Perspectives on Terrorism*. The calendar includes academic and (inter-) governmental conferences, professional expert meetings, civil society events and educational programs organised between August and October 2021 (with a few shortly thereafter). The listed events are organised by a wide variety of governmental and non-governmental institutions, including several key (counter) terrorism research centres and institutes listed in the February 2021 issue of this journal.

We encourage readers to contact the journal's Associate Editor for Conference Monitoring, Olivia Kearney, and provide her with relevant information, preferably in the same format as the items listed below. Olivia Kearney can be reached at <[oliviaj.kearney@gmail.com](mailto:oliviaj.kearney@gmail.com)> or via Twitter: [@oliviajkearney](https://twitter.com/oliviajkearney).

### August 2021

#### Threat, Vulnerability and Risk Assessment Course

Counter Terrorism Certification Board, Online

3-4 August, Online

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: N/A

#### Update on the Victims of Sinjar: The Need to Locate Thousands of Missing Yazidi's

The Wilson Center, Online

10 August, Washington DC, United States

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@TheWilsonCenter](https://twitter.com/TheWilsonCenter)

#### Withstanding Terror in Afghanistan

Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Online

11 August, Australia

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@ASPI\\_org](https://twitter.com/ASPI_org)

#### Global Jihad 20 Years After 9/11

Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Online

13 August, Denmark

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@diisdk](https://twitter.com/diisdk)

#### Online Summer Programme: Preventing, Detecting and Responding to Violent Extremism

Institute for Security and Global Affairs (ISGA), Online

16-18 August, The Hague

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@ISGA\\_Hague](https://twitter.com/ISGA_Hague)

#### Sahel – Vulnerable States, Conflict, and Climate

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Online

18 August, Norway

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@Nupinytt](https://twitter.com/Nupinytt)

**The Deeper Consequences of the War on Terror***Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), Online*

19 August, Washington DC, United States

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@CSIS](#)**Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States***Foreign Policy Research-Institute, Online*

24 August, Philadelphia, United States

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@FPRI](#)**September 2021****The Aftermath: Meaning-Making After Terrorist Attacks in Western Europe***Institute for Security and Global Affairs (ISGA), Online defence of doctoral thesis*

1 September, The Netherlands

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@ISGA\\_Hague](#)**The 9-11 Attacks from a Historical Perspective***Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Online*

2 September, United Kingdom

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@RUSI\\_org](#)**Countering Violent Extremism: The Need For a New Direction?***International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), Online*

2 September, The Netherlands

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@ICCT\\_TheHague](#)**Webinar on the Far Right in Morocco***Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online*

8 September, Norway

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@CrexUiO](#)**ICT's 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Summit: International Conference on Counter-Terrorism***International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), Online*

11-14 September, Herzliya, Israel

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@ICT\\_org](#)**Global Jihad 20 Years After 9/11***Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark*

13 September, Copenhagen

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@diisdsk](#)**Intelligence & National Security Summit***Intelligence and National Security Alliance, Online*

13 September, Virginia, United States

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@INSAlliance](#)**CTF Online Symposium No. 6: Understanding Terrorism Financing Risk in European Crowdfunding***Project CRAFT – RUSI Europe, Online*

14 September, United Kingdom

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@Projectcraft](#)

**How to Best Use Local Crime Prevention Approaches for P/CVE***RAN Europe, Online*

20-21 September, Belgium

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@RANEurope](#)**Mental Health Practices and Interventions in P/CVE***RAN Europe, Online*

22-23 September, Belgium

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@RANEurope](#)**Disarmament and Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction***Asser Institute, Online*

27 September – 1 October, Netherlands

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@TMCAsser](#)**Illicit Money: Financing Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century***RUSI's Centre for Financial Crime and Security Studies, Online*

30 September, United Kingdom

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@CFCS\\_RUSI](#)**October & Beyond 2021****Webinar on the Far Right in the Philippines***Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online*

6 October, Norway

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@CrexUiO](#)**Eurojust Virtual Open Day***Eurojust, Online*

8 October, The Netherlands

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@Eurojust](#)**Webinar on the Far Right in Russia***Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online*

3 November, Norway

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@CrexUiO](#)**Battlefields of the Future: Trends of Conflict and Warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Stockholm*

8-11 November, Sweden

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@SIPRIorg](#)**Governing Through Crisis – Conflict, Crises and the Politics of Cyberspace***The Hague Program for Cyber Norms, The Hague*

9-11 November, Netherlands

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@HagueCyberNorms](#)**The Modern Foreign Fighters Phenomenon – Repatriation, Prosecutions and/or Reintegration?***Asser Institute, Online*

15-16 November, Netherlands

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@TMCAsser](#)

**Working With (Violent) Right Wing Extremists in Your Community**

RAN Europe, Online

23-24 November, Belgium

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@RANEurope](#)

**Webinar on the Far Right in Israel**

Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online

1 December, Norway

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@CrexUiO](#)

**Webinar on the Far Right in Malaysia**

Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Online

12 January, Norway

Website: [visit](#) | Twitter: [@CrexUiO](#)

**Acknowledgment**

*Special thanks go to Alex Schmid and Berto Jongman for their suggestions and contributions to this conference calendar.*

**About the Compiler:** *Olivia Kearney is an Associate Editor of Perspectives on Terrorism as well as a member of the Editorial Board for the ICTR Journal. She is the Community Building Officer for Project CRAAFT led by RUSI Europe. Before that, she worked as a Project Assistant for the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) after having obtained a Master's degree in Crime and Criminal Justice at Leiden University.*

## About *Perspectives on Terrorism*

*Perspectives on Terrorism* (PoT) is a joint publication of the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI), headquartered in Vienna, Austria, and the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) of Leiden University, Campus The Hague. Now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year, PoT is published six times annually as a free, independent, scholarly peer-reviewed online journal available at the URL: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/perspectives-on-terrorism>.

*Perspectives on Terrorism* has recently been ranked by Google Scholars again as No. 3 in ‘Terrorism Studies’ (as well as No. 5 in ‘Military Studies’). PoT has over 9,400 subscribers and many more occasional readers. Our journal seeks to provide a platform for established scholars as well as academics and professionals entering the interdisciplinary fields of (Counter-)Terrorism, Political Violence and Conflict Studies.

The editors invite researchers and readers to:

- present their perspectives on the prevention of, and response to, terrorism and related forms of violent conflict;
- submit to the journal accounts of evidence-based, empirical scientific research and analyses on terrorism;
- use the journal as a forum for debate and commentary on issues related to the above.

*Perspectives on Terrorism* has sometimes been characterised as ‘non-traditional’ in that it dispenses with some of the rigidities associated with commercial print journals. Topical articles can be published at short notice and reach, through the Internet, a much larger audience than subscription-fee based paper journals. Our online journal also offers contributors a higher degree of flexibility in terms of content, style and length of articles – but without compromising professional scholarly standards. The journal’s Research Notes, Special Correspondence, Op-Eds and other content are reviewed by members of the Editorial Team, while its Articles are peer-reviewed (double-blind) by outside academic experts and professionals. Due to the hundreds of submissions we receive every year, only the most promising and original ones can be sent for external peer-review.

While aiming to be policy-relevant, PoT does not support any partisan policies regarding (counter-) terrorism and waging conflicts. Impartiality, objectivity and accuracy are guiding principles that we require contributors to adhere to. They are responsible for the content of their contributions and retain the copyright of their publication.

The Editorial Team of *Perspectives on Terrorism* consists of:

|                                                                   |                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prof. em. Alex P. Schmid</b> , Editor-in-Chief                 | <b>Dr. Craig Whiteside</b> , Associate Editor                          |
| <b>Dr. James J.F. Forest</b> , Co-Editor                          | <b>Dr. Aaron Y. Zelin</b> , Associate Editor                           |
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| <b>Dr. Bart Schuurman</b> , Associate Editor                      | <b>Mr. Brody McDonald</b> , Assistant Editor for Theses                |
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