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Special Issue on
Anti-Government Extremism

Guest Editors:
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Words of Welcome from the Editors

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume XVI, Issue 6 (December 2022) 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 can be found at: https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/perspectives-on-terrorism.

Perspectives on Terrorism (PoT) is indexed by JSTOR, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar where it ranks No. 3 of journals in the field of Terrorism Studies. *Jouroscope™,* the directory of scientific journals, has listed PoT as one of the top ten journals in the category free open access journals in social sciences, with a Q1 ranking. Now in its 16th year of publication, PoT has close to 8.000 registered subscribers and many more occasional readers and website visitors in academia, government and civil society worldwide. 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.

This is a **Special Issue on Anti-Government Extremism**, guest edited by Prof. Tore Bjørgo (Center for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo) and Dr. Kurt Braddock (American University, Washington, DC). They will themselves in their own opening article introduce the seven **Articles**—most of them the result of a call for papers on this topic in the December 2021 issue of PoT. The theme of anti-government extremism could hardly be more topical, following the recent discovery of a conspiracy to overthrow the German government by the so-called Reichsbürgers—a right-wing movement which also contains (former) members of police and military. While some observers might dismiss this particular incident as a farce which should not be taken too seriously, it deserves, in our view, careful attention and in-depth study, while also recognizing that this event took place too recenlty to be analysed in this issue. Several of the articles in this Special Issue focus on the situation in Germany. Not only in Germany but elsewhere in Europe and North America, elements of extreme right-wing ideologies have gone mainstream in the wake of populist demagoguery around the Covid-19 pandemic and in the wake of renewed migration pressures caused by repressive regimes, economic hardship and climate change in other parts of the world. *Perspectives on Terrorism* will publish several articles on this topic in 2023.

The **Resources** section features, in its CT-Bookshelf, four short reviews by our book reviews editor, Joshua Sinai. Our information resources editor, Judith Tinnes, offers, together with two junior colleagues, David Teiner and Darius Engel, a bibliography on Accelerationism, an important ideological driver of right-wing extremists, that seeks to make things worse in the hope that an ensuing socio-political crisis will bring them to power. Finally, Associate Editor *Berto Jongman* contributes another of his wide-ranging surveys of recent online resources on terrorism and related subjects.

In **Announcements**, our new Associate Editor for Conference Monitoring, Méryl Demunyck presents her "Conference Calendar". At the end, the brief **About Perspectives on Terrorism** section lists the people behind the journal and their tasks.

The texts of the current Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* have been finalized and formatted 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 December 2022 issue of our journal has been in the hands of our departing Associate Editor for IT, *Audrey J. Vrolijk* (ISGA, The Hague).

Anti-Government Extremism: A New Threat?

by Tore Bjørgo and Kurt Braddock
(Special Issue Editors)

Keywords: Anti-government, anti-state, conspiracy theory, anarchism, Sovereign Citizens

Introduction

In recent years, intelligence and security agencies have identified "anti-government extremism" (AGE) as an emerging threat to democracy, political processes, institutions, and elected politicians.[1] However, this term is used to refer to a rather wide range of phenomena, movements, ideas and actions, and it is not always clear what exactly makes such manifestations extremist rather than being considered legitimate expressions of political dissent. We hope that this Special Issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* will contribute to open a scholarly discussion on these issues and give us a better grasp on this slippery AGE concept and phenomenon.

Anti-government extremism finds different expressions in terms of organizational formations, conspiracy theories, collective action, and violence and threats against politicians and government representatives. These different expressions are loosely connected or combined in the sense that specific AGE movements tend to adhere to some conspiracy theories to justify certain forms of action, whether that be collective demonstrations or individual violence. In some cases, the conspiracy theory (e.g., QAnon) is the driver behind the formation of a social movement that takes a variety of action routes, such as mass demonstrations or violent attacks by individual persons.

One form of AGE is *movements, networks and individuals that reject the legitimacy of the government* as a matter of principle and refuse to obey or submit to any authorities and regulations (see Jackson's contribution in this issue). The earliest modern manifestation started on the far left with the Anarchist movement that emerged during the second half of the 19th century and in the early 20th century, rejecting the legitimacy of state authority. In recent decades, the most influential anti-government movements have been affiliated with the far right rather than with the far left. Thus, anti-government extremism is nothing new, and it may have very different ideological roots. In David Rapoport's theory of the four waves of terrorism, [2] the first three waves were anti-government in different ways: the anarchist wave (1879–2020s), the anti-colonialist wave (1919–1960s), and the New Left wave (1960s–1990s). AGE movements vary considerably: some reject all forms of state authority, while others oppose specific governments or policies. The argument that all terrorism is anti-government is incorrect—many terrorist groups direct most of their violent attacks against non-state targets, such as ethnic and religious minorities, media institutions, businesses, or the public. Other terrorist movements make a point of only (or mainly) attacking targets representing the state, governmental institutions or politicians.

The first wave of modern revolutionary terrorism began around 1880 with anarchist movements like Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will) in Russia. Their strategy of "propaganda by the deed" selectively targeted individuals they considered to be embodiments of the autocratic, oppressive state, aiming to assassinate the czar, senior government officials and other prominent representatives of state power.[3] The broad anarchist movements contained a variety of anti-authoritarian socialist groups and ideas, some rejecting all forms of state power and ready-to-use violence, while others were pacifist and even libertarian.[4] Although many anarchists were opposed to violence, a string of anarchist militant groups and lone actors were behind the first wave of modern terrorism, lasting from the late 1870s until around 1920. During this period, anarchists were behind assassinations of a Russian czar (1881), the Empress of Austria-Hungary (1898), the president of Italy (1900), the American president (1901), two prime ministers of Spain (1897 and 1912) and other representatives of state authority, as well as conducting a number of less-selective bombing attacks. The anarchist terrorist campaigned peaked during the 1890s, often fed by sensationalist news media and brutal overreactions by governments. The terrorist campaign faded gradually after the turn of the century. As a significant political movement, anarchism

was in most respects crushed at the end of the Spanish civil war in 1939. In the post-WWII era, anarchism survived in limited circles and saw a resurgence with the student rebellion of 1968 and beyond.

The wave of anti-colonialist terrorism from the end of WWI until the 1960s was opposed to Western colonialist governments but was not directed against government as such; the militant movements tried (often successfully) to build new independent states.

A wave of the "New Left" terrorist movements during the 1970s and 1980s was strongly anti-government but it varied among groups and participants in terms of the extent to which they were influenced by anarchist ideas. Although anarchist ideology was quite pronounced among some groups like Action Directe in France and several others, major groups like the German Red Army Faction (RAF), the Red Brigades (BR) in Italy, or the Japanese Red Army were more inspired by Marxist–Leninist ideology and communism, opposing western imperialism in general and the US war in Vietnam in particular. Although they claimed that the Soviet Union and its European satellite states had become traitors to the communist cause, several of these groups were secretly sponsored by the Soviet Union and Eastern Germany. These movements were fiercely anti-*Western* governments but admired communist governments like the one in North Vietnam and its Vietcong movement and regimes like Mao's China and Castro's Cuba.[5]

This left-wing terrorist wave had faded in most Western countries by the early 1990s. What emerged instead was an anarchist subculture of militant "autonomous" groups, mostly youths that opposed the police and all other forms of governmental authorities, but also fascists and neo-Nazis. They increasingly branded themselves as anti-fascists using the acronym Antifa. They were often violent, sometimes seeking out their enemies to beat them up, or seeking confrontations with the police. They damaged property, including by arson, and they were frequently involved in fierce street fights, yet they rarely took recourse to lethal or terrorist violence.[6]

In recent decades, anti-government extremism has increasingly taken a turn towards the far right. Whereas the main historical traditions of the extreme right in Europe have promoted strong centralized states with powerful dictators like Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, the dominant stream of the far right in the U.S. has opposed a strong federal government, a sentiment that has also been influential in the Republican party. A predecessor to the modern American militia movements was the conspiratorial, anti-government Posse Comitatus movement, starting from the late 1960s, and before it, the Ku Klux Klan movement from the 1870s onwards.[7] A variety of anti-government militias and patriot movements crystallized in the wake of the FBI's shootout with Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge in 1992, and the heavy-handed Waco siege in 1993 - events that in the eyes of many were proof that the federal state was a tyrannical government, allegedly infiltrated by evil leftist and globalist forces, the "New World Order".[8] The militias are heavily armed with military-style guns and gear, and oppose any attempt by the government to restrict their access to guns, claiming a right to opposing the federal government with armed force. Adherents of the militia movements have been involved in a number of violent clashes and even terrorist attacks, including the Oklahoma City bombing of a federal government building in 1995. The militia movements got another boost with the election of the first black American President, Barack Obama. Paradoxically, when Donald Trump was elected in 2016, many of these previously anti-government groups suddenly became strong supporters of the new president, feeling that they finally had one of their own in the White House (e.g., see Arie Weil's article in this issue). After Trump's defeat in the next presidential election, members of several militia groups (including Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and Three Percenters), were at the forefront of the storming of the Capitol on January 5, 2021, to "stop the steal"—i.e., to disrupt Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's 2020 electoral victory.[9]

Another strand of American anti-government extremism is the Sovereign Citizens movement that originated in the 1970s. They fundamentally rejected the legitimacy of a central government[10], much like the leftist anarchist movement that originated a century earlier. The American Sovereign Citizens movement has inspired like-minded movements like the Freemen on the Land in Canada, UK, Australia and several other countries, and the Reichsbürger movement in Germany. Although supporters of these movements and ideas are mostly not violent, their refusal to pay taxes, adhere to traffic rules and other governmental regulations have frequently led to clashes with the police and other governmental agencies, resulting in some cases in fatal violence (see

the contributions by Rathje and Fiebig & Koehler in this issue).

Whereas these anti-government movements were until recently relatively marginal, such sentiments and conspiracy theories have increasingly become quite mainstream on the right side of the polarized US political landscape. A considerable proportion of American voters believe that the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 was justified[11], and that the presidential election was "stolen" from Donald Trump, or they believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory that "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media."[12]

Thus, the far right in the U.S. has a long tradition of being opposed to the federal government (going back all the way to the events leading up to the American Civil War and its aftermath in the 1860s). A number of armed militia organizations are based on this anti-government doctrine. In contrast to the American far-right scene, the main historical extreme right traditions in Europe, Fascism and Nazism, promoted a strong central state with a dictator as leader.

Several of the articles in this special issue analyze anti-governmental movements and groups that in various ways reject state authority. In his contribution to this special issue on anti-government extremism, Sam Jackson makes a conceptual distinction between ideological AGE and issue-driven AGE. The latter objects to a government's actions or stated priorities, such as policies to handle the current pandemic or lax immigration control. Issue-driven AGE may end if the government changes its policy so as to be in line with the opposition, at least on this specific issue. Ideological AGE rejects the legitimacy of any governments, at least above the local level (for example, some American AGE movements will only accept the county sheriff as the highest level of legitimate authority).

Ari Weil analyses what happened when U.S. anti-government militias faced the situation that someone they supported – Donald Trump – took power at president of the United States. Through the period of 2015 to 2021, the Oath Keepers changed their rhetoric from staunch opposition to federal power to embracing mass federal action (including the use of military power and martial law) to keep Trump in office – in stark conflict with the group's founding ideology.

Verena Fiebig and Daniel Koehler's article analyzes one important ideological AGE movement, the Sovereign Citizens. On the basis of a systematic literature review, they collected and compared data on what is known about the demographics, radicalization drivers, mental health status, and violent and criminal behaviors of sovereign citizen activists. Sovereign citizens are commonly described as "individuals and loose networks who hold strong anti-government beliefs that lead to the rejection of local, federal, or state authority and the legal system." Based on their literature review, Fiebig and Koehler find that sovereign citizens are typically middle-aged or older males with financial difficulties, who are also often socially isolated. They tend to radicalize at a relatively old age after biographical breaks (such as losing a job or undergoing a divorce) and the loss of protective factors. Their experiences of powerlessness are often explained by conspiracy theories. If they use violence, they justify it as self-defense in the face of governmental encroachment. The reactive nature of their violence is typically manifested in violent attacks on police officers when they try to enforce governmental authority, such as executing eviction orders, arrest warrants or following traffic stops.

This reactive pattern of violence also comes out clearly in Jan Rathje's article on the justification of violence among 'Reichsbürger' and other conspiracy-ideological sovereignists in Germany. The two cases studied involved middle-aged men who were in conflict with governmental authorities related to an eviction order due to unpaid debts, and the police trying to collect illegal weapons, respectively. Both claimed that their homes were sovereign states, independent of the German state, which they did not recognize as legitimate, asserting their right to self-defense by armed force. They both justified their violence by framing their cause along the lines of extreme right conspiracy theories (see below).

As editors of this special issue, we tried to find articles to cover a broad variety of anti-government extremism movements, not just those leaning towards the extreme right. Unfortunately, despite proactive invitations, we have not been able to obtain contributions of sufficient quality to address left-wing forms of anti-government

extremism. For comparative reasons as well as for ideological balance, we really deplore the lack of articles on historical anarchist movements as well as on modern varieties of left-wing anti-government militancy (such as Antifa) in this Special Issue.

A second form of AGE refers to the spreading of *conspiracy theories that undermine the legitimacy of governments, institutions, policies, and political opponents*. A highly influential conspiracy theory was the notorious "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", a fabricated text originally distributed in Russia in 1903 claiming to describe how the Jews were plotting to achieve global domination.[13] It was used to incite anti-Jewish pogroms as well as justifying the Nazi persecution and extermination of Jews in the death camps.

A more recent twist of this anti-Semitic conspiracy theory was the notion of a Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), claiming that Jews are already in control of the political establishment, the police, the media, academia, and the cultural elites, and are used by Jews as instruments to destroy the Aryan race through immigration and the promotion of homosexuality etc. This was a very popular conspiracy theory among neo-Nazis and white supremacists, especially from the late 1980s onwards, but still exists as a fringe phenomenon.[14]

The "Eurabia" theory [15]—the claim that EU leaders had made a secret agreement with Muslim leaders to Islamize and Arabize Europe through immigration of Muslims—gained a broader reception among far-right and anti-immigration movements and among some populist parties from the early 2000s onwards. This conspiracy theory also inspired extreme-right terrorists like Anders Behring Breivik, whose attacks against goverment ministries and youth party members in Norway in 2011 killed 77 people.

Whereas the Eurabia theory focuses on the cultural threat of Islamization, the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory claims that there is a secret plot to dilute and destroy the ethnic character of the European population by replacing it through immigration of non-white people, reinforced by a drop in birth rates among native Europeans. This conspiracy theory, originally developed by the French author Renaud Camus, was promoted by the Identitarian movement in Europe and continues to have a considerable impact on populist parties and movements. In the U.S., the Great Replacement theory linked up well with the notion of the "white genocide" theory which is popularized by the neo-Nazi David Lane. It was also strongly promoted by Fox News host Tucker Carlson as well as by parts of the Alt Right movement and the New Zealand terrorist Brenton Tarrant.

Among recent conspiracy theories, few have gained a more rapid and widespread following than the highly bizarre QAnon conspiracy, launched in 2017. It claims the existence of a cabal ring of satanistic, cannibalistic child abusers, allegedly linked to Democratic politicians like Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and a broad range of liberals. They allegedly operated a global child sex trafficking ring that conspired against former U.S. President Donald Trump. After Trump lost the presidential election, QAnon supporters were at the forefront of the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Several high-level Republican politicians have expressed support for the QAnon conspiracy, and a quarter of the party's electorate believes there is some truth to it.[16] Although QAnon is tightly linked to U.S. politics, it has rapidly found a large base of supporters in Europe.

An article on QAnon in this Special Issue, by Julia Ebner, Christopher Kavanagh and Harvey Whitehouse, applies linguistic methodology and fusion-based theory to assess the risk of violence that might arise from adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory. They explore a hypothesis that a high level of identity fusion—a visceral feeling of oneness with the group—in combination with a strong perception of an existential threat may predict an enhanced risk of violence. They find support for this fusion-plus-threat model in their data but do not claim that they possess a predictive model at this stage. Neither do they claim that their approach can be used to reliably identify individuals who will commit acts of violence. However, their study does support the thesis that the QAnon movement poses a risk to national security, particularly in English-speaking countries. The three authors conclude that the "high prevalence of identity fusion indicators along with external threat narratives, violence-condoning group norms as well as demonizing, dehumanizing and derogatory vocabulary in several QAnon groups are a particularly concerning warning sign that points to an increased proneness of group members to commit acts of political violence."

Jan Rathje's paper in this issue also addresses how conspiracy theories serve to justify violence among 'Reichs-

bürger' and other conspiracy-ideological sovereignists in contemporary Germany. Drawing from two case studies, Rathje demonstrates how violent anti-government actors make use of various conspiracy theories (such as "New World Order", "the Great Replacement") to justify their use of firearms against the police.

A third expression of anti-government activism is *issue-oriented demonstrations and opposition to specific policies*. Most of these demonstrations were legitimate expressions of opposition and criticism of government authorities and policies, and the large majority among the participants were non-violent. However, some of these demonstrations crossed the boundary into violent extremism, and violence was clearly planned by some of the activists. The most flagrant example was the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, where thousands of demonstrators—incited by the outgoing president Donald Trump—tried to stop the certification process of the results of the presidential election. The mob, consisting of members of right-wing extremist organizations, such as the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys, and the Three Percenters, as well as adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory and ordinary Trump supporters, used violent means to break through the barricades and into the Capitol building, assaulting the Capitol Police and chasing lawmakers who feared for their lives. At least five people died during and after the event, directly or indirectly as a consequence of the attack.

A similar—but less dramatic event—took place on 29 August 2020, when several hundred protesters attempted to break into the German Reichstag (the federal parliament building in Berlin) as part of a vast protest against the country's coronavirus restrictions. Far-right Reichsbürger and neo-Nazi activists led the attackers, although many of the protesters did not have such connections.

Similar demonstrations took place in many European countries during the pandemic, usually breaking restrictions on masks and social distancing but also sometimes turning violent. Typically, the crowd consisted of an unusual mixture of far-right activists, conspiracy theorists, new-age adherents, left-wingers, anti-vaccine activists and people who had never before participated in political demonstrations. They shared their anger against governmental COVID-19 restrictions, policies, or in some cases, election results. What is more, they also tended to share the same slogans and conspiracy theories. Far-right extremist activists and organizations often took the lead in initiating these demonstrations, and sometimes also initiated violent attacks on the police or attempts to break into buildings.

In a forthcoming issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*, several articles will address how pandemic policies and restrictions became the rallying point for mass demonstrations and violent mobilization against governmental institutions, politicians and health workers. These are examples of issue-driven anti-government extremism in contrast to ideological AGE, as discussed by Sam Jackson in his article in the current issue.

A fourth form of anti-government extremism is *violent attacks, plots, threats, and harassment against politicians and governmental representatives*. Political assassinations have a long history—in modern times from the anarchist murders of Russian czar Alexander II (1881) and the American president William McKinley (1901) to the murders of British MP Jo Cox (2016) and German regional governor Walter Lübcke (2019) by right-wing extremists. More recently the plot to kidnap Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer and the attempt to attack and mutilate Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi stand out. During the period between 1975 and 2011, at least 132 (mainly local) politicians have been killed in Italy by left-wing and right-wing extremists as well as by organized crime.[17] Far more common than physical attacks is the stream of harassment and threats towards elected politicians and civil servants at all levels, increasingly communicated via social media. Although rarely resulting in actual violence, it is well documented that such harassment and threats have a strong negative impact on the democratic process, causing many politicians to become less outspoken on controversial issues, and consider quitting politics due to the heavy personal cost. Terrorism is not only physical violence but may also involve threats of violence to achieve psychological repercussions beyond the immediate target.[18]

In this Special Issue, two articles specifically address violent attacks, threats, and harassment against politicians. In her article, Agata Kałabunowska examines politically motivated extreme-right attacks on elected representatives in contemporary Germany. After reviewing police and security service statistics documenting a widespread and increasing frequency of violent crimes against officials and elected officials, she analyzes in detail three recent cases of serious violent attacks against prominent regional and local politicians, including the 2019

murder of the head of the regional council of Kassel, Walther Lübcke; the 2015 near-fatal knife attack on the mayoral candidate in Cologne, Henriette Rieker; and the 2017 attempted knifing of another mayor, Andreas Hollstein in Altena. A related phenomenon was the series of death threats towards politicians circulating under the name NSU 2.0, referring to the terror campaign of the terrorist group National Socialist Underground.[19] Kałabunowska's study shows that the perpetrators selected their targets based on the victims' views on the German liberal immigration policy. She also notes that most of the attacks were directed against local politicians, which gives valid reason to assume that this might be the most vulnerable group of elected political figures. Politicians from the left, center and right of the political spectrum were targeted. The perpetrators were generally lone actors, not members of organized far-right groups, but they were holding far-right views.

The other article addressing this topic—by Tore Bjørgo, Anders Ravik Jupskås, Gunnar Thomassen and Jon Strype—analyzes patterns and consequences of threats towards politicians in Norway, based on surveys of national and local politicians. Although Norway experienced two extremely lethal attacks on government institutions and youth party politicians in 2011, actual attacks on politicians are nevertheless rare. However, many politicians have experienced serious threats (mainly through social media) against themselves or their families, as well as other forms of harassment. These verbal threats may have severe consequences: a majority of the exposed politicians reported some levels of fear, and many avoided speaking publicly on certain policy issues or even said they considered quitting politics. Thus, violent threats and incitement may not even have to lead to actual violence to have a terrorizing impact: politicians at national as well as local levels restrain themselves from engaging in or speaking out on certain issues or consider quitting politics due to fear and stress caused such verbal threats, in turn harming democratic institutions and processes.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this Special Issue has been to open up a scholarly debate on the slippery concept and phenomenon of anti-government extremism. There are several topics and questions that have not yet been properly addressed in the present contributions. For example, is anti-government extremism a useful descriptive or analytical concept at all? How can we distinguish legitimate expressions of political dissent from extremism? Under which conditions may legitimate dissent transform into extremism? Under which circumstances does AGE wax and wane as a threat to society? And what is the connection between militant, issue-oriented AGE and ideological AGE that rejects all forms of government authority?

As noted earlier, an issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* in 2023 will include several articles that address AGE-related issues, specifically involving opposition to anti-pandemic policies. In addition, it will include some articles that did not pass the review process in time for inclusion in the current issue of this journal.

About the Authors

Tore Bjørgo *is professor at the University of Oslo and the Norwegian Police University College (adjunct), and Director of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). In the course of a long career, he has carried out research into a wide range of topics, including political violence and terrorism, right-wing extremism, extremist careers, and prevention. He is associate editor or Perspectives on Terrorism, and co-editor of this special issue.*

Kurt Braddock *is an Assistant Professor of Public Communication in the School of Communication at American University. Kurt also holds a faculty fellow position at the SOC's Center for Media and Social Impact (CMSI). His research focuses on the persuasive strategies used by violent extremist groups to recruit and radicalize audiences targeted by their propaganda. He also co-editor of this special issue.*

Notes

[1] E.g., the U.S. National Security Council (2021). URL: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf; The Norwegian Police Security Service (2022). URL: https://pst.no/globalassets/ntv/2022/nasjonal-trusselvurdering-2022-pa-engelsk.pdf; Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat & Bundeskriminalamt (2020). Politisch motivierte Kriminalität im Jahr 2019. Bundesweite Fallzahlen, URL: https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/veroeffentlichungen/2020/pmk-2019.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=6.

[2] Rapoport, David (2022). *Waves of Global Terrorism: From 1879 to the Present*. New York: Columbia University Press.

[3] For background on Anarchist terrorism, see Bruce Hoffman (2006). *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press; W. Laqueur (1987). *The Age of Terrorism*. Boston: Little, Brown; Jensen, R. (2004). Daggers, Rifles and Dynamite: Anarchist Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Europe. *Terrorism and Political* Violence, 16:1, pp. 116–153; Jones, T. (2015). Anarchist Terrorism in the United States; in: R. D. Law (2015, Ed.). *The Routledge History of Terrorism*. London and New York: Routledge; A. P. Schmid & J. de Graaf (1982). *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: Sage.

[4] Anarchists were not necessarily opposed to all forms of governance; rather they wanted non-hierarchical forms of direct democracy.

[5] Alexander, Yonah and Dennis Pluchinsky (1992). *Europe's Red Terrorists: The Fighting Communist Organisations*. London: Frank Cass.

[6] For an analysis, see Nigel Copsey and Samuel Merrill (2020). Violence and Restraint within Antifa: A View from the United States. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 19, Issue 6: 122–138.

[7] Blee, Kathleen and Mehr Latif (2019) Ku Klux Klan: Vigilantism against Blacks, Immigrants and other Minorities. In: Tore Bjørgo and Miroslav Mareš (Eds.) (2019). *Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities*. Oxon: Routledge.

[8] Pitcavage, Mark (2001). Camouflage and Conspiracy. The Militia Movement from Ruby Ridge to Y2K. *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 44, No. 6, pp. 957–981.

[9] URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-63013702.

[10] Smith, John L. (2021). *Saints, Sinners, and Sovereign Citizens: The Endless War over the West's Public Lands*. Lincoln: University of Nevada Press; Christine M. Sarteschi (2020). *Sovereign Citizens: A Psychological and Criminological Analysis*. Cham: Springer.

[11] According to one opinion poll, 11% of Americans believed the siege of the Capitol was completely or somewhat justified. URL: https://www.businessinsider.com/insider-poll-capitol-siege-ten-percent-justified-2021-1?r=US&IR=T

[12] URL: https://www.npr.org/2020/12/30/951095644/even-if-its-bonkers-poll-finds-many-believe-qanon-and-other-conspiracy-theories. See also the articles by Ebner, Kavenagh and Whitehouse in this special issue.

[13] Segel, Binjamin (1995). *A Lie and a Libel: The History of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Norman Cohn (1967). *Warrant for Genocide.* Pelican Books.

[14] Barkun, Michael (1998). Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge: The Basis for a New Age Racism? In: Jeffrey Kaplan and Tore Bjørgo (Eds.) (1998). *Nation and Race: The Developing Euro-American Racist Subculture*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

[15] Originally formulated by Bat Ye'or (2005). *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

[16] URL: https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2022-02-24/a-quarter-of-republicans-believe-central-views-of-qanon-conspiracy-movement .

[17] Lo Moro D., Gualdani M., Zizza V., Cirinnà M. (2015). Commissione Parlamentare d'inchiesta sul fenomeno delle intimidazioni nei confronti degli amministratori locali. Senato della Republica Italiana; cited in: Gianmarco D. (2015). Strike one to educate one hundred: organized crime, political selection and politicians' ability. *Working Papers* 2015/37. Instituto d'Economia de Barcelona. See note [31] in Kałabunowska's article in this issue.

[18] Hoffman, Bruce (2006). *Inside Terrorism.* New York: Columbia University Press (p. 40).

[19] The National Socialist Underground, NSU, operated between 2006–2011, murdering nine immigrants and one policewoman, while also being responsible for a series of bank robberies, bombings and other crimes. Although the core group consisted of only two men and one woman, they were receiving logistical and other support from an outer circle of more than 100 people. For details, see Daniel Koehler (2017). *Right-Wing Terrorism in the 21st Century: The "National Socialist Underground" and the History of Terror from the Far-Right in Germany*. London: Routledge.

What Is Anti-Government Extremism?

by Sam Jackson

Abstract

Researchers studying extremism commonly use ideological categories to describe actors, actions, and ideologies. One such category is anti-government extremism. This article attempts to define and clarify this concept. After providing a basic definition, the analysis distinguishes ideological anti-government extremism from issue-driven anti-government extremism. The discussion examines whether this category should be seen as a subcategory of other categories (namely, right-wing extremism), as well as the relevance of this category when the government that extremists oppose changes. Several challenges to developing a universally applicable definition of anti-government extremism are identified, and it must be recognized that such a definition might not be useful for research focused on different extremist actors, actions, and ideologies in different political contexts. Finally, the discussion acknowledges the limits of using the definition developed through this article for (post-)positivistic research that would treat anti-government extremism as a variable to be measured across different cases.

Keywords: Anti-government extremism, ideological categories, conceptualization, conceptual pragmatism

Introduction

Researchers studying extremism commonly use ideological categories to describe actors, actions, and ideologies. For example, START's PIRUS dataset identifies 18 different ideological categories, plus a catch-all "other" category.[1] One such category used by researchers is "anti-government" (or "antigovernment"; some researchers have used the phrase "anti-federalist" instead, reflecting the common focus on the federal government by anti-government extremists in the United States).[2] Like many concepts used in scholarly research, this concept seems to primarily be used in a nonspecialist way without special definitions: anti-government extremism (AGE) is simply extremism that opposes government. But as is also commonly the case, as research on this concept matures, researchers may find that this lay definition is inadequate.

This article attempts to define and clarify AGE as a concept useful for research. The following discussion takes up a series of issues and questions related to the term. It is useful to distinguish ideological anti-government extremism from issue-driven anti-government extremism (even though this distinction is blurred in many cases), and to determine whether this category should be seen as a subcategory of other categories (namely, right-wing extremism). Finally, it must be acknowledged that a universally applicable definition of anti-government extremism might not be helpful for research focused on different extremist actors, actions, and ideologies in different political contexts.

Two final prefatory points: first, this definition emerges from my substantive focus on AGE in the United States. This article is not explicitly framed around American AGE, but it is surely the case that my research focus shapes how I see this category more broadly. Second, there is no attempt here to create a typology of extremist ideologies in which AGE is one part of a larger set of "mutually exclusive" and "jointly exhaustive" categories, with which we can locate actors, actions, and ideologies within one and only one category.[3] Nor does this effort seek to define AGE in a way that would be compatible with its inclusion in such a typology. Instead, ideological categories like AGE are viewed as part of a murky, overlapping, and incomplete constellation of concepts that can help us better understand and explain extremist phenomena.[4] In part, this approach recognizes that extremist actors are often motivated by a dizzying combination of ideas: for example, one extremist might be motivated by anti-government ideas alongside white supremacy, while another might be motivated by extreme misogyny and conspiracy theories about 5G communications technology.[5] By not insisting that AGE is mutually exclusive with other ideological categories, this understanding of anti-government extremism does not foreclose the possibility of such messy motivations.[6]

A Starting Point

Most simply, anti-government extremism can be defined as extremism that opposes a government.[7] This minimal definition, though, does not do us much good—it is so broad that it could include nearly all ideologies associated with instances of terrorism, given the understanding that terrorism is a technique used to influence political change[8] and given the assumption that political change often comes about by influencing government. Instead, anti-government extremism can be better understood as those instances of extremism that *primarily* or *consistently* focus on government as a source or cause of perceived crises, where that focus on government is central to the worldviews of the actors in question. With this conceptualization, AGE can serve as a label that distinguishes one category of extremism from other categories that are not primarily or consistently focused on government.

Additionally, anti-government extremism does not (primarily) target a government as a proxy for a broader intended target (in the more formal language of victim-target differentiation within theories of terrorism: the government is not a victim that stands in for a broader target that the actor hopes will be terrorized by their act, though an individual associated with the government can be a victim that stands in for the broader target of the government writ large).[9] Thus, the government is a central feature of the ideology of different forms of anti-government extremism—not merely a passing thought or a subject of tactical discussions about how to achieve goals, but a key aspect of the understanding of the world (along with the perceived crisis and perceived solution to that crisis) advocated by the extremist.[10]

With this definition, researchers can identify examples of extremism that include acts of violence against a government without classifying those examples of extremism as anti-government. For example, when groups involved in the Iraqi conflict during the 2000s justified attacks against government targets, that might qualify them under any non-context-specific definition of anti-government extremism; yet it is more helpful to understand these groups as being involved in a broader insurgency that was about who should have political control rather than as being anti-government extremists as such.

Ideological AGE versus Issue-Driven AGE

We can distinguish ideological anti-government extremism that is broadly opposed to government (or broadly opposed to particular governments) from issue-driven anti-government extremism that opposes a government because of that government's stance (or course of action) on an issue.

Some anti-government extremism primarily objects to a government's action or stated priorities. For example, there has been a surge since early 2020 in forms of extremism that object to governments that recognize the COVID-19 pandemic and have taken measures to mitigate the harms of that pandemic.[11] Other issues that are common for this type of anti-government extremism include immigration, economic policy, and abortion, to name just a few. More broadly, we could think of forms of extremism that are primarily motivated by other ideologies but also include opposition to government as forms of issue-driven AGE. For example, white supremacists in the United States might object to the federal government based on a perception that the government allows too many racial minorities to enter the country; those white supremacists might decide to carry out vigilante border patrol operations to try to prevent immigrants from entering the country.[12] But in this case, the primary ideology of the extremists is racism (or white supremacy more specifically), and the opposition to government would be eliminated if the government adopted policies that the white supremacists perceived as sufficiently exclusionary of those perceived as racial minorities.[13]

On the other hand, other examples of anti-government extremism do not focus on particular issues. For example, many anti-government extremists in the U.S. habitually talk about perceived tyrannical government. Sometimes this occurs in the context of specific issues (particularly gun control), but the framing of the ideas that underlie this type of AGE often focuses on government (or government officials and employees) as an evil-intentioned actor even more so than the specific issue (such as gun control). In ideological anti-government extremism, no change in policy will satisfy the extremists (who might claim that the policy changes are misdirection to hide deeper nefarious action or who might just move to the next issue); some-

times, however, a change in leadership to someone that these actors believe is more ideologically in line with themselves might silence their comments on particular policies even without a substantive change in that policy.[14] In response to accusations that they are anti-government extremists, some individuals in this category respond with an assertion that they are not anti-government, just anti-*bad*-government;[15] but for ideological anti-government extremists, nearly all government is bad.

The biggest difference between ideological AGE and issue-driven AGE is whether a government could change its stance or action on a policy area and resolve the anti-government extremism in question. If such policy change effectively reduces the AGE, that AGE should be seen as issue driven. If instead no policy change will satisfy the extremists, it is more helpful to think of those extremists as belonging to the ideological AGE category.

In practice, this distinction between ideological and issue-driven might not be as clean as suggested here so far. Some individuals might be best understood as ideological AGE but at different times express a form of AGE that seems more issue-driven. For example, ideological anti-government extremists might focus on how governments have attempted to mitigate the worst of the pandemic as an example of tyranny (or some other word used to describe governments that violate the rights of constituents); if a researcher is only aware of that actor's focus on COVID mitigation policies, they might identify the actor as an issue-driven AGE rather than ideological AGE.[16] Indeed, ideological AGE actors might regularly orient themselves around specific issues to try to connect with a broader public that doesn't have ideological objections to government. More broadly, this points to the messy nature of categorization of human behavior and beliefs. Researchers rely on ideal types to develop categories and concepts, yet these categories and concepts rarely exist as cleanly as they are depicted in these ideal types.

Even though the distinction between ideological AGE and issue-driven AGE is often murky in practice, the difference at the heart of this distinction may have important implications for initiatives meant to counter different instances of AGE. For example, a counter messaging campaign aimed at an instance of issue-driven AGE will likely focus on the issue at the heart of that example of AGE, perhaps attempting to provide accurate information in response to incorrect information believed by the AGE actor to be true. On the other hand, a counter messaging campaign aimed at an instance of ideological AGE would not focus (only) on particular issues like climate change or gun control, instead focusing on the broad ideas (like tyranny or "natural rights")[17] that are the foundation for that example of ideological AGE. Again, in practice the distinction between ideological and issue-driven AGE may not be as clear as presented here, and differences in initiatives to counter examples of these types of extremism may not be as distinct. But viewing these two subcategories as ideal types can help guide those designing interventions to ensure that those initiatives actually speak to the issues that motivate or mobilize these extremists.

Is AGE a Subcategory of RWE?

As previous work has argued, one of the subcategories of right-wing extremism (RWE) in the United States is AGE.[18] RWE can be broadly defined as "activity that, in reaction to perceptions of negative change, aims to revert fundamental features of the political system to some imagined (though not necessarily imaginary) past state."[19] Does this mean we should think of AGE as exclusively a subcategory of RWE? Or should we see it as a category that spans the left-right dichotomy?

Recently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the United States described five categories of domestic violent extremism: racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE), animal rights/environmental violent extremism, abortion-relation violent extremists (which includes "ideological agendas in support of pro-life or pro-choice beliefs"), anti-government/anti-authority violent extremists (AGAAVE), and "all other domestic terrorism threats."[20] The anti-government/anti-authority category includes actors who are often considered to be right-wing extremists (namely, militia violent extremists and sovereign citizen violent extremists), but it also includes anarchist violent extremists, a category that is more commonly conceptualized as being left-wing rather than right-wing.

One role that categories can play is in helping us identify actors, actions, and ideologies that share important commonalities. The patriot/militia movement (my preferred term for what the FBI and DHS call "militia violent extremists") shares some ideas with sovereign citizens.[21] These movements have common ways of thinking about the role and legitimacy of government (referring to an alleged historical golden age when the extremists think government was more legitimate for various reasons), and they also share intellectual lineage in part. For example, much of the patriot/militia movement argues that county sheriffs have more legal authority than any other law enforcement actors within the sheriff's jurisdiction, an idea that can be directly traced back to the rabidly antisemitic Posse Comitatus movement of the 1970s and 1980s; and the Anti-Defamation League goes so far as to say that "the modern sovereign citizen movement is descended from the Posse Comitatus."[22]

It is less obvious that there are important commonalities between the patriot/militia movement and sovereign citizen movement on the one hand and the anarchist movement on the other. At a very broad level, it is true that both right-wing anti-government extremists and anarchists oppose the state in important ways. But anarchist extremists often advocate for a radically inclusive form of governance, perhaps best understood as a non-hierarchical form of direct democracy; right-wing anti-government extremists instead typically argue in favor of excluding people from a political community or restricting participation in public life, often for racial, ethnic, or cultural reasons.[23]

Researchers might treat concepts as simple, stable, straightforward descriptions of the phenomena that occupy those categories—this is particularly true for researchers who take a naturalist approach to the study of social phenomena, arguing that the social world can be understood and explained just as non-social phenomena (like the properties of electromagnetic radiation) are. An alternative approach, though—one we might call "conceptual pragmatism"—sees concepts as useful to the extent that they help us understand or explain phenomena.[24] In this approach, it might be reasonable to say that anarchist extremism fits the definition of anti-government extremism but still decline to use the concept of AGE to describe anarchist extremism: including anarchism in this category blurs the category in unhelpful ways, and we can better understand and explain anarchism by treating it as a concept on its own rather than folding into a broader category alongside right-wing AGE.

Thus, the concept of anti-government extremism should exclusively refer to those forms of right-wing extremism whose ideology primarily or consistently focuses on government, depicts government as a threat that must be confronted, and calls for hostile action against government.[25] However, other researchers who have different research questions, emphases, or goals might reasonably use the concept of AGE to apply to a broader or simply different range of extremisms.

In part, this narrower definition of AGE reflects my interest in understanding the relatively more mainstream correlates of AGE in the United States, including the different parts of the right-wing coalition that argue for dramatically less government intervention in a range of spheres—interpersonal, religious, economic, etc. A definition of anti-government extremism that focuses on RWE can facilitate comparisons and discover connections (or lack thereof) with these political figures whose goals overlap to varying degrees with AGE actors. To make this more concrete: this definition of AGE highlights similarities in the ideas and goals of patriot/militia movement actors like the anti-government Oath Keepers organization with politicians and lobbyists like Grover Norquist (who famously quipped that he wanted to see government shrink to the size where Americans "can drown it in the bathtub").[26] This definition might also prime us to see similarities between the Oath Keepers and advocacy organizations like the National Rifle Association that have described federal law enforcement like the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives as "jack-booted thugs" who are conspiring to confiscate privately owned firearms.[27]

AGE That Travels?

In many areas and forms of research, scholars look for concepts that "travel." In Sartori's often-cited work on concepts, these are "universal" concepts that "are applicable to any time and place."[28] As Sartori says,

this is an appropriate goal for many concepts, particularly in comparative research when the concept is a characteristic of the phenomena being compared and researchers need to determine whether or to what extent a phenomenon matches that concept. For example, we might want to determine whether different regimes are democratic (or to what extent they are democratic, if we reject a dichotomous conceptualization of democracy), and this requires a stable, even universally applicable, understanding of democracy. However, a healthy skepticism is warranted about whether AGE should be a universal concept, in part because differences in political cultures affect how individuals in those contexts think about political categories and concepts.

Consider the role of libertarianism in the United States, which can be found in many actors, actions, and ideas, including some extremists.[29] One approach to understanding anti-government extremism focuses on extremists who advocate for radical forms of libertarianism.[30] But libertarianism is not broadly present in all political contexts. For contexts in which a more involved state is widely accepted—for example, in countries with more robust social democratic functions—libertarianism might be marginal or even all but absent. In these contexts, ideological anti-government extremism as defined here might not be present at all. For researchers working on these areas, the logic of AGE might focus more often on issue-driven forms of anti-government extremism. To illustrate this difference: one typical form of AGE in the United States is a militia group that is animated by the perception of tyrannical government, whereas a typical form of AGE in Germany might be pandemic-skeptical extremists organized in opposition to pandemic mitigation policies.

(At the same time, consider sovereign citizens—a mostly ideological[31] AGE movement characterized by esoteric understandings of the law and history, often claiming that individuals can exempt themselves from governmental authority by meticulously following some special process or using language believed to have special legal powers.[32] This movement has increasingly appeared in countries around the world. Though the movement started in the United States, adherents and offshoots can be found in Australia, Ireland, Canada ("Freemen on the Land"), the United Kingdom ("Lawful Rebellion"), and Germany ("Reichsbürgers"), among others.[33] This is not meant to suggest that ideological AGE only exists in the United States; instead, it is possible that the proportion of AGE that is ideological rather than issue-driven might be higher in the United States compared to other countries.)

Research focused on the U.S. has a legitimate interest in thinking about extremism with a libertarian flavor; research focused on other contexts might not need to take libertarianism into account as much, or perhaps even at all. A universal conceptualization of AGE would either include a characteristic absent for much research or would exclude that characteristic that is important for much research.

AGE and Government Change

What happens when the government opposed by anti-government extremists changes? For example, many AGE actors in the U.S. were strong supporters of Donald Trump's presidential candidacy and later of his administration. Rather than indicating that AGE is not a meaningful category, it may be that this type of change could result in several different possibilities where AGE is either still present or is better thought of as describing a previous iteration of an actor in question.

First, AGE actors might view change in government leadership (whether in terms of a person, a party, or an ideology) as a change without a difference. This is particularly likely when a new leader is a member of the party in charge or when a new party that is perceived as very similar to the previous party takes power. Additionally, this possibility seems likely when an actor's anti-government extremism becomes identity as much as ideology, making it difficult for such actors to change their orientation to government even when the face of that government changes.

Second, AGE actors might truly leave behind their anti-government stance, swinging in line behind the new governmental authority. This might be particularly likely when there are larger shifts in who governs (as the result of major changes through elections or a non-democratic change such as a coup), particularly when

the new authority aligns themselves with the anti-government extremists. Such alignment could be explicit, or it could be more implicit, perhaps by using language commonly used by AGE actors or by talking about issues that matter to them. It also could be more likely for issue-driven AGE actors, if the new government adopts a new stance on the issues that matter to these extremists.

The third possibility is a more complex scenario in which the AGE actors identify with the new leadership but still retain much of their anti-government stance. In the case of ideological AGE, this might take the form of extremists believing that the new leader is a partner in their fight against the government. (In my view, this is the best way to understand many ideological AGE actors who supported Donald Trump: they viewed him as an ally in their desire to "drain the swamp" or defeat the so-called "Deep State" that they believe prevented Trump from keeping some of his campaign promises and more generally from carrying out some of his most extreme ideas. Similarly, this is one way to understand the anti-government extremists who participated in the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, where those individuals perceived broad governmental and non-governmental corruption that aimed to prevent Donald Trump from winning re-election.) For issue-driven AGE, this might be most likely in cases where the new authority positions themselves as allies with the extremists but where the government as a whole does not make changes on the issues that matter to the extremists.

A fourth possibility is a variation on (and might in fact co-occur with) the third: AGE actors identify with the new leadership and pivot to focusing on non-government entities as the perceived source and cause of crises. In this case, the anti-government ideology might be in hibernation—not absent, but also not the most important ideas for a period of time. We can also see this possibility playing out in the U.S., where since 2016 ideological AGE actors increasingly focused on the alleged threats to the nation posed by Antifa and Black Lives Matter, both of which were portrayed by some AGE actors as terrorists and part of a global Communist insurgency that was attempting to destroy the nation.[34] But as these non-government entities are often seen as allies of the government at the heart of the anti-government extremism in question, this possibility should not be seen as a rejection of AGE.

Toward a Final Definition

The argument presented here is that anti-government extremism refers to certain forms of right-wing extremism (i.e., extremism that seeks to restore some imagined golden past) that primarily or consistently oppose the government. A distinction can be drawn between ideological anti-government extremism and issue-driven anti-government extremism. In my own work, when using the term "anti-government extremism" without one of these descriptors, I am referring to the ideological type of anti-government extremism.

This definition emerges from a specific context (my research focus on right-wing extremism in the United States) and might not be equally helpful for research in other contexts. Further, researchers might focus on different elements or examples of AGE to such an extent that they disagree about whether certain characteristics are necessary elements of a definition of AGE. It must also be noted that this disagreement is not necessarily problematic: so long as researchers agree about the core of what anti-government extremism is, different definitions with different elements might well reflect different research focuses rather than fundamental disagreement about what the concept is.

However, this conceptualization is not particularly conducive to (post-)positivistic[35] operationalization of anti-government extremism. Indeed, research that relies on categorizing cases based on an operationalized concept likely requires a universal definition of that concept that is part of a "mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive" typology.[36] If researchers use different definitions (and develop different operationalizations based on those different definitions) for work that treats anti-government extremism as a variable that can be measured, their findings might seem to contradict one another when in fact they are simply speaking about different phenomena.

But even for research that uses this concept as a variable (for example, if we want to know whether anti-gov-

ernment extremists or white supremacists in the United States have been the subject of more criminal investigations, we need to classify investigations based on whether their subject is AGE or white supremacy), the approach outlined here can be reasonable as long as the researchers are clear about which definition they use, how they operationalize that definition, and how they classify actors, actions, or ideas using that operationalization. Outliers are particularly prominent here, though: for example, the decision about whether to treat the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing of the Murrah Federal Building as anti-government or racist[37] has substantial implications for any attempt to determine the relative lethality of anti-government or racist ideologies in the United States; whichever ideological category this bombing is assigned to will be identified as far more lethal than any other category. Transparency about conceptualization and operationalization of anti-government extremism is key here, but this example also highlights the care needed when accounting for outliers in research.

In the end, though, researchers of extremism and terrorism can have many different goals for their work, and those differing goals will both affect and be affected by definitions of concepts like anti-government extremism. Like the broader concepts of extremism and terrorism themselves, we should not expect to see universal agreement about what anti-government extremism is. Instead, so long as definitions are clear and reasonable (i.e., have a high level of face validity or what Gerring calls "resonance"),[38] consumers of research on anti-government extremism should expect to see differing conclusions based on where the boundaries of this ideological category are drawn. Reasonable people might disagree about those boundaries, and reasonable people should be comfortable with that disagreement.

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Notes

[1] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), "Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States [Data File]," n.d., URL: http://www.start.umd.edu/pirus.

[2] Examples of scholarship that use this term include: Arie Perliger, "Challengers from the Sidelines: Understanding America's Far-Right" (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, November 2012), URL: https://ctc.westpoint.edu/challengers-from-the-sidelines-understanding-americas-violent-far-right/; Arie Perliger, *American Zealots: Inside Right-Wing Domestic Terrorism*, Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Southern Poverty Law Center, "Antigovernment Movement," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed November 6, 2022, URL: https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/antigovernment; Anti-Defamation League, "Anti-Government Extremism," June 26, 2017, URL: https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/anti-government-extremism; J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 36; Michael Barkun, "Violence in the Name of Democracy: Justifications for Separatism on the Radical Right," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12, no. 3–4 (2000): 193; Erin M. Kearns and Allison Betus, "Asymmetric Coverage of Asymmetric Violence: How U.S. Print News Media Report Far-Right Terrorism," in *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada and the United States*, ed. Barbara Perry, Jeff Gruenewald, and Ryan Scrivens, Palgrave Hate Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 100, URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99804-2_5; Erin Miller, Elizabeth A. Yates, and Sheehan Kane, "Check All That Apply: Challenges in Tracking Ideological Movements That Motivate Right-Wing Terrorism," in *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada and the United States*, ed. Barbara Perry, Jeff Gruenewald, and Ryan Scrivens, Palgrave Hate Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 119–51, URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99804-2_6; Steven Chermak et al., "Far-Right Extremist Violence in the United States," in *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada and the United States*, ed. Barbara Perry, Jeff Gruenewald, and Ryan Scrivens, Palgrave Hate Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 306, URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99804-2_12; Jeff Gruenewald, Katie Ratcliff, and Hayden Lucas, "Criminal Justice

Responses to Right-Wing Extremist (RWE) Violence in the United States," in *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada and the United States*, ed. Barbara Perry, Jeff Gruenewald, and Ryan Scrivens, Palgrave Hate Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 492, URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99804-2_19; Robert L. Tsai, "The Troubling Sheriffs' Movement That Joe Arpaio Supports," POLITICO Magazine, September 1, 2017, URL: http://politi.co/2er3E3M; "Going to Extremes: The Anti-Government Extremism behind the Growing Movement to Seize America's Public Lands" (Center for Western Priorities, August 11, 2015), URL: http://westernpriorities.org/2015/08/10/going-to-extremes/. These uses of the term anti-government extremism often do not have explicit definitions; Michael Jensen confirmed this for START's PIRUS in personal correspondence. Those definitions that do exist focus on American anti-government extremism rather than anti-government extremism more broadly; these definitions (including those by Perliger, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Southern Poverty Law Center) focus specifically on hostility to the American federal government.

[3] Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *The American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (1970): 1038–39, URL: https://doi.org/10.2307/1958356. Jacob Ravndal develops a typology of right-wing terrorism that includes the goal of having mutually exclusive categories; his typology focuses on the level of organization and whether there is a political strategy present rather than ideologies. Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Thugs or Terrorists? A Typology of Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe," *Journal for Deradicalization* no. 3 (June 30, 2015): 1–38.

[4] Sam Jackson, "A Schema of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States," Policy Briefs (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, November 4, 2019), URL: https://icct.nl/publication/a-schema-of-right-wing-extremism-in-the-united-states/. This "murky, overlapping, and incomplete constellation" approach to concepts could be viewed as a variation on Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" approach to concepts, illustrated in Umberto Eco's discussion of fascism. Umberto Eco, "Ur-Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995, URL: http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/06/22/ur-fascism/.

[5] J. M. Berger uses the evocative phrase "a bestiary of extremists" in the context of the different ideological categories he discusses. Berger, *Extremism*, 28–43. See also Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Brian Hughes, "Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism," Lawfare, December 19, 2021, URL: https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism. For an explanation of 5G conspiracy theories, see Rebecca Heilweil, "How the 5G Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory Went from Fringe to Mainstream," Vox, April 24, 2020, URL: https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/4/24/21231085/coronavirus-5g-conspiracy-theory-covid-facebook-youtube.

[6] Other scholars have noted this possibility of ideological complexity within individual cases. For example, Barkun, "Violence in the Name of Democracy," n. 2; Miller, A. Yates, and Kane, "Check All That Apply," 120.

[7] The Anti-Defamation League makes a similar observation. Anti-Defamation League, "Anti-Government Extremism."

[8] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Third Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 43–44.

[9] Alex Schmid, "The Definition of Terrorism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, ed. Alex Schmid (Routledge, 2013), 80–82, https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Terrorism-Research/Schmid/p/book/9780415520997.

[10] Sam Jackson, "Non-Normative Political Extremism: Reclaiming a Concept's Analytical Utility," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 2 (2019): 248–49, URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2016.1212599. Berger's definition of extremism also includes perceptions of crisis and perceived solutions to that crisis as core features. Berger, *Extremism* especially chapter 4.

[11] For example, see Jakob Guhl and Lea Gerster, "Crisis and Loss of Control: German-Language Digital Extremism in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic" (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, December 14, 2020), URL: https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/crisis-and-loss-of-control-german-language-digital-extremism-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/; "Denmark Adds COVID-19 Extremism in Terror Assessment," *AP NEWS*, March 29, 2022, sec. Coronavirus pandemic, URL: https://apnews.com/article/covid-business-health-europe-covid-19-pandemic-17b154cb5ff9dc21f3443917accf7f95; Teun van Dongen, "Assessing the Threat of Covid 19-Related Extremism in the West" (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, August 5, 2021), URL: https://icct.nl/publication/assessing-the-threat-of-covid-19-related-extremism-in-the-west-2/.

[12] For example, the white supremacist and neo-Nazi Tom Metzger organized border patrols in the 1970s. Concepción de León, "Tom Metzger, Notorious White Supremacist, Dies at 82," *The New York Times*, November 13, 2020, sec. U.S., URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/us/tom-metzger-dead.html. This type of vigilante border operation could also be understood as an instance of pro-government extremist action in cases where the extremists view themselves as helping (rather than opposing) the government.

[13] Note here that what matters is whether the extremists perceive border and immigration policy as sufficiently exclusionary, not whether other observers would characterize it that way. In the current political context of the United States, many Americans view border and immigration policy as draconian while at the same time other political actors like Fox News publish articles about "Biden's open-border policies." Tom Homan, "Biden's Open-Border Policies Guaranteed Tragedy and Loss of Life," Fox News, July 1, 2022, URL: https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/biden-open-border-policies-guaranteed-tragedy.

[14] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point about the role of particular leaders. See also the section entitled

"AGE and Government Change."

[15] Dobratz and colleagues point out that Randy Weaver, the white supremacist whose rural home in northern Idaho was the subject of the Ruby Ridge raid in 1992, described himself as "not antigovernment but anti *bad* government." Betty A. Dobratz, Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, and Danelle Hallenbeck, "What Happened on Ruby Ridge: Terrorism or Tyranny?," *Symbolic Interaction* 26, no. 2 (2003): 338, URL: https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2003.26.2.315.

[16] My thanks to Tore Bjørgo for pointing out this mixing of ideological AGE with issue-driven AGE in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among European pandemic-skeptical movements.

[17] Sam Jackson, *Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), chap. 4: The Ongoing Struggle over Natural Rights, URL: https://cup.columbia.edu/book/oath-keepers/9780231550314.

[18] Jackson, "A Schema of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States."

[19] Ibid., 4.

[20] Federal Bureau of Investigation and Department of Homeland Security, "Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism," File, May 2021, 5, URL: https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view.

[21] Jackson, "A Schema of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States," 13–14.

[22] Anti-Defamation League, "Posse Comitatus," accessed June 10, 2022, URL: https://extremismterms.adl.org/glossary/posse-comitatus; Michael Barkun, "Purifying the Law: The Legal World of 'Christian Patriots,'" *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2007): 57–70; Barkun, "Violence in the Name of Democracy"; Jackson, "Non-Normative Political Extremism," 251–52.

[23] For example, Holbrook and Macklin argue that three forms of nationalism (racial, ethnic, and cultural) are key ideas for contemporary right-wing extremism. Donald Holbrook and Graham Macklin, "Deconstructing Rightwing Extremism: Conceptual Variance and Attitudes Towards Islam" (RESOLVE Network, June 14, 2022), URL: https://resolvenet.org/research/deconstructing-rightwing-extremism-conceptual-variance-and-attitudes-towards-islam.

[24] Peter Carruthers, "Conceptual Pragmatism," *Synthese* 73, no. 2 (1987): 205–24. We might also recognize that concepts have "messy histories" that complicate how we understand and use them. Christopher Ansell, "Coping with Conceptual Pluralism: Reflections on Concept Formation," *Public Performance & Management Review* 44, no. 5 (September 3, 2021): 1120–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2019.1677254. For additional critiques of naturalist approaches to concepts in social science research, see Mark Bevir and Asaf Kedar, "Concept Formation in Political Science: An Anti-Naturalist Critique of Qualitative Methodology," *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 3 (September 2008): 503–17, URL: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592708081255.

[25] Generally speaking, pro-democracy activists who oppose authoritarian regimes are not seeking to return to some perceived golden age in the past. Since I view AGE as a subcategory of RWE, I do not think of these types of anti-authoritarian actors as anti-government extremists.

[26] "Conservative Advocate," *Morning Edition* (NPR, May 25, 2001), URL: https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1123439.

[27] Elspeth Reeve, "Two Decades of Paranoid Pronouncements by the NRA's Wayne LaPierre," The Atlantic, January 30, 2013, URL: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/two-decades-wayne-lapierre-saying-hyperbolic-things-about-guns/318915/.

[28] Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," 1035.

[29] To be clear, I am not asserting that all instances of libertarianism in the United States constitute extremism. But there are certainly forms of extremism that emphasize libertarian thought.

[30] Some who take an approach like this include Arie Perliger, J. J. MacNab, D. J. Mulloy, and Mark Pitcavage. Coincidence or not, many of these researchers also influenced my thoughts on the varieties of right-wing extremism in the United States as described in Jackson, "A Schema of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States."

[31] Some individuals are drawn to the sovereign citizen movement through claims that adherents can avoid paying taxes by following sovereign citizen methods. For such individuals, their sovereign citizen AGE might well be issue-driven; but the sovereign citizen movement more broadly relies on an ideological stance that government (or a particular government) is illegitimate.

[32] Matthew Sweeney, "What Is the Sovereign Citizen Movement, What Do They Believe and How Are They Spreading?," Rad-

icalisation Research, June 19, 2018, URL: https://www.radicalisationresearch.org/guides/sweeney-sovereign-citizen-movement/; J. M. Berger, "Without Prejudice: What Sovereign Citizens Believe" (GW Program on Extremism, June 2016), URL: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/downloads/JMB%20Sovereign%20Citizens.pdf.

[33] Sweeney, "What Is the Sovereign Citizen Movement, What Do They Believe and How Are They Spreading?"; "The Queen's Enemies," *Out of the Ordinary* (BBC Radio 4, February 9, 2018), URL: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09qhsc4; Barbara Perry, David Hoffman, and Ryan Scrivens, "Anti-Authority and Militia Movements in Canada," *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 1, no. 3 (January 31, 2019): 30, URL: https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v1i3.822.

[34] Sam Jackson, "The Long, Dangerous History of Right-Wing Calls for Violence and Civil War," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2020, sec. Monkey Cage, URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/11/long-dangerous-history-far-rights-calls-violence-civil-war/.

[35] I use "(post-)positivistic" to refer to forms of social science research that borrow from natural science research, centering falsifiability and focusing on investigating phenomena that are believed to exist independently of human perception of those phenomena. (Post-)positivistic research either believes that research can be "objective" or believes that objectivity is an unreachable goal that we should nevertheless pursue. Finally, these forms of research often attempt to discover "law-like regularities" or as close as possible to that standard, often with the goal of discovering or characterizing relationships between different variables. In contrast, non-positivistic research (such as interpretivism) focuses more on understanding how people think and understand things in the social world.

[36] Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics."

[37] START's Global Terrorism Database identifies the perpetrator of the attack as "Anti-Government extremists." URL: https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtdid=199504190004. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), "Global Terrorism Database [Data File]," 2021, URL: http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd. Similarly, Arie Perliger includes this attack in the broader category of anti-government/militia movement. Perliger, *American Zealots*. Personal correspondence with Perliger, July 2022. I focus on the centrality of white supremacy in Timothy McVeigh's worldview, which leads me to think of the attack as primarily belonging to the category of racism.

[38] John Gerring, *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework*, 2nd ed., Strategies for Social Inquiry (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 117–19.

Strategies of Narrative Coherence: How Militias Justify Embracing State Power

by Ari Weil

Abstract

What happens to the anti-government movement when someone they support takes power? When Donald Trump was elected in 2016, the U.S. militia movement faced a challenge of narrative coherence: the risk that the stories the movement tells were no longer logically consistent. This article investigates the Oath Keepers, a group that pivoted from staunch opposition to federal power to supporting Trump, and ultimately in 2020 called for massive military action to suppress protests and re-run the election. Through an analysis of 137 official Oath Keepers online statements and posts from 2015–2021 and over 4,000 comments by followers and members on those posts, two narrative strategies are identified. First, the group extended their existing narrative by continuing to tell Revolutionary War metaphors but made Trump the new protagonist in those stories. Second, they used semantic adjustments to avoid hypocrisy as they embraced central state power. As they aligned with Trump, the military gradually supplanted the militia as a key actor in their narratives of change. Additionally, in 2020 they told their followers to no longer use the term martial law in order to make their new narrative fit within their founding ideology. This article bridges work on narratives in terrorism studies and the large civil war literature on shifting alignments and provides a deeper understanding of the strategic messaging of anti-government extremists. At a more micro-level, the analysis of debates among followers gives insight into how anti-government extremists think about their relationship to the state.

Keywords: Oath Keepers, narrative, anti-government extremism, militia, alignment

Introduction

How do anti-government organizations justify aligning with the state? Political actors often need to defend their cooperative dealings both internally to members and externally to broader audiences. This is particularly important in cases of unlikely alignments, where tacit or official cooperation occurs between actors with opposing ideologies.[1] In the US, the anti-government militia movement grew in the 2010s. But when Donald Trump was elected in 2016, many had to reframe their goals when someone they supported was in the executive.

In political violence studies, a large body of research in the last decade has analyzed reasons for terrorist cooperation and insurgent side-switching.[2] Yet this work has largely not addressed how non-state actors defend and explain these switches in loyalty. Instead, this analysis turns to sociological work on movement narratives and draws on the concept of *narrative coherence*. Groups may try to make their stories logically consistent, especially when shifting alignments.

This article examine the case of the Oath Keepers, a militarized social movement active in the patriot and militia sections of US anti-government extremism. The group was founded in 2009 around a narrative of impending federal overreach and participated in armed standoffs against federal officials in the 2010s.[3] From 2016 on, however, they embraced Trump, and in 2020 called for extreme measures that went against their founding ideology, such as deploying the US military to suppress domestic unrest and having the military re-run the election.[4] This analysis seeks to understand how this anti-government movement explained its embrace of a central state figure.

The analysis draws on 137 official Oath Keepers online statements and posts from 2015–2021, over 4,000 comments by followers and members on those posts, as well as their leaked emails from 2021 and internal chat room from 2020–2021. By comparing their statements before and after their switch to supporting Trump, two strategies are identified that the group used to try and achieve narrative coherence.

First, the Oath Keepers used *narrative extension* by continuing their pre-existing practice of using Revolutionary War references, but instead made Trump the protagonist of those stories. Second, they made *semantic adjustments*, switching the language in their narratives to avoid hypocrisy. This manifested in telling their followers to no longer use the term martial law. They also focused more on the role of the military, while the militia receded in importance in their statements. Evidence from online comments and their internal forum shows that members responded positively to this shifting narrative, although they were slow initially to accept it, and critiqued the group's leadership in the first year of the Trump administration. The case also shows the stickiness of narratives: rather than accepting an ally's identity narrative, the group found ways to reform their own narrative to include elements of a new partner without alienating their support base.

The article proceeds in four parts. It begins with an overview of relevant literatures, drawing on research on alignment and cooperation. This is followed by an exploration of how narratives in particular offer a useful analytic lens, and then the data collection and analysis procedures for the project are provided. The fourth section presents an analysis of Oath Keepers statements and member responses, and identifies two different strategies used by the group, followed by a conclusion and discussion of broader implications.

Alignments in Political Violence

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in terrorism studies scholarship on alliances and cooperation. This work has highlighted when alliances between either two non-state actors or a non-state actor and the state occur, which groups are most prone to cooperate, and the mechanisms through which cooperation occurs.[5] Broader work has addressed civil war alignment between rebels and states, starting with a wave of conceptual work that described alignment relationships along axes such as the level of cooperation between the state and militants, level of support from the state, and whether they compete for territory.[6] Following on to these theories have been data-gathering efforts to catalog the alignment of armed groups across numerous conflicts,[7] and two recent ambitious large-n projects have identified the ideological and identity-based reasons why certain rebel groups ally with each other.[8]

However, this scholarship primarily focuses on categorizing alignments and examining causes and effects. We understand what kinds of groups can shift, the factors that lead to shifts in loyalty, and the effects those shifts can have, but less about how non-state actors justify these choices to internal and external audiences. This literature has yet to address how non-state actors legitimize their alignment choices.

In political violence studies broadly, one major theory of civil war alliances argues that alignment narratives are instrumentally used to justify power-based alliance choices. Fotini Christia theorizes that after groups form alliances, elites create narratives that construct a common sense of identity with the new partner by centering a similar element with the ally that the enemy does not have.[9] Christia is explicit that the theory is limited to inter-rebel alliances in civil wars and does not claim the theory travels to other scenarios.[10] Given the limited theorizing about alignment narratives, this discussion adopts Christia's understanding as a starting point as the clearest elucidation of the role in narratives in sub-state conflict, and builds from there.

Narratives

Narratives are selective presentations of events that are "temporally ordered" and "meaningfully structured".[11] As applied to terrorism studies, Braddock defines narratives as "cohesive, causally linked sequences of events that take place in dynamic worlds subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through nonhabitual, purposeful action performed by characters."[12] In social movement studies, narratives are critical for building of collective identity, through both the telling of how a group came to be, and the labeling of the in-group as protagonists and their opponents as antagonists.[13] Thus, narratives can be a tool to articulate a story about a group's identity during times of possible identity change due to realignment.

How can narratives be used by aligning actors? First, narratives imbue events with meaning.[14] Narratives thus provide justification for cooperation: once an alignment is chosen, leaders and members must make

sense of it. Second, narratives help establish collective identity. In a world of shifting alignments, narratives explain who is a friend and an enemy.[15] Sociologists have defined two types of narratives: participant and movement narratives, and this analysis will focus on the latter of these. What distinguishes movement narratives from the individual level is the presence of "alternative middles and endings"; movement narratives present a status quo story, along with a better ending if followers take the movement's suggested course of action.[16]

The problem of crafting a legitimizing movement narrative is particularly acute for unlikely partners. The central narrative challenge they face is bringing an ideologically opposed party into the fold while still maintaining commitment from the group's followers. Going against a founding ideology can be risky for a non-state actor; internally, that shift has potential effects on recruitment, movement sustainment, and keeping membership engaged who originally signed on for commitment to a different ideology and narrative. For groups shifting alignments, they must find a way to still make their ideology and goals legible and convincing to existing members while incorporating elements of the new party.

This is the "problem of narrative coherence".[17] The concept of narrative coherence refers to the logical consistency of the story and has roots in both narrative studies and psychology.[18] This can refer to internal consistency of one narrative, but in this discussion it is used primarily to compare several narratives. This is particularly important for shifting alignments: when non-state actors deploy several narratives over time, does the change resonate as coherent to the movement members?

To illustrate how groups justify alignments and try to make them coherent, a spectrum of plausible strategies a non-state actor can use is provided in Figure 1. At one end, an armed group may prioritize satisfying members, so they maintain their original narrative and make small changes to adapt to the new partner. At the other, a group may wholesale adopt the partner's rhetoric to please the new ally. In the middle lies the creation of a shared identity narrative of the two groups in the middle.[19] This framework is used here as a starting point, and to then inductively identify specific strategies the Oath Keepers used along this spectrum.

Figure 1: Spectrum of Narrative Strategies

Data and Methods

To examine narrative strategies of the anti-government movement, this analysis focuses on the case of the Oath Keepers, a US anti-government militia organization. This case provides an anti-government group with an active messaging operation that aligned with the state, allowing for comparison of two periods: before and during alignment. Two sets of primary sources are examined: Oath Keepers statements, and discussions among their membership. First, the Oath Keepers regularly wrote and disseminated statements about current and planned events on their website and social media. Second, there are two sources of membership discussion. Each post on the Oath Keepers' website has comments underneath, which are collected. In addition to that public source, private sources such as emails and the group's internal chatroom from 2020 and 2021 were leaked online.[20][21]

In total, the corpus contains 137 statements from 2015–2021, along with a total of 4,488 comments posted underneath each.[22] Data collection took place in fall 2021, after the group's Twitter and Facebook were banned in late summer 2020, but while their website was still online.[23] Many items on the Oath Keepers' website are reposted articles and opinion pieces from conservative media, so data collection was limited to posts tagged "Stewart Rhodes" or "Oath Keepers". This ensured that only statements directly written by the organization were analyzed. These posts range from a few short paragraphs to several page-long statements.

There is also more engagement from members on these posts compared to the articles, with an average of 35 comments on each, and some reaching up to 300 or 400.

The data are examined using two methods. First, the website statements and comments were scraped, enabling a quantitative analysis of distinctive keywords before and after aligning with Trump.[24] Second, a qualitative examination of their statements before and after the alignment inductively revealed two narrative strategies used to obtain coherence. The analysis focused on continuity or change in major themes, and in particular sought to identify how the group talks about its own ideological tenets versus the new partner's values in the post-shift period.

Case Background

The Oath Keepers were founded in 2009 by Elmer Stewart Rhodes, and unveiled at an April 19 rally in Lexington, Massachusetts, the site of the first battle of the Revolutionary War. They seek to recruit active-duty and retired military and law enforcement officers, who they call "Oath Keepers" for their oath to the US Constitution. Their founding document, "Declaration of Orders We Will Not Obey" lists ten orders an authoritarian government could give, and that all Oath Keepers should refuse to fulfill.[25] These include the imposition of martial law, firearm confiscation, blockading cities, and the use of foreign troops on American soil.

This ideology positions the Oath Keepers as part of the patriot and militia movement, a branch of anti-government extremism. This milieu is organized under the belief that "the federal government poses the greatest threat to the life, liberty, and happiness of Americans and that all true Americans should prepare themselves for an inevitable conflict with the government."[26] In their movement narrative, the ten orders represent the status quo, and the Oath Keepers' various calls to action are opportunities to reach an alternative ending. The Oath Keepers are loosely organized, with a national leadership board and local chapters that have some autonomy. The size of the organization has been of much debate: an internal membership list had contact information for 25,000 people, but researchers estimate there are 1,000–3,000 active members.[27] However, between their email list, and their former Facebook page having 500,000 followers [28], the group has a large platform for its messaging.

The group has a history of armed protest actions. They joined ranchers in the standoff at Bundy Ranch in Nevada in 2014, which pitted the Bureau of Land Management against the patriot movement. The Oath Keepers also appeared at protests of other movements; in 2014, the group brought firearms to the Ferguson Black Lives Matter protests and said they were standing guard over local business.[29]

After Trump was elected, the group shifted their support to him. They began providing armed security at Trump rallies,[30] called for members to monitor the polls in 2016,[31] and engaged in street fights with leftist protestors and the Antifa movement in 2017 and 2018. Most recently, the group has faced scrutiny after several members were present at the January 6th capitol riot, leading to arrests and at least 21 people charged.[32]

Sam Jackson's 2020 book provides the most comprehensive history of the organization, in particular by using frame analysis to understand the group's worldview.[33] Jackson's study finds that the group uses historical references to key American events to situate fears of federal overreach and provide a familiar template for how to act in response. This article builds on the work in this specific case in two ways. First, Jackson's study ended in 2016, so this analysis extends the time period to when the group was aligned with a figure in the executive. Second, Jackson chose not include member rhetoric in his analysis, focusing only on the group's official posts.[34] This article incorporates analysis of member discussion to identify whether leadership narratives resonated. Lastly, this case is used to interrogate a different question, examining how alignment shifts are legitimized by groups. The discussion includes an examination of an original body of post-2016 primary sources, a comparison of pre- and post-alignment shift narratives, and a study of member comments.

Empirical Analysis

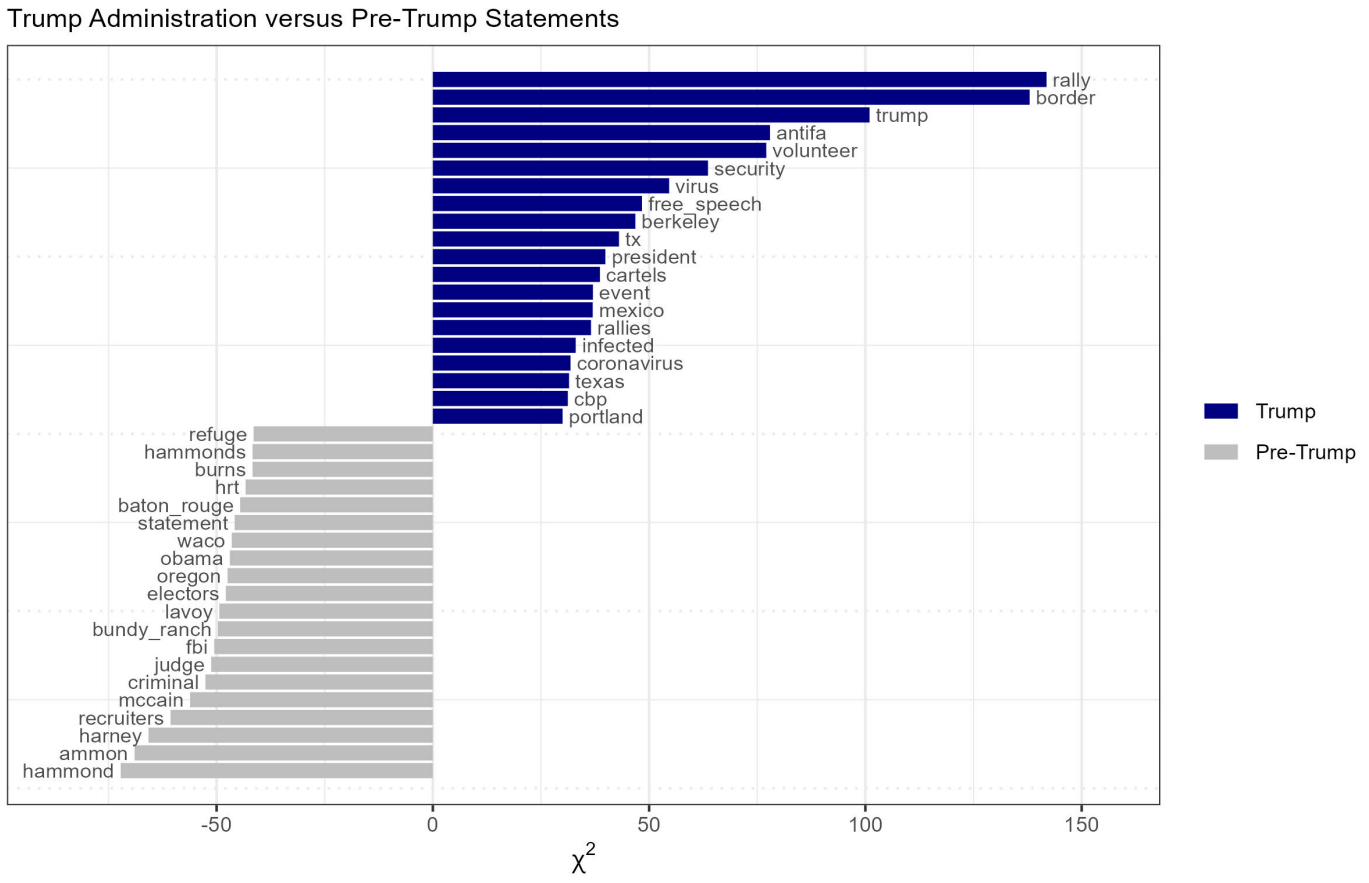
The empirical analysis proceeds in three parts. First, a computational text analysis provides an overall descriptive look at key terms in Oath Keepers' rhetoric before and during their alignment with Trump. Next, a qualitative comparison of statements before and after the shift in alignment revealed two narrative strategies, which are labeled narrative extension and semantic adjustments. Lastly, the discussion examines how Oath Keepers' members and supporters responded to each of those strategies.

Keyness Analysis

To provide an overall assessment of the Oath Keepers' rhetoric, we can compare their language before and after shifting to support Trump. One way to make this comparison is to calculate a type of distinctive word analysis known as keyness statistics.[35] Keyness is a measure for which terms are used more or less frequently than expected in a target set of documents when compared to a reference set.[36] For this analysis, the data are divided by the January 2017 inauguration of President Trump, using pre-2017 as a reference set and post-inauguration as a target set.[37] Figures 2 and 3 plot keyness results for both Oath Keepers' statements and member comments on those posts. Words with a positive chi-squared value appeared more frequently in the post-January 2017 set than would be expected from the pre-Trump baseline. Words with a negative chi-squared value appeared much less frequently in the post-corpus than expected from the baseline.

This analysis of the data reveals a striking shift in common terms. After Trump's inauguration, the group was less likely to use terms about the federal government and its perceived overreach. Terms such as "judge", "Waco", and "FBI" were less likely to appear in the post-shift set than before, as were the names of ranchers such as Ammon Bundy and Lavoy Finicum. Instead, much more common is discussion of immigration (Border, Cartels, Wall, Texas, Illegal, CBP).

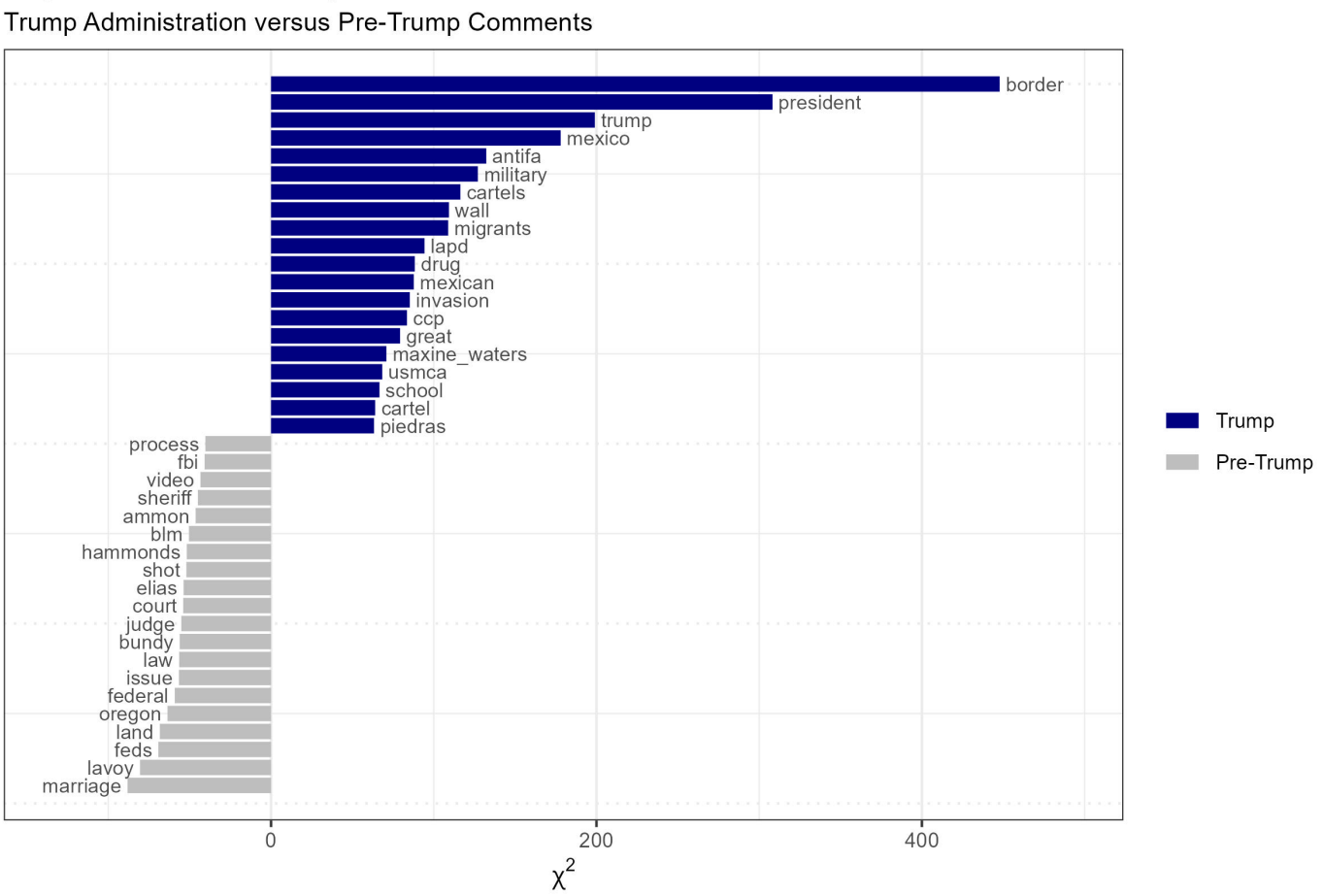
Figure 2: Keyness for Oath Keepers Statements



Through a reading of these statements, this difference can be interpreted as the Oath Keepers' switching the primary enemy in their narrative. Pre-Trump, in line with their founding ideals, the Oath Keepers held that their main enemy was federal agencies who would overreach their power. Whereas once Trump was in power, the federal government was no longer the enemy in their narrative but instead was leftists ("Antifa"), who they wrote about as planning a Marxist "insurrection". Key terms such as "volunteer", "rally", and "security" come from their calls to action to stand guard at Trump rallies and provide protection from the perceived threat from leftists. They also took up Trump's primary political argument about border security, frequently talking about illegal immigration, and even calling for the National Guard to be deployed to the border.

Applying this same measure to the corpus of member comments on those statements results in similar patterns. Pre-Trump the focus was on standoffs with federal agencies, while post-Trump keywords are much more likely to be about the border, immigration, and leftist organizing.

Figure 3: Keyness for Oath Keepers Comments



Narrative Extension

The first strategy identified in the Oath Keepers' shifting rhetoric can be called *narrative extension*. Rather than creating a new narrative, the group used their original story but shifted the protagonist to be a new partner. This allowed the group to stay true to its original identity by continuing the same narrative structure, while making the new partner fit into the group's schema. This sits at the left end of the spectrum of strategies, as it involves only minimal changes to the preexisting narrative. Previous research has identified the Oath Keepers frequently reference American history, often comparing today to the Revolution.[38] Jackson identifies several key moments the Oath Keepers draw on: natural rights, the Revolution, the Waco siege, and the government response to Hurricane Katrina.[39] These filter down into everyday language: they call their members patriots, and Rhodes signs off all his posts "for the republic". Building on Jackson's analysis of the pre-2016 period, this analysis reveals that after aligning with Trump, the group continued to

use Revolution references, but where they previously positioned central state power as the enemy, they instead embraced Trump and made him the George Washington in the Revolution story, thus making a figure of the state their protagonist.

Before the group's alignment shift, their references to the Revolution positioned the federal government as the main antagonist, a modern-day imperial British enemy. For example, after the Sandy Hook shooting in 2013, the Oath Keepers tapped into fears of gun confiscation by comparing back to April 19, 1775 and the British order that the colonial militia disarm and disperse.[40] During the Malheur occupation, a post called the Bureau of Land Management and people who support federal agencies "Loyalist, Tory", referencing the colonists who supported British rule.[41] And the Oath Keepers used that metaphor to explain their preferred strategy, writing that the patriot movement shouldn't be goaded into a confrontation but should wait for central state power to make the first move, as British General Gage had at Lexington and Concord.[42]

Yet the focus shifted after the group aligned with Trump: the main antagonist became Antifa and leftist protesters, and Trump himself became the revolutionary protagonist in their narratives.[43] No longer was central state power the enemy but opposing social movement organizations. But the Oath Keepers continued to use the same narrative structure of American historical stories that had resonated with members before, and just inserted Trump into that narrative. In a 2018 open letter to Trump about migration, Rhodes said Trump should "show himself to be a modern George Washington, who takes lead and does what needs to be done to save his country."[44] Even though Trump now was located at the nexus of state power, the Oath Keepers positioned him in their stories as the revolutionary. Trump became a figure compared to Washington and Lincoln in their statements.[45] After Trump lost the election, the Oath Keepers implored him to take measures to keep power. They framed the moment as a dire turning point like what Washington faced before the Battle of Brooklyn in 1776.[46] And they asked Trump to follow the example of Abraham Lincoln who had "suppressed an insurrection and rebellion that had spread throughout all branches of government at all levels."[47]

The opponent in their narratives became the political left; for example, the Oath Keepers described Virginia Governor Ralph Northam's ban on guns on state capitol grounds as a "wanna-be King George tyrant's decree."[48] Additionally, elements of the federal government seen as not supporting Trump were positioned as traitors in the Revolution story. The Oath Keepers wrote that Trump was facing the "Benedict Arnold"[49] of the deep state, and that if he suddenly seized and declassified data from the CIA, FBI, and NSA, it would be akin to George Washington surprising the Hessians at Trenton.[50]

This reuse of existing narrative structure allowed the Oath Keepers to stay true to their original identity while bringing in the new partner. The shifting of characters also allowed the narrative responsibility of labeling friend and foe to be updated. As explained later in this article, this came with a growing acceptance of the role of the military and central state power in their theory of victory.

Semantic Adjustments

The second strategy identified here involves *semantic adjustments*. Here groups shift language in their narratives to avoid hypocrisy and attempt to achieve narrative coherence. They try to use language that fits with the new partner's ideology, while not contradicting the group's previous identity. This strategy also provides a way to avoid rhetorical entrapment, where previous statements limit future action.[51] By shifting language, a non-state actor can open space to act toward their partner's goals without alienating the group's membership. Again, this falls on the left side of the spectrum of strategies, because the group is trying to embrace a new partner without appearing to have changed their identity and ideology. This appeared in two ways for the Oath Keepers—the use of the term martial law, and the role of the militia. First, Oath Keepers leadership told followers to stop using the term martial law in 2020 as they tried to make federal action fit within their ideology. Second, throughout Trump's term, the group shifted the primary actor responsible for defense in their narrative from the militia to the military and central state power. The discussion below traces the shift in language from militia to military in both official statements and discussions among members.

Martial Law

First, the Oath Keepers displayed a marked change in approach to the term "martial law", which had been a key part of their ideology.[52] The group's founding document, "Orders We Will Not Obey," states that "the imposition of martial law by the national government over a state and its people, treating them as an occupied nation, is an act of war."[53] Martial law represented the pinnacle of their fears because it would involve a military takeover and suspension of the Constitution. It featured so prominently in their ideology that the organization promoted conspiracies such as FEMA being used for martial law and claiming that the government suspended the Constitution and confiscated guns during Hurricane Katrina.[54]

Post-alignment shift, the Oath Keepers began moving away from the term martial law to embrace a wider latitude of action for Trump. This came to a head after the 2020 election. On a November 13 conference call, the group discussed how Trump could overturn the results. To make his call for action by Trump more palatable, Rhodes prefaced his comments by saying "you know, I understand. I'm a libertarian. I'm a constitutionalist. But he has the authority within the constitution to suppress insurrections."[55] Rhodes framed the action as within the Oath Keepers' original constitutional narrative.

Then in December 2020, the Oath Keepers wrote two open letters to Trump. They asked him to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807, call up the National Guard, declassify federal data that would prove supposed voter fraud, and use the military to re-run the election.[56] This embrace of mass federal action to keep Trump in office stands in stark contrast to the group's founding ideology. To justify this shift, Rhodes specifically asked followers to stop using the phrase "martial law", writing:

> PS – PATRIOTS, QUIT USING THE TERM "MARTIAL LAW."
>
> The term "martial law" is nowhere in the constitutional text (go look. You won't find it there). The power of Congress to provide for calling forth the militia to suppress an insurrection, on the other hand, IS in the constitutional text, and Congress did so, starting in 1807, in the Insurrection Act (and all its amended versions since). Suppressing an insurrection and "martial law" are very different and should not be conflated or confused.
>
> All the above recommended actions can be done under constitutional powers and authorities pursuant to the Insurrection Act, and pursuant to the President's powers and duties under Article II. President Trump does NOT need to try to step outside the Constitution to enforce it. He merely needs to use his constitutional powers in defense of that same Constitution, and in defense of the rights of the American people, pursuant to the Constitution (such as the right to vote, as well as the right to equal protection of the laws).[57]

By saying that martial law doesn't appear and arguing that Trump can take decisive federal action within the Constitution, the Oath Keepers avoided an obvious contradiction. This shift allowed them to achieve coherence by changing language to stay within their founding constitutionalist ideology.

While martial law fell away, the Oath Keepers increasingly used a different term: insurrection. Rhodes first used the term in 2016 to describe Black Lives Matter protests and shootings of police officers in the summer of 2016.[58] He used it again in 2017, describing Antifa and leftist protestors as an insurrection following a street brawl between groups in Berkeley.[59] And Oath Keeper statements in 2018 described the state of California and sanctuary cities as undertaking "acts of rebellion/insurrection against the laws of the Union."[60] The Oath Keepers portrayed their opponents as undertaking an insurrection, one that then justified the embrace of federal powers and other measures that originally would not have been within the scope of their ideology. This ultimately culminated in 2020 with the Oath Keepers' focus on the Insurrection Act as the key legal mechanism Trump should use to maintain control post-election.

Militia to Military

The Oath Keepers also adjusted their language in their narrative of who is responsible for defense. Pre-shift, the militia was the primary actor, but after the alignment shift the group and its leadership increasingly called for military action first, and after a lag its membership also embraced this new narrative. The analysis below traces the shift in language from militia to military in both official statements and discussions among members.

Initially, the group pushed for revitalization of the Constitutional Militia and was wary of the military acting on US soil. In response to fears about ISIS attacks in America, then Oath Keepers spokesman Jason Van Tatenhove posted a statement about the importance of the militia and individual self-defense, and put the militia on par with the military by saying they should have access to the same quality of weapons.[61] In July 2016, Rhodes wrote that "what is now needed, more than ever, is the reestablishment of the militia of the people, trained, equipped and organized in each town."[62] And in response to police being shot in Baton Rouge, Rhodes argued that the militia should be responsible for "suppressing insurrections," in the US, not the military.[63]

The preeminence of the militia over the military is also seen in discussions amongst members. When one commenter stated in July 2016 that a military coup could help re-establish a government more loyal to the Constitution, Rhodes responded forcefully that "there can be no such thing as 'a military dictatorship based upon the Constitution,'" and that "under the Constitution, it is the MILITIA not the standing Army or Navy, that is tasked with executing the laws of the Union."[64] Several other commenters joined in support of Rhodes, criticizing a standing army and positioning the militia as the best tool for targeting their domestic enemies.

And in September 2016, one member suggested Obama be removed by the military and Clinton tried for treason. The group's founding ideology was based on fear of federal overreach, and they quickly pushed back on ideas like this. Rhodes disagreed and provided an alternative, saying:

> "the US military has no authorization to take over the reigns of government in this nation. But what institution is tasked with executing the Laws of the Union, suppressing insurrections and repelling invasions? The Militia.
>
> …Remember, the Founders did not trust standing armies, and saw them as a danger to liberty, and so they would not, and did not, look to the standing army or Navy to be the remedy for abuse of power and tyranny."[65]

After their re-alignment, the Oath Keepers' language shifted from focusing on militias to calling for the use of the military. This shift began in 2017–2018 and was fully solidified by 2020. This language first appeared in 2017 after street fighting between the Oath Keepers and other right-wing groups and Antifa counterprotestors. In a comment, Rhodes wrote "Trump needs to call the National Guard into federal service, to put down what really is an insurrection."[66] Whereas a year before the organization had stated that the militia was responsible, now state forces were the primary actor in the narrative.

Then in 2018, the Oath Keepers responded to two crises by calling for military action instead of militia use. After a school shooting in May 2018, the Oath Keepers posted a statement calling for Trump to send armed National Guard into schools across the country.[67] In October, another Oath Keepers statement implored Trump to send active-duty troops to patrol the border with Mexico.[68] Rhodes was aware of the tension this posed for the group's ideology. So the post included a coda from him, saying that the Oath Keepers know border defense should be the job of the militia, but since the militia is not active and ready, "we believe it is necessary for President Trump to use the U.S. military now, immediately, along with calling forth the National Guard."[69] The coda also says the members of the Oath Keepers would gladly serve in a militia of the people if called up. However, the majority of the main statement focuses on the military exclusively, going into great detail about the suggested needs on the border, all of which focus on why the US military

with its unique capabilities can secure the border using drones, air assault infantry, and quick reaction forces.[70] 2018 thus presents a pivotal shift in Oath Keepers language, as the militia recedes in importance in their narrative and the military took its place.

This shift from militia to military culminated after the 2020 election, when the Oath Keepers called for the military to conduct operations they previously would have disavowed. In the two open letters to Trump in December 2020, the group requested he have the military seize data from the CIA, FBI, and NSA, go on high alert, and have the Georgia National Guard monitor the runoff election.[71] In a turnaround from the group's pushback to followers calling for a military coup in 2016, the statement declared that Trump should "immediately order the U.S. military and National Guard units to conduct a new nationwide election that is an actually clean election using paper ballots."[72] By shifting their language to use insurrection instead of martial law, the Oath Keepers attempted to tell a coherent narrative about why increasing threats to the US required extraordinary measures, thus making the military the primary actor in their story.

Member Response

How did members respond to the changes in language? By looking at key debates about the role of central state power (militia vs military), we can observe how much members pushed back on narratives versus embraced and repeated them. Overall, this analysis finds that the strategy resonated with members, but with a time lag. The organization and its leadership more fully embraced the use of central state power by Trump before the group's members did.

In 2016 and 2017, there was much more pushback in the comments section of Oath Keepers' website posts compared to later posts in 2018–2020 that ask for military force. In September 2016, commenter Rhoda called for Obama to be removed by the military and Hillary tried for treason. Another commenter Former-WAC responded that "Uniting with our military to remove a duly elected sitting president is called a "military coup" and is in direct contravention to our laws, and the stated goals of Oath Keepers."[73] In August 2017, a poster suggesting a military coup to reinstate their interpretation of the Constitution was again forcefully corrected, with others noting that would be use of power beyond what the group envisioned for a limited standing army.[74] In December 2017, all 79 commenters on a post about retired flag officers supporting gun control assailed them, arguing that this was federal overreach and the militia should start preparing itself.[75] Even as the organization and its leadership had started to embrace central state power in 2017, the membership still held to the original narrative.

By 2018, comments were full of support, suggesting the membership's views had shifted. For example, in the October 2018 statement to send troops to the border, only one commenter out of 49 dissented, arguing that it would involve the "military acting unconstitutionally within our borders."[76] In contrast, other comments were supportive, with many members going even further and saying Trump should send troops south of the border to create a "buffer zone" inside northern Mexico. When the Oath Keepers repeated their call for troops two months later, every comment was supportive, and nobody objected to using the military.[77]

Again, this culminated in 2020, with the majority of the 200 members in the comments of the two open letters to Trump being supportive and repeating the call to use the Insurrection Act.[78] Members in the internal Oath Keepers forum displayed a similar pattern. Many still wanted to conduct operations themselves, but often they placed the military as the primary actor. One member wrote that he hoped Trump used the Insurrection Act, "because if the military puts down the rebellion, we won't have to."[79]

Conclusion

Using an in-depth reading of statements and comparison before and after an alignment change, this article has identified three major changes in the Oath Keepers' narratives and investigated the membership response. First, keyness analysis shows the group pivoted the main opponent in their narrative from the federal government to Antifa and the left broadly. Second, the Oath Keepers retained the same narrative metaphors of Revolutionary America but introduced Trump as the protagonist. Third, the Oath Keepers carefully tuned

their language, increasingly positioning the military as a main actor of change in their post-2016 statements and moving away from the term "martial law" to avoid hypocrisy. Evidence from discussions among Oath Keeper followers show that the shift in language was accepted after an initial period where members pushed back on giving the military a greater role in their ideology.

What can we learn from this case? First, narrative adjustments can take time. For the organization, the shift from focusing on the militia to embracing the role of the military took place over several years and took another year for the membership to agree. Second, narratives can be sticky. The Oath Keepers largely kept to their existing narrative structure, with some changes made to accommodate Trump's ideology, and shifts in language to embrace state power. Third, both strategies identified from this case are at one end of the spectrum. They did not generate a new joint narrative by finding a common identity element.

This analysis is not without limitations, and they present opportunities for future research. This case presented an influential role for group leadership in narrative change. Throughout the corpus, there is evidence of Rhodes policing member language, whether arguing with commenters about the role of the militia in 2016, or in 2020 asking followers not to use the term martial law. There was thus a great deal of "message discipline" present, which likely contributed to the resulting narrative consistency.[80] Future studies should examine groups with less dominating leaders to identify the resulting narrative.

Moreover, how necessary is it for groups to reconcile narratives? A recent wave of research in terrorism studies has introduced new conceptual frameworks such as "composite violent extremism" or "salad bar ideologies," where an extremist combines elements from multiple ideologies.[81] And extremists can switch ideological sides,[82] such as from far-left to far-right. However, these cases are all at the individual level, which suggests it may be easier for single perpetrators to have incoherent narratives, while organizations may have more need for coherence.

Finally, this study conceptualized a spectrum of narrative strategies, but given that the Oath Keepers only used tools to maintain their original narrative, further work is needed to elucidate the full range of options that groups have to legitimize their alignments. There are several factors that may lead to joint identity or the uptake of the partner's identity narrative. More cohesive groups may have greater ability to pivot away from an original narrative. The Oath Keepers are loosely organized and found it important to hold to founding principles to keep membership involved. Second, groups pressed to align with the state may take a different approach. Lastly, this project examined a case of an informal alignment. Formal alliances and partnerships may instead lead to more joint narratives or switching to the state's narrative.[83]

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[21] These sources are stored locally on a password-protected device. I do not record personal names in my notes, and only report names in the manuscript if the person had a public-facing official role with the Oath Keepers. I do include mention of screennames and usernames, but only if it has no discernible connection to an identifiable name.

[22] The Oath Keepers website contains posts from 2015 to 2021. While the group was founded in 2009, they switched website platforms in 2015, leaving only content from then on available today. I draw on secondary sources and archived material from the pre-2015 period to flesh out their pre-shift narratives.

[23] The Oath Keepers website was taken down around November 25, 2021, two days after the group and Rhodes were subpoenaed by the House Select Committee on the January 6th attack. The website came back online as of December 4, but with a different design, hosted through Wordpress, and without any of the previous blog posts or statements posted.

[24] Word counts and code necessary to replicate the keyness analysis are available at: https://github.com/aweil41/narrativecoherence. Copies of the full Oath Keepers statements can be made available by the author upon request.

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[39] Jackson, 4.

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[42] Stewart Rhodes, "The Hammond Family Does NOT Want an Armed Stand Off, and Nobody Has a Right to Force One on Them," Oath Keepers, January 1, 2016.

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[70] Rhodes; In a later statement, the Oath Keepers also called for the Army to build bases and forts on the border, and for the Army, Marines, and National Guard should use border patrolling as their training, see: Rhodes, "State of Emergency."

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Uncharted Territory: Towards an Evidence-Based Criminology of Sovereign Citizens Through a Systematic Literature Review

by Verena Fiebig and Daniel Koehler

Abstract

Sovereign citizens are part of an extreme anti-government movement. Since they fundamentally reject the authority of the state, they repeatedly come into conflict with governmental actors. Many publications have examined ideology and strategies of sovereign citizens. However, few studies empirically address their demographics and criminogenic factors. Based on a systematic literature review, we identified only eight empirical studies, which are used as the basis for this article's assessments. The results of the systematic literature review provide information about empirical results on demographics, driving factors of radicalization, mental health issues, behaviors and offences. However, due to the predominantly descriptive analyses and the lack of generalizability, these results can only be considered as preliminary evidence for a criminology of sovereign citizens. Further empirical research is needed to better understand who sovereign citizens are, what their radicalization processes look like, and which factors can predict the use of violence. Only then can effective P/CVE measures be developed and adequately established.

Keywords: Sovereign citizens, anti-government extremists, systematic literature review, U.S., Canada, Germany

Introduction

As early as 2014, U.S. law enforcement personnel ranked the sovereign citizens movement as the nation's top domestic extremist threat.[1] Sovereign citizens, however, are only one type of anti-government extremists in the U.S., which also include groups such as tax protesters and militia supporters, among others. Similar to the U.S., anti-government extremists in Canada are diverse, with Freemen on the Land (FOTL) as the supposedly largest movement.[2] Comparable groups and milieus also exist in other countries—such as Australia, New Zealand, and Germany—where authorities struggle with these extremists, as there is in recent years an increasing number of supporters and a growing endorsement of violent acts among them in the last few years.[3] Determining the number of anti-government extremists or specific subgroups is difficult in the U.S. and Canada due to ideological similarities and the membership overlap between groups, and due to the lack of surveillance and monitoring. Rough estimates for sovereign citizens in the U.S. arrive at about 300,000 members and supporters.[4] In Canada, the anti-authority community is estimated to number between 5,000 and 10,000 individuals.[5] German sovereign citizens—the so-called "Reichsbürger"[citizens of the empire] and "Selbstverwalter" [self administrators]—are monitored by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) as an extremist milieu, currently estimates the membership at 21,000.[6]

Sovereign citizens are responsible for a significant number of nonviolent offenses and violent crimes. For example, in their study of tax-financial crimes in the U.S., Sullivan et al. (2019) show that sovereign citizens are the second largest perpetrator group of financial crimes, such as tax fraud, at 34 percent, next to tax protesters at 38 percent.[7] Violent crimes are primarily directed against law enforcement personnel and other representatives of the state, as their authority is seen as illegitimate and a constraint for personal liberties.[8] In an analysis of 24 violent U.S. sovereign citizen incidents, the Department of Homeland Security found that in 20 out of 24 incidents between 2010 and 2014 the victims were law enforcement officers (LEO).[9] Sarteschi finds that in "75 instances in which sovereign citizens attempted to harm or did harm LEOs, there were 27 LEOs killed by sovereign citizens between 1983 and July 2020."[10] Multiple studies show that sovereign citizen violence most frequently occurs during "routine law encounters at a suspect's home, during enforcement stops and at government offices."[11] Police officers and bailiffs are most often the victims of acts of resistance. Public administration and court employees are often targets of coercion and extortion

in response to official documents.[12] In Germany, "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" are classified as extremist milieus after two violent incidents occurred in 2016, in which two so-called "Selbstverwalter" proclaimed their private property to be a sovereign state and shot at police officers, killing one.[13]

Because the anti-government extremist movement is complex and includes many different groups subsumed under this label, this article focuses on sovereign citizens and comparable groups. A growing body of academic literature focuses on the origin and ideology of sovereign citizens in order to facilitate identification of individuals and groups from this spectrum for example by law enforcement and judicial personnel, as well as to provide recommendations for countermeasures. However, there is a lack of empirical studies that address the characteristics and criminogenic factors of movement adherents.

The overarching goal of this article is to assess and chart the existing empirical basis of knowledge about this largest group of anti-government extremists by applying a systematic literature review on demographics and criminogenic factors of sovereign citizen using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) format.[14] The study is limited to the U.S., Canada, and Germany because, beyond from the identification of sovereign citizens in other countries such as U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, little research has been conducted on individuals and groups in these countries. This article proceeds as follows: after information on the definition and overlaps between sovereign citizens in the U.S., Canada, and Germany, the methodology for the systematic literature review will be introduced and its results are presented. Through the systematic literature review, it was possible to identify in total eight empirical studies on personal characteristics of sovereign citizens, which are reviewed and discussed regarding demographics, driving factors of radicalization, mental health issues, behaviors and offences.

Sovereign Citizens in Different Countries and Their Commonalities

American, Canadian, and German law enforcement agencies and extremism experts define sovereign citizens as individuals and loose networks who hold strong anti-government beliefs that lead to the rejection of local, federal, or state authority and the legal system.[15] Sovereign citizens are classified as a domestic terrorist threat in the U.S.[16] In Germany, the sovereign citizens movement is monitored as an extremist milieu by the BfV.[17] Applying Berger's definition of extremism, sovereign citizens as extremists share "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group,"[18] which in the present cases targets the allegedly illegitimate state and its representatives.

Given the influences from different anti-government extremist movements and far-right groups, sovereign citizens today are very heterogeneous regarding ideology, narratives, behavior, and visions of the future.[19] Nevertheless, remarkable and significant commonalities between all of these movements are clearly visible, in part because sovereign citizens in Canada and Germany are taking their cues from developments among U.S. sovereign citizens.[20] Based on the belief that the political system, the government, and the laws are illegitimate, sovereign citizens employ specific strategies to challenge the authority of the state. For example, they invoke laws from other historical contexts, such as the "Third Reich" in Germany,[21] or use their own legal interpretations of common law [22] in the US and Canada, to delegitimize currently valid laws. They use fraudulent license plates and identity documents in order to distance themselves from the current system.[23] Furthermore, they use redemption theory in the belief that (unlike their strawman) as an "individual" they do not fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government,[24] and thereby seek to avoid any legal consequences resulting from their illegal behavior. Their worldview is built on conspiracy theories which supposedly prove that the state acts illegally in order to restrict citizens in their innate rights and that the government makes a profit at citizens' expense.[25] Narratives and conspiracy theories that complement the core assumption vary and are usually specific to the countries' history, governmental and legal systems. However, the narratives often function and are used in similar ways, namely as underpinnings of the basic assumptions to legitimize the desire to emancipate oneself from a state perceived as arbitrary and to portray their own intimidating and violent behavior as self-defense.[26]

In addition to ideological overlaps, more commonalities among sovereign citizens in the U.S., Canada, and Germany can be identified regarding strategies and behavior. Experts in all aforementioned countries highlight instances of paper terrorism by supporters of this ideology, including the use of pseudo-legal language—for example by declaring sovereignty by filing pseudo-legal documents—and particular spellings of their names, demands that judges or police officers identify themselves, use of false documents to withdraw from government, claims for damages and false liens against state officials, and harassment or intimidation of officials.[27]

Based on such multiple similarities, we consider the various regional sovereign citizen movements to be comparable in order to assess the existing empirical literature for the identification of the current state of knowledge on demographic characteristics and criminogenic factors of followers.

Systematic Literature Review

The increasing number of supporters and violent acts attributed to this extremist spectrum in recent years has led to a growing body of literature about this phenomenon. However, most of that literature focuses on the origin,[28] the ideology,[29] or isolated incidents whereby the latter usually remain anecdotal in nature. There is a lack of empirical research, and so far we have not accumulated much robust knowledge about demographic and biographical characteristics of sovereign citizens as well as the causes and trajectories of their radicalization. As Perry et al. state, "there is still a paucity of scholarship on the motives, nature, and methods of the FOTL [Freemen of the Land] and similar anti-authority movements in Canada that are informed by primary data."[30]

To answer the guiding research question of this article, we conducted a systematic literature review in May and June 2022 using PRISMA.[31] The PRISMA flowchart is reproduced below in Figure 1. As explained above, this systematic literature review is limited to the U.S., Canada, and Germany, as there has been little research on sovereign citizens in other countries. The data were generated using the search terms ("Sovereign Citizen" | "Sovereign Citizen Movement" | "Freemen-on-the-land" | "Freemen on the land") AND (extremism | anti-government | moor | militia | posse)) and (("Reichsbürger" | "Selbstverwalter") AND (Extremismus | BRD | Bundesrepublik Deutschland) in Google Scholar and Scopus with the help of the software Publish or Perish.[32] In addition, the leading academic (i.e., peer-reviewed) journals in the field of terrorism and extremism research [33] were explored using the search terms "Sovereign Citizen", "Sovereign Citizen Movement", "Freemen-on-the-Land", "Freemen on the Land", as well as "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter". The same search terms were used to identify publicly available law enforcement documents and research reports on the home pages of the Department of Homeland Security, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) located in the U.S., the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS) as well as the BfV in Germany. Wherever possible on the listed home pages, the search was restricted to publications, which excluded (for example) glossary contributions. In addition, the references of the studies identified as relevant were searched for other important studies (snowball technique). English and German language literature was included. The main inclusion criteria for our assessment were that (1) the study must be based on systematically collected primary data (e.g., interviews with movement members, participant observation, or press reports) with (2) personal characteristics of sovereign citizens as research interest. Isolated case studies and theses were excluded. This search resulted in a total of 1998 reports screened of which 1631 were excluded based on title and abstract. In the end, only eight studies met the inclusion criteria and were evaluated for this article.

Figure 1: Identification of Studies Included in Literature Review

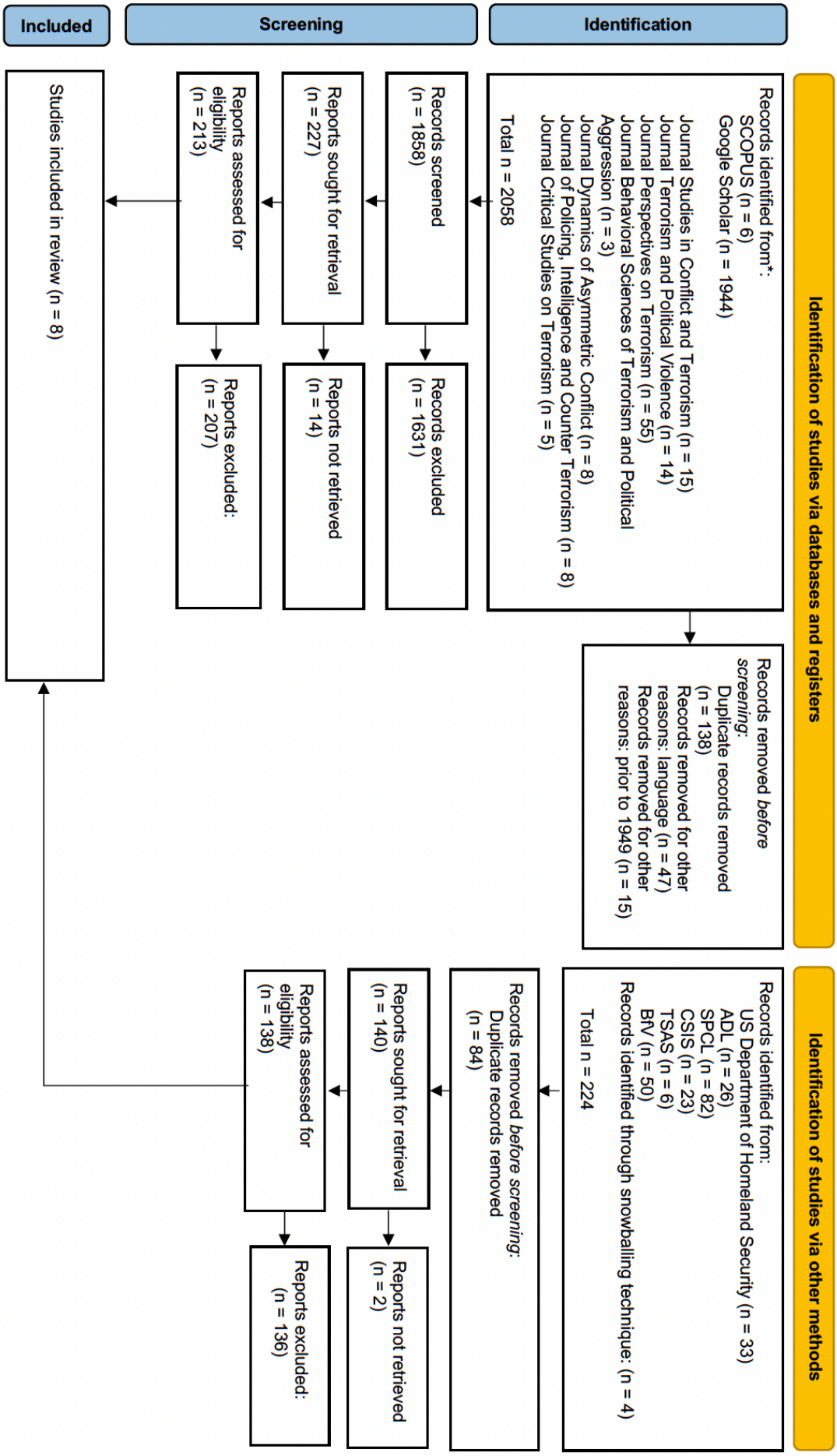

Table 1: Studies Included in This Literature Review

Authors	Country	Research Method	Sample	Research Subject	Data Resources	Assessed Variables / information	Methodological Quality	External Validity
Parker, 2014	United States	Descriptive analysis	n = 9	US Sovereign Citizens undergoing court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations	Court records from Marion County	Competence to stand trial, age, sex, education degree, ethnic background, criminal record, biography, mental health history, criminal offenses	Superficial description of sample selection, no inclusion criteria, and criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to highly selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
Keil, 2015	Germany	Descriptive analysis	n = 224	German "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter", known to the police of the federal state Brandenburg	Police data	Age, sex, criminal record	No description of sample selection, no inclusion criteria, criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
Perry et al., 2017 Perry, 2018	Canada	Qualitative content analysis	n = 32	Canadian law enforcement officers, lawyers, judges, notaries (n=22) Canadian anti-authority adherents (n=10)	Semi-structured interviews	Structure, potential for violence	Transparency on sample selection but criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to highly selective sample, and qualitative approach
Keil, 2018	Germany	Descriptive analysis	n = 580	German "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter", known to the police of the federal state Brandenburg	Police data	Age, sex	No description of sample selection, no inclusion criteria, criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
Paradis et al., 2018	US	Descriptive analysis and bivariate statistics	n = 36	New York City defendants who declared themselves as Sovereign Citizens undergoing court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations	Competence to stand trial reports at the Kings County Hospital Forensic Psychiatry Service of Brooklyn, New York	Competence to stand trial, age, sex, education degree, ethnic background, mental health problems	Transparency about search queries to identify cases; criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics

Table 1: Studies Included in This Literature Review (cont.)

Challacombe and Lucas, 2019	US	Bivariate statistics	n = 58	US individuals or groups associated with the sovereign citizen movement	Publicly available data on cases identified through press reports and releases, SPLC, Global Terrorism Database	Sex, violent or nonviolent criminal actions, TRAP-18 distal and proximal characteristics	Unclear sample description due to the unspecified number of individuals and groups; transparency about search queries, two raters with good interrater reliability; criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
Fiebig and Koehler, 2019	Germany	Descriptive analyses	n = 487	German "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" who received press coverage in Germany	Systematic press research through LexisNexis, search terms "Reichsbürger", "Selbstverwalter"	Age, sex, employment status, criminal record, possible motivation, offences, victims	Transparency about search queries to identify cases, no information on inclusion criteria; criteria for classification as sovereign citizen missing	No generalizability due to selective sample, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics
BfV, 2021	Germany	Descriptive analyses	n = 20.000	German "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" known to the BfV	Intelligence data	Age, sex	No transparency on sample selection and inclusion criteria due to nature of intelligence data	Generalizability due to targeted full survey, no multivariate statistics, no inferential statistics

Results

Apart from the information on the age and gender proportion of German sovereign citizens that the BfV provides, none of the identified eight studies offer representative results for the sovereign citizen movement as a whole. Rather, the empirical literature provides insights into the phenomenon from different perspectives using different research methods and highly selective, often small, samples. Most studies are based on descriptive analyses of the sample (five out of eight). Furthermore, two out of eight studies use bivariate statistics for comparative analyses. One study took a qualitative approach and used semi-structured interviews as data.

Demographics and Biography

In six of the eight identified empirical studies on sovereign citizens, they are described as middle-aged or older males.[34] The identified average age of sovereign citizen samples range from 38.7 to 50.0 years. The sovereign citizen samples are dominated by men. The proportion of women in the presented samples ranges from 0 to 25 percent.

In the two analyses based on court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations of sovereign citizens, their average age is about 39.[35] In a study of competence to stand trial reports conducted at the Kings County Hospital Forensic Psychiatry Service in Brooklyn, New York, Paradis et al. identified 36 male sovereign citizens but no females; their age ranged from 21 to 54.[36] In the Marion County court records analysis only one out of nine identified sovereign citizens was female.[37] In their study of German sovereign citizens who were covered by press reporting in the period from 2003 to 2018, Fiebig and Koehler had identified 487 sovereign citizens, who were on average 50 years old. Over 90 percent were 30 years and older and age ranged from 21 to 77. The proportion of women in this sample was 13.76 percent. The results of the studies based on police data are comparable. In samples of 224 and 540 German sovereign citizens known to the police in the federal state of Brandenburg, Germany, they were on average 50 years old and age ranged from 17 to 81. More than half of the samples were 51 years and older. In these studies, too, the proportion of men outweighed the proportion of women. The latter made up 21 percent and 22.6 percent of the samples, respectively. The most comprehensive survey of sovereign citizens by the BfV in Germany shows that the majority of the 20,000 German sovereign citizens are between 40 and 60 years old. The BfV identified the proportion of women at about 25 percent.

Three studies provide information on the education and employment status of sovereign citizens. The majority of the sovereign citizens considered in the court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations have at least a high school education. In Parker's study, "of the six defendants who completed the interview, all had passed the GED (General Educational Development) test or had graduated from high school, three had attended college, and one had a master's degree."[38] At the time of their arrest, three people were unemployed and three were self-employed. In the study by Paradis et al., information was available for 28 of the 36 sovereign citizens.[39] Five individuals (17.86 percent) did not have a high school diploma, 22 individuals (78.57 percent) had high school education, and one individual (3.57 percent) had a college degree or higher. In the analysis of German sovereign citizens identified through press coverage, information on the professional occupation learned or last held was recorded for 111 of 487 individuals.[40] Of these 111 individuals, 59.64 percent were identified as blue-collar workers and 40.54 percent as white-collar workers. Furthermore, information on 130 out of 487 German sovereign citizens reveals that 38.46 percent were reported as unemployed, 30.0 percent as employed and 31.54 percent as retired.

Looking at ethnic background, the studies of competence to stand trial evaluations by Parker [41] and Paradis et al. [42] report a proportion of African-American sovereign citizens of 67 percent and 91.67 percent, respectively. This indicates that primarily dark-skinned sovereign citizens were considered in the two analyses. However, because of the highly selective and small samples, no general conclusions can be drawn from this about the ethnic distribution across the sovereign citizen milieu as a whole.

Driving Factors for Radicalization

From the empirical studies identified, several driving factors appear to be of particular importance for radicalization into the sovereign citizen ideology. Through an analysis of press reporting, Fiebig and Koehler were able to gather information about a possible motivation for the crime for 156 of 487 sovereign citizens.[43] Financial difficulties were reported for 67.95 percent of these 156 individuals. In addition, 44.87 percent had work-related problems (e.g., insolvency), 12.18 percent had health problems, 10.90 percent had family difficulties, and 12.82 percent had a sense of injustice toward government regulations at the beginning of their radicalization—e.g., grievances regarding rejection of a construction permit.

Alongside this, Parker reports in the analysis of competence to stand trial evaluations that four out of six sovereign citizens experienced biographical breaks and violence in childhood: "two had experienced divorce at a young age, and one was raised by his mother. One of the six defendants was physically abused by his father and stepfather and another defendant witnessed serious trauma."[44]

Two German studies provide some evidence that sovereign citizens tend to be socially isolated. They are often affected by unemployment or retirement and display little embeddedness in organized antigovernment groups.[45] Social isolation is even more pronounced among sovereign citizens who become involved in violent acts.[46] The proportion of unemployed and pensioners was larger in the sample of violent offenders, with 78.13 percent compared to the proportion of 67.13 percent in the sample of nonviolent offenders. Apart from that, Fiebig and Koehler found no relevant differences in demographics and biographical aspects between violent and nonviolent German sovereign citizens.[47]

However, due to the use of descriptive analyses only, all of these results should be interpreted as indications only. Whether there is a causal link between these driving factors on the one hand and radicalization as well as the committed offences on the other, is unclear.

Mental Health Issues

Sovereign citizens' belief system as well as their unusual pseudo-legal speech and behavior in courtrooms may appear psychotic. However, findings from court-ordered evaluations regarding the competence to stand trial show that the assessed individuals "do not qualify for a diagnosis of a psychotic disorder based only on the nature of the shared beliefs."[48] Parker found that only one out of a sample of six defendants who espoused sovereign citizens beliefs was incompetent to stand trial. This particular defendant was diagnosed with delusional disorder. Another defendant had recurrent depression and three other defendants showed substance abuse disorders. Nonetheless, Parker concluded that "sovereign citizens typically have the capacity to understand criminal proceedings and assist an attorney."[49] Paradis et al. furthermore compared 36 sovereign citizen cases of competence to stand trial evaluations with 200 non-sovereign citizen cases of competence evaluations.[50] The authors report a significantly higher competency rate for the assessed sovereign citizens (70 percent) than for their comparison group (50 percent). In addition, sovereign citizens showed significantly fewer psychotic disorders, mood disorders, and substance abuse history than non-sovereign citizens in this study. Specifically, 11 of 36 sovereign citizens (31 percent) were diagnosed with a psychotic disorder during the competency to stand trial evaluation, six (17 percent) were diagnosed with a mood disorder, 11 (31 percent) had a history of substance abuse, and 13 (36 percent) did not receive a psychiatric diagnosis.

Behavior, Crimes, and Violence

When it comes to behavior, criminal acts and violence of sovereign citizens, the evidence base varies according to differences in the research methods and samples used. For example, Perry et al. used interviews with "law enforcement, lawyers, judges, notaries, and movement adherents (n=32)," as well as open-source data such as media reports and court documents, in order to assess the potential for violence by the Canadian anti-authority phenomenon.[51] On the basis of their qualitative data, the authors identify harassment and

intimidation of the movement's opponents, as well as defensive or reactionary violence directed towards law enforcement or other agents of the state, as most common forms of crime. In particular, law enforcement officers highlighted traffic stops as a primary context creating significant risk for potential violent conflicts. However, the authors see the risk for offensive violence only in individual cases as there was "general consensus—among both law enforcement and adherents in our study—that the anti-authority movement in Canada is not, by and large, a violent one."[52] It should be noted here that it is not clear from the study which results are based on the information provided by the movement adherents and which are based on the assessment of law enforcement and other interviewees.

With the focus on the subsample of German sovereign citizens who received press coverage, Fiebig and Koehler identified resistance against law enforcement officers as the most common act among this subsample (in 19.32 percent of the events in which sovereign citizens were involved).[53] Resisting usually occurred in the course of the execution of arrest warrants or distraints (64.54 percent) or during traffic stops (22.70 percent). The authors found coercion and extortion, as well as (administrative) offences relating to vehicle connected contexts (e.g., driving without a driver's license, driving without mandatory insurance, and fake license plates) as second and third most common acts in the sample. Similar to Perry et al. [54], Fiebig and Koehler [55] emphasized the reactive nature of these acts. (Administrative) offences arise in response to confrontation with law enforcement and other agents of the state, for example in response to received official documents, and during house searches or traffic stops. Although defensive or reactive in nature, these confrontations are indeed provoked by adherents' behavior and their belief system.

Based on police data from the German federal state of Brandenburg, Keil showed that the majority of registered sovereign citizens have no criminal record.[56] Only 30 percent of the persons had been charged with a criminal offense for at least the second time at the time of registration. In contrast, Parker revealed that "all of the defendants had prior arrest records and all but one had multiple prior arrests; two had served time in prison."[57] However, this result ought to be evaluated in the light of the specific sample, which consisted of nine sovereign citizens undergoing court-ordered competence to stand trial evaluations.

Using the TRAP-18 risk assessment protocol, Challacombe and Lucas identified several proximal and distal variables to be predictive for violence within a sample of "United States-based individuals or groups associated with the sovereign citizen movement."[58] The authors showed that the identification with previous attackers or the desire to stand up for a special cause and belief system, the perception of personal grievance, the perception of violence as the only remaining solution, planning and intending violent acts, and a criminal history were predictors for the use of violence within their sample. Another relevant conclusion by the authors concerns the lack of a directly communicated threat in advance as a significant differentiator between violent and nonviolent sovereign citizens. They concluded that "violent sovereign citizens are often more impulsive on their actions."[59] This aligns with the previously elaborated reactive nature of the violent and nonviolent offences of sovereign citizens.

Discussion

In this article, we present a systematic literature review in order to provide an overview of the available evidence-based knowledge regarding sovereign citizens. Only eight empirical studies were identified that shed light on demographic and criminogenic factors of movement adherents. However, due to mainly small and specific samples, apart from German intelligence data, none of the assessed studies offers results that could be seen as representative for the sovereign citizen movement as a whole. This article shows that we are still in the very early stages of understanding who sovereign citizens really are and why they radicalize, as most articles on this extremist phenomenon examine ideology and strategies, or describe individual case studies.

Nonetheless, the systematic literature review reveals some noteworthy findings that ought to inform future research. Compared to other extremist movements or criminals in general, the higher average age and extremist radicalization in the second half of life represent a key characteristic of sovereign citizens. This find-

ing contrasts with consistent findings regarding the age-crime curve [60] as well as the age distribution of terrorist offenders.[61] The age-crime curve shows that the percentage of offenders in a population increases from late childhood to the teenage years and declines from the early 20s.[62] Factors assumed to influence desistance from offending behavior with increasing age are (among others) individual variations in self-control, changes in social risk and protective factors (e.g., embedding in a stable social environment, including the family and at work), and changing life circumstances (e.g., getting married, finding employment).[63] In contrast, many sovereign citizens appear to radicalize and engage in criminal behavior at older ages after biographical breaks and the loss of protective factors. For example, in their systematic literature review on protective factors against extremist radicalization, Lösel et al. identified employment and ownership of residential property as key protective factors.[64] In the case of sovereign citizens, on the other hand, financial difficulties due to insolvency, unemployment and debt, and the associated loss of property, play a prominent role in their radicalization trajectories. In addition, a sense of injustice towards governmental actions also appears to be a central radicalization factor among sovereign citizens.[65] These initial indications of possible causes of sovereign citizen radicalization could support the hypothesis that "at its core, the Sovereign Citizen movement is about the (re)acquisition of power by those who feel powerless."[66] As Hodge points out, sovereign citizen ideology convinces its adherents that "the frustration they feel at being subject to state authority and administration and the vulnerability they experience in the shifting economic fortunes of an increasingly globalized economy are in fact evidence of oppression and the impetus to change."[67] The identification of these relevant radicalization factors can be an important clue for the development of prevention measures. However, to gain a better understanding of the driving factors behind the radicalization processes of sovereign citizens and radicalization processes in old age in general, future research needs to be conducted in this area, for example via qualitative interviews and longitudinal studies with affected individuals.

The findings from the systematic literature review on mental health of sovereign citizens are very limited but seem to align with the most current literature on the impact of mental health problems on extremist radicalization and behavior. Many different factors that can interact in different ways to promote radicalization into violent extremism are well-known. Mental health problems can be one of them. However, extremist radicalization and behavior cannot be equated with mental health disorders.[68] Although sovereign citizens' beliefs and behavior are oftentimes perceived as confused or even psychotic,[69] sovereign citizens' court-ordered evaluations show that the majority of them are classified as competent to stand trial and that sovereign citizens do not display greater mental health problems in comparison to other criminals.[70] Rather, Hodge sees the radicalization of sovereign citizens as deploying "a radical concept of citizenship, rooted in conspirational thinking and often in direct conflict with the state to help manage status anxiety and uncertainty."[71] However, as conspiracy theories play an important role in sovereign citizens' ideology, it may be worthwhile to examine the impact of ideology and engagement on adherents' mental health. As Pytyck and Chaimowitz stressed, "there is an inherent conspirational or paranoid aspect" in sovereign citizens' ideology.[72] Belief in conspiracy theories has previously been linked to stress, anxiety, feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, and disillusionment, and distrust in institutions and authorities [73] (among other factors), and thus may have an impact on sovereign citizens' mental health. However, due to the correlational nature of these studies, the causal direction of these associations is not yet clear.

Nevertheless, research findings show that these negative feelings connected to the belief in conspiracy theories have an impact on individuals' behavior, leading (for example) to lower vaccination intentions [74] or increased tendency toward ordinary crimes.[75] Combined with a key finding of the systematic literature review that criminal behavior by sovereign citizens largely occurs in response to prior contact with authorities and state representatives, this may explain why sovereign citizens primarily legitimize violent confrontation as mere self-defense. Conspiracy theories about a supposedly illegitimate state enriching itself at the expense of its citizens, deceitfully forcing them into contracts and thus enslaving them, may lead to feelings such as anxiety and thus provoke self-defense reflexes. The reactive nature of many acts by sovereign citizens is particularly evident in violent attacks on law enforcement officers. The systematic literature review reveals that violent crimes are not actively committed by sovereign citizens without a specific cause. Rather, they

occur in response to the enforcement of governmental regulations and authority, such as arrest warrants, evictions, or traffic stops.[76] Due to their ideology, sovereign citizens judge these enforcement acts as unlawful encroachments. However, it must be emphasized that those sovereign citizens naturally provoke state action through their own behavior.

The aforementioned perceptions related to a belief in conspiracy theories might have greater impact on sovereign citizens who are socially isolated, because support from a group is missing. Although the results of the literature review on this point must be viewed with caution, two German studies provide information on violent sovereign citizens who appear to be more socially isolated when compared to non-violent ones.[77] Beyond these findings, it is still largely unknown which factors cause violent behavior in sovereign citizens.

Limitations and Future Directions

Since only English- and German-language literature was considered, there is a possibility that relevant empirical studies on sovereign citizens in other languages were overlooked. In addition, this review is limited to studies from the U.S., Canada, and Germany. It is possible that the search terms used to identify empirical studies on demographics and criminogenic factors of sovereign citizens excluded relevant studies from other countries that have comparable ideological groups and individuals but use different terms to describe them.

The systematic literature review showed that there is not only a significant shortage of empirical studies in this field but in addition, only the results regarding age and sex based on intelligence data from the BfV in Germany lead to generalizable knowledge about movement adherents. The other seven studies are severely limited due to small or highly specific samples. In addition, most empirical studies to date have not moved beyond descriptive analyses, so that we can only speculate about explanatory factors for radicalization processes or the use of violence by sovereign citizens. It is clear that future research is necessary in order to attain a better understanding of *who* sovereign citizens are, *what* their radicalization processes look like, and *which* factors might predict the use of violence. Only then can effective countermeasures as well as preventative safeguards be developed and adequately established.

This article focused on demographic and criminogenic factors of sovereign citizens and therefore predominantly on the individual level. However, anti-government extremism has also led to violence at a societal level, as seen most recently in the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, as well as in the sometimes-violent protests against the protective measures against Covid introduced in many Western countries, where sovereign citizens—among other anti-government extremists—were and are using the Covid pandemic to mobilize others against the state. This shows the importance of studying this diverse set of actors, ideologies and movements further, to better predict, understand, and prevent such incidents in the future.

In conclusion, it must be stated that the results of this systematic literature review should be seen as a first step forward, which should be (re-)examined in more detail in further empirical research. In doing so, it is important to choose methodologically advanced study designs. Moreover, since sovereign citizens differ greatly from other extremists in some respects (for example, regarding average age), previously established theories of radicalization and disengagement cannot be transferred to them without significant caveats.

About the Authors

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right, jihadist and left-wing), radicalization, and deradicalization processes and programs. Dr Koehler is also the co-founder of the first peer-reviewed open access journal on deradicalization (www.journal-derad.com), which he created together with the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS) in 2014. In 2016, he was appointed as the first court expert on deradicalization in the United States of America at the District Court in Minneapolis. In July 2017 he became a member of the Editorial Board of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague and in November 2019 he was appointed as a research fellow at the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) of the American University in Washington D.C. Since 2022, Daniel Koehler is also an associate fellow at the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI) in the United Kingdom. His most recent publication is "From Traitor to Zealot: Exploring the Phenomenon of Side-Switching in Extremism and Terrorism" with Cambridge University Press (November 2021). His work can be followed on Twitter via @GIRD_S.

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Driven by Conspiracies: The Justification of Violence among "Reichsbürger" and Other Conspiracy-Ideological Sovereignists in Contemporary Germany

by Jan Rathje

Abstract

Violence is an integral part of the sovereignist milieu involving the "Reichsbürger" and other groups. Shootouts between sovereignists and police officers in 2016 left several people injured and one police officer dead. Since then, their violence has been a subject of nationwide investigation and media reporting in Germany. The visibility of the sovereignist milieu increased significantly due to recent protests against the government's COVID-19 pandemic measures and a subsequent centralization of protest communications on the social media platform Telegram. This article examines how the use of violence is being justified within the German sovereignist milieu. Drawing from primary sources on the milieu's main planned and executed acts of violence in 2016, this article reveals a conspiracy-ideological Manichaeism that serves both as a driving force and justification for the use of violence. In addition, evidence indicates that violence is not solely directed against government and state officials, but against groups perceived as part of an alleged conspiracy against their in-group, especially Jews and migrants. At its core, the sovereignist milieu spreads a thin ideology that is particularly amenable to right-wing extremism and antisemitism.

Keywords: Reichsbürger, sovereignism, conspiracy ideologies, anti-government extremism, Germany

Introduction

The phenomenon of the "Reichsbürger" [literally: "citizen of the empire" - JR] scene has often been downplayed in public discourses as consisting of a collection of nutcases who play "Reich" government in their living rooms and mostly just send long letters to the government of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). However, this changed in 2016, when two shootouts between "Reichsbürger" and the police occurred in quick succession, injuring several persons and killing one police officer. Since then, Germany's national domestic intelligence service (the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) has been monitoring the phenomenon more closely. Most recently, actions by "Reichsbürger" were part of international news coverage when several hundred members from this milieu climbed over the police barriers in front of the Reichstag building (the seat of the German parliament) in Berlin on August 29, 2020, and occupied the steps leading to the entrance. Three police officers managed to prevent the crowd from entering the building by threatening to use force. After a few minutes, the stairs were cleared when more police officers arrived. However, the pictures of Reich flags in front of the Bundestag garnered worldwide attention.[1]

Generally, it can be stated that so far there have been only isolated scientific analyses on the topic of conspiracy-ideological sovereignism. The existing studies are mainly devoted to a specific (national) phenomenon from a criminological, legal, or psychological perspective,[2] such as the Sovereign Citizen Movement, the Freemen on the Land, or the German "Reichsbürger".[3]

This article addresses the question of how members of the sovereignist milieu view and use violence. An exploratory qualitative study analyzes common patterns of justification to show that violence is an inherent part of the milieu's ideology. After a brief section on definitions, the results of quantitative analyses provide information on the extent and nature of violence emerging from the sovereignist milieu. In the main body of this article, a qualitative analysis explores the two central violent events of 2016. There, a chronology of the events is followed by elaborations on the patterns of justification used by sovereignists. In the concluding sections, the findings are summarized and placed within the larger context of the milieu. Here, particular attention is paid to the Manicheism of conspiracy ideologies, which plays an important role in the justification of violence in the sovereignist milieu.

Definitions

To analyze the justification of violence in the German sovereignist milieu, one first has to establish some definitional boundaries. As a categorical term for the phenomenon under consideration, the author proposes *conspiracy-ideological sovereignism*.[4] This description does not reduce the phenomena to national specifics ("Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter"/"Self-administrators" in Germany)[5] or to simply extremism directed against the state ("staatsfeindliche Verbindungen"/"anti-state associations" in Austria)[6] and government ("Anti-Governmental-Extremism" in the USA)[7], but instead allows one to describe interconnected milieus[8] ideologically and with regard to the actions of their members transnationally. Conspiracy-ideological sovereignism is understood in this article as the effort to (re-)establish individual or people sovereignty, as well as a related order conceived as natural, against the prevailing social and political order, which is identified as the product of a global conspiracy with the aim of destroying one's own group.[9]

The sovereignist milieu in Germany is very heterogeneous and older than the Federal Republic of Germany (which dates back to 1949) itself. It can be divided into four sub-milieus:

1. *Traditionally organized National Socialists, neo-Nazis, and right-wing extremists since 1945* who seek to restore the (National Socialist) German Reich and its ethnic community ("Volksgemeinschaft"). They were and are active in and around political parties (e.g. the Socialist Reich Party and the National Democratic Party of Germany) as well as other right-wing extremist organizations, networks, and/or publishing houses. Some adherents describe themselves as "Reichsbürger".

2. *"Reichsbürger" who follow the tradition of the "Reich Chancellor" Wolfgang Gerhard Günter Ebel*[10]—persons who had not previously held memberships in traditional right-wing extremist organizations. They form pseudo-"Reich governments" and believe that they have therefore restored the legal framework of the German Reich.

3. *Individual, group, and secessionist sovereignists* who do not (initially) want to restore a German Reich, but declare themselves sovereign as individual persons, families, groups, or state founders. They dissociate their "state territories" from the one of the German Federal Republic, which most of them believe to be a corporation rather than a state.

4. *"New Right" sovereignists* act as a link between conservative circles and other extreme right, sovereignist, and conspiracy-ideological milieus. Superficially, they do not mention the National Socialist German Reich but lament the lack of sovereignty of Germany, which is not seen as coexisting with the current territory of the German Federal Republic. The first members of the "New Right" openly called for the (re-)establishment of a new German Reich.[11]

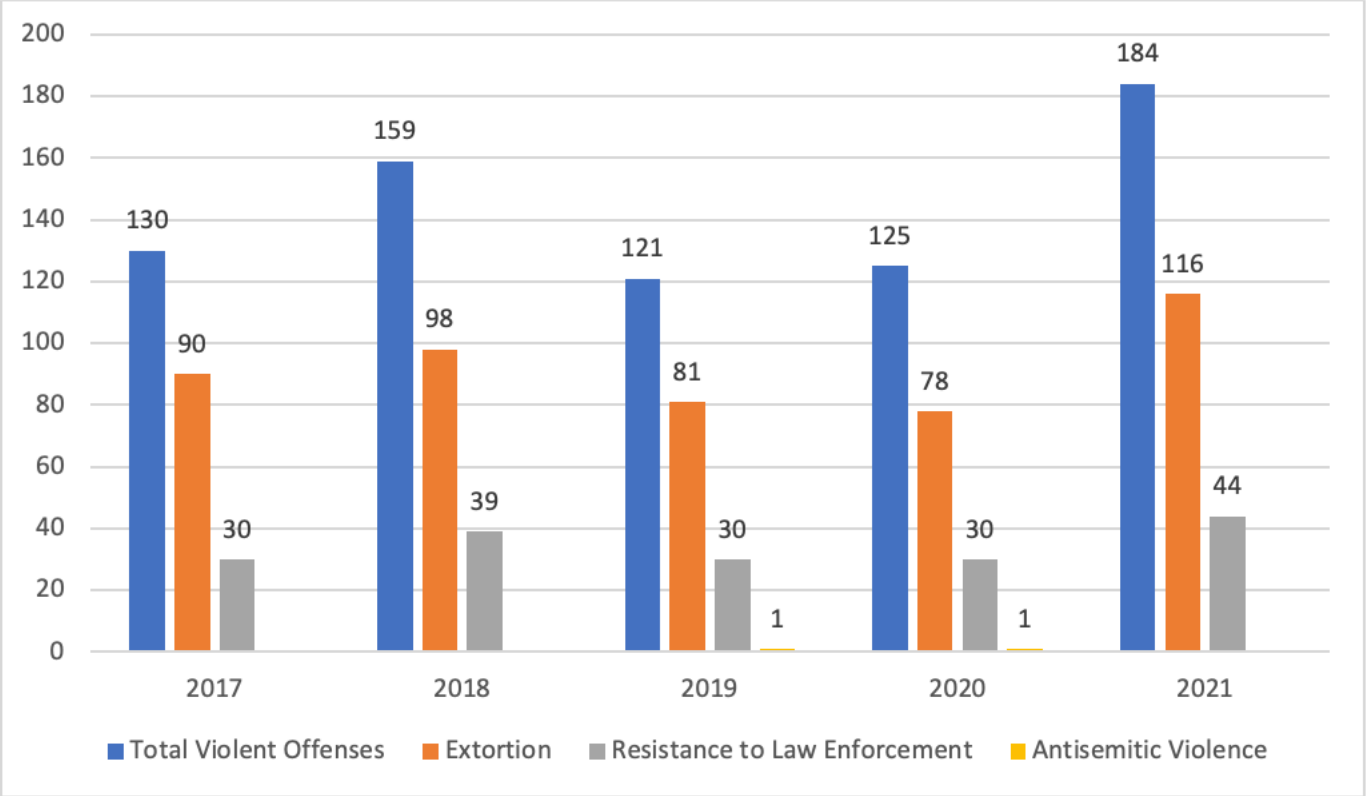
In this article, violence is understood as an action potential in a power relationship with an inherent perpetrator-victim structure. In addition to the physical act of harming, violence has verbal and nonverbal dimensions that can precede or accompany the physical expression. The perpetrator aims to hurt and marginalize the target emotionally and cognitively.[12] From a criminal law perspective, physical violence in Germany includes murder, manslaughter and killing on request (gun for hire), rape and sexual assault, robbery, extortion, bodily harm resulting in death, dangerous and serious bodily harm, kidnapping for extortion, hostage-taking and attacks on the captains of air and sea transport.[13] However, the subsequent analysis of the justification of violence in the sovereignist milieu primarily considers its physical and verbal dimensions.

Quantitative Findings on Sovereignist Violence

Since 2016, the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) has systematically recorded misdemeanor and felony incidents from the sovereignist milieu in Germany as part of its collection of statistics on politically motivated crime.[14] The figures are also published in the annual reports of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (the German domestic intelligence service), which provides more specific information on developments in the milieu. In terms of violence, the Federal Office records show that cases of extortion and resistance to law enforcement officers showed the strongest growth between 2017 and 2021 (see Figure 1).

In parallel to the figures from German governmental offices, similar data have been collected by Daniel Koehler and Verena Fiebig. These are based on an analysis of media reports about misdemeanors and criminal offenses of sovereignists from 2003 to 2018.[15] Their database features 730 entries. Broken down into various categories, the authors counted, inter alia, 141 cases of resistance against law enforcement officers (19.32%), 116 cases of (attempted) coercion and extortion (15.89%), 81 cases of bodily harm (11.10%), and 5 cases of manslaughter/murder (0.69%). According to Köhler and Fiebig, resistance to law enforcement officers occurred primarily during enforcement, routine traffic stops, and identity checks, as well as in emergency situations in which calls to the police were made. Cases of coercion and extortion occurred mainly in response to official notices, or as a result of criminal prosecutions and seizures, but also took place without any prior contact with the authorities. In most cases these were attempts to confront officials with claims for damages in an effort to intimidate them. This includes, for example, the entry of fictitious debts of officials in the U.S. Uniform Commercial Code (UCC) register—a tactic adopted by German sovereignists from their American counterparts—to lend an aura of legitimacy to their claims.[16]

Figure 1: Sovereignist/"Reichsbürger" Violence by Type [17]



The reports cited provide only general information on the sovereignist justifications for acts of violence. "Reichsbürger" justifies violence—especially against state officials—most often through the portrayal of an assumed/fictitious self-defense situation, usually based on conspiracy ideologies and myths widespread in their milieu. In his analysis of discourses of violence in the German sovereignist milieu, Georg Schuppener identified two lines of argumentation: sovereignists proclaim that on the one hand violence is perpetrated against Germany and its people by external powers and/or groups and individuals through state or pseudo-state institutions and organs, which, on the other hand legitimizes violent resistance.[18]

Below, two case studies will be presented to illustrate which conspiracy ideologies and myths are specifically associated with the use of violence and to identify how sovereignists use conspiracy ideologies and myths to justify their violence. The following analysis focuses on two acts of violence that took place in 2016 that can be attributed primarily to the sub-milieu of secessionist sovereigntists—although other sovereigntists have also planned and carried out acts of violence in the past decades.[19] These two cases led to a shift in the perception

of the milieu by German law enforcement agencies which began to view it as producing an "extremism sui generis".[20] Furthermore, for both cases extensive source material for an analysis is available.

Reuden, "State of Ur", Adrian Ursache

On August 25, 2016, a dispute with state authorities escalated during a foreclosure procedure in Reuden, Saxony-Anhalt. Beginning in 2006, the family of Adrian Ursache had accumulated debts of over €480,000, money they could not repay. For this reason, a compulsory auction procedure was opened in August 2013 and the family's house was sold in mid-June 2016. In 2015, disputes began between the sovereignist Adrian Ursache and the responsible bailiff. Ursache claimed that the bailiff was not a civil servant and that the FRG was in fact an occupying administrative corporation, meaning the bailiff was not authorized to carry out foreclosures. In addition, he had proclaimed his property to be the "State of Ur",[21] a territory on which the bailiff supposedly held no sovereign powers. To settle his debts, Ursache and his wife took their cue from actions of U.S. Sovereign Citizens. At the beginning of 2016, Mrs. Ursache tried to settle the leasing fees for a car using a forged or fabricated promissory note from the director of the Zeitz District Court worth €1,500,000 in gold. Adrian Ursache sent the 'promissory note' to the local court.[22] Because he had copied a signature of the director onto his 'promissory note', the court ordered (to preserve evidence) a search of the already-sold house, where the Ursache family still lived, given the suspicion of document forgery. It was carried out on July 6, 2016.

Ursache continuously documented the escalating conflict with the authorities and initially published videos to this effect on his YouTube channel *Ich Bin [I am/exist]*. In March 2016, one of his videos attracted a great deal of attention within the sovereignist milieu and beyond—a fact which Ursache used to win supporters for the foreclosure hearing on August 24, 2016.[23] In one of the last videos before the deadline titled "Finale 24.08.2016 - Fascists of the FRG against State of Ur", Ursache published the picture, name, and address of the bailiff, called him a "dirty pig" and threatened to "slaughter him like cattle" if he entered the territory of his 'State of Ur'.[24] In addition, he threatened:

> *"So, if any pig should try to remove us from our holy ground here, it will be paid for in blood. It doesn't matter if it's women, children, pregnant women—it doesn't matter."[25]*

On August 24, 2016, according to media reports, about 30–40 supporters gathered on the property still occupied by Ursache and succeeded in preventing an eviction. The morning of the following day, police provided support for carrying out the eviction with two hundred men and a special task force (SEK). Only a few supporters remained on the property and they were evicted by the police. In front of the residence, the armored special task force officers exchanged words with Adrian Ursache, who was carrying a firearm. Several SEK officers shot at Ursache, wounding him severely. Ursache was accused of shooting at a police officer as well, a fact that was substantiated in court. As a result of his injuries, Ursache underwent emergency surgery at a clinic in Leipzig and was subsequently arrested by police. In April 2019, Ursache was sentenced to seven years in prison for attempted murder, assault, resisting law enforcement officers, and for the illegal possession of arms and ammunition. The Federal Supreme Court rejected an appeal in 2020, making the sentence legally binding.[26]

Justifications

Adrian Ursache used several patterns of justification for his use of violence against the bailiff and the police. In his justification for the violent threats against the bailiff, he referred primarily to his claim of being the head of state of the 'state of Ur'. He denied the bailiff access to his 'state territory', on which he saw himself as a self-declared head of state, claiming that he was authorized by international law to use any form of force.[27] Ursache took his own logic of legitimacy even further, telling a journalist on the original eviction date that he believed the 'State of Ur' was at war:

> *"We live in international law. So here are a people, they have been recognized. And if he [the bailiff; JR] comes now no matter what, then it would be aggression against international law. And then we experience a war. Nothing else."[28]*

In his opinion, not only Ursache's 'state' was in a state of war, but a war against the Germans outside the 'State of Ur' was also taking place. Even before the events of August 25, 2016, Ursache did not recognize the state sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Germany and thus the orders of the German court. For him, the FRG represented an occupation administration of the Allies, which, he claimed, had been secretly transformed in 1990 into a corporation that operated exclusively under private law.[29] Regarding law enforcement, Ursache stated that "[...] without a state there are no legal laws or officials—all measures used to collect money correspond to pillage and piracy according to HLKO [*The Hague Convention with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 1907*; JR] and VStGB [the German Code of Crimes against International Law; JR]."[30] According to Ursache, as an occupying administration, the FRG was subject to HLKO Article 47, which expressly prohibited plunder by occupying forces. Using this logic, he was resisting alleged illegal appropriation attempts ("looting", "piracy") on his "state"/private property that occurred in Reuden on August 25, 2016. Based on this chain of reasoning, he called police officers and the responsible bailiff "criminals [using] the trademark POLICE" and also labeled them "terrorists" in his viral video from June 30, 2016.[31]

Ursache thus held that he was justified in defending his "state of Ur" in the event of an imminent war. In his sovereignist worldview, he placed the immediate conflicts with the FRG in the context of a global conspiracy. Consequently, he claimed the function of the occupying administrative corporation FRG was a) domestically the "continuation of the war against the German people", which included the "destruction of German culture and tradition," and the "physical annihilation and expulsion of the German people," as well as b) "internationally: to enforce the New World Order (NWO)."[32] Based on these premises, he stated, "Simple logic: as long as the covert war against Germany continues, there will be an occupying administrative corporation 'FRG' to conduct this war."[33] To end this war, he claimed, it was not enough to deal with just the FRG: "Resistance does not take place under the premise of dissatisfied people against state power but people against fraudulent foreign rule."[34] "The forces that planted the evil [the FRG; JR]" would also have to be "pulled into the light of day and eliminated! This is a world problem!"[35] Regarding the destruction of the German people and their culture, Ursache stated:

> *"The country is just now being flooded by the occupying administrative corporation, foreign-dominated as always, with a Muslim and criminal invasion army, disguised with a few real war refugees.*
> *The Germans will finally be wiped out in a war on their own territory, which will be presented as a religious conflict but is in fact a race war.*
> *So, unless a miracle happens here, sooner or later there will be violent confrontations."[36]*

Here, Ursache repeats the right-wing extremist conspiracy myth of the "Great Replacement"/"Race War"/"White Genocide", which he sees as part of a "Jewish world conspiracy" to exterminate the German people. In this context, Adrian Ursache also quoted from a paper by Udo Walendy, a German far-right Holocaust denier.[37] Ursache not only believed in a replacement of German volk through a "Great Replacement" orchestrated by Jews but insinuated also that "Germans are currently experiencing the Holocaust against themselves."[38]

In Ursache's mind, his personal financial debts and a resulting dispute with banks and enforcement officials of the FRG was part of a decades-long conspiracy against the German people with the aim of annihilating them. In Ursache's view, the conspirators' will to annihilate them, as well as the existence of an ongoing state of war, justified the use of violence as a means of legitimate resistance. This resistance was directed against law enforcement officers in the immediate confrontation linked to the eviction from his home but was also directed against others who were identified as instruments (migrants, Muslims) and those behind the conspiracy (Jews). The designation of police officers as "Nazis" and "fascists" not only trivializes National Socialism but can also be interpreted as a justification for acts of violence through demonization. The designation of the bailiff as a "dirty pig" is also striking, as dehumanizing a target can lower the inhibition threshold for the use of violence.[39]

Georgensgmünd, "State of Plan"/"Government District Wolfgang", Wolfgang Plan

Closely related to the events in Reuden is the murder of a police officer by Wolfgang Plan a few weeks later, on October 19, 2016, in Georgensgmünd, Bavaria. In contrast to the incident in Reuden, the violent acts of the

secessionist sovereignist Wolfgang Plan did not occur in the course of an eviction, although Plan also had debts amounting to €166,500. In his case, the state officials came to search for arms held by Plan after his permit to possess weapons had been canceled. He had a number of weapons in his home, as he had been an active sports shooter for 25 years and was also in possession of a hunting license. In 2015, he began collecting information from members of the sovereignist milieu on the banking and financial system, as well as on secessionist sovereignism. In doing so, Plan (like Ursache) learned about forms of action from, and the explanatory models of, the Freeman on the Land and Sovereign Citizens. He also adopted the idea that the FRG was not a real country, but only a corporation.[40] He made several "life declarations" in front of other sovereignists, including one issued on January 25, 2016.[41] On that day, Plan returned his identity card issued by the Federal Republic of Germany to the municipality of Georgensgmünd. Two months later, he deregistered his residence there, although he continued to live in the same house.[42] By May 2016, he had attracted the attention of German administrative authorities by refusing to pay vehicle taxes, based on sovereignist claims. At the same time, he had apparently also sent a proclamation to the Red Cross in Geneva, Switzerland, informing them that he had created the "Absolute State of Plan" on his property. When a seizure at Plan's house was scheduled to take place on May 25, 2016, he prevented it with help from supporters, claiming that his "state territory" was not to be entered. In addition, Plan had also supported other sovereignists who were also threatened with foreclosure. Consequently, he was also in Reuden with Adrian Ursache in August 2016. On August 23, both agreed to a pact between their "states" in which they pledged each other economic and military support. However, Plan was not on site during the events on August 25 but learned about them only later from the media. He interpreted the police action as a raid.[43]

The failed seizure against Plan at the end of May 2016 and his openly signaled affiliation with the sovereignist milieu had led to the revocation of his right to possess firearms. Several attempts to convince Plan to surrender his 31 firearms and ammunition failed. In the early morning of October 19, 2016, a special police task force entered Wolfgang Plan's residence to confiscate his firearms. Plan shot at the officers in rapid succession through the still-locked apartment door, wounding several policemen—one fatally. He then surrendered to the police officers. In October 2017, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder by the Nuremberg-Fürth Regional Court.[44]

Justifications

Wolfgang Plan, like Adrian Ursache, claimed the German Federal Republic to be a "sham state" whose "mercenaries" planned to carry out an attack on the territory of his supposedly sovereign state—an attack against which he was merely defending himself. In his *Pact with the State of Plan*, also sent by Plan to the Red Cross in Geneva, he promised that his "state" would be "ready at any time to defend the freedom of the people [...] with blood, iron, and fire."[45] This was also recorded as his main explanation and justification in the judgment of the Nuremberg-Fürth Regional Court.

Plan had also used an additional justification, independent of his secessionist aspirations. He claimed in court that he was surprised by what he considered to be an unannounced police intrusion and that he had not recognized the policemen. He said that he had thought that the Third World War had broken out and that he was being attacked.[46] In an interview from 2021, he substantiated the rationale behind this justification. In this interview, he stated that he was left in a state of fear after the attacks by Islamists in Paris on November 13, 2015, which were followed by other acts of terrorism closer to home—in Würzburg on July 18, 2016, and in Ansbach on July 24, 2016. This fear was intensified, he claimed, because he had received secret information from security circles and the Internet about an impending civil war triggered by Islamists and armed refugees. Plan claimed he had believed the deployment of the special task force on the morning of October 19, 2016, was the start of this civil war, and that he would not have shot at police officers if he had known who they were.[47] Plan consequently justified the fatal shootings as supposed acts of resistance against criminals or foreigners he claimed were the attackers.

Like Ursache, Plan included the "Great Replacement" conspiracy myth in his reports of an impending Third World War/civil war. On Facebook, Wolfgang Plan placed several posts pointing to such a connection. Five

days before the fatal shooting, he had shared a post from the antisemitic, racist, and far-right blog *Lupo Cattivo*, which portrayed the "Great Replacement" myth as being part of a "secret war against the Germans."[48] Plan also propagated the myth of a "Jewish world conspiracy" on Facebook. On April 23, 2015, before the Paris attacks, he shared an antisemitic and sovereignist post calling police officers "Zionist mercenaries." It also warned of a "Day X", "when Zionists will seek to reduce the population to a minimum of 500 million worldwide."[49]

Wolfgang Plan saw himself—or portrayed himself—as not only resisting the FRG, but also fighting a "Jewish-Zionist world conspiracy" that would carry out a "secret war against the Germans" with the aim of exterminating them. He connected these (pseudo) events with apocalyptic ideas of a "Day X" and the outbreak of a civil war or the Third World War. With the framework of such a logic, he was not only engaging in resistance, but was "at war". As a defender of his "countrymen" or even just of his own life and the lives of his fellow residents, he saw himself justified in shooting at the people invading his home.

Manichaeism and the Legitimation of Violence

The analysis of the cases from Reuden and Georgensgmünd initially confirms the findings of Köhler and Fiebig's study, that conspiracy ideologies are used to justify self-defense against supposedly unlawful behavior within the sovereignist milieu. As the analysis shows, however, the legitimation of violence through conspiracy ideologies is not merely linked to the alleged conspirators' desire for power and an associated "disregard for the well-being of the allegedly oppressed,"[50] as Köhler and Fiebig indicated, but above all with the assumed existential threat to the sovereignist self-group. Violence as self-defense is thus part of a Manichean conception of the world in which, according to conspiracy ideologues, including sovereignists, a final battle between the forces of good and evil is imminent. This notion offers relief in crisis situations because it decouples local conflicts from individual responsibility, reducing it to a simple face-off of good versus evil with clear sides to identify: Ursache and Plan did not bring about their situation themselves with their economic decisions, but, as part of the German people, are victims of a global conspiracy waging a secret war against them. In the war that Ursache and Plan believed in, the conspirators are not merely concerned with territorial gains—such as occupation or annexation of the state territory of a German empire—but with the annihilation of the enemy. Adrian Ursache stated, regarding this, that: "[...] the shifting of the [German; JR] border after 1918 happened without legal basis and by breaking the HLKO [The Hague Convention of 1907; JR] and everything that happened afterward was genocide against the German people."[51]

This emphasis on one's own identity as victims and the violence presumably perpetrated against the individual and the German people is typical for the whole of the sovereignist milieu, as Georg Schuppener's polito-linguistic study of discourses of violence in the German sovereignist milieu has shown.[52] This creates a special identity for those who engage in resistance in contrast to those who remain passive. Ursache and Plan thus saw themselves in this apocalyptic constellation as heroic fighters for good and against evil.[53] Others shared this perception, as shown by the positive response to Ursache's calls for support on the day of the planned eviction of his former property.

The Manichaeism of the sovereignist milieu encompasses not only its own identity as a victim but also the identity of state officers and others as perpetrators. The characteristics attributed to the perpetrators can lower the inhibition threshold for the use of violence through demonization and an assumed lawlessness. In the logic of the sovereignist milieu, the alleged conspirators have been committing atrocious acts ("genocide", "holocaust of the Germans") for decades, for which they have not been held accountable. Although pseudo-legal recommendations for action have spread within the milieu, they have not been able, despite all assurances of their effectiveness, to eliminate the perceived injustice and save the German people. Against such an enemy, who in the last instance personifies evil itself, all means seem morally justified. These conspiracy-ideological, Manichean, and (structurally) antisemitic ideas were not only an essential part of the ideology and propaganda of National Socialism but were already propagated by German antisemites since the end of the 19th century.[54] They are still part of the ideology and propaganda shared by right-wing extremists worldwide.[55]

Targets of Sovereignist Violence

As the quantitative studies on violence from the sovereignist milieu show, such violence is primarily directed against law enforcement officials of the Federal Republic of Germany.[56] However, this is primarily because of their function in the rule of law, in which they necessarily come into contact with sovereignists who consistently refuse to pay debts, taxes and duties or otherwise deliberately violate the laws and regulations of the FRG, which sovereignists view as illegal or invalid. Within conspiracy-ideological sovereignism, other perceived enemies exist besides law enforcement and other officials in people who are perceived as the means used by the conspiracy in its war against the German people. Consequently, migrants and refugees are also marked as targets when they are identified as part of the conspiracy, such as through the myth of the "Great Replacement". In February 2012, the sovereignist group *Die Reichsbewegung - Neue Gemeinschaft von Philosophen* ("The Reich Movement - New Community of Philosophers") published a folkish racist appeal "to all foreigners in Germany who are alien to space, nature, and culture, especially Turks, Muslims and Negroids (blacks and half-blacks)."[57] In this appeal, the group demanded that those they were addressing leave Germany within a certain period, or else they would face summary execution on "Day X", the outbreak of World War III. Wolfgang Plan also used the outbreak of World War III to justify his shooting of the policemen as self-defense against an attack by Islamists/armed refugees.[58]

In addition to racist and 'ethnopluralist' ideas, antisemitism plays a special role within the sovereignist milieu, which is expressed in the propagation of the myth of the "Jewish world conspiracy". Accordingly, Jews are also marked as legitimate targets of violence, as they are identified as representatives of the secret foreign rule. Ursache and Plan also insinuated that the FRG and its officials were controlled by a Jewish/Zionist plot. This conspiracy myth is not voiced by sovereignists by chance but is rather directly related to the genesis of German conspiracy-ideological sovereignism.

Right-Wing Extremism and a Tradition of Antisemitism

For historical reasons, conspiracy-ideological sovereignism in the Federal Republic of Germany is closely linked to neo-Nazism and right-wing extremism. National Socialists attempted to restore the German Reich's governing ability after the Allied victory over the German Reich in 1945, the subsequent occupation, and the establishment of two German states in 1949. Like the neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists who succeeded them, they insinuated that the Federal Republic was an instrument of domination over the Germans controlled by foreign powers.[59] German right-wing extremists ran a campaign for the restoration of the German Reich until the 1980s but it was subsequently displaced from its position by other racist and 'ethnopluralist' campaigns, such as one against asylum seekers.[60] Various individuals and groups, however, continued to devote themselves to the Reich campaign. Revisionism, and especially Holocaust denial, became the central field of action for these traditionally organized far-right "Reichsbürger" and their continued effort to restore the legal capacity of the German Reich. The neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier Horst Mahler formulated the connection between antisemitism and conspiracy-ideological sovereignism in a court case exemplary for this sovereignist sub-milieu:

> *"The Germans will only ever be free again when the German Reich has regained its legal capacity. The path to the self-glorification of the German Reich goes through the overthrow of Jewish foreign rule. The Jewish foreign rule falls with the unmasking of the Auschwitz lie."[61]*

Traditionally organized right-wing extremist "Reichsbürger" provided not only the ideological foundations for German conspiracy-ideological sovereignism, but also used acts of violence to achieve their goals. For example, the right-wing extremist "Reichsbürger" Manfred Roeder, who had already convened a "Reichstag at Flensburg" in 1975, went underground in 1978 because he no longer saw any legal means of restoring the German Reich's ability to act. In 1980, he joined the far-right terrorist group *Deutsche Aktionsgruppen* (German Action Groups), which was responsible for seven arson and explosive attacks that fatally injured two Vietnamese. Other targets included an exhibition on the Auschwitz concentration camp and a Jewish school.[62] That same year he was caught by the police and sentenced to 10 years in prison. From 1990 onwards, Roeder was active in the settlement of Germans in the Russian city of Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg), the dissemina-

tion of Reich-related propaganda, and Holocaust denial.[63]

Today's "Reichsbürger" and other sovereigntists still draw on the traditional knowledge of the right-wing extremist "Reichsbürger" of the past. Since the 2000s at the latest, there has also been evidence of personal contacts between members of these sub-milieus.[64] The Internet, and especially the social network Telegram, bring the individual milieus even closer together and facilitate the exchange of ideology and narratives. While, for example, the right-wing extremist "Reichsbürger" Horst Mahler was still accusing the "Reichsbürger" in the tradition of Ebel of high treason because of their positive reference to the Allies in 2003, his ally Nikolai Nerling fifteen years later interviewed Adrian Ursache in prison for his video blog *Der Volkslehrer* (The Volk's Teacher) and reported on his trial.[65]

Conclusion

The findings of both case studies confirm the results of previous studies on the justification of violence within the German sovereignist milieu.[66] In both cases discussed here, violence was legitimized through conspiracy myths about a supposed annihilation of the German people and through apocalyptic visions of the future. The Manichean conception of history and society contained in such beliefs compel believers to action on behalf of the good people and to fight the evil enemy. At the same time, the exaggeration of the enemy's "bestiality", their supposed lawlessness, and almost limitless power provides moral justification for violent resistance by members of the sovereignist milieu. In this sense, violence is an integral part of the milieu's ideology. The function of conspiracy narratives for extremists to legitimize their own acts of violence as their only option—highlighted also in a study by Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller—is evident in the two case studies analyzed here, as are the in-group/out-group dynamics and the increasing demonization.[67]

In contrast to (other) openly right-wing extremist milieus in Germany, which spread the same or similar conspiracy ideologies and myths, conspiracy-ideological sovereignists focus on 'proving' the supposed lack of sovereignty, as well as on actions to (re-)establish sovereignty by means of (pseudo-)legal documents and concentrate also on the establishment of their own structures. It is precisely this sovereignty construction that inevitably leads to a confrontation with the sovereign established and internationally recognized German state. This challenge to the official state has increased the pressure of repression on the milieu in Germany since 2016. A pending eviction (Adrian Ursache), as well as the seizure of weapons due to being part of the violence-prone milieu (Wolfgang Plan) can be interpreted by sovereignists as the beginning of the final showdown and thus justify the use of violence. The concrete use of violence, however, is not only dependent on ideology, but also on the individual psychological dispositions of sovereignists. This marks the limits of the present analysis, with its focus on the ideological dimension, especially when comparing the findings here to those of studies on American Sovereign Citizens. Although these U.S. analyses acknowledge the antisemitic and conspiracy-ideological origins of the sovereignist ideology,[68] they focus more on the personal reasons behind sovereignist violence, emphasizing individual psychological dispositions more than the perpetrators' ideology (which legitimizes violence).[69]

The analyzed type of violent confrontation was related to foreclosures or the seizure of weapons. The violence that resulted does not amount to terrorism. While the selection of the targets was based on ideology, the intent of having a wider psychological impact played at best a limited role.[70] This does not mean, however, that sovereignist violence is limited to cases in which individuals face financial hardship. Terrorist acts of violence were committed as early as 1980 by another German "Reichsbürger", Manfred Roeder. Other individuals of the sovereignist milieu are currently under investigation for allegedly planning attacks on infrastructure and for plans to kidnap the German Minister of Health, Karl Lauterbach in order to trigger a "Day X." They also share the old conspiracy myths of a "Jewish world conspiracy" and the "Great Replacement".[71]

This analysis shows more than just a close connection between extremist ideology and willingness to engage in violence in the German sovereignist milieu. It emphasizes also that, in addition to law enforcement officers, migrants, Muslims and Jews are also potential targets of attacks. In 2019 as well as in 2020, cases of antisemitic violence from sovereignists were registered by German authorities. These do not represent anomalies but can

be explained by the explicit and implicit antisemitism present within the milieu. For the assessment of the potential for violence and possible targets of sovereignists, the focus should not only be on the (pseudo-)legal and (pseudo-)administrative texts of the milieu, which are particularly frequent in communication with the state. Georg Schuppener rightfully points out that these texts have less room for expressions of violence than texts with directive or emotive textual functions.[72] These other texts—many of them available online—must be examined more closely in order to assess the potential for violence of members from the milieu and identify possible targets—especially since studies have so far failed to identify any clear differences between sovereignist perpetrators and non-perpetrators of violence.[73]

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Notes

[1] See Rathje, J. (2021). "Reichsbürger" und Souveränismus. *Aus Politik Und Zeitgeschichte* (35-36), pp. 34–40.

[2] See e.g., Keil, J.-G. (2017). "Zwischen Wahn und Rollenspiel: Das Phänomen der 'Reichsbürger' aus psychologischer Sicht." In D. Wilking (Ed.), "*Reichsbürger*": *Ein Handbuch* (3rd ed., pp. 54–115). Potsdam: Demos - Brandenburgisches Institut für Gemeinwesenberatung; Schönberger, C. & Schönberger, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Die Reichsbürger: Verfassungsfeinde zwischen Staatsverweigerung und Verschwörungstheorie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag; Sarteschi, C. M. (2020). *Sovereign Citizens: A Psychological and Criminological Analysis*. Cham: Springer.

[3] On Sovereign Citizens see e.g. Pitcavage, M. (2012). *The Lawless Ones: The Resurgence of the Sovereign Citizen Movement*. New York. ADL; Berger, J. M. (2016). *Without Prejudice: What Sovereign Citizens Believe*; Washington. Program on Extremism; Sarteschi, C. M. (2020). "Sovereign Citizens: A Narrative Review with Implications of Violence Towards Law Enforcement." *Aggression and Violent Behavior.* Advance online publication. URL: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2020.101509. On German "Reichsbürger", see e.g. Wilking, D. (Ed.). (2017). "*Reichsbürger*": *Ein Handbuch* (3rd ed.). Potsdam: Demos - Brandenburgisches Institut *für* Gemeinwesenberatung. Furthermore, it should be noted that the focus is mainly on the USA, Canada, Australia and Great Britain as well as Germany and Austria, although sovereignist groups exist in other states as well, e.g., Russia and the Czech Republic; Luxmoore, M. (2019, May 25). "You understand what's happening? All the organs of Soviet power are being recreated". *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*. URL: https://www.rferl.org/a/flouting-law-in-nostalgia-s-name-russia-s-growing-movement-of-soviet-citizens-/29962523.html; Czech Ministry of the Interior. (2022). *Hnutí Suverénních občanů a jejich aktivity v České republice*. URL: https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/hnuti-suverennich-obcanu-a-jejich-aktivity-v-ceske-republice.aspx.

[4] The term was proposed by Susann Bischof as a categorical description for the milieu as a whole.

[5] See Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz. (2022). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021*. Berlin.

[6] See Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung. (2019). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2018*. Wien. Bundesministerium für Inneres.

[7] See ADL. (2017, June 26). *Anti-Government Extremism*. URL: https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/anti-government-extremism; Alcoke, M. (2019, November 19). *The Evolving and Persistent Terrorism Threat to the Homeland.* Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC. URL: https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/the-evolving-and-persistent-terrorism-threat-to-the-homeland-111919; Southern Poverty Law Center. (2021). *Antigovernment Movement*. URL: https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/antigovernment.

[8] Like Colin Campbell's concept of the cultic milieu, the phenomenon could be described as an independent milieu that is primarily ideological and characterized by a culture of conspiracy. It shows overlaps with the current forms of the cultic milieu, as well as with right-wing extremist, antisemitic and other conspiracy-ideological milieus. See Barkun, M. (2013). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2nd ed.). *Comparative Studies in Religion and Society: Vol. 15*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. (Originally published in 2004); Campbell, C. (2002). The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization. In J. Kaplan & H. Lööw (Eds.), *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization* (pp. 12–25). Walnut

Creek, Lanham and Oxford: AltaMira Press; Campbell, C. (2012). *The Cultic Milieu Revisited.* Universität Leipzig, Leipzig. URL: https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4473.3286; Kaplan, J. & Lööw, H. (2002). Introduction. In J. Kaplan & H. Lööw (Eds.), *The Cultic Milieu*, op. cit., (pp. 1–11). On the link between conspiracy ideological milieus and the cultic milieu, see Asprem, E. & Dyrendal, A. (2019). "Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories." In A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, & E. Asprem (Eds.), *Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion: Vol. 17. Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (pp. 207–233). Leiden and Boston: Brill. URL: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004382022.

[9] See Rathje, J., "Reichsbürger", op. cit. The concept of conspiracy ideological sovereignism is based on the concept of national and popular sovereignism. Sovereignists argue that national or popular sovereignty is at fault and needs to be restored, see Spiegeleire, S. D., Skinner, C. & Sweijs, T. (2017). *The Rise of Populist Sovereignism: What it is, Where it Comes From, and What it Means for International Security and Defense.* The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, pp. 32–40. As a conspiracy ideology, conspiracy-ideological sovereignism, like Cas Mudde's definition of populism, can be described as a thin-centered ideology that may be combined with other ideologies. See Mudde, C. (2004). "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), pp. 541–563. URL: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x. On the concept of conspiracy ideologies, see Pfahl-Traughber, A. (2002). "'Bausteine' zu einer Theorie über 'Verschwörungstheorien': Definitionen, Erscheinungsformen, Funktionen und Ursachen." In H. Reinalter (Ed.), *Quellen und Darstellungen zur europäischen Freimaurerei. Verschwörungstheorien: Theorie - Geschichte - Wirkung* (pp. 30–44). Innsbruck: Studienverlag; Rathje, J. (2017). *Reichsbürger, Selbstverwalter und Souveränisten: Vom Wahn des bedrohten Deutschen*. Münster: Unrast.

[10] Current research indicates that this sub-milieu of "Reichsbürger" emerged in the mid-1980s. It is particularly linked to the actions of Wolfgang Gerhard Günter Ebel, who claimed to be "Reich Chancellor", formed a "Provisional Reich Government", and inspired many others. See Gessler, P. (2000, August 15). "Die Reichsminister drohen mit dem Tod." *Taz* (6219), p. 19. URL: http://www.taz.de/!1217553/.

[11] See Rathje, J., Reichsbürger, Selbstverwalter, op. cit.

[12] Schwarz-Friesel, M. & Reinharz, J. (2017). *Inside the Antisemitic Mind: The Language of Jew-Hatred in Contemporary Germany*. Waltham and Berlin: Brandeis University Press, pp. 12–13.

[13] See Bundeskriminalamt (2005). *Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik 2004: Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Wiesbaden, p. 16.

[14] In 2016, two shootouts with sovereignists occurred, in which several persons were injured, and one policeman died from his wounds. Since then, authorities have published estimates on the size of the milieu. For 2021, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution estimated a size of 21,000 persons belonging to this milieu, of which 1,150 were counted as right-wing extremists. See Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz. (2022). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021*. Berlin, p. 103. The actual number of people in the milieu is probably higher, as the large number of subscribers to milieu-specific Telegram channels suggests.

[15] See Koehler, D. & Fiebig, V. (2019). *Taten, Täter, Opfer.: Eine Studie der Reichsbürgerbewegung auf Grundlage einer Presseauswertung.* Stuttgart. Ministerium für Inneres, Digitalisierung und Migration.

[16] For more detailed information on this, see Caspar, C. & Neubauer, R. (2015). "Durchs wilde Absurdistan: Was zu tun ist, wenn 'Reichsbürger' und öffentliche Verwaltung aufeinandertreffen." In D. Wilking (Ed.), "*Reichsbürger": Ein Handbuch* (2nd ed., pp. 93–171). Potsdam: Demos - Brandenburgisches Institut für Gemeinwesenberatung, pp. 126–128; Stahl, T. & Homburg, H. (2015). "'Souveräne Bürger' in den USA und deutsche 'Reichsbürger' - ein Vergleich hinsichtlich Ideologie und Gefahrenpotential." In D. Wilking (Ed.), "*Reichsbürger": Ein Handbuch* (2nd ed., pp. 203–224). Potsdam: Demos - Brandenburgisches Institut für Gemeinwesenberatung.

[17] See Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz. (2018). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2017*. Berlin, pp. 30–31; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz. (2019). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2018*. Berlin, pp. 30-31; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz. (2020). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2019*. Berlin, pp. 30–31; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz. (2021). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2020*. Berlin, pp. 32–33; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz. (2022). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021*, op. cit, p. 32; Bundeskriminalamt. (2022, May 10). *Politisch motivierte Kriminalität im Jahr 2021: Bundesweite Fallzahlen.* On the problem of classification used by the police, see Keil, J.-G. (2021). "Zur Abgrenzung des Milieus der 'Reichsbürger' – Pathologisierung des Politischen und Politisierung des Pathologischen." *Forensische Psychiatrie, Psychologie, Kriminologie.* Advance online publication. URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11757-021-00668-7.

[18] See Schuppener, G. (2019). "Gewalt-Lexik und Gewalt-Diskurse in reichsbürgerlichen Texten." *Linguistische Treffen in Wrocław* 15 (1), 199–208. https://doi.org/10.23817/lingtreff.15-16.

[19] See e.g. Rathje, J. (2019). "Eine neue rechtsrerroristische Bedrohung? Souveränismus von 'Reichsbürgern' und anderen in Deutschland." *Wissen schafft Demokratie* (06), pp. 158–167. URL: https://doi.org/10.19222/201906/14; Janz, C. & Speit, A. (2017). "'Wir sind im Krieg': Waffen innerhalb der Szene." In A. Speit (Ed.), *Reichsbürger: Die unterschätzte Gefahr,* (pp. 115–132). Berlin: Ch. Links.

[20] See Freitag, J., Hüllen, M. & Krüger, Y. (2017). "Entwicklung der Ideologie der 'Reichsbürger'." In U. Backes, A. Gallus, & E. Jesse (Eds.), *Jahrbuch Extremismus & Demokratie (E & D): 29. Jahrgang 2017* (pp. 159–174). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. URL: https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845288642-158, p. 165.

[21] See Chronologie: Der Fall Adrian Ursache: Mordprozess gegen "Reichsbürger" (2019, Dezember 30). *Mdr Sachsen-Anhalt*. URL: https://www.mdr.de/sachsen-anhalt/halle/chronologie-reichsbuerger-prozess-adrian-ursache-100.html.

[22] See Ursache, A. (2016). *Warum Ur: Ich bin der ich bin*, pp. 129–136. On the tactics of the Sovereign Citizens' promissory notes; see Federal Bureau of Investigation (2011). *Sovereign Citizens: An Introduction for Law Enforcement*. URL: https://info.publicintelligence.net/FBI-SovereignCitizens.pdf.

[23] Ursache, A., Warum Ur, op. cit.; Ursache, A. (2016, July 10). Interview by L. Coldwell.; Ursache, A. (2016, August 21). *Finale 24.08.2016 - Faschisten der BRD gegen Staat Ur*.

[24] Ursache, A., Finale, op. cit., min. 03:17-03:36. The video was deleted from Ursache's YouTube channel shortly after it was published. A copy of the video can be found with a release date of 08/21/2016 on vk.com.

[25] Ibid., Video time 02:42-02:50.

[26] See Chronologie; Der Fall Adrian Ursache, op. cit.

[27] See Ursache, A., Finale, op. cit.

[28] S und T Info. (2016, August 24). *24 08 2016 Adrian Ursache - Interview mit MDR Teil 1*.URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hizrq1GIgPc, min. 1:06–1:16.

[29] See Ursache, A., Warum Ur, op. cit., pp. 36–38.

[30] Ibid., p. 61.

[31] Ursache, A. (2016, June 30). *MENSCH setzt sich gegen Polizei, GV und 9 maskierte durch* [YouTube]. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2ENx8TFvf8. The entry "POLIZEI" at the German Patent and Trademark Office as a trademarked word is wrongly interpreted within the sovereignist milieu as evidence that the German police cannot be an authority. See Schumacher, G. (2015). *Vorwärts in die Vergangenheit: Durchblick durch einige "reichsideologische" Nebelwände*. URL: http://buch.sonnenstaatland.com/, p. 67.

[32] Ursache, A., Warum Ur, op. cit., pp. 84–86.

[33] Ursache, A. (2016, May 27). *Kein Name! Kein Spiel! Teil 2*. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IlsH3MAWln8, min. 3:07–3:10.

[34] Ursache, A., Warum Ur, op. cit., p. 94.

[35] Ibid., p. 89.

[36] Ibid., p. 97.

[37] See ibid., pp. 14–17.

[38] Ursache, A. (2017, April 7). *Was stimmt hier nicht? Wovor habt ihr Angst?* URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmD6yfP922o, min. 34:26–34:34.

[39] See Giner-Sorolla, R., Leidner, B. & Castano, E. (2012). Dehumanization, Demonization, and Morality Shifting: Paths to Moral Certainty in Extremist Violence. In: M. A. Hogg & D. L. Blaylock (Eds.), *The Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology. Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty* (pp. 165–182). Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. URL: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444344073.ch10.

[40] See Verurteilung eines "Reichsbürgers" wegen Mordes - Heimtückische Tötung eines Polizeibeamten bei Einsatz aus niedrigen Beweggründen, 5 Ks 113 Js 1822/16 (Landgericht Nürnberg-Fürth October 23, 2017). URL: https://www.gesetze-bayern.de/Content/Document/Y-300-Z-BECKRS-B-2017-N-141430.

[41] See Plan, W. (2016, January 25). *Erklärung unter Eid*. Facebook post.

[42] See Verurteilung, op. cit.

[43] Ibid.

[44] See "Reichsbürger" hortete in seiner Wohnung 31 Waffen (2016, October 19). *B.Z.* URL: https://www.bz-berlin.de/archiv-artikel/reichsbuerger-schiesst-bei-razzia-auf-polizisten-4-verletzte; Maxwill, P. (2017, October 23). *Urteil in "Reichsbürger"-Prozess: Ein "wahrhaftiger Mensch", ein Mörder*. URL: http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/reichsbuerger-prozess-ein-wahrhafter-mensch-ein-moerder-a-1174273.html.

[45] As cited in Verurteilung, op. cit.

[46] Ibid.

[47] See Plan, W. (07.2021). Interview by M. Möglich.

[48] See Plan, W. (2016b, October 14). *Geheimkrieg gegen die Deutschen*. Facebook post. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20181222141117/https://www.facebook.com/wolfgang.plan/posts/630129063815324.

[49] Plan, W. (2015, April 23). *B L I T Z E R – M A R A T H O N das Ende der zionistischen Söldnerschaft [POLIZEI]!* Facebook post. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20170731082403/https://www.facebook.com/wolfgang.plan/posts/426596134168619.

[50] See Köhler, D. & Fiebig, V., Taten, op. cit., p. 33.

[51] Ursache, A., Warum Ur, op. cit.

[52] See Schuppener, G., Gewalt-Lexik, op. cit.

[53] See Berlet, C. (2003). "Apocalypticism." In P. Knight (Ed.), *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia* (85-91). Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO; Schuppener, Gewalt-Lexik, op. cit.

[54] See e.g. Herf, J. (2006). *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. URL: https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674038592; Marr, W. (1879). *Der Sieg des Judentums über das Germanentum: Vom nicht confessionellen Standpunkt aus betrachtet* (6.th ed.).

[55] See e.g. Barkun, M. (1989). "Millenarian Aspects of 'White Supremacist' Movements." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1(4), pp. 409–434. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546558908427037; Barkun, M. (1996). "Religion, Militias and Oklahoma City: The Mind of Conspiratorialists." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 8(1), pp. 50–64. URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559608427332.

[56] See Köhler, D. & Fiebig, V., Taten, op. cit.

[57] Die Reichsbewegung - Neue Gemeinschaft von Philosophen. (2012, February 1). *Ausweisung aus Deutschland*. URL: http://web.archive.org/web/20120227024449/http://www.reichsbewegung.org/portal/attachments/058_Ausweisung_aus_Deutschland.pdf.

[58] See Plan, W., Interview, op. cit.

[59] While the Allied occupation after the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 could actually be experienced as such during the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany, it must be noted that for the subsequent period a de facto military occupation or a central political supervision of the government of the German Federal Republic no longer existed (East Germany, the DDR occupied by the Soviet Union being a different story).

[60] See Stöss, R. (2010). *Rechtsextremismus im Wandel* (3rd ed.). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Forum Berlin., pp. 31–33.

[61] Mahler, H. (2004). *Das Ende der moralischen Geschichtsbetrachtung führt zur Antwort auf die Judenfrage*. Einlassung zur Anklage wegen Volksverhetzung vor der 22. Großen Strafkammer des Landgerichts Berlin (522) 81 Js 3570/KLs (1/03), p. 5.

[62] See Bauerschmidt, M., Brandt, S., Jentsch, U. & Ohrowski, K. (1996). "Deutsche Aktionsgruppen." In J. Mecklenburg (Ed.), *Handbuch deutscher Rechtsextremismus* (p. 156). Berlin: Elefanten Press.; Manfred Roeder. (2002). In T. Grumke & B. Wagner (Eds.), *Handbuch Rechtsradikalismus: Personen - Organisationen - Netzwerke vom Neonazismus bis in die Mitte der Gesellschaft* (pp. 302–304). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

[63] For a detailed account of the development of conspiracy-ideological sovereignism in the Federal Republic of Germany and its relation to antisemitism, see Rathje, J. (2021). "For Reich and Volksgemeinschaft - Against the World Conspiracy: Antisemitism and Sovereignism in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1945." *Antisemitism Studies*, 5(1), pp. 100–138. URL: https://doi.org/10.2979/antistud.5.1.04.

[64] See ibid.

[65] See Mahler, H. (2003, December 7). *Verkündigung der Reichsbürgerbewegung*.; Ursache, A. (2018, May 2). Interview by N. Nerling.

[66] See Köhler, D. & Fiebig, V., Taten, op. cit.; Schuppener, G., Gewalt-Lexik, op. cit.

[67] See Bartlett, J. & Miller, C. (2010). *The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-Terrorism*. London: Demos. Benjamin Lee critically notes that in addition to this particular function of conspiracy narratives for extremists, their exact role in radicalization processes cannot yet be clearly determined; see Lee, B. J. (2020). "Radicalisation and Conspiracy Theories." In: M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Conspiracy Theories. Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories.* Abingdon: Routledge.

[68] See e.g. McNab, J. J. (2010, August 1). *'Sovereign' Citizen Kane.* Southern Poverty Law Center. URL: https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2010/sovereign-citizen-kane; Berger, J. M. (2016). *Without Prejudice: What Sovereign Citizens Believe*, op. cit.

[69] See e.g. McNab, J. J., 'Sovereign' Citizen Kane, op. cit.; Challacombe, D. J. & Lucas, P. A. (2019). "Postdicting Violence with Sovereign Citizen Actors: An Exploratory Test of the TRAP-18." *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 6(1), pp. 51–59. URL: https://doi.org/10.1037/tam0000105.

[70] On the definition of extreme right-wing terrorism see Ravndal, J. A. & Bjørgo, T. (2018). "Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12(6), pp. 5–22.

[71] See Rathje, J., Rechtsrerroristische Bedrohung, op. cit.; Dittrich, M. (2021). Zwischen Militärgericht und "Corona-Diktatur": QAnon und der "Tag X". In *Die Bundestagswahl 2021: Welche Rolle Verschwörungsideologien in der Demokratie spielen* (pp. 46–53); Junghans, R. (2022, April 27). "'Vereinte Patrioten': Vom Protest zum Terror - Die Radikalisierung von Thomas O." *Belltower News*. URL: https://www.belltower.news/vereinte-patrioten-vom-protest-zum-terror-die-radikalisierung-von-thomas-o-130453/.

[72] See Schuppener, G., Gewalt-Lexik, op. cit.

[73] See Köhler, D. & Fiebig, V., Taten, op. cit.

The QAnon Security Threat: A Linguistic Fusion-Based Violence Risk Assessment

by Julia Ebner, Christopher Kavanagh, and Harvey Whitehouse

Abstract

This study compares the narratives and language of QAnon groups in the encrypted messaging apps Telegram and Discord to those observed in the manifestos of terrorists. Drawing on our systematic linguistic analysis of fifteen terrorist manifestos that were published in the past decade, we developed a coding scheme which traces the narratives and linguistic markers that occur in the written communication of perpetrators of political violence. In this pilot study we apply our new coding scheme to QAnon content to assess the scale and nature of violence-associated narratives within the movement. Based on 200,000 messages that we collected from the online QAnon group "Great Awakening Community" on the gaming chat application Discord, we quantitatively examine to what degree they carry the trademarks of violent terrorist manifestos that are not found in non-violent texts. We then compared the results for the Great Awakening Community to content from both a non-violent and a violent-terrorist control group. To complement our computational assessment of QAnon narrative and linguistic patterns we share ethnographic observations from ten QAnon Telegram and Discord groups with English, German, and French speaking audiences. Past research has found that identity fusion in combination with a range of mediating and moderating variables is a strong predictor of violence in groups, and this is further supported by our terrorist manifesto analysis. Our study of QAnon messages found a high prevalence of linguistic identity fusion indicators along with external threat narratives, violence-condoning group norms as well as demonizing, dehumanizing, and derogatory vocabulary applied to the out-group, especially when compared to the non-violent control group. The aim of this piece of research is twofold: (i.) It seeks to evaluate the national security threat posed by the QAnon movement, and (ii.) it aims to provide a test of a novel linguistic toolkit aimed at helping to assess the risk of violence in online communication channels.

Keywords: QAnon, terrorism, radicalisation, manifestos, lone-offender attacks, identity fusion, social media

Introduction

QAnon has made headlines in recent years for its links to the storming of both the U.S. Capitol on 6 January 2021 [1], and the German Reichstag a few months earlier on 27 August 2020.[2] In both assaults on democratic institutions the flags, banners, and T-shirts carried by the rioters featured prominent QAnon slogans such as WWG1WGA ("where we go one, we go all") and QAnon symbols, such as the letter Q.[3] According to a 2021 analysis by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), at least 61 QAnon adherents participated in the Capitol insurrection.[4] QAnon connections were also detected in a series of violent plots and threats against political representatives in North America, Europe, and Australia.[5] As of September 2021, 101 QAnon followers had committed crimes in the U.S. alone, according to START's data.[6] Its adherents have also inspired election-related violence, anti-vaccine protests, and pro-Russia demonstrations across the world.[7]

A May 2019 report by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) highlighted the growing role of anti-government extremism, including conspiracy theory extremists such as QAnon, in criminal activity, including acts of violence.[8] Likewise, the Norwegian Police Security Service flagged the rising threat from anti-government extremism, partly fueled by foreign state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, in its National Threat Assessment for 2022.[9] Nonetheless, many governments have been hesitant to label QAnon as a violent extremist threat to national security, as the advocates, followers, and sympathizers are a diverse group and do not necessarily share a distinct and clearly defined belief system. Moreover, in the past few years, policymakers and law enforcement agencies have tended to focus terrorism prevention efforts on ji-

hadist and far-right extremist groups and networks.[10]

The term "violent self-sacrifice" will be used in this article to describe violent pro-group behaviors that entail risk to life and limb for the perpetrators, regardless of whether they subscribe to ideological extreme beliefs or not. By contrast, we will apply the term "ideological extremism" with reference to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue's extremism definition:

> *Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based 'in-group' over all 'out-groups.' It advances a dehumanising 'othering' mind-set incompatible with pluralism and universal human rights.*[11]

QAnon began as a U.S.-centered online subculture in 2017. On 18 October 2017, an anonymous post on 4Chan's /pol (politically incorrect) board predicted that "Hilary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM – 8:30 AM EST on Monday – the morning on Oct 30, 2017." The message was signed with "Q", in reference to Q-level clearance in the U.S. government's secret document classification. As the successor of the original *Pizzagate* conspiracy myth, QAnon continued to promote the idea that a global cabal of Satan-worshipping elites secretly controls the world and is also running underground child-trafficking networks. Knitting together a variety of old and new conspiracy tropes, QAnon has become a conspiratorial master narrative that has attracted adherents from diverse ideological backgrounds, based on the common denominator of anti-establishment resentment.[12] Today the movement's support base ranges from far-right extremists, hardline conspiracy theorists, and sovereign citizens to alternative medicine esoterics, anti-vaxxers, Covid deniers, and concerned parents.[13] A recent study by Baker demonstrated the role of health and wellness influencers in amplifying the reach of the conspiracy myth.[14]

In the beginning, QAnon had only a few thousand followers and was mainly focusing on the U.S. However, less than one year after its emergence, QAnon followers were running campaigns across Europe, including efforts to boost hardline Brexit campaigns [15] and influence the discourse around the 2018 Bavarian elections.[16] In 2018, ISD identified close to 30 million mentions of "QAnon" across Twitter, YouTube, and forums such as Reddit and 4chan.[17] By 2020, the movement had expanded to more than 4.5 million aggregate followers worldwide.[18] Several studies pointed to the QAnon movement's successful exploitation of the Covid-19 pandemic and related grievances and uncertainties in the population to increase its support base.[19] In March 2020, ISD research registered major spikes in QAnon related content on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.[20]

In this article we present a pilot study that seeks to assess the threat of violence posed by the growing QAnon community. Government policies, legal frameworks, and intelligence investigations tend to be based on explicit online threats or expressions of support for terrorism in an effort to reduce the danger of violent terrorist acts and crimes.[21] Verbal threats, however, are not a reliable predictor of actual violence as many users make empty threats.[22] Consequently, the challenge is to establish a more robust set of predictors of violence based on analysis of more fine-grained patterns of language use. In this study, we outline a theoretically grounded and empirically tested approach to assessing the risk of violence based on language that indicates strong motivations to engage in extreme forms of pro-group action, regardless of whether acts of violence are specifically threatened or not. We do not claim to have a predictive model at this stage but are rather working to build the foundations of a linguistic framework that identifies recurrent socio-psychological factors associated with subsequent violence committed by individuals or groups.

The systematic text-based coding framework we apply to QAnon content is grounded in social identity studies. There has been a growing body of research into the relationship between different forms of group cohesion and radicalisation towards violence.[23] Previous studies found evidence that the socio-psychological phenomenon of identity fusion – a visceral feeling of oneness with the group – motivates violent self-sacrifice on behalf of the group, when combined with a real or perceived existential threat to the in-group.[24] The fusion-violence link has been demonstrated in a number of studies conducted among groups as diverse as Libyan revolutionary battalions [25], Indonesian religious fundamentalists [26], Cameroonian herders and farmers [27], as well as British and Brazilian football hooligans.[28] Our new threat assessment

framework is based on Whitehouse's fusion-plus-threat model, which aggregated previous theoretical and empirical findings.[29] Key to this model is that in-group identity fusion has been shown to be the more potent driver of extreme pro-group behavior, including acts of terrorism, than in-group identification.[30] However, before outlining our approach and methods in greater detail it is necessary to first review the existing research on the QAnon phenomenon.

Emerging Literature

QAnon's sudden emergence in 2017 and swiftly rising influence on both the political arena and the security threat landscape has resulted in widespread interest from both academic and non-academic researchers across multiple disciplines. Since the movement's inception, many investigations have sought to better understand the nature, motivations, and tactics of this new online community.

Holt and Rizzuto's data-driven analysis analysis of QAnon catchphrases on Gab, Parler, Dot-Win forums, 4chan, and 8kun during the timeframe of January 2020 to April 2021 concluded that QAnon-related slogans remained considerably higher on mainstream platforms than on alternative fringe platforms.[31] However, Ebner pointed out that the "alt-tech universe" meant that QAnon could adopt a "glocal" strategy to disinformation, using a globally standardised and networked approach coupled with hyper-localised mobilisation channels.[32]

In 2021, ISD's research highlighted the rising importance of Telegram for QAnon influencers and online groups.[33] Zihiri, Lima, et al.'s 2022 study used a mixed-methods approach to compare QAnon with far-right and far-left extremist communities. The researchers analysed over 3.5 million Telegram messages from these three extreme subcultures to establish QAnon's position in the wider political ecosystem of the political fringes. Their conclusion was that despite its mainstreamed appeal to different population segments, the QAnon community continues to share important traits with the far-right and coalesces around similar political events in the U.S.[34]

Recent research and polls have highlighted the extent to which QAnon has been mainstreamed. Fourteen congressional candidates on ballots in the 2020 U.S. elections openly endorsed QAnon conspiracy myths.[35] A 2020 NPR/Ipsos poll of U.S. Adults found that 17 percent of Americans believed in the idea that "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media."[36] Another representative survey conducted in the U.S. by the Chicago Project on Security & Threat reported that there are 21 million adamant supporters of insurrection movements with potential for violent mobilisation. According to the study, American insurrectionists are driven by two main conspiracy theories: 65 percent of them believe in the Great Replacement – the idea that whites are gradually being replaced by non-whites – and 54 percent believe in QAnon.[37]

Many researchers have sought to understand the appeal of the QAnon cult. Matfess and Margolin established that women have played a key role in the creation and dissemination of QAnon propaganda content. According to them, QAnon is more gender-inclusive than traditional far-right extremist groups.[38] As Argentino and Crawford noted, the use of female influencers and hashtags such as "#SavetheChildren" has allowed the movement to widen its reach beyond traditional audiences.[39] Holoyda outlined the importance for forensic psychiatrists to better understand how the psychological drivers and belief systems of QAnon followers are consistent and how they are different from those held by proponents of other conspiracy theories.[40] Zuckerman highlighted common narrative patterns QAnon shares with other conspiracy theories but also argued that QAnon may be the first conspiracy that fully taps into the participatory potential of modern-day media and technology.[41] According to a report by the Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL) and the Network Contagion Research Institute, "QAnon bears many of the hallmarks of an augmented reality game (ARGs)."[42]

Both in academia and in policy circles, there has been significant disagreement on the extent to which the QAnon movement poses a threat to national security and democracy. Amarasingam and Argentino warned in 2020 that QAnon presents a novel challenge to the security forces and a domestic terror threat in the

making. Their report presented five criminal case studies with a nexus to QAnon, including one case that resulted in a terrorism charge.[43] Likewise, Jensen and Kane conducted a study of the backgrounds of 100 QAnon sympathizers who committed crimes in the U.S., arguing that traditional counter-terrorism strategies are unfit to address the new risk factors (e.g. mental health problems, substance use disorders and family disruptions) found among QAnon supporters.[44] Taking the opposite stance, Moskalenko and McCauley argued in their research that "deradicalization efforts aimed at QAnon opinions are a waste of resources and potentially dangerous in exaggerating the QAnon threat and increasing Right-Wing perception of government over-reach."[45] The authors combined the Two-Pyramids model of radicalization with polling data to conclude that the threat of radical action from QAnon is "relatively small".[46]

The underlying thesis of the Two Pyramids model is that there are two types of radicalisation: radicalisation in opinion and radicalisation in action, with only the latter culminating in terrorist activity.[47] Moskalenko and McCauley's model bears comparison with our socio-psychologically grounded distinction between identification versus fusion-based radicalization. In particular, identification may be associated with extreme ideologies but not self-sacrificial behaviours (e.g. among religious fundamentalists), while fusion may drive self-sacrificial behaviour in the absence of extreme ideology (e.g. among football fans and soldiers). Nevertheless, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that QAnon radicalisation is predominantly limited to the first pyramid. Our study seeks to contribute to this debate and help to better understand whether the prevalence of linguistic indicators can indicate underlying psychological processes that may be capable of motivating violent action among QAnon followers. Based on this pilot study of systematically detecting fusion-plus-threat in digital materials, we propose a new text-based approach to identify socio-psychological violence risk factors in online groups.

Approach and Methods

Our study of QAnon uses a mixed methods approach, combining NLP-driven quantitative analysis with ethnographic qualitative analysis of QAnon-related communications channels. Both the quantitative and the qualitative research streams draw on a new theoretically grounded framework of violence-predicting narratives and linguistic patterns that we created based on a recently published systematic analysis of manifestos of authors who went on to commit acts of terrorism.[48] To test our linguistic framework we completed an Intercoder Reliability (ICR) Analysis with the help of two independent expert coders and twenty-four non-expert coders, yielding a reliability rate of over 90 percent for most narrative categories.[49] Compared to a control group of political manifestos – ranging from ideologically extreme to moderate – that were not followed by violent activities by their authors, we found a high prevalence of in-group identity fusion and existential threat narratives among the manifestos of future terrorists. In addition to supporting the fusion-plus-threat model, our manifesto analysis demonstrated a high presence of anticipated mediating and moderating variables such as violence-condoning norms and offensive language applied to members of the out-group.[50]

Here we apply the same fusion-based violence risk assessment framework to QAnon groups, and then compare the results to the outcomes in non-violent and violent control groups. Our NLP analysis was conducted in R, tracking linguistic markers we previously identified as associated with subsequent violence (see Appendix 2 for an overview of the linguistic markers).[51] Our selection of variables and the metrics we used to measure them was informed by the findings of our manifesto analysis and our review of the existing literature (see Appendix 1 for more details).[52] For example, metaphors of kinship or familiar ties (e.g. brotherhood) when talking about the in-group and its members have been identified as an important diagnostic marker of fusion in written or verbal communications.[53] Furthermore, previous research has indicated that survivors of atrocities develop feelings of psychological kinship that mediate the relationship between fusion and self-sacrificial behaviors.[54] Hence, early detection of kinship language that is applied to fellow group members in conjunction with existential threat narratives might offer an important indicator of a higher risk for future acts of extreme violence and terrorism.

The quantitative analysis covered 200,000 messages scraped from the "Great Awakening Community", an

online QAnon group of over 5,300 members exchanging messages using Discord, a VoIP and instant messaging platform originally associated with gaming communities. The 'Great Awakening Community' Discord server was one of the main communication hubs for QAnon during the timeframe 2018-2019. We compared the results from the server to content taken from both non-violent and violent control groups. The first control group was Third Hour, a popular discussion forum for Mormons with at least 30,000 users. The second control group was the white supremacist platform Iron March, which was a public web forum used by roughly 1,200 regular users – many of whom were found to have participated in terrorist activities and engaged with proscribed groups, such as National Action and Atomwaffen Division.[55] A total of 1,160 messages from Iron March posted in 2017 until the forum's closure in November that year and 160,000 messages from Third Hour in the timeframe 2004-2019 were included in the analysis. We selected Third Hour and Iron March in order to compare the QAnon content with content from two groups of online users that are characterised by a shared ideology, like QAnon, and represent the two ends of the violence spectrum for the comparative analysis.

The R code of our NLP analysis used a dictionary approach (see Appendix 3). By using the grep R function, we wanted to capture a wide range of derivations of our selected linguistic markers (e.g., nouns, verbs and adjectives in both singular and plural forms) and thereby minimise the number of false negatives. However, this approach meant that the R-based datasets for each narrative contained a relatively high proportion of false positives—i.e., terms and phrases that were wrongly categorized as a narrative-specific linguistic marker. For instance, a common false positive that was mistaken for a fusion marker by our R code was the use of kinship language by users to speak about their biological family rather than refer to fellow group members as "brothers" and "sisters". Likewise, the messages the R code identified as instances of out-group dehumansation (using linguistic markers such as "monkey", "dog" or "beast") sometimes contained references to real animals. To address this potential limitation, the datasets of phrases captured by the R code for each narrative category were exported from R and scanned manually for false positives by the lead author. Based on a careful review of all messages, every detected case of a false positive was removed manually from datasets with up to 800 messages.

Due to time constraints, a sampling technique was used for the manual review of large datasets. Whenever a dataset filtered for narrative-specific markers by the R code exceeded 800 messages, the lead author manually reviewed a random sample of 500 messages taken from the respective dataset to determine the percentage of false negatives and applied this percentage to the overall dataset. To ensure that the manually reviewed sample was large enough and the percentage of false positives found in the sample was representative for the entire dataset, a confidence interval was calculated. The confidence interval we used (95% CI < ± 3) means that the false positive percentages we computed based on the manual sample review for larger datasets is expected to vary by a maximum margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points at a 95 percent probability. We also tested our datasets for spam activities by conducting a manual review of 100 sample messages posted by the five accounts with the highest number of messages. Based on our review, no spam accounts were detected; even the messages of the user with the highest number of messages (38,813 messages) appeared authentic. Our general observation was that Discord is not a platform that is accommodating to bots due to its infrastructure and communication mode of live chats which bots do not perform well in.

To complement the quantitative analysis with real-time observations from live channels, an ethnographic analysis was carried out across QAnon groups that were active during the timeframe May 2020 - May 2022. In the wake of the U.S. Capitol riots on 6 January 2021, big tech companies such as Twitter, Meta, and Google, were pressured to remove QAnon-related groups and networks from their platforms. As a result, QAnon and their adherents migrated from large social media platforms towards smaller alt-tech platforms, in particular Gab, Discord, and Telegram.[56] As of July 2021, there were at least 3,500 QAnon Telegram groups and channels and more than 10,000 affiliated groups and channels in multiple languages with a global reach, according to the database of the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET).[57]

Our ethnographic analysis covered ten QAnon channels on Telegram and Discord varying in their size,

mode of interaction, and geographical focus. To identify relevant channels we searched for key words that have emerged as typical QAnon phrases: "QAnon", "WWG1WGA", "great awakening", "the storm", "trust the plan", "dark to light", "the military is the only way", "future proves past", "Q forces" "expose the pedos", "end the cabal", "save the children", and other phrases containing "Q" or "anons". Many of these keywords were used in previous analysis of QAnon, such as studies conducted by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab which identified 13 QAnon phrases and terms.[58] We included channels operating in English, German, and French to allow for the detection of comparative differences and commonalities across different geographies. The narratives and associated linguistic markers used in this analysis do not vary substantially across these three languages. For full transparency, we provide all original quotes featured in the ethnographic observations and translated for the purpose of this article in the notes.

Table 1 provides an overview of the selected channels:

Table 1. QAnon Group Selection

Channel Name	Geography	Language	Subscribers (as of May 2022)	Channel Type
Great Awakening Community	United Kingdom, United States	English	7869	Discord, Open Posts
Q+Anons	United States, United Kingdom	English	35164	Telegram, Central Posts
SpecialQForces	Worldwide	English	91207	Telegram, Central Posts, Open Comments
Anons	United States	English	10299	Telegram, Central Posts, Open Comments
Q Kingdom Family	Germany	German	7357	Telegram, Central Posts
QFaktor Germany Die Echtzeit Analyse	Germany	German	25201	Telegram, Central Posts
QAnon Austria	Austria	German	12792	Telegram, Central Posts
Qlobal Change	Germany, Austria, Switzerland	German	136943	Telegram, Central Posts
Dark to Light Channel	Germany	German, English	4226	Telegram, Central Posts, Open Comments
QAnon Quebec/France	Canada, France	French	1003	Telegram, Central Posts

The aim of our qualitative risk assessment was to investigate the nature and context of violence-predicting narratives and language found in QAnon groups. The lead author scanned all messages published in the selected groups (see Table 1) in the timeframe May 2020-May 2022 to (a) identify occurrences of relevant linguistic markers (see Appendix 2), (b) analyse them in the context of the entire message exchange, and (c) classify them into risk categories. The risk categories "high", "medium" and "low" were used to reflect the prevalence of both fusion and threat in the messages from the assessment timeframe. The additional metric "calls to violence" was included as a comparative measure to determine to what degree the outcome of our fusion-based approach aligns with traditionally used violence risk assessments via explicit threats to violence.[59]

To fulfil our duty of care, we ensured full anonymity and confidentiality of all gathered data. No identifiable data such as user names or meta data is shared in this study to protect the privacy of all users. The collected datasets were treated confidentially and held in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Data Protection Act 2018, and research codes of conduct. Collected datasets and screenshots were securely stored as evidence for all observations and quotes provided in this study. Due to the sensitive nature of the analysed content, the raw datasheets and screenshot evidence will only be made available on

demand to researchers who can provide proof of their academic affiliation.

Quantitative Results

Table 2 below summarises the relative prevalence of each of the linguistic categories in the target Great Awakening Community and the related Violent and Non- Violent Control Group. Percentages shown in the table describe the detected number of messages carrying relevant linguistic markers of each narrative category relative to the overall message count of the relevant data set (200,555 total messages in Great Awakening, 161,977 total messages in Third Hour and 1164 total messages in Iron March). The risk categories were determined based on the combined value of markers for fusion and threat. The following classification scheme was used: low: 0-0.05%, medium: 0.06-0.15%, high: 0.16-0.4%, "very high": > 0.4%.

Table 2. Quantitative Analysis Results

	Violence Predictors		Potential Violence Mediating and Moderating Variables										Risk
	Fusion	Existential Threat	Out-Group Slurs	Out-Group Demonisation	Out-Group Dehumanisation	Belief in Conspiracy of Out-Group	Inevitable War Narrative	Justification of Violence	Martyrdom Narrative	Violent Role Model	Hopelessness of Political Solutions	Calls to Violence	Estimated Violence Risk
Great Awakening Community	**0.27%**	**0.08%**	**0.04%**	**0.79%**	**0.24%**	**0.48%**	**0.01%**	**0.38%**	**0.01%**	**0.00%**	**0.00%**	**0.23%**	**HIGH**
Non- Violent Control Group: Third Hour	0.06%	0.02%	0.00%	0.39%	0.00%	0.04%	0.01%	0.00%	0.03%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	**LOW**
Violent Control Group: Iron March	0.86%	0.43%	2.75%	0.95%	1.03%	0.60%	0.26%	0.34%	0.00%	0.09%	0.00%	1.55%	**VERY HIGH**

Our analysis indicates elevated levels of fusion and threat among members of the Great Awakening Community, when compared to the non-violent Control Group. One pattern in the Third Hour content was that kinship language was not applied to the in-group but to all of humanity. For example, one message said: "We are told that we are all children of God. We're all brothers and sisters." Likewise in Third Hour content, existential threat narratives hardly ever highlighted threats to the in-group of fellow Mormons but most often dealt with threats faced either on an individual level or by mankind.

The patterns found in the Great Awakening Community analysis demonstrate a much greater presence of anticipated predictors of violence than in average discussion forums. Notably, however, compared to the violent control group, the levels were lower. As expected, the conversations on the terrorist Iron March website were marked by very high levels of fusion and threat as well as calls to violence.

This same pattern was found for additional variables that we predicted to mediate or moderate pathways from fusion to violence. For example, violence condoning norms such as justification of violence and calls to

violence as well as demonising, dehumanizing and derogatory language applied to the out-group were found to be more common in the Great Awakening Community than in the Third Hour content – but less common than in the Iron March group.

Qualitative Results

All QAnon groups we examined in our ethnographic research showed some degree of identity fusion and existential threat markers. However, fusion and threat were more pronounced in some QAnon groups than in others. Four out of the ten examined channels exhibited very high or high levels. Four were marked by medium levels and two by low levels of fusion and threat. Higher fusion and threat levels generally correlated with more instances of calls to violence but there were a few cases that did not follow that pattern. Contrary to common practice among counter-terrorism professionals, we argue that it can be misleading to focus predominantly on calls to violence to determine the violent potential of any given group or individual. The fact that calls to violence are low does not necessarily mean risk of violence is low. On a group level we would expect that high levels of calls to violence tend to go hand in hand with actual proneness to violence. They can be indicative of a group-based acceptance of violence and responsible for a violence-inciting atmosphere in the group. However, on an individual level they are not a robust predictor for which users are most likely to engage in extreme pro-group violence. The ones who use the most violence-threatening language are not necessarily identical to those that are most willing to put their lives on the line for the group.

Table 3 illustrates an overview of the observations made in the ethnographic research. The risk categories were determined based on the combined value of markers for fusion and threat. The following classification scheme was used to describe the prevalence of fusion, threat and violence metrics: high: > 3 examples per 100 messages, medium: > 1 examples per 100 messages, low: 0-1 examples per 100 messages.

Table 3. Qualitative Analysis Results

Channel Name	Fusion	Threat	Fusion + Threat	Calls to Violence	Estimated Violence Risk
Great Awakening Community	High	Medium	High	High	High
Q+Anons	High	Medium	High	High	High
SpecialQForces	High	High	Very High	High	Very High
Anons	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Q Kingdom Family	High	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
QFaktor Germany Die Echtzeit Analyse	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
QAnon Austria	Medium	High	High	Medium	High
Qlobal Change	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
Dark to Light Channel	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
QAnon Quebec/France	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium

Fusion + Threat

A significant proportion of QAnon groups (40% in our selection of groups) showed very high or high levels of the linguistic hallmarks found in terrorist manifestos. Based on the fusion and threat levels we found in the different geographies, English speaking groups tended to have higher estimated violence risk levels than German and French ones. However, we acknowledge that the geographic variations in threat detected in this study might be coincidental and should be further explored in follow-up studies.

Identity fusion markers in combination with existential threat narratives were highly prevalent in the channels Special Q Forces, Q + Anons, Great Awakening Community, and QAnon Austria, but could also be observed in other channels of the conspiracy theory movement. QAnon adherents frequently referred to each other as "brothers and sisters of the Awakening", "Anon Brothers and Sisters" and "Q family". One member of the Great Awakening Community wrote: "I love you all, fellow Patriots, fellow Guardians of Q... We happy few, we band of brothers... Never ever ever ever ever ever ever give up." Another one commented: "Stay strong my brothers and sisters. Satan wants to keep your [sic!] from God and His word […]." One user in the channel Q-Kingdom Family wrote: "I love you all, siblings of light […] We are almost there, dear brothers and sisters […]."[60] A third one said he was deeply touched and grateful whenever he received messages from fellow members and stressed an eternal bond with his "brothers" and "sisters".[61] A message in Q Anon Quebec/France read: "Rest assured my brothers and sisters, a new world is slowly taking shape and this requires the type of battle we are currently fighting."[62] One Qlobal-Change user shared a song together with the words: "How many of our brothers and sisters are playing this song before the drop?"[63] Members of the channel QFaktor Germany die Echtzeit Analyse were encouraged to trust God, the Q-Family, the plan and the military. The same post continued: "Look where we are, brothers and sisters. Would you have thought that we manage to get here?"[64]

The emphasis on metaphorical kinship with like-minded fighters in other geographies was a common feature across different channels. "Support to our brothers and sisters from the Netherlands! WE WILL NOT OBEY THIS Mandatory vaccination and the fascistic covid pass...WE ARE ALL UNITED," a message in the Anons channel said. A post by the Special Q Forces channel read: "WE LOVE OUR RUSSIAN BROTHERS and SISTERS! WE ARE THE HUMAN FAMILY." One QAnon Austria post announced that "our French brothers and sisters just arrived in Berlin,"[65] while a comment in QFaktor Germany die Echtzeit Analyse stressed that Anons "need to pay attention to our brothers in the U.S. and abroad."[66]

Fusion often appeared in tandem with the idea of an existential threat against the metaphorical family of QAnon: "Brothers and sisters […] we are in a race against time and a battle against sustained, relentless propaganda. But together we can turn the tide," read a message in the Great Awakening Community. The same channel warned that "the Globalists/Communitarians/Internationalists are attacking, whites, guns, and free speech" with the alleged end goal of "destroying the U.S.". One conspiracy theorist wrote: "The evil government controls the skies, the high ground, and if you are a dissident, you will be hunted down and killed unless you have a protector.[…] their objective is to reduce world population by 95%." Another Great Awakening Community member shared the fabricated idea that "electromagnetic weapons are used to torture and subjugate countless American citizens..." Shared suffering of the Q-family was also highlighted frequently: "Your Patience and Suffering was NOT for Nothing, Brothers and Sisters!" According to previous research, the reflection by group members on shared negative transformative experiences such as periods of suffering and traumatic incidents is a leading cause of identity fusion.[67]

Representation of an existential threat frequently came in the form of inevitable war narratives: "With you on this one brother," a user in the Great Awakening Community wrote, "war is inevitable I think and it feels like it's getting closer every day." Another one commented: "Now my family is being called up to end this galactic war." When asked "Your family? Your earthly family?" the QAnon adherent replied, "No not my human family, my soul family." Likewise, a Special Q Forces post announced: "THIS IS WAR," calling on fellow members to prepare for the fast-approaching storm. The channel QFaktor Germany die Echtzeit Analyse urged fellow patriots and Anons to be strong in anticipation of "the hardest part of the looming war."[68] Meanwhile, a member of Q + Anons wrote: "We are in a war". The user described the war as a battle "against the cabal, news media propaganda, banking systems, tyranny authorities." According to a member of QAnon Quebec/France, "the war between Dark and Light is the war between Satan and God. Between the reptilian bloodline of Satan and the human bloodline of Jesus."

QAnon channels made frequent use of demonising and dehumanising language to denounce political opponents. For example, members of the Great Awakening Community claimed that Jews "were born predators," speaking about their "animalistic mentality." One message from Q+Anon read: "Pay these parasites

no mind, OUR love makes us Stronger." Celine Dion was called a "reptile" for promoting vaccines. QAnon Quebec/France spoke of the "satanic Elite, the Iluminati, the Cabal" and claimed that "13 ROYAL families are REPTILIAN hybrids who are shape-shifters posing as HUMANS." The Dark to Light channel warned of the "globalist parasites."[69]

Calls for Violence

Even if calls for violence in isolation are not a reliable proxy for violence, they can nonetheless be a helpful marker to understand the overall atmosphere in a group. A violence-condoning group setting can – if combined with high fusion and threat – be indicative of a higher violence risk level. As expected, calls for violence were generally observed to be more common in the channels that showed higher levels of fusion and threat language. The channels Special Q Forces, Q+Anons and Great Awakening Community contained a high number of direct calls for violence and use of force, compared to the other examined channels. "Divided we fall, and the only way to be united outside of government is an insurrection and concentration of force. That is what we called "a target rich environment." QAnon members frequently painted the picture of a situation with no viable political or peaceful alternatives. One Q+Anon member stressed that "there is no legal path". Members who choose the illegal path can hope that "a brother will back your freedom." Another one wrote: "You may have to defend what you took thru violence." One user in the Great Awakening Community commented:

> *It is us or them. We live and they die, or we die and they live. If they live with us, they subvert the system as they have been doing for centuries. Only by removing them and their evil influence do we have any hope of survival.*

There was a recurring theme of justifying violence with the need to protect the in-group. One message in the Q+Anon channel read: "If the fools think this shit is still legitimate, they deserve the death that's coming quickly for them. Protect yourselves against the shedding. Arm up […]." Another member of the channel wrote: "I say, if you see anyone coming to get you, shoot first and ask questions later!"

Calls for violence were often directed at prominent people supportive of the Covid-19 vaccines. "Kill Gates," one user in Q+Anon wrote. Another asked "Why isn't anyone killing Soros?" A third user replied: "That's an excellent question!! He's a Jew." The user who posed the question about murdering Soros continued: "Someone should go and cut his throat." Prince Harry and Meghan Markle were also targeted with threats to violence. "Can I shoot them now?" a group member wrote in response to a message that read "this couple are promoting the vaxx," linking to a video of the speech by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge at the Global Citizen Live event in New York. Other political opponents who were at the centre of violent threats included anti-fascist movements and minority communities such as Black people and trans people: "PEDOPHILE TRANSGENDER PINK NAZIS | ANTIFAS" (…) GOOD THING: you will die," a post in the Q Special Forces channel said. One post in Q+Anon called on fellow members: "LYNCH this Black Lowlife Parasite, if this was my kid, this ANIMAL would not see the next light of day."

Calls for violence frequently went hand in hand with dehumanizing language applied to the targeted group or individual. For example, one Q+Anon member wrote "HANG THESE MONSTERS," while another posted "We need to kill all these sick pedo satanic dogs!" A post about Bill Gates' vaccine promotion was met with the comments: "This fucking rats [sic!] need to burn" and "this is evil not a human." One post by the Special Q Forces said: "just plain filth," "they are part of SATAN" and "I will definitely not object to pedophiles getting a bullet in the head! No mercy to these f*ckers! Send them to the black depths of hell!" The administrator of QAnon Austria warned that "it smells like rat" and announced that Anon "fighters" should "identify the enemy within in order to defeat the most dangerous enemy."[70]

The narrative of widespread pedophilia among the global elites was used to justify violence. "Expose the Pedos. End the Cabal," on message in the Special Q Forces channel read and was linked to an image of an execution rope with the words "get em all". The same channel warned: "ARE YOU A PEDO OR EVEN A REPTO? Expect a bullet ANYTIME". Other threatening messages in the Special Q Forces channel included

"To all BASTARDS: YOUR DEATH IS NEAR," "NO WHERE TO HIDE - the last rats got in the traps" and "THE HUNT IS ON, NO MERCY". Under every message the slogan "Military is the only way" featured in combination with pictograms of skulls, fire and swords and "WWG1WGA" and the signature of "Q".

Research Limitations and Future Perspectives

Due to time and capacity limitations, we only analysed a small fraction of available QAnon channels. However, we selected our sample of groups varying in their sizes, communication modes and geographies, in order to try and achieve a broader representation of the overall QAnon community. Despite this, an important limitation this introduced is that while we believe it is appropriate to quantitatively analyse one dataset per group, the limitations this introduces did not allow for us to conduct meaningful inferential statistical analysis. The associations and details we provide are thus primarily descriptive in nature and need to be subject to more robust statistical tests—ideally with future studies conducting a wider quantitative assessment using multiple datasets of QAnon and control groups.

Furthermore, even though our narrative and linguistic framework was tested, using in an Intercoder Reliability Analysis, language is always subjective, contextual, and ambiguous. We therefore acknowledge that our manual sorting of the NLP-based results can be subject to potential differing interpretations. Discord is also an idiosyncratic platform that is heavily populated by gamers and trolls whose messages cannot always be taken at face value. The linguistic markers used in this study, however, aim to detect patterns that can reflect subconscious and socio-psychological phenomena that are not reliant on making a distinction between satirical and serious threats.

Regarding classifications, while the selected control groups were classified into "violent" and "non-violent", these classifications only reflect a general group tendency based on known cases of members engaging in acts of violence and terrorism. However, as both groups count many users, most of them anonymous, it is impossible to determine the exact number of violent or non-violent members. Our risk of violence assessment is not primarily based on the comparative analysis of QAnon content with the violent and non-violent control groups but rather draws on a large body of evidence of the fusion-violence link and our systematic terrorist manifesto analysis, which served as the foundation for the text-based assessment framework. Nonetheless, it is important to be clear that we make no claim that our approach can or should be understood as reliably singling out individuals who will commit acts of violence. Our intention in the article is more limited and is focused around building the foundations of a framework and providing a linguistic toolkit that can help with risk assessment based on the proposed fusion + threat model which has been, and is being, tested in many different contexts.

To avoid that outliers dominate our analysis, we cross-checked the raw datasheets for recurring user names who made repeated use of the selected linguistic markers. While our checks reassured us that the linguistic analysis would not be distorted by one or several outliers, we found that there were dozens of usernames who made more frequent use of fusion language and other variables than others, potentially signaling a greater propensity for violence than the group average. The QAnon Telegram groups we included for the qualitative assessment varied widely in their architecture and mode of communication. While some groups were highly interactive with messages originating from many different members, other channels were dominated by the host accounts, meaning the content was primarily that of the host. This implies that in these specific cases the linguistic markers might say more about the group leader's proneness to violence than that of the broader membership. On the other hand, continued membership in such a group does seem to imply at least a tolerance for such language. Nevertheless, our estimated risk assignments should be understood with this important limitation in mind.

Our finding that QAnon groups vary widely in their degrees of proneness to violence points to a need for future research. We recommend that follow-up studies focus on further exploring why some QAnon groups and individuals showed much stronger violence predictors than others. The findings also raise further questions about the evolution of pro-violence group dynamics: What are the psycho-social factors that make

anti-establishment conspiracy myth groups turn towards violence as a viable solution? What role does in-group identity fusion play in this process? What are potential measures that could be taken to prevent identity fusion or to intervene by de-fusing members?

Conclusion

Our study supports the thesis that the QAnon movement poses a risk to national security, particularly in English-speaking countries. The high prevalence of identity fusion indicators along with external threat narratives, violence-condoning group norms as well as demonising, dehumanising and derogatory vocabulary in several QAnon groups are a particularly concerning warning sign that points to an increased proneness of group members to commit acts of political violence. This assessment is further supported by the higher occurrence of calls for violence we detected in QAnon channels when compared with our non-violent control group.

Taken together, the findings from the three groups offer support for the fusion-plus-threat model and illustrate how the proposed narrative and linguistic framework can be employed effectively for a computational NLP analysis of large datasets when this is followed up with a manual review of representative samples. Our holistic framework seeks to provide a better way of assessing risk of violence than simply taking calls to violence at face value. Apart from the fact that cases of high risk for violence might be missed when only measuring calls to violence, the fusion-plus-threat approach adds to our understanding of how to manage the threats posed by today's online spaces. With increasingly strict removal policies adopted by the big tech platforms for social media, we have seen that violent extremist movements have skillfully adapted their language to evade detection and deletion of their accounts and content. This means that even the most violent groups and individuals have started to refrain from making explicit calls to violence and would therefore easily go under the radar in most conventional monitoring systems. Even if it appears that there is a correlation in our study that looks at end-to-end encrypted messaging apps, this might no longer be the case when groups operate in spaces where they purposefully seek to cover up their willingness to commit violence.

Our findings have direct implications for research and policy. QAnon's proneness to extreme violence points to the need for a new definition of violent extremism. The movement's confusing ideological composition, post-organisational structures and wide-ranging membership [71] means that it does not fit into existing counter-terrorism frameworks. Many national and international terrorism strategies tend to list specific jihadist, right-wing or left-wing extremist groups, neglecting movements that transcend clear-cut ideological and organisational boundaries.[72] As mentioned in the introduction, the UN Designated Terror Groups list is almost exclusively focused on ISIS and Al-Qaeda related threats.[73] Broad categories such as "right-wing extremism" and "Salafi-jihadist extremism" are insufficient in an era of ideologically fluid movements with the potential to resort to violence – a growing phenomenon the FBI described as "salad bar ideologies".[74] Reflecting on this trend, the German intelligence agency introduced a new category for the monitoring of anti-government and anti-democracy extremist groups ("Staatsdelegitimierer") in 2021 to include violent extremists who no longer fit into the traditionally applied framework.[75] We could even ask whether radicalisation towards violence should be viewed as a phenomenon entirely distinct from ideological indoctrination, driven not by group doctrines but by identity fusion. From the perspective of security services, despite the important limitations discussed above, we contend that the analytical approach outlined in this article could help with resource allocation, as it can help narrow down at-risk populations. Follow-up projects could take a user-centered approach, although this would inevitably raise ethical concerns that would need to be navigated carefully. Ultimately, our research might open new doors for potential intervention approaches, such as de-fusing [76] members of violent extremist groups.

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[61] Original message: "Fühl mich jeden Tag zutiefst gerührt/Dankbarkeit wenn ich Eure Sprachnachrichten und Nachrichten höre und lese! Ewige Verbindung Bruder/Schwestern."

[62] Authors' translation of the French original: "Rassurez-vous mes frères & sœurs, un nouveau monde s'installe peu à peu et cela nécessite de livrer le type de batailles qu'on mène actuellement."

[63] Authors' translation of the German original: "Wie viele unserer Brüder und Schwestern spielen dieses Lied vor dem Drop (LZ)?"

[64] Authors' translation of the German original: "Alles wird gut werden und wir sollten GOTT, der Q-Familie, dem Plan und dem Militär vertrauen, die harte Arbeit der White Hats schätzen und stolz auf uns sein, dass wir so weit gekommen sind! Seht, wo wir sind, Brüder und Schwestern... Wer hätte gedacht, dass wir es bis hierher schaffen und dass wir den Wandel zum Guten miterleben werden? Was für eine ZEIT, um am LEBEN zu sein!!!"

[65] Authors' translation of the German original: "Unsere Französischen Brüder und Schwestern sind in Berlin angekommen."

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[69] Authors' translation of the German original: "Viele von uns in der Freiheitsbewegung verstehen die Eigenschaften des globalistischen Parasiten sehr gut, und das macht es viel einfacher für uns vorherzusagen, was sie tun werden."

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Appendix 1: Relevant Variables and Definitions

For this study we selected variables that were previously identified as potential mediators or moderators of the fusion to violence pathway. Of particular note due to being frequently cited factors that might contribute to an escalation towards violence include:

(1) Perceived out-group entitativity,[1] which will be traced via the use of "us versus them" narratives[2], in particular the use of language that insults, demonizes or dehumanizes an entire out-group,[3]
(2) perceived out-group threat,[4] which may manifest itself in narratives of an existential threat posed to the in-group,[5] the belief in a conspiracy of the outgroup,[6] or the belief in an inevitable war between the in- and out-group,[7] and
(3) violence condoning norms,[8] which may include the justification of violence, the glorification of violence via martyrdom narratives or the so-called "warrior mentality",[9] the identification with a violent role model,[10] and perceived hopelessness of alternative solutions.[11]

Figure 1. Proposed Relationships Between Group Alignment and Behavioural Outcome

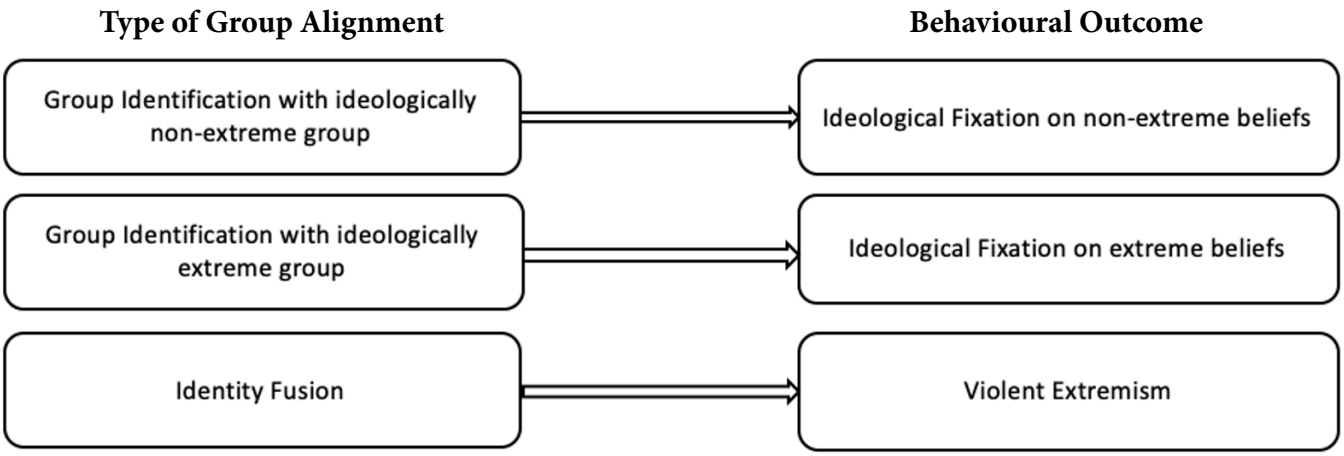
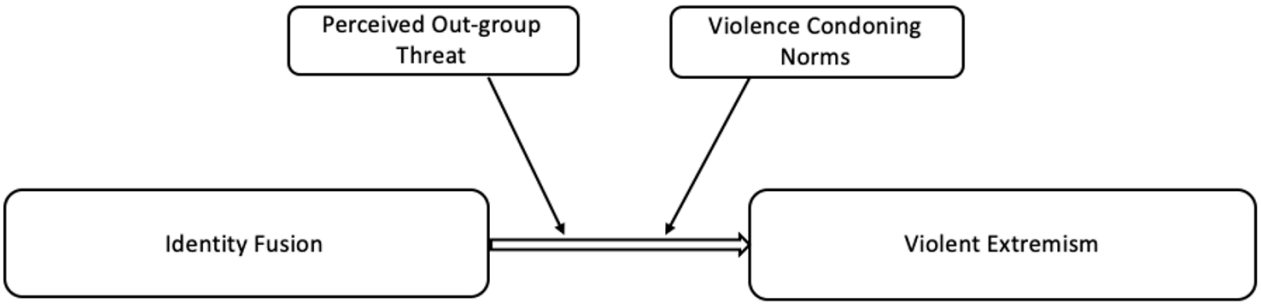


Figure 2. Proposed Relationship Between Fusion and Violence



Meta - Category	Sub-Category	Definition
Group alignment	**In-Group Identification**	*In-Group Identification* describes an individual's sense of belonging to a defined group in social psychology (Pennebaker and Chung 2008). Previous studies found that in-group identification can be reflected in the use of first-person plural pronouns such as "we", "us", "our".[12]
	In-Group Identity Fusion	*In-Group Identity Fusion* is a socio-psychological concept that describes a process where an individual's identity merges with the group identity. This dynamic is usually characterized by the use metaphors of kinship and family relatedness when talking about the in-group: e.g. words such as "brother", "sister", "loyalty" "family" "sons" "daughters" "our blood" "brotherhood" "motherland" "fatherland" might be used to talk about the in-group and/or fellow group members.[13]
Out-Group Entitativity	**Out-Group Slurs**	*Out-Group Slurs* are derogatory terms used in the context of hate speech and extremist texts.[14] They are offensive labels used to describe an entire group of people based on their ethnicity, race, gender, religion or sexuality.[15] Well known examples are "kike", "kufar", "infidel", "fag", "negro", "spic", "the Jew", the n-word or similar terms.[16]
	Out-Group Demonization	*Out-Group Demonization* describes "the attribution of basic destructive qualities to the other",[17] or the blaming of the out-group for the personal misfortunes or the in-group.[18] It usually involves the framing of an out-group as bad, hostile or threatening to the in-group. For example, studies explain that depictions of Jews as the "devil", "sly conspirators", "greedy Shylocks" or "vengeful beneficiaries" have been used to demonize them as a dangerous out-group.[19]
	Out-Group Dehumanization	*Out-Group Dehumanization* "involves viewing others as less than human", for example by describing them as, or comparing them with, animals.[20] Beyond the literal comparison with animals such as "monkey", "donkey, "dog", non-human related words applied to members of an out-group such as "creature", "tame" and "breed" could also be indicative of out-group demunisation.[21]
Out-Group Threat	**Existential Threat to In-Group**	*Existential Threat to In-Group* summarizes the idea of the in-group being threatened with physical or symbolic collective annihilation.[22] This might express itself in the belief that the in-group is facing a genocide or coordinated attack: for instance, some far-right extremist groups argue that white populations are facing an existential threat because they are dying out demographically due to immigration, abortion, and violence against whites.[23]
	Belief in Out-Group Conspiracy	*Belief in Out-Group Conspiracy* denotes a functionally integrated mental system which assumes that "a group of actors collude in secret to reach malevolent goals".[24] A linguistic analysis of the subreddit r/conspiracy found that compared to the control group the conspiracy theory community made more frequent use of words related to the categories "crime", "stealing" and "law".[25]
	Belief in Inevitable War	*Belief in Inevitable War* involves the idea that a war of races, religions, cultures or other opposing groups is looming above the in-group and cannot be prevented, or that a war between the in- and out-group is already under way. Inevitable war narratives are closely linked to "Accelerationism", which describes the desire to trigger a looming and inevitable violent escalation of existing tensions and societal collapse.[26]

Violence Condoning Norms	**Justification of Violence**	*Justification of Violence* include rational or emotional reasonings of why resorting to violence is the best or only solution.[27] For example, research highlighted group norms within jihadist groups that suggested a moral justification of terrorism and violent action via the ideas of pre-emptive action, self-defence or escape from a deleterious condition that requires an immediate action.[28]
	Martyrdom Narrative	*Martyrdom Narrative* describes the glorification of violence and terrorism by framing past or future violent action by in-group members against the out-group as heroic, selfless acts that serve a bigger purpose. For example, the language and symbolism of martyrdom might appear in the form of references to "heroic martyrs", "resistance", "self-sacrifice" or "dying in glory".[29]
	Violent Role Model	*Violent Role Models* may be mentioned in manifestos by invoking well-known perpetrators of genocidal violence as sources of inspiration.[30] For example, authors might indicate support of previously successful terrorists by expressing identification, support or admiration (e.g., "I admire", "I salute", "I support", naming someone "Saint", "God", etc.) for previous terrorists.[31]
	Hopelessness of Alternative Solutions	*Hopelessness of Alternative Solutions* summarizes the perceived failure of non-violent solutions such as political, diplomatic or other peaceful activist means. Authors of manifestos may indicate that they have "nothing to lose" or that "democracy/politics have failed" and therefore resort to more extreme solutions.[32]
Violence Threats	**Calls to Violence**	Calls to Violence cover announcements of violence and/or extreme self-sacrifice committed by the author as well as calls that encourage the manifesto's readers to engage in violence and/or self-sacrifice against a defined out-group. Words such as "kill", "shoot", "hang", "bomb", "slaughter" or "assassinate" may be indicative but calls to violence may also reference specific weapons such as "sniper rifles", "ammonium nitrate", etc.[33]

Appendix 2: Linguistic Markers used in NLP analysis

	Narrative	Detected Keywords
Group Alignment	**In-Group Identification**	*"We"/"Us"/"Our" in combination with* "European", "cultural conservative", "Christian conservative", "conservative", "indigenous", "non-Muslim", "Justiciar Knight", "patriot", "martyr", "nationalist", "my people", "my race", "our race", "anon", "white men", "whites", "Aryan", "true Muslim", "believer", "Muslim community", "ummah", "Muslim society"
	In-Group Identity Fusion	"brother", "sister", "sons", "daughters", "kin", solidarity", "family", "fellow …", "comrades", "my blood", "our blood", "bloodline", "ancestry", "descendant", "ancestor", "brethren" (These terms only indicate identity fusion when used metaphorically to describe the in-group rather than biological family.)
Violence Threats	**Calls to Violence**	"executed", "execution", "punished", "punishment", "death penalty", "kill", "massacre", "attack", "destroy", "retribution", "revenge", "punish", "eradicate", "starve", "die", "torture", "behead", "guns", "must attack", "must fight", "must kill", "give them hell", "must play his part in this revolution", "burn", "shoot", "flamethrowers", "firearm", "weapon", "grenade", "bomb", "set fire", "Molotov", "fight", "brutal steps", "jihad", "bring death to", "forcible overthrow", "revolution"
Out-Group Entitativity	**Out-Group Slurs**	"kike", "nigger", "negro", "spic", "fag", "goyim", "golem", "the Jew", "global Jewry", "pajeet", "bitch", "whore"
	Out-Group Demonization	"traitor", "corrupt", "evil", "enemy", "our enemies", "vicious", "barbaric", depraved", "vile", "puppets", "perversion", "blood libel crimes", "cruel", bloody", genocidal", "sinful", deceitful", "invader", "poison", parasite, "menace", "brutal", "ruthless", " "bloodsucking", "dirty", "deceptive", "treacherous" "poisonous", "oppression" , "oppressive", "shirk" "unbeliever", "immoral" "jahili", "pollute", "demolish", "shake the foundations", "Dar- ul-Harb", "arrogant", "mischievous", "criminal", "deceivers", "liars"
	Out-Group Dehumanization	"animal", "plague", "impure", "brute", "dog", "lower Iq", "lower being", "inferior", "squalid" "parasitic", "parasite", "creature", "trash", "filth", "vermin", "spider", "devil", "monster", "beast", "reptile", "reptilian", "snake", "cockroach", "beneath human skin", "scum"
Out-Group Threat	**Existential Threat to In-Group**	"subjected to", "coerced", "brainwashed", "exterminated", "brutalised", "raped", "terrorised", "ravaged", "robbed", "replace", "subjugate", "make war upon my people" "destroyed", "overwhelmed", "under siege", "under demographical siege", "disenfranchise", "subvert", "destroy", "assault", "kill us", "kill our…", "running out of time", last chance", "enslavement", "suffer", "economic plunder", "condemned to death", destruction of all mankind", "ill society", "at the brink of", "danger", "annihilation", "extinction", "decay"
	Belief in Out-Group Conspiracy	"betray", "betrayal", "sell", "sold", "collude against", "colluded", "conspire", "fake", "fraud", "corruption", "corrupt", "ZOG", "Kalergi", "white genocide", "great replacement"
	Belief in Inevitable War	"war", "battle", "fight", "jihaad" *in combination with* "imminent", "inevitable", "looming", "started", "already"

14. Violence Condoning Norms	**Justification for Violence**	"pre-emptive", "defend", "protect", "self-defense", "self-defence", "forced to fight", "no longer ignore", "act of defense", "purified", "purify", "brutal steps should have been used", "need for jihaad", "reasons for jihaad", "need for war", "the struggle is imposed upon", "natural struggle", "cannot co-exist"
	Martyrdom Narrative	"die in glory", "sacrifice", "knight", "martyr", "dying selflessly", protecting our people", "immortal", "act of preservation", "my death", "defending the work of the Lord", "standing guard", "appears as the herald", "release mankind from servitude", "free from", "freed from"
	Violent Role Model	Mention of the names of previous terrorist attackers or violent political leaders (e.g. Breivik, Tarrant, Hitler, etc.) or specific attack references (e.g. Christchurch, Poway, El Paso, Utoya, Halle, etc.), in combination with terms that indicate perceived role model status such as "hero", "role model", "saint", "inspiring", "inspire", "inspiration", "support", "influenced by"
	Hopelessness of Alternative Solutions	"democracy", "democratic", "peaceful", political", "system", "politics", "dialogue", "passivity" *in combination with* "meaningless", "weakness", "failed", "end", "vanish", "man-made", "jahili", "all societies existing"

Appendix 3: R Codes for Narrative Categories

```
#FUSION
data_filtered_fusion = QAnon[grep("Brother|sister|family|motherland|our blood|fatherland|sons|daughters|kin|my people|my race|our people|European race|ancestry|ancestor|descendant|fellow", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_fusion)/nrow(QAnon)

#VIOLENCE
data_filtered_violence = QAnon[grep("kill|hang|bomb|shoot|slaughter|exectued|execution|punish|death penalty|massacre|destroy|must attack|must fight|revenge|retribution|eradicate|starve|die|torture|behead|burn|bring death to| give them hell|weapon|firearm|assassinate|gun|rifle|knife|grenade|brutal steps|molotov|jihaad|jihad|set fire|revolution|forcible overthrow|flamethrowers|M1-16|ammonium nitrate", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE, useBytes = TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_violence)/nrow(QAnon)

#SLURS
data_filtered_slurs = QAnon[grep("kike|nigger|negro|dirty jew|spic|fag|goyim|golem|the jew|global jewry", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_slurs)/nrow(QAnon)

#DEMONISATION
data_filtered_demonisation = QAnon [grep("traitor|evil|enemy|corrupt|vicious|barbaric|depraved|vile|puppets|perversion|blood libel|pervert|pedo|blood libel|crime|cruel|bloody|genocidal|sinful|deceitful|invader|poison|parasite|menace|brutal| ruthless|blood-sucking|dirty|deceptive|treacherous|poisonous|oppressive|oppressor|shird|
unbeliever|immoral|jahili|pollute|demolish|shake the foundations|dar ul-harb|arrogant|mischievous|criminal|deceivers|liars", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_demonisation)/nrow(QAnon)

#DEHUMANISATION
data_filtered_dehumanisation = QAnon[grep("animal|plague|impure|brute|dog|lower iq|lower being|inferior|squalid|parasitic|parasite|creature|trash|filth|vermin|spider|devil|monster|beast|reptile|reptiloid|femoid|reptilian|snake|cockroach|beneath human skin|sub human| anti-human|disease|savage|infest|breed|locust|monkey|gorilla|rat|microbe|satan|cancer", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_dehumanisation)/nrow(QAnon)

#EXISTENTIAL THREAT
data_filtered_existentialthreat = QAnon[grep("subjected to|coerced|brainwashed|exterminated|brutalised|raped|terrorised|ravaged|extinction|replacement|genocide|robbed|subjugate|make war upon my people|destroy|subvert|overwhelmed|under siege|demographic siege|disenfranchise|assault|kill us|kill our|kill my|running out of time|run out of time|last chance|enslavement|enslaved|suffer|plunder|condemned to death|destruction of all mankind|at the brink of|endanger|annihiliation|decay", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_existentialthreat)/nrow(QAnon)

#BELIEF IN CONSPIRACY
data_filtered_conspiracybelief = QAnon[grep("betray|betrayal|sell|sold|collude|conspire|fake|fraud|corruption|corrupt|zog|great replacement|white genocide|kalergi", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_conspiracybelief)/nrow(QAnon)

#BELIEF IN INEVITABLE WAR
data_filtered_inevitablewar = QAnon[grep("war|battle|fight|jihad|jihad|collapse|conflict", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
data_filtered_inevitablewar = data_filtered_inevitablewar [grep("imminent|inevitable|looming|started|already", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)

# VIOLENCE JUSTIFICATION
data_filtered_violencejustification = QAnon[grep(paste(violencejustification,collapse="|"), QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
```

```
nrow(data_filtered_violencejustification)/nrow(QAnon)

#MARTYRDOM NARRATIVE
martyr_dist <- function (message) {
 return(min(unlist(lapply(martyr, function(pattern) {
  drop(adist(pattern, message, partial = TRUE)) / nchar(pattern)})))}
QAnon$martyrdom_distance = unlist(lapply(QAnon$message, martyr_dist))

data_filtered_martyrdom = QAnon[QAnon$martyrdom_distance<0.15,]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_martyrdom)/nrow(QAnon)

#VIOLENT ROLE MODEL
data_filtered_violentrolemodel = QAnon[grep("breivik|tarrant|hitler|crusius|rodger|baillet|earnest|minassian|mcveigh", QA-
non$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
data_filtered_violentrolemodel = data_filtered_violentrolemodel[grep ("hero|role model|saint|inspire|inspiration|inspiring|sup-
port|influenced", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_violentrolemodel)/nrow(QAnon)

#HOPELESSNESS OF ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS
data_filtered_hopelessness = QAnon [agrep("democracy|democratic|peacful|political|system|politics|dialogue|passivity", QA-
non$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
data_filtered_hopelessness = data_filtered_hopelessness [grep ("meaningless|weak|fail|end|vanish|man-made|flawed|jahili|given
up", QAnon$message, ignore.case=TRUE),]
nrow(QAnon)
nrow(data_filtered_holelessness)/nrow(QAnon)
```

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Politically Motivated Extreme-Right Attacks Against Elected Representatives in Contemporary Germany

by Agata Kałabunowska

Abstract

The discovery of the NSU terrorist cell, the Halle synagogue shooting, and the murder of nine persons with a migration background in Hanau caused a serious shift in the perception of the extreme right in Germany and led to a number of legislative changes. The killing of CDU politician Walter Lübcke by a sympathiser of the far right should be considered a negative highlight that drew attention to the security of elected representatives. This article offers an overview of available official data on the scale of the threat by the extreme right in Germany in general and on violent attacks against public figures, including elected representatives, in particular. It analyses three instances of attacks against politicians (Henriette Reker, Andreas Hollstein and Walter Lübcke) and discusses as well a series of threats from the so-called NSU 2.0, the aim being to discover underlying patterns of violence. The author also briefly reviews countermeasures taken by the federal government in order to prevent and counter far-right threats in the Germany of today.

Keywords: Germany, extreme right, political violence, political murders, Verfassungsschutz

Introduction

The National Socialist Underground (NSU) murders committed between 2000 and 2007 (known as the *NSU-Mordserie*), followed by a lengthy trial of several people connected to this extreme-right terrorist organization, has captured German public attention for years and caused a significant shift in the perception of the far-right threat. And yet, in recent years, Germany was once again shocked by a number of criminal offences, either racially motivated or xenophobic. The 2019 synagogue shooting in Halle, as well as the murder of nine people with a migratory background in shisha bars in Hanau in 2020, became exemplary demonstrations of Germany's struggle against the far right. These incidents have alarmed security agencies, sensitized society, and led to several legislative changes.

These were not only people of colour, Jews or Muslims who became targets of the attacks. Strengthening of the far-right scene has impacted on the daily life of employees in the German public administration, as well as of elected representatives. In May 2022, the German newspaper *Handelsblatt* was reporting on "German cities and local communities registering a 'dramatic' increase in violence against officials and elected representatives."[1] The murder of Christian Democrat (CDU) politician Walter Lübcke in June 2019 should be considered a "negative highlight of far-right violence" in Germany.[2] As many authors claim, it was the first far-right murder of an active elected representative since the end of the Nazi era.[3] Sadly, contemporary Germany does not stand alone when it comes to attacks against elected representatives. In the recent years, similar political murders occurred also in the United Kingdom (the case of MP Jo Cox) or in Poland (the case of Gdańsk city mayor Paweł Adamowicz), among other countries.

Even though politically motivated violence cannot be ascribed exclusively to the far-right milieu, this article concentrates on violent attacks motivated by this particular extremist worldview. Focusing on this phenomenon can be justified, first, by the German federal government's perception of far-right extremism as the biggest security threat in Germany—a perception that has been popularised during Horst Seehofer's (CSU) tenure as the Federal Minister of the Interior. It has also been reiterated by his successor, Nancy Faeser (SPD). The government's stance on this issue was repeatedly highlighted in public statements. Secondly, according to data published by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (in German: *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, BfV), the extreme-right milieu outnumbers (in terms of membership) other groups and movements considered by the BfV as a threat to the democratic order. Finally, most of

the well-known politically motivated attacks committed in Germany in recent years can be attributed to perpetrators with either explicit or latent far-right worldviews.

This article aims to place three instances of right-wing attacks against politicians in the broader context of the increasing extremist threat in contemporary Germany. It is based on data of the BfV and the Federal Criminal Police Office (German *Bundeskriminalamt*, BKA), which are crucial yet underresearched sources of information on the scale of the extremist threat in Germany. Seeking to contribute toward an improved understanding of contemporary right-wing extremism, this article's main objective is to search for patterns in recent attacks against elected representatives. The goal is to understand how, when, and under which circumstances have these attacks taken place, as well as to explore the socio-political characteristics of the perpetrators. Understanding the patterns of past crimes is an important step in creating effective countermeasures for the future. The article will also shed light on countermeasures taken so far to secure the fundamental German democratic order, including the protection of state officials.

In this article, the term "extreme right" (German *Rechtsextremismus*) is preferred and occasionally used interchangeably with "far right" or "radical right" mainly for stylistic reasons. What is meant are people, groups, organisations and movements whose worldview assumes that belonging to a specific ethnic group or nation determines a person's worth; who turn to racism, antisemitism, and xenophobia; and whose beliefs stand in conflict with the constitutional democratic order. We, therefore, follow the definition of the German *Verfassungsschutz*, while acknowledging the ongoing controversies among scholars regarding the definition of the extreme right.[4]

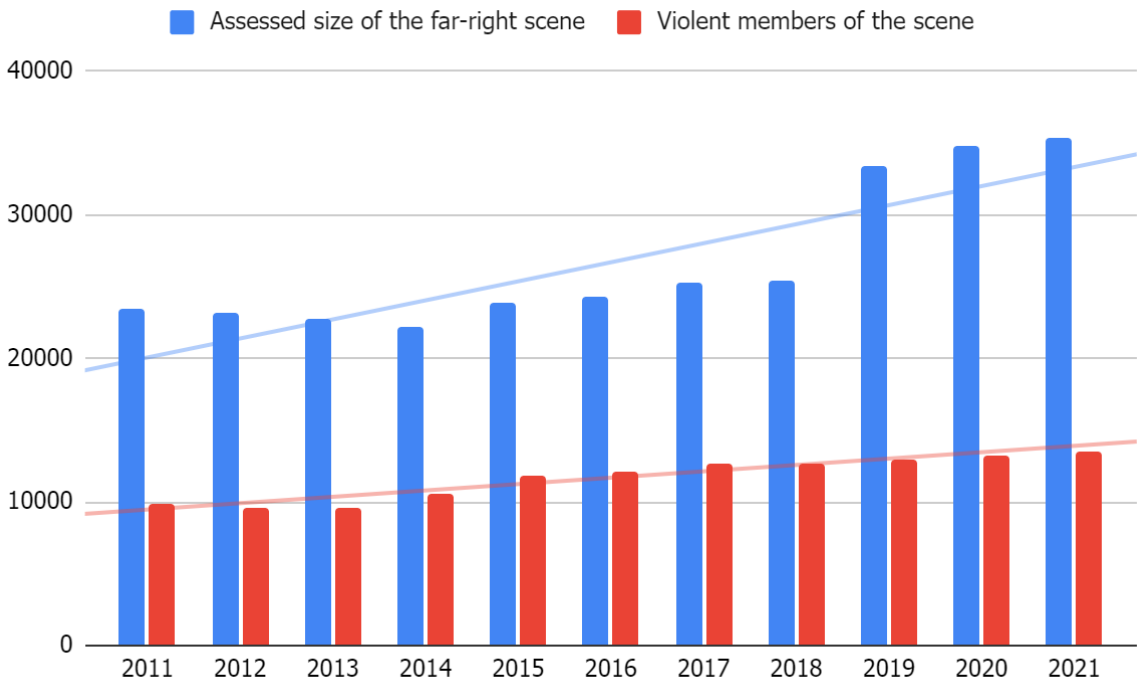
Germany's Far-right Milieu in the Light of Official Data

Apart from opinion polls, there are two main sources of information about the scale of the "far-right problem" in Germany. One of them is the BfV, an institution established in 1950 and currently operating as an executive agency of the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community. Each of the federal states has its own domestic intelligence service called *Landesbehörde für Verfassungsschutz* (LfV). The second source of information are the statistics published by the BKA. In 2001, BKA introduced a new classification of crimes which includes "politically motivated crimes". In this section, we will summarize some of the most current data on the radical-right scene in Germany.

BfV and LfVs, appointed to protect fundamental constitutional values, collect and analyse data on threats to the German democratic order, in particular "information on extremist efforts, activities posing a security risk, and activities undertaken on behalf of foreign intelligence services."[5] The character of such threats has changed over time. Currently, the annual report discusses the estimated size of the following milieus: the far right, the far left, Islamism/Islamic terrorism, extreme tendencies among foreigners, espionage, and "miscellaneous" groups, such as the *Reichsbürgerbewegung* or the sect of scientology. Annually, the BfV presents a comprehensive report on the number, size, and character of radical milieus that are considered a threat to democracy. In these reports, the far-right is repeatedly perceived as the biggest of these movements. While presenting the newest available report, summarising the year 2021, federal minister Faeser, together with the director of BfV Thomas Haldenwang, highlighted again that it was the extreme right that posed the biggest threat to the German liberal democratic order.[6]

As Figure 1 shows, as many as 1/3 of all members of far-right groups and environments are considered violence-prone (*gewaltbereit*). Nevertheless, as it will be shown in the following paragraphs, many far-right perpetrators have never draw attention to themselves – neither their neighbors and relatives nor security agencies considered them as a potential threat.

Figure 1: Assessed size of the far-right milieu (including its violent members) in Germany between 2011 and 2021



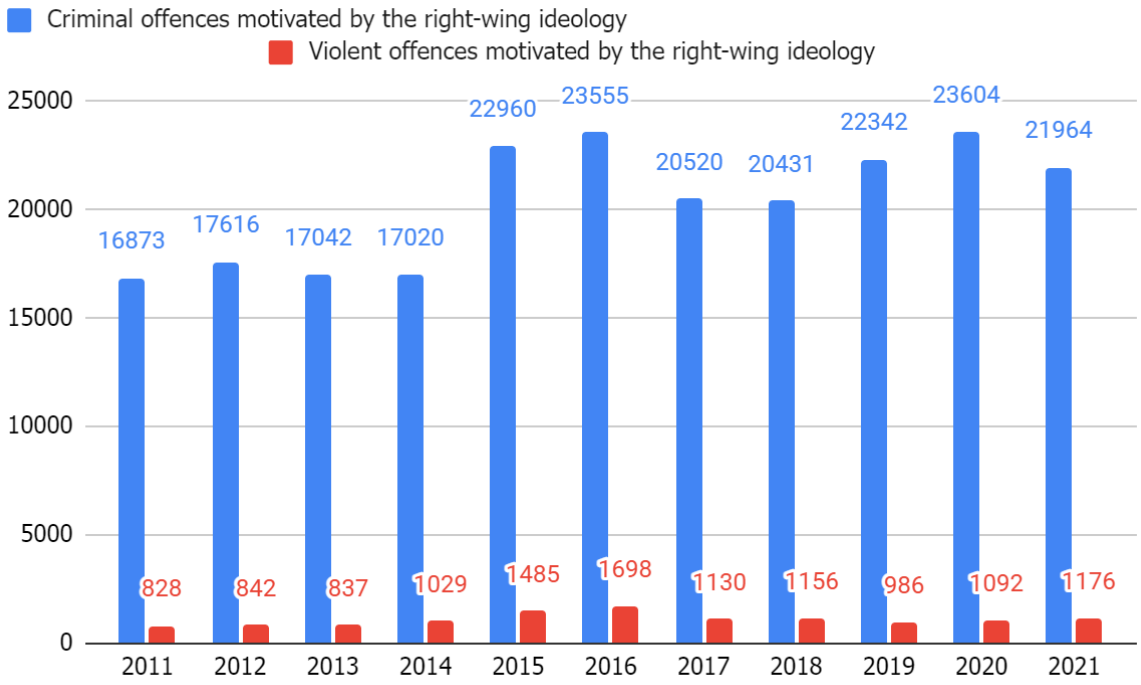
Source: Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz

The second source of information about threat posed by right-wing extremism is the BKA's annual report summarising politically motivated criminal offenses. Among roughly 5 million crimes committed in Germany every year, politically motivated cases represent a minor part. However, among these, crimes motivated by a far-right worldview form the majority.

According to the definition of the BKA, politically motivated offences aim at achieving or hindering political aims. They are directed against the liberal democratic social order, or against other persons for reasons having to do with their political views, nationality, ethnic background, skin colour, religious affiliation, social status, physical and mental disabilities, sexual orientation or appearance.[7] When it comes to offences committed with a far-right motive, these include (for instance) an arson attack on a refugee camp, verbal or written insults focusing on a person's religion or skin colour, or a physical assault on a person who upholds a culturally different perspective on life. Crimes committed against elected representatives that will be described below are also considered to be politically motivated, even in cases where the perpetrators had never been members of any known far-right organisation.

Statistics published by the BKA show an increase in both politically motivated offences committed with a far-right motive and violent offences between 2011 and 2021 (see Figure 2). Similar to the data published by the BfV, BKA's data should be regarded as rough estimates only. Many insults, written and verbal attacks, and even cases of assault were not reported to the police. Furthermore, in many cases that were in fact reported, it is difficult to determine the motive of a perpetrator – some of the motives given were rather vague, while in other cases perpetrators lied about their motivation.

Figure 2: Criminal offences motivated by far-right ideology, including violent offences, committed in Germany between 2011 and 2021



Source: Bundeskriminalamt

With this in mind, one may notice that the statistics of both BfV and BKA indicate a slight increase in right-wing criminal offences around the year 2015, when a significant number of immigrants and asylum seekers—mainly from Middle Eastern countries—crossed German borders. Although right-wing attacks had taken place in German history before, there is a wide consensus that the current phenomenon is closely related to the migration crisis.[8] We might, therefore, assume that the presence of immigrants and asylum seekers not only led to a growth of the milieu, but, more importantly, it reinforced extreme reactions, both verbal and physical attacks.

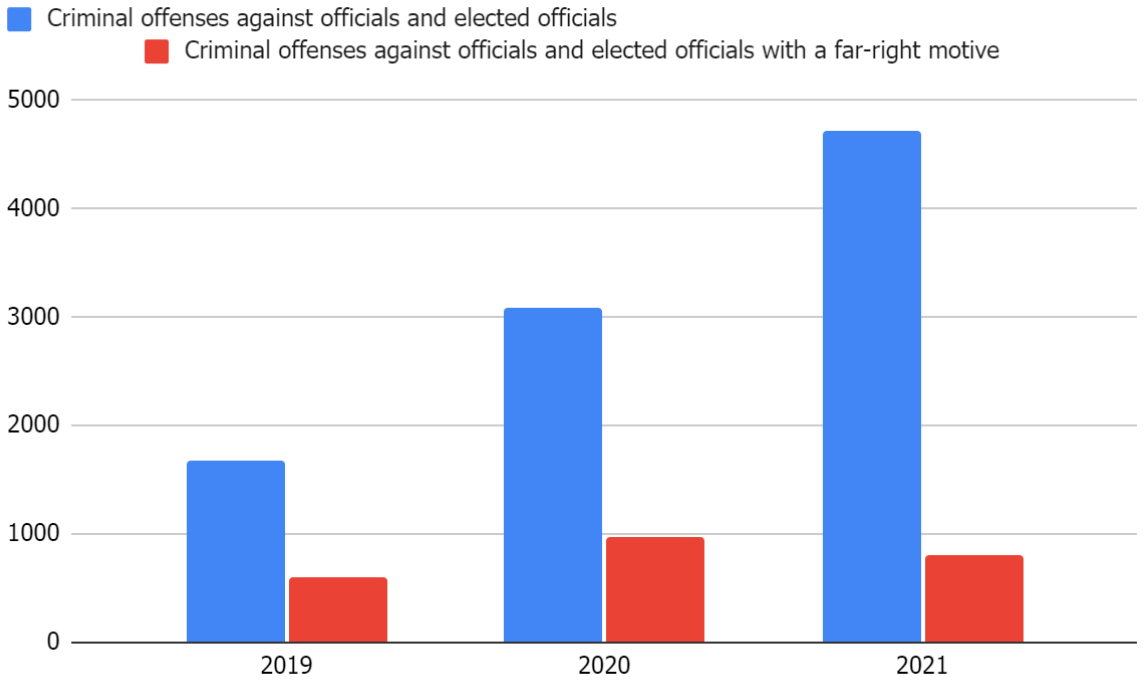
Criminal Offences against the State and its Officials

Since 2019, BKA has monitored criminal offences directed against the state and its officials separately. According to the information available on the Office's website, the main reason for a more scrupulous data collection was precisely the increase in the number of cases like those described in this article: the murder of Walter Lübke and the attacks against Henriette Reker and Andreas Hollstein. This change in the collection of data led, not for the first time, to accusations that the German state acted too late – only after tragedy strikes. Stefan Bisanz, an expert on personal protection, concluded in a widely cited statement that Germans are by nature not a "preventative nation".[9]

The numbers of recorded criminal offences directed against officials increased in three consecutive years (see Figure 3). In 2019, BKA took note of 1,674 criminal offences categorised as "against officials and elected representatives" (*gegen Amts- und Mandatsträger*). In 609 instances, or 36% of all cases, a far-right motive has been determined. In 89 of the total number of cases, the crime committed was described as an act of violence, 20 of these resulting in bodily harm.[10] During the following year, 2020, the number of attacks against officials increased dramatically. Among a total of 3,097 criminal offences registered under this category, 978 were committed with a far-right motive.[11] The most recent statistical data available during the preparation of this article covers the year 2021. In addition to crimes "directed against officials and

elected representatives", the annual report of the BKA also described criminal offences committed "in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic" and "in the context of elections". [12] The targets of these criminal offenses were in many cases also public officials. In 2021, the number of offences directly affecting officials and elected representatives of the state grew to 4,772, with 801 of these linked to sympathisers of, or from, the far-right milieu.[13]

Figure 3: Number of criminal offences against officials and elected officials committed in Germany between 2019 and 2021



Source: Bundeskriminalamt

When it comes to elected representatives and politicians, the attacks were committed regardless of their political party affiliation. The victims belonged to—or sympathised with—parties that are considered left, right and center in Germany's political spectrum.[14]

Apart from the data collected by government agencies, another source of information about the scale of the threat directed against representatives of the state are polls and studies. For example, "Kommunal" published in 2020 the results of an opinion poll conducted amongst a representative sample group of local politicians. A total number of 2,494 mayors of German towns and cities (a quarter of the entire community) answered questions about their perception of threats related to the exercise of their official duties. Roughly 64% of them responded that they had been offended, insulted, threatened, or directly attacked because of their public role and function. The survey showed that these threats were not a function of the size of the community; "Kommunal" concluded that "it is no longer a big city problem."[15]

In an updated version of the study published a year later, 72% of mayors responded that they feared for their personal safety. Approximately 15% of all respondents claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative influence on how they felt about their personal safety.[16] Studies conducted by two foundations—the Körber-Stiftung [17] and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung [18]—confirm that public officials experience insults or attacks, or otherwise fear for their personal safety, because of their role in public administration or local politics.

Cases of Right-wing Attacks Against Politicians

Henriette Reker and Andreas Hollstein

Attacks against Henriette Reker in Cologne and Andreas Hollstein in Altena, in 2015 and in 2017 respectively, were committed under different circumstances, but in both instances perpetrators shared similar motives: they opposed the pro-immigrant policies of their victims. The public function of the victims of these attacks, combined with a clear political motivation of the perpetrators, allows us—for the purpose of this article—to classify these offenses as politically motivated crimes committed against elected representatives in Germany.

On 17th October 2015, Henriette Reker, an independent politician supported in the Cologne mayoral elections by CDU, the Greens and FPD, was stabbed with a knife and seriously wounded. Four bystanders were injured as well. The attack took place during a public event that was part of the political campaign and happened one day before the mayoral elections. Reker needed to undergo several surgical procedures following the incident.[19] In the summer of 2016, the perpetrator, 44-year-old Frank S., was found guilty of attempted murder and grievous bodily harm, and sentenced to 14 years in prison.

The trial offered important insights into his personal situation, characteristics, and motives behind the attack on Reker. The court determined that Frank S. had his first contact with the right-wing scene at the age of 16. He then started wearing typical neo-Nazi clothing, partook in *Rechtsrock*-events as well as in Rudolf-Hess-marches. He also engaged in fights with members of the Antifa movement and conducted attacks against foreigners, which had led to his imprisonment between 1997 and 2000. After his release, Frank S. worked as a painter but was also frequently unemployed. For the last three years prior to his attack on Reker, he remained unemployed, engaged in only a limited social life, and would spend his time observing political events revolving around the migration crisis, with growing disappointment in Germany's politics. He put more trust in extremist internet portals than mainstream media, which according to him, were controlled by the government. He viewed the government as lacking legitimacy to make any decisions whatsoever concerning the accommodation of asylum seekers. According to a quote included in the verdict, S. believed the government "betrayed the German nation" and pushed the country into a state of chaos.

His disappointment in democratic—and allegedly ineffective—forms of protest led him to take steps of a more extreme nature. The then-upcoming mayoral elections and numerous campaign posters in favour of Reker, known for her support for asylum seekers and her advocacy for a *Willkommenskultur* (welcome culture), convinced S. that it she was an appropriate target for his plans to do something. The fact that (while independent) Reker was backed in this election also by the Green Party had an impact on his perception. According to S., the Greens and Antifa were closely associated. His first words after the attack at the campaign stand in Cologne were: "I did this for all of you," followed by: "I did this for all of you and your children." Voluntarily, he confessed to police officers that he wanted to kill Reker to express his disagreement with the policies of Angela Merkel's government. During the investigation, S. was found to be mentally healthy. Therefore, his crime in light of his motives was classified as strictly politically motivated. The motivation resurfaced with full clarity when he used the opportunity to speak publicly in front of the court, as he began to detail his political views.[20] The court concluded that the perpetrator wanted to prevent Reker from being elected for mayor, while expressing his disagreement with Germany's immigration policy.[21] Reker was elected mayor of Cologne the day after the assassination attempt and re-elected in 2020.

Two years after the attack on Reker, in November 2017, another public official Andreas Hollstein – politician, member of CDU, and mayor of the city of Altena – was attacked with a knife in a kebab restaurant. Only thanks to the quick reaction of the owner of the restaurant was the perpetrator stopped and apprehended. There are several similarities between the perpetrators of the attacks in Cologne and Altena, as well as between the two victims. Werner S., the man who attacked Hollstein, was an unemployed, middle-aged man with strong opinions on immigration policies, while his victim was known for his decision to accept more refugees in his region than required according to the Königstein distribution key which obliged local governments to take a fair share of the asylum seekers arriving in Germany. In 2017, the city governed by mayor Hollstein was presented the National Integration Award for their integration efforts.

Contrary to the severe sentence in the case of the attack on Reker, the perpetrator in Hollstein's case was only sentenced to two years on parole and court-ordered social work. The justification for a lower sentence was that the mayor had not been severely wounded, and that the attack was not planned, but rather committed on the spur of the moment, out of desperation rather than on grounds of political convictions. Although Werner S. made a xenophobic statement during the attack, the court did not classify the offence as motivated by racism or xenophobia. Werner S. reportedly said to the mayor that while he invited refugees to Altena, the citizens of the city were doomed to starve.[22] All in all, the attack was neither assessed as politically motivated nor as attempted murder. The court sentence announced in June 2018 failed to satisfy many commentators as well as the mayor – himself a lawyer by profession. Hollstein was convinced that a lenient sentence for S. would send the wrong message and might encourage others to consider similar assaults.

Even though the judiciary decided differently in the two cases under consideration here, there is broad agreement among journalists as well as other observers of Germany's political life, as well as scholars of the far right, that both attacks can be assessed as motivated by a radical worldview. The assault on Reker and the attempted attack on Hollstein have repeatedly been cited as examples of the growing threat posed by the far right to politicians.

Walter Lübcke

At the time of his death, Walter Lübcke was the head of the regional council in Kassel. Previously, from 1999 to 2009, he had been a member of the Landtag [local parliament] of Hesse. Since 1986 he had been an active member of the CDU party and was known as a supporter of the German *Willkommenskultur*, also during the 2015-2016 refugee influx. Because of his involvement in refugee-related policies, he was repeatedly insulted and received countless threats. At the beginning of June 2019, Lübcke was fatally shot in the head at point-blank, while sitting on his porch in Istha and smoking a cigarette. The murderer was Stephan Ernst, a 45-year-old sympathizer of the far-right.

As mentioned earlier, according to the media and some scholars, this was the first political assassination in post-war Germany coming from the far-right. The attribute "political" should, in this specific context, be understood as "directed against an elected political representative." Murders carried out by the NSU on members from the immigrant community can also be considered politically motivated. The same could be said about an attempted attack against a synagogue in Halle in October 2019, or about the death of nine citizens with a migratory background in Hanau in February 2020. Nevertheless, the murder of Lübcke has rightly been considered a turning point in the history of post-war violence by the extreme right in Germany.

Similarly to Andres Hollstein, Lübcke was attacked off duty (i.e., after hours). The perpetrator Ernst, on the other hand, resembles the attacker who tried but failed to kill Henriette Reker. He had been known to the police and the security services due to his involvement in the far-right milieu. Ernst was arrested by the police two weeks after the crime took place and confessed to murder. For years, he had been closely observing Lübcke's political activity and his work on behalf of refugees, and increasingly he strongly disagreed with this. What allegedly provoked him most was a public speech given by the politician in October 2015. When booed by those opposing the welcoming of refugees, Lübcke replied that living in Germany was inseparably connected with adhering to rules and sharing specific values. Those who did not share them, he continued, were free to leave the country. Members of the right-wing scene perceived these words as a frontal attack. During his criminal trial, however, it was revealed that Ernst's anger was not only directed against one politician. His rejection of multiculturalism and hatred toward foreigners surfaced on other occasions too. For instance, in January 2016, he allegedly attacked and wounded an asylum seeker from Iraq, though he was later cleared in court of these charges.

For the murder of Lübcke, the right-wing extremist was sentenced to life imprisonment by the High Regional Court of the City of Frankfurt a.M. in early 2021. The crime was qualified as "especially severe" (*besonders schwer*) and the motives of Ernst as racist, xenophobic and *völkisch* (German supremacist and nationalist). Markus Hartmann, an alleged accomplice of Ernst, was not charged with being an accessory to murder, but for breaking firearm laws, and sentenced to one year and six months in prison. The justification of the court

sentence gives additional insight into the logic of the perpetrators. Both Ernst and Hartmann believed that the growing number of foreigners, especially Muslims, would lead to a civil war in Germany for which they needed to be prepared. Ethnic Germans who do not wish to live in a multicultural society, but rather in a culturally and ethnically homogenous community, should prepare themselves to fight in defense of their identity. That was also the reason why Ernst and Hartmann had acquired guns and worked on their shooting skills. At the same time, they considered those supporting the *Willkommenskultur*, and therefore advocating the idea of a multicultural society, including Lübcke, as traitors of their own people (*Volksverräter*).[23]

NSU 2.0

Another phenomenon that relates to the security of elected representatives in Germany is the series of death threats circulated under the name NSU 2.0. The first person to receive such a threat in August 2018 was Seda Başay-Yıldız, a lawyer representing the family of Enver Şimşek, the first known victim of the terrorist NSU cell. The threats continued to be sent in the following years via fax, e-mail, and text messages to many journalists, politicians, and artists known for condemning racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, and/or supporting the idea of a *Willkomenskultur*. According to German media, there were more than 100 known cases of threats and insults sent by the so-called NSU 2.0, including death threats or messages about plans to explode bombs, as well as hate-filled messages.[24] Some of the letters included sensitive personal information, such as private residence addresses or names of family members of those targeted. Interestingly, some of the personal information was reportedly retrieved from computers belonging to the police, which complicated the issue and led to additional interest from sectors of the public.[25]

NSU 2.0 contacted a number of elected representatives. Messages were sent, among others, to Janine Wissler, a member of the Hessian Landtag, leader of Die Linke (The Left) and later its chairwoman in parliament; Martina Renner, a member of the Bundestag and deputy leader of Die Linke; Volker Bouffier, a member of the CDU, and Minister-President of Hessen; Karamba Diaby, a member of the Bundestag, and a Senegalese-born member of the SPD party; Claudia Roth, vice-president of the Bundestag and a member of the Greens; and Saskia Esken, co-leader of the SPD. Notably, the perpetrators selected their targets regardless of political affiliation.

In February 2022, the trial of Alexander Horst M. began; he was believed to be the author of 67 cases of insult, 11 cases of coercion, and 23 cases of harassment. The messages signed by NSU 2.0 contained references to the Nazi regime and its symbols, as well as references to conspiracy theories, such as the Great Replacement Theory (which argues that mass immigration is a top-down, government-controlled process aimed at dissolving European nations).[26] At the time of this writing, the trial of Alexander Horst M. is still proceeding. However, if the court finds him guilty of harassment of public persons and politicians, it will be yet another similar case of a middle-aged and unemployed male perpetrator with a far-right ideology.

Patterns of Violence

Although the selected cases represent only a small part of all right-wing violent attacts committed in Germany in recent years, one can identify several recurring elements. Firstly, the perpetrators selected their targets based on the victims' views about Germany's immigration policy. More than any other political topic, it was the politicians' welcoming of refugees that irritated Frank S., Werner S., Stephan Ernst and Alexander Horst M. Importantly, the political party affiliation of the victims appeared to be of lesser importance to the attackers. Secondly, most of the discussed attacks were directed against local politicians, which gives valid reasons to assume that these might be the most vulnerable group of elected political figures. The crimes against politicians were committed both when they were on duty as well as off duty. This points to the scale of protection needed if current trends continue. When it comes to persons committing crimes, one can point out both commonalities and differences. Even though all the discussed perpetrators were white, male, and middle-aged, they differ regarding previous membership in right-wing groups or the presence or absence of previous criminal history.

Countermeasures

How to protect the democratic state—along with its institutions and citizens—from violent extremists is a question that has been a concern in postwar Germany for many years, given the legacy from the Nazi period. In light of the incidents covered in this article, another issue has gained in importance: how to protect public administration employees and elected politicians from militant radicals and violent extremists? Before focusing on countermeasures introduced by the federal government, we need to point out a specificity of the German system of protecting the liberal-democratic rule of law. The obligation to protect state and society from groups and individuals aiming at subverting and overthrowing the democratic order is embedded in the German constitution. Therefore, in comparison to other modern democracies, the Federal Republic of Germany has been equipped with extended competencies for combatting manifestations of radicalism, extremism and terrorism that could threaten the stability of the existing order. Although the state has already made use of some of these constitutional instruments in recent decades, the scope and intensity of countermeasures visibly increased in the years following the *NSU-Mordserie* and the immigration crisis of 2015-2016.

Among the most important steps taken to counter and prevent violent extremism, is the banning of radical groups and organisations. In recent years, several groups have been outlawed, such as Combat 18, Nordadler and Sturmbrigade 44. In 2016, the German authorities announced their strategy for countering and preventing extremism and promoting democracy, followed by a national program against Islamist extremism and a national action plan against racism, both published in 2017. Another important step towards bolstering the state's response against the threat of extremism took place after the incidents in Hanau and Halle, and the death of Walter Lübcke. In October 2019, Angela Merkel's government announced a nine-point plan for combating both the extreme right and hate speech. This document included a statement addressing the need to step up the protection of local politicians and restrict public access to weapons. The government acknowledged that local politicians did not enjoy the same level of protection as politicians on the federal level or leaders of Germany's Länder [federal states], and suggested amendments to existing laws.[27]

In March 2020, the government created a new cabinet committee ordered to develop a comprehensive program on countering extremism. The fact that the body was chaired by chancellor Merkel herself stressed the importance of the issue. This committee issued a catalogue of 89 measures to be introduced in response to radicalization developments. It included, among other things, measures aimed at greater protection of local politicians and stricter monitoring of hate speech online. The government secured EUR 1.1 bn in the budget for the years 2021-2024 for the implementation of these proposed measures and programmes.[28]

Moreover, a new law on hate crimes entered into force in April 2021. Most controversies arose around the fact that it compels social media platforms to report posts and comments that might be considered hate speech or criminal expressions to the BKA. What is most important from the perspective of politicians' security is that the definition of punishable threats has been broadened, the penalties for insults and slander has been increased, and special protection against defamation and malicious gossip has been extended to include politicians at the local level as well.[29]

It goes without saying that the measures introduced by government and parliament will need to prove their effectiveness in the years to come. The role of researchers in the field of social and political sciences in their assessment will be crucial. Based on details highlighted in this article, the effectiveness of some of the proposed countermeasures might be disputed. For example, knowing that the perpetrators in the cases discussed in this article were not active members of extreme-right political organizations, banning such parties and groups will not "catch" the "lone wolves". On the other hand, greater control over online content in social media, while potentially effective, might limit freedom of speech.

Regardless of the effectiveness of specific measures – only a few of which could be mentioned here – it is difficult to agree with the opinion that the years since the discovery of the NSU and the murder of Lübcke were, as some suggested, a period of inaction.[30] Merkel's four cabinets laid the legal basis for stricter policies against and the current ruling coalition in charge of Germany, consisting of SPD, FDP and the

Green Party, are – according to their coalition program – willing to continue along these lines.

Concluding Remarks

Because of their public profile, elected representatives are at a greater risk of receiving threats and being violated than ordinary people. The cases of Henriette Reker, Andreas Hollstein, Walter Lübcke and those of the recipients of the NSU 2.0 threats – as well as many other active politicians not mentioned in this article – clearly prove that the German Federal Republic is no stranger to hate and violence. Nonetheless, compared to some other countries, there have, at least until recently, been fewer reported cases of acts of violence against politicians. While the case of Lübcke was the first far-right murder of an elected representative in Germany, we know, for instance, that 132 mainly local politicians died in Italy in the period 1975 to 2011 alone.[31]

A review of attacks against elected officials in Germany yields a few interesting findings. First, the offences were not committed by known members of right-wing political organisations, but rather by "lone wolves". The perpetrators in question were not in possession of special military training or other resources. They were acting mainly out of disappointment, dissension, or desperation. Whether the presence of far-right groups, political parties, websites, or online platforms in the German public sphere stimulated these perpetrators has not been explored here. This might be, however, be an interesting research question for further studies on the topic.

Secondly, the "lone wolves" discussed here—Frank S., Werner S. and Stephan Ernst—all illustrate the theory that those attacking politicians "evidenced a downward spiral in their lives in the months or year before their approach or attack."[32] This observation is in line with other research on the topic, identifying "fixated individuals"[33] rather than organised groups behind attacks against politicians.[34] Thirdly, the analysed cases indicate that local rather than nationally prominent politicians form the most vulnerable group. This observation is in line with findings of studies conducted in other countries, including the United Kingdom, Poland and Norway.[35] This is partly due to the lower level of protection of local politicians and by their greater combination of public and private lives.[36]

Finally, and most interestingly, in all discussed cases the reason for assault or threats was the politicians' defense of multiculturalism, their support for a liberal migration policy and/or their personal support for, and involvement in, refugee communities. Furthermore, the cases of Reker, Hollstein and Lübcke show that the victims were selected regardless of their political party affiliation. In other words, one does not necessarily have to belong to a left-of-center party to become a target of the extreme right.

Even though, in comparison to other countries, Germany has institutions in place that collect data on the scale of far-right threats, these data must still be treated with caution – they are in many cases estimates only. While estimated quantitative data of offences against politicians in Germany are useful, future research seeking a better understanding of far-right violence will also have to focus on qualitative data to obtain a better understanding of both patterns of violence and motives of perpetrators' motives. This, on the other hand, might bring important insights on extremism prevention to light.

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Patterns and Consequences of Threats Towards Politicians: Results from Surveys of National and Local Politicians in Norway

by Tore Bjørgo, Anders Ravik Jupskås, Gunnar Thomassen and Jon Strype

Abstract

Norway has experienced vicious acts of anti-government terrorism in the form of a massive car bomb attack on the government district and a shooting massacre on members of the youth wing of the governing Labour Party in 2011. Still, such acts of violence towards politicians are rare and exceptional. However, violent threats and harassment are common and have a significant negative impact on the private and political lives of elected representatives. In this article, we study the extent to which democracy is being slowly undermined through everyday forms of harassment of, and threats against, politicians. The research is based on a unique series of surveys with Norwegian national and local politicians, including the parties' youth wings, exploring the extent to which they have been exposed to various forms of harassment, threats, and violent attacks, and the consequences. The surveys provide comparable data between different categories of politicians as well as longitudinal data on the experiences of members of parliament and cabinet ministers. The findings show that elected politicians are significantly exposed to hateful harassment, verbal threats, particularly through social media. A few politicians have also experienced actual violent attacks. Such exposure has a major impact on both the private and political lives of the politicians, in particular female politicians. As a result, threats of violence and other forms of hateful harassment towards elected politicians represents a considerable challenge to democratic processes and institutions. Given that Norway is a country characterized by a well-functioning liberal democracy, a low level of political polarization, and a generally high level of trust in authorities among the population, such threat to the democracy system is most likely even more severe in other countries.

Keywords: harassment, Norway, right-wing extremism, social media, survey, terrorism, threats, violence

Introduction

On July 22, 2011, Norway experienced the most devastating attacks on government institutions and political party members in Europe since the Second World War. A lone actor terrorist from the extreme right, Anders Behring Breivik, drove a van filled with a ton of explosives up to the main government buildings, housing the prime minsters' office, the ministry of justice and several other ministries in Oslo. The blast killed eight persons, severely injured dozens of other people, and caused enormous material damage. Around two hours later, the same terrorist started a shooting massacre at the summer camp of the youth wing (AUF) of the governing Labour Party on the Utøya island. The attacker killed 69 (mostly) young people, seriously injured 33 others, and caused immense mental traumas to many of the 495 survivors.[1] Although the terrorist was arrested and convicted, he obviously had some sympathisers. In the aftermath of the attack, surviving leaders and members of the youth party were bombarded with messages of hatred and threats, such as "You should have been killed at Utøya", "Pity that Breivik did not aim better", "You are living on borrowed time, wait until next year's AUF camp." In the aftermath, many AUF activists quit politics due to their traumas and this atrocious hate campaign, including several leaders.[2] However, some of the surviving youth politicians carried on their political work and were elected to prominent positions in local and national politics—but continued to receive hateful messages, often with direct or indirect reference to the 22 July attacks. For example, eleven years after he survived the Utøya attack, the district mayor of the Finnmark province, Tarjei Jensen Bech, declared that he would not go for reelection due to the continued stream of hatred, including wishes that he should also have died at Utøya.

Norway's neighboring country Sweden also has a grim history of assassinations of politicians, in particular, the murders of prime minister Olof Palme (1986) and foreign minister Anna Lindh (2003). More recently, in

July 2022, a mentally disturbed man with Nazi views and admiration for Breivik stabbed to death a prominent female psychiatrist during the Almedal's week, an annual political festival. Police investigation revealed that his intended target most likely was Annie Lööf, the leader of the Center Party, but he chose another target as she was protected by bodyguards. Lööf was known as a long-time opponent of any political collaboration with the radical right Sweden Democrats party. Due to her engagement, she had received death threats for several years. The revealed plot against her life contributed to her decision to step down from her position as a party leader. The perpetrator has since then been convicted of terrorism.[3]

Although actual violence against politicians is rare in Norway and Scandinavia, these exceptional violent attacks may add an element of credible risk to the far more frequent incidents of harassment and threats against politicians, contributing to remarkably high levels of fear. As Bruce Hoffman states in his often quoted definition, "terrorism is […] political in aims and motives; violent—or equally important, threatens violence; designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target […]."[4] Thus, *threats of violence* may also have terrorizing impacts and real consequences.

This article will explore the patterns of such threats and harassment among different categories of elected Norwegian representatives, and the negative consequences this has for their private and political lives as well as for democratic processes and participation in political elections and willingness to accept public offices. We also explore the extent to which democracy is also being slowly undermined through everyday forms of threats and harassment against politicians. We are also inquire whether the Norwegian data on these patterns and processes may contribute to a better understanding of the broader phenomenon of anti-government extremism.

This article is based on a unique series of surveys [5] among members of the Norwegian parliament as well as cabinet ministers in the years 2013, 2017 and 2021. In addition, members of the executive boards of the parties represented in parliament and the parties' youth wings in 2021, as well as elected members of municipal councils in Norway in 2020 were also surveyed.[6] We refer to the latter as "local politicians" in contrast to the "national politicians". The 2021 survey at the national level was extended to include members of the executive committees of the political parties represented in the national parliament, as well as the executive boards of youth wing parties.[7] Response rates varied from 43% to 60 % for the various categories, and the respondents were fairly representative of the actual population in terms of gender, age and party membership.

Data from these surveys provide interesting opportunities for comparative analysis along several dimensions, both in terms of development over time (using data from 2013, 2017 and 2021 with parliamentarians and cabinet ministers), across different categories of national (youth wings versus older politicians, those elected by the voters versus those elected by the party organization) and across different levels (national versus local politicians). This provides us with insight into the categories of politicians who are most frequently subjected to various types of incidents; how serious, wide-ranging, and frequent such threatening incidents are; the impact of these incidents for the politicians themselves, and changes over time. The surveys are based on the politicians' own experiences of such incidents but also provide insights into the motivation, inducement and issues believed by politicians to underlie the incidents.

The article consists of four sections reflecting the results of original empirical research. First, we map the levels of exposure to unwanted incidents, ranging from milder forms of harassment to more serious threats, and we also explore how these levels have changed over time. We focus particularly on unwanted incidents via social media, as this appears to be one of the most important channels for harassment. Second, we investigate the extent to which certain types of politicians are more likely to experience threats and harassment. Then, we present findings on how the politicians themselves explain the assumed reasons for being subjected to threats and harassment. Finally, we map the consequences of harassment and threats on the private and public life of politicians. In the concluding section, we summarize the main findings and discuss their implications.

Levels of Exposure

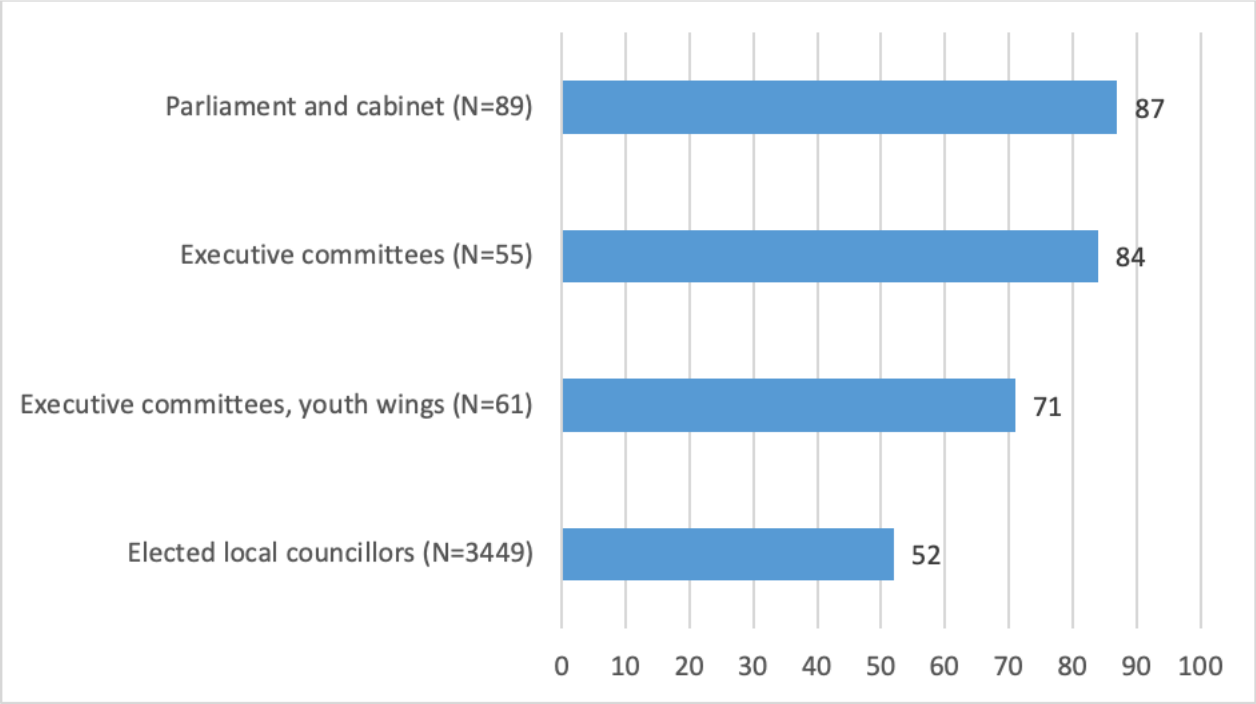
In this section we will analyse the results of the 2021 survey and compare the responses with data from the equivalent surveys conducted in 2013 and 2017 where it is relevant to look at changes over time. Since the number of respondents among cabinet ministers were low (N=9) we have, for statistical purposes, grouped them together with the MPs. In some areas we will also compare our data on national politicians with data from a survey of local politicians.[8]

Frequency and Types of Unwanted Incidents

The respondents were asked whether they had been exposed to incidents which could be presumed to be linked to their political activity during their time as parliamentarians, cabinet ministers, executive committee members or members of local councils. Eleven pre-defined incidents of varying degrees of severity were listed. However, before we look in more detail at the individual incidents and the distribution of respondents across them, it is appropriate to focus on the proportion that report one or more incidents, regardless of type, within the four respondent groups.

Figure 1 shows that a majority within each of the three respondent groups reports one or more unwanted incidents linked to political activity throughout their political career. Parliamentarians and cabinet ministers appear to be most affected. Almost 9 out of 10 (87%) respondents in this group report one or more incident. Within this group, the proportion of those affected is somewhat higher for cabinet ministers compared to parliamentarians (but we need to keep in mind the low number of cabinets ministers in the survey). Members of the political party executive committees are next; here 84% report one or more incidents.

Figure 1: Proportion of Respondents Reporting One or More Incidents of Harassment or Threats

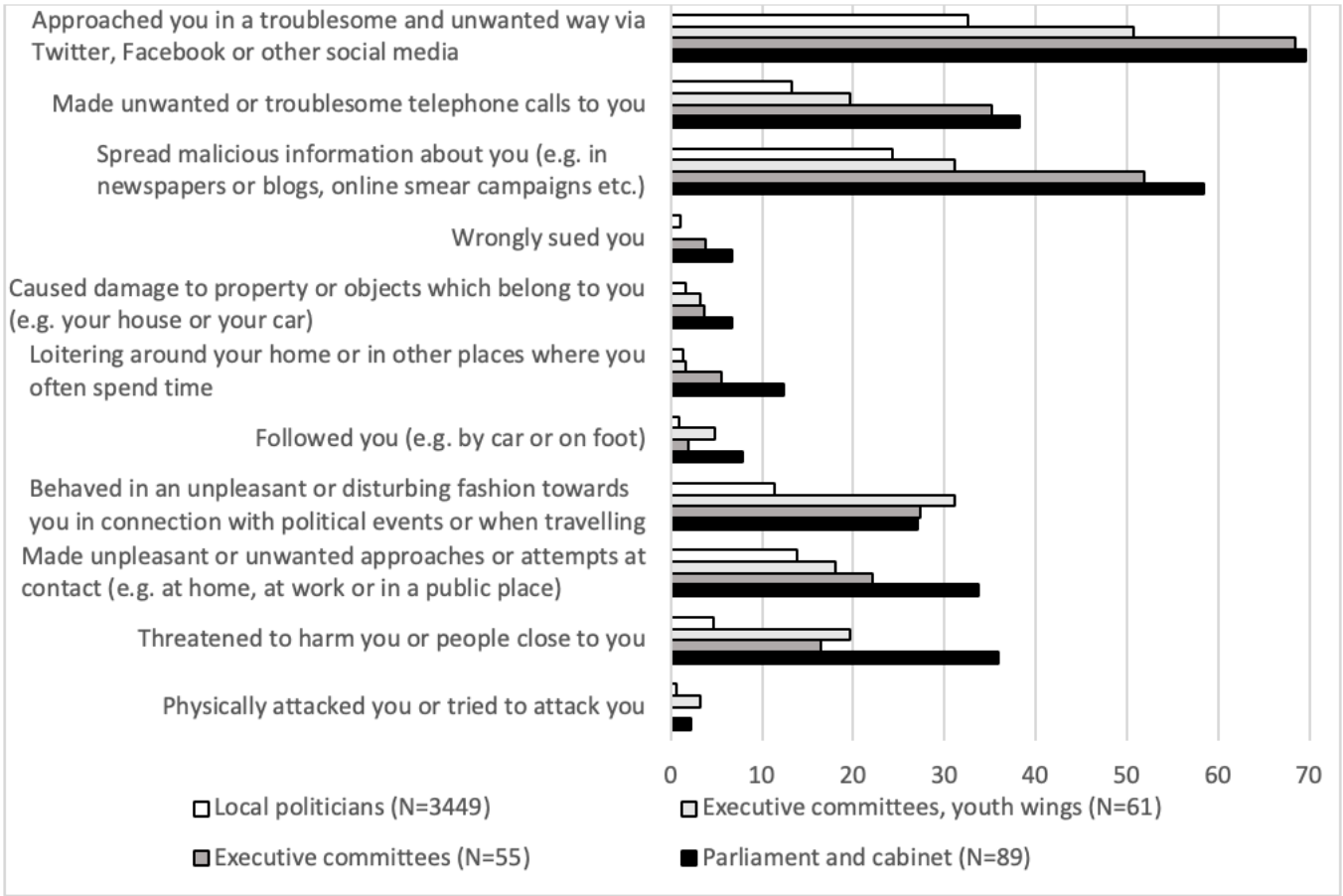


Executive committee members of the parties' youth wings are slightly less exposed, but even here ca. 71% report one or more unwanted incident linked to their political activity. Equivalent data from elected local politicians showed that a somewhat lower proportion (52%) of local politicians had experienced such unwanted incidents, and that politicians in more prominent positions were more exposed.[9] For example, local politicians who are part of a municipal executive body (*formannskapet*) are more likely to experience harassment and threats (61%) compared to members of municipal council (*kommunestyret*) (46%). This shows

that politicians at all levels are affected, but that the more prominent the position they have in the political hierarchy the more exposed they are to threats, hate speech and troublesome incidents. Politicians who take up controversial cases are also more exposed to intimidation. Although executive committee members of the youth parties appear to be somewhat less exposed (71%) than other national level politicians, this should be seen against the background of the relatively short political careers of these youth politicians.

The types of incident respondents have been exposed to varies considerably both within and between the different groups. Figure 2 below shows the proportion of national and local politicians who reported a specific incident within each of the four respondent groups. The category which clearly stands out in this connection is troublesome and unwanted incidents via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. A majority within all three groups at the national level and one third of the politicians active at the local level mentioned that they had experienced such approaches. Quite a few have also experienced communication of "malicious information" and "troublesome telephone calls": Between 35% and 60% among national politicians (except youth wings) and between 20% and 30% among members of the youth wing executive and local politicians. Fewer have been exposed to the most serious kinds of incidents, but even these form a minority. There is still a considerable number who have reported receiving threats of experienced harm to themselves or someone close to them, particularly among the parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (36%).[10] There are very few reports of direct physical attacks in the 2021 survey among national politicians and in the 2020 survey among local politicians. However, at the same time it should be emphasised that direct physical attacks must be regarded as very serious incidents.

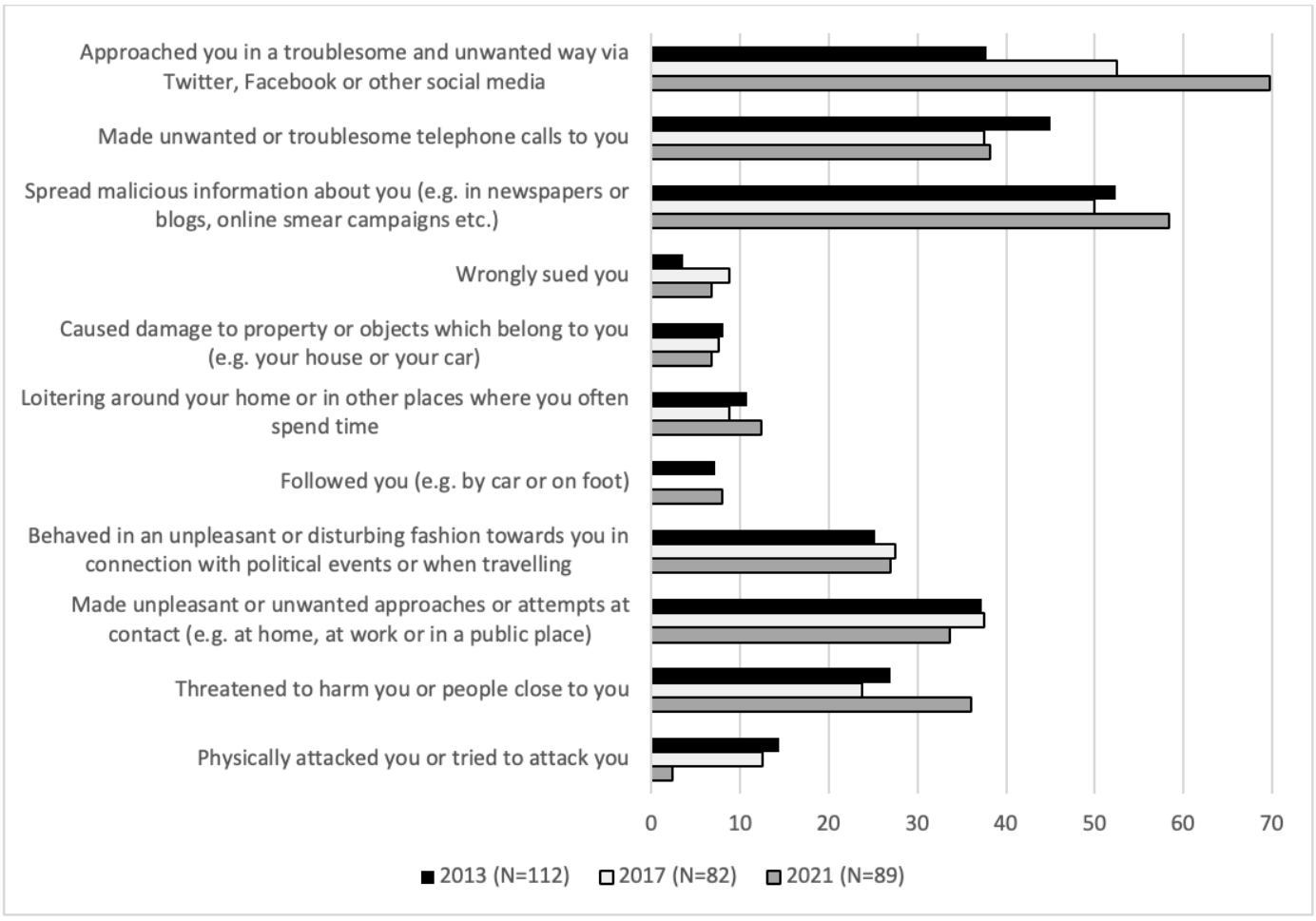
Figure 2: Reported Incidents by National and Local Politicians in Norway 2020-2021



The various incidents are not equally distributed between the different groups. Parliamentarians and cabinet ministers are most exposed in 9 of the 11 incident categories. They are particularly exposed to threats against themselves and against close family members, as well as "troublesome or unwanted approaches or attempts at making contact".

In addition to making comparisons across different groups and between the local and national levels, the surveys among national politicians allow us to make comparisons over time. As far as parliamentarians and cabinet ministers are concerned, available data from previous surveys provide insights into developments over time for this group.[11] Figure 3 shows that the proportion of respondents reporting a specific incident in 2013, 2017 and 2021 respectively. For most types of incidents, including unwanted telephone calls, spread of malicious information, property damage and unpleasant behaviour at events, at home, at work or in a public space, the pattern appears to be stable over time. One important exception, however, is the marked increase over the whole period regarding "troublesome and unwanted incidents through social media". The proportion of those who reported such incidents has increased from just under 40% in 2013 to over 50% in 2017, and to almost 70% in 2021. This trend probably reflects an increased presence on social media such as Facebook and Twitter both among politicians and the population as a whole.[12] Another important exception is a considerable increase from 24% to 36% between 2017 and 2021 in the proportion of those reporting having been threatened with harm against themselves or someone close to them. On the other hand, there has been a marked decline in the proportion reporting "physical attacks or attempted physical attacks" from 2013 and 2017 to 2021, a decline from 14% to 2% in this period. However, the relatively small numbers mean that we cannot exclude the possibility of random fluctuation. It is also possible that the respondents in 2013 and 2017 were thinking of the 22 July 2011 attacks against the government district and the Labour youth wing summer camp, which then were more fresh in their memories.

Figure 3: Unwanted Incidents Reported by Parliamentarians and Cabinet Members 2013-2021

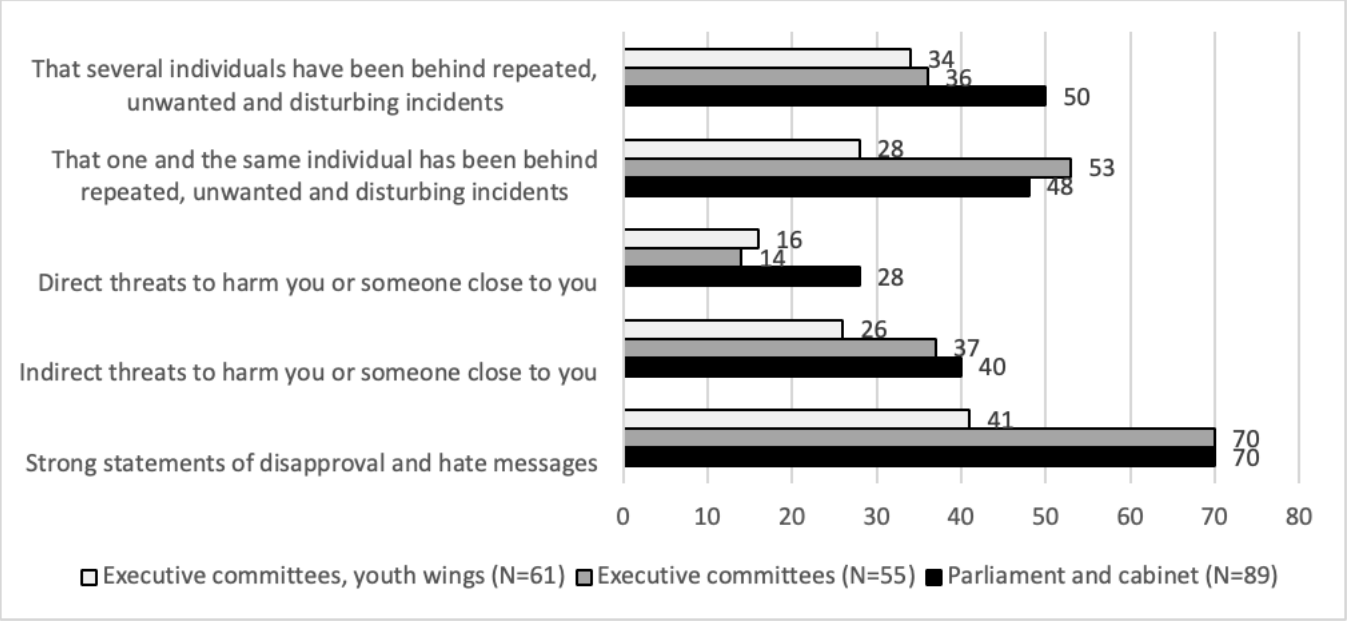


Unwanted Incidents Through Social Media

Figures 2 and 3 above showed that troublesome and unwanted incidents through social media was the dominant category in all four respondent groups and indicates that there was a significant increase in the number of such incidents. Figure 4 below looks more closely at the type of unwanted incidents which the respondents had experienced through social media. Due to lack of comparable data among local politicians, we only look at national politicians.

The unwanted incidents can be split into two categories, *harassment* and *threats*. Not surprisingly, various forms of harassment are more common than threats. The most common sub-category in all three groups is "expressions of extreme disapproval and hateful statements": 70% of the parliamentarians, cabinet ministers and executive committee members reported such incidences, while just over 40% of the youth wing executive committee members did so.

Figure 4: Incidents Experienced Through Social Media



Indirect and direct threats via social media about harming politicians or those closest to them was reported with lower frequency compared to harassment. Indirect threats were the most common in all three respondent groups, and the most common of all among the parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (40%), followed by executive committee members (ca. 37%) and youth wing executive committee members (26%). Direct threats to politicians were less reported; however this was still experienced by more than one out of four parliamentarians and cabinet ministers (28%), while about one of seven members of executive committees both in the mother parties and their youth wings (14-16%) experienced it.

As far as parliamentarians and cabinet ministers are concerned, we have longitudinal data for four of the five categories which dealt with unwanted incidents on social media. Figure 5 below shows developments between 2013 and 2021.

Figure 5: Incidents Experienced on Social Media 2013-2021
(Parliamentarians and Cabinet Ministers)

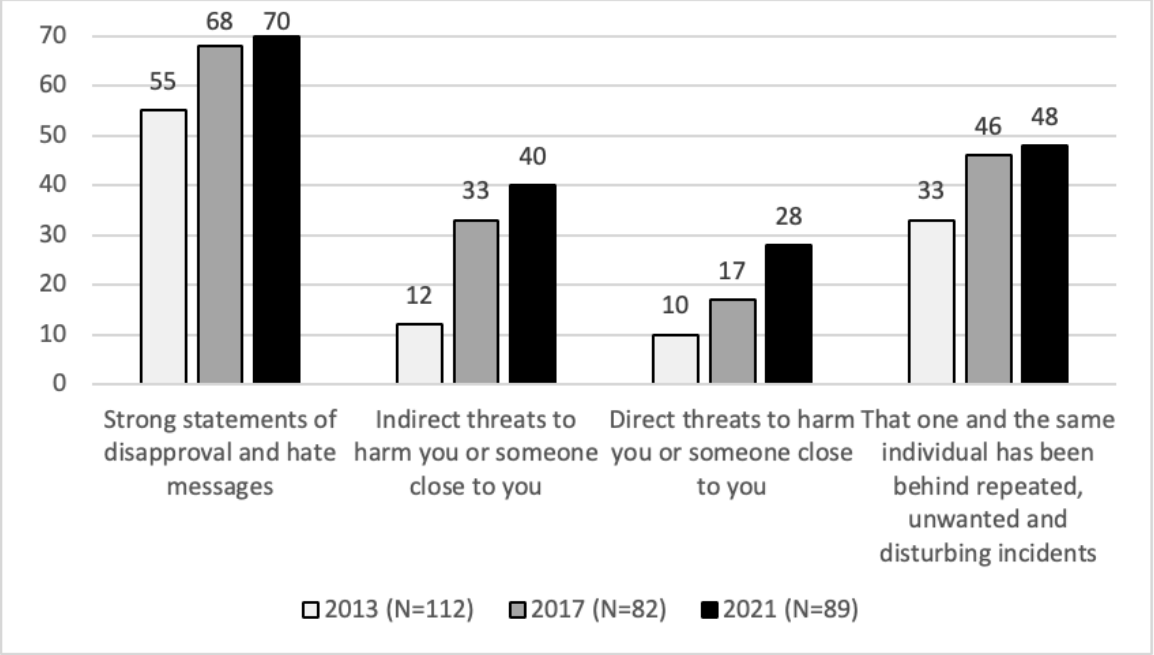


Figure 5 shows an increase during the period in terms of both threats and harassment on social media, but the relative (and actual) increase is greatest when considering threats. This is crucial because it shows that social media platforms not only generated less severe forms of harassment, which are likely to have less severe consequences, but also produced a significant number of very severe forms of verbal attacks, such as indirect and direct threats. The proportion of respondents who reported indirect threats on social media has increased from ca. 12% in 2013 to ca. 40% in 2021, while the proportion reporting direct threats has increased from ca. 10% to ca. 28% during the same period. When we combine these figures with other forms of what we call "serious incidents" (i.e., threats to harm, physical attacks and damage to property or personal belongings),[13] we find that the share of politicians being exposed to such serious incidents had increased from 36 to 46% between 2013 and 2021.

Who is Most Susceptible?

We have looked more closely at exposure to unwanted incidents based on socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, ethnic background, income, and education), political affiliation, experience, and visibility. The patterns are complex and not always in line with expectations (all numbers are reported in Table 6 of the *Appendix)*.

It has been generally assumed that female politicians have been particularly susceptible to online harassment.[14] However, this was not supported by our data, at least not when it came to the number of reported incidents generally. In fact, except for the executive committee members of the parties, where men are clearly more susceptible (93% vs. 71%), both the national and local surveys showed no gender differences at all. The absence of a gender effect remains also evident when looking at the most serious incidents. Having said that, the surveys also showed that female politicians, not unexpectedly, were far more often exposed to harassment of a sexual character than their male colleagues (see below).

When looking at age differences, there are similarities but also differences between the national and the local level. At the national level there is a curvilinear relationship in which the susceptibility appears at first to increase with age, only later to fall as respondents get older. At the local level, by contrast, there is a consistent negative relationship in which increasing age leads to less exposure to incidents. When looking at serious incidents, however, the pattern is curvilinear also at the local level with the youngest cohort being

least exposed and the second youngest cohort being most exposed. The reduction in susceptibility above a certain age both at the local and national level is hard to explain, not least because older politicians tend to be more experienced and visible, which should increase the likelihood of having been exposed to unwanted incidents. One possible hypothesis is that one becomes more thick-skinned with age and the threshold for what is reported is raised. Another possible hypothesis could be that older politicians were less active on social media, which has become the most important channel of harassment.

The survey among local politicians also provides information about susceptibility according to ethnic background and social status. Somewhat surprisingly, there are no differences between those with and without parents born in Norway. One could assume that some local politicians with parents born outside of Norway were particularly susceptible to harassment due to their skin-color or ethno-cultural background. However, even when looking at exposure to both serious and less serious incidents for those with parents with a non-Western background, there were no significant differences emerging from our surveys. Regarding social status, the data suggest that those with lower social status (low levels of education or low levels of income) were marginally more likely to experience serious and less serious incidents.

When it comes to party affiliation, politicians belonging to parties at the extreme ends of the ideological/political scales (far-right, far-left, radical environmental) tended to be more exposed, with representatives of the right-wing populist party, the Progress Party, being most likely to report (both serious and less serious) incidents at the national level and serious incidents at the local level.

Not surprisingly, the strongest predictor of being targeted by threats and harassment was the degree of media exposure. At the national level, there is a clear connection between the degree of experienced media exposure and susceptibility to unwanted incidents. In fact, of those who mentioned that they had a high degree of media exposure, all responded that they had been exposed to at least one unwanted incident. A lower degree of media exposure meant a reduction in the proportion of those reporting such incidents. Among those who said that they were exposed in the media to a very small extent, less than half of those respondents (46%) report having experienced any unwanted incidents. There is no comparable data from the local level, but this survey shows that politicians who have positions in local politics that most likely makes them more visible in the media, were significantly more likely to experience both serious (9% vs. 5%) and less serious incidents (57% vs 40%).

Characteristics of Those Persons Who Threaten and Harass

In this section, we will explore possible drivers of threats towards, and harassment of, politicians. We do so by looking at how the *national* politicians perceived the characteristics of the communication, how they assessed the presumed motives and what their presumptions were about what the person(s) expressing threats and harassment would have wanted to achieve. We also present data on how *local* politicians themselves explained why they were being exposed to threats and harassments, as well as what of kind of issues usually lead to unwanted incidents.

Characteristics of the Individuals or the Communication

The national politicians in our survey were asked to think about the most serious incident and say something about what characterized the person or the communication in this incident. Nine pre-defined characteristics were listed whereby the respondents were given the option to select more than one. Table 1 below shows the proportion in each of the groups who marked a given characteristic. For the group parliamentarians/cabinet ministers figures for 2013 and 2017 are also given.

The characteristics are ranked according to the frequency with which they appeared across all three groups. The characteristic which clearly appeared most frequently was "hostile", i.e., that the perpetrator "expresses anger and bitterness, verbal insults or sarcasm". A majority of the incidents within all three groups has been characterized as such. A considerable proportion in all three groups further reported that the person or the

communication appeared threatening. Another frequently mentioned characteristic was that the person was "preoccupied with ideas or perceptions which are clearly incorrect". In terms of issues such as "intoxicated" and "sexual approaches", these were reported to a lesser extent. However, there was some variation between the groups, even though the picture was more or less the same for all three.

Table 1: Which Characteristics Describe the Communication or the Person Best?

	ECMP	ECYW	P&C (2021)	P&C (2017)	P&C (2013)
Hostile (expresses anger and bitterness, verbal insults or sarcasm)	61	56	64	44	43
Threatening	37	35	43	29	29
Preoccupied by ideas or perceptions which are clearly incorrect	39	51	30	15	16
Confused (illogical and contradictory thoughts which are difficult to understand)	26	28	14	2	17
Compulsive (repeats the same thing over and over)	15	26	18	8	16
Suspicious/has thoughts about being persecuted	9	12	12	6	11
Boasting or bragging	11	21	4	2	5
Intoxicated	4	16	10	0	16
Sexual approaches	13	14	5	4	11
Other	2	7	5	10	24
N	46	43	77	53	78

Note: ECMP = Executive Committee Member, Mother Party; ECYW = Executive Committee Member, Youth Wing; P&C = Parliamentarians and Cabinet Ministers.

If we break the data down by gender we also find more or less the same picture, albeit with smaller variations. The greatest difference was found in the proportion reporting "sexual approaches", where women (ca. 18%) were clearly more susceptible than men (ca. 3%). On the other hand, we note that the proportion of men (ca. 46%) who experienced the incidents as threatening was higher than the proportion of women (ca. 37%) who were reporting the same.

In terms of developments over time in the parliamentarian/cabinet minister group, we see, broadly speaking, the same characteristics appearing most frequently. The ranking of the three top characteristics was almost unchanged from 2013 to 2017, but there was a strong increase of 15-20 percentage points in all the three characteristics in 2021. The other characteristics appeared to fluctuate over time without a clear trend.

Presumed Motives

In line with previous surveys, the respondents were also asked about the motives they think were behind the most serious incident. Table 2 shows the proportion in each of the groups who mentioned a given pre-defined motive. On the far right of Table 2 figure the proportions of parliamentarians/cabinet ministers in 2017 and 2013, respectively.

Table 2: Presumed Motives Behind the Most Serious Incident

	ECMP	ECYW	P&C (2021)	P&C (2017)	P&C (2013)
Interest in a particular policy issue/case	24	26	31	34	21
Conspiracy theory	24	33	26	19	21
Conflict with public services (e.g., children's and welfare services)	28	2	35	No data	No data
Unknown	20	7	19	25	38
Racism or hostility towards strangers	13	26	9	6	9
Right-wing extremism	15	21	7	8	7
Other	9	16	5	17	17
Environment or animal rights activism	7	5	7	8	1
Left-wing extremism	4	2	5	2	4
Religious activism	2	2	7	6	12
Anti-racism	2	5	0	2	1
N	46	43	77	53	78

As in the previous table, the motives are ranked according to how frequently they were registered for all three groups collectively. We see that certain motives appeared to show up fairly frequently in all three groups, among them "interest in a particular policy issue/case" and "conspiracy theory." Otherwise, there was considerable variation between the groups in what they regarded as motives for the unwanted incidents. "Conflict with public authorities like children's services, welfare services, etc." was, for example, the most frequent motive among both executive committee members of all parties and the parliamentarian/cabinet minister group. However, among the youth activists this motive was hardly mentioned at all. On the other hand, motives like "racism or hostility towards strangers" and "right-wing extremism" were mentioned relatively frequently by youth wing executive committee members, but to a somewhat lesser degree among the mother party executive committee members and, to an even lesser degree, among parliamentarians and cabinet ministers. Motives like "environment or animal rights activism," "left-wing extremism", "religious activism" and "anti-racism" were registered to a lesser extent, regardless of group.

If we focus on the parliamentarian/cabinet minister group, we see that the picture is relatively stable over time. "Conflict with public authorities" which is the dominant category in the last survey from 2021 was unfortunately not included in 2013 and 2017. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that this category was prominent also in previous years.

The survey among local politicians also included a question about presumed motives, although with slightly different options. The most important reasons by far for being threatened or harassed, according to the local politicians themselves, were single issues (75%). As many as three quarters mentioned this motive (see Table 3). These issues were not necessarily those frequently associated with extreme or radical groups in the public debate (e.g., immigration, asylum-seekers, wind power, child protection), but traditional local issues such as regulation and housing development and the shutting down of public institutions. Merging of municipalities—a major political reform in Norwegian local politics in recent years—was also mentioned as an important issue. What these issues had in common is that they have a large impact on citizen's daily life and/or identity.

The second most important reason mentioned was "the party they represent". Not surprisingly, suggesting that their party affiliation was the reason for being harassed was most common among representatives of the far-right, far-left and the radical environmentalists. These were the parties most frequently experiencing

harassment (see above). Local politicians also mentioned the celebrity factor—including the fact that they were well-known persons and received more media coverage—as important factors for being exposed to harassment or threats. Only a few politicians mention socio-demographic characteristics as reasons for being harassed or threatened, although gender was considered an important factor by female politicians (almost all the 10% of respondents mentioning this factor were female). Age was considered an important factor by relatively young politicians (two thirds of those mentioning this issue were below 35 years old).

Table 3: Perceived Motives for Being Exposed to Unwanted Incidents

	Share of local politicians*
Single issues	75
The party you represent	55
That you are a well-known person	28
The way media represents you	15
Gender	10
Age	7
Ethnicity	1
Religion/life stance	2
Sexual orientation	1
Functional impairment	0
Don't know/none of these	5
Other	7
N	1771

**Share of local politicians among those exposed to unwanted incidents who mentioned this motive*

Table 4: Issues Perceived to be the Main Drivers of Threats and Harassment

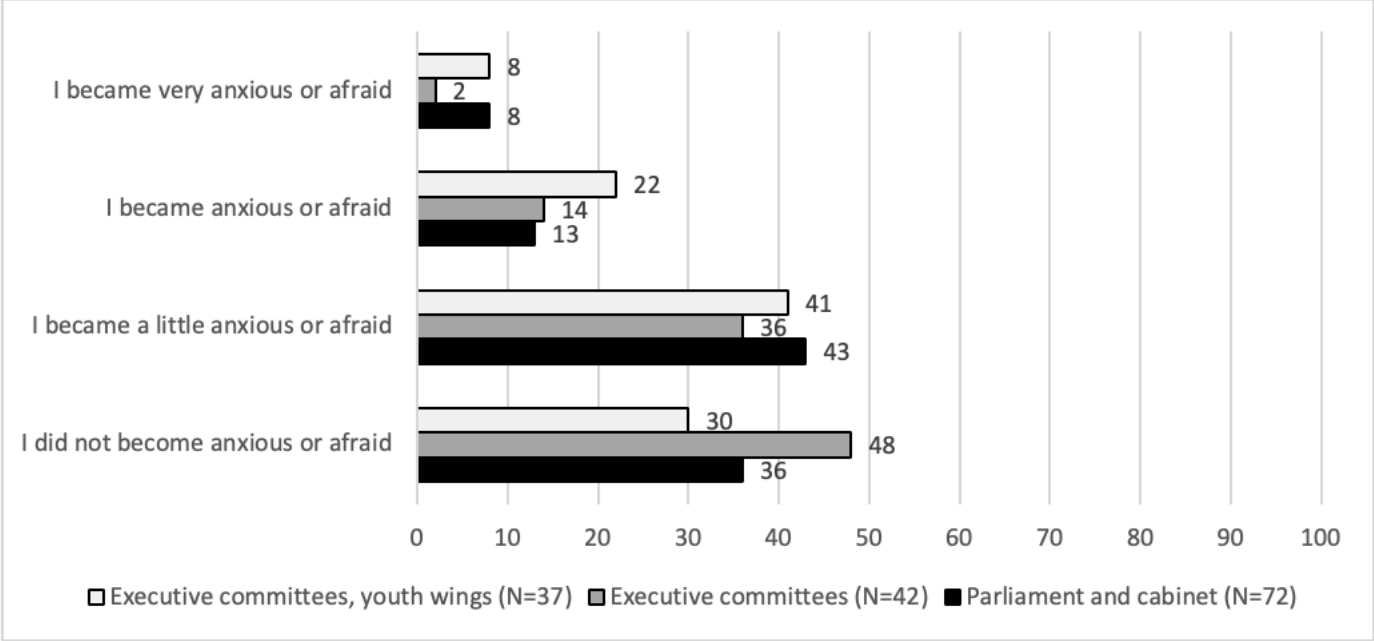
	Share of politicians*
Regulation and housing development	43
Shutting down public institutions	33
Merging municipalities	26
Location of infrastructure	17
Immigration	17
Location of housing/institutions for vulnerable groups	16
Road toll	13
Wind power	12
Child protection	7
Carnivore	7
Reception center for asylum seekers	6
Property tax	1
Alcohol policies	1
Other	24
N	1321

** Share of local politicians mentioning different issues as drivers of threats and harassment*

Consequences of Unwanted Incidents

Threats and harassment can have a serious impact both on an individual and societal level, and for those who experience it directly it can be particularly frightening. In this and the previous survey the respondents were asked to think about the most serious incident and how they experienced it. Figure 6 shows the degree to which the respondents in the three groups experienced anxiety or fear in connection with this incident.

Figure 6: Experience of Fear



A clear majority within all three respondent groups state that they experienced, to varying degrees, being anxious or afraid in connection with the incident. It may not be surprising that the highest proportion here are the executive committee members from the youth wings (ca. 70%). The memory of the mass murder of youth politicians at Utøya probably felt particularly significant to them. It is also conceivable that the older and more experienced politicians are a little more thick-skinned when it comes to such threats and harassment. However, parliamentarians and cabinet ministers also reported considerable levels of fear (ca. 64%), and so did members of the mother party executive committee boards where a small majority reported some degree of experienced fear (ca. 52%).

Even if female politicians are not exposed to more frequent harassment and threats than their male colleagues, a greater proportion of women (ca. 68%) experience fear compared to men (ca. 59%). This may partly be explained by the sexual character of a considerable part of the harassment, but also that women are generally not as physically strong as men and therefore feel more vulnerable.

While we cannot compare these figures directly with figures from the local level, the local survey showed similar patterns. A significant minority of local politicians said that harassment and threats made them sad (18%), angry (15%) and/or feeling powerless (16%). A few politicians also felt scared (4%).[15] For all these reactions, particularly being scared or angry, there is a clear gender effect noticeable, since female politicians were far more likely than their male colleagues to report such feelings (Numbers not shown here).

Threats and harassment have potential consequences both for private lives and political activity. In both this and previous surveys the respondents have been asked to think about all types of unwanted and troublesome approaches, including intimidation and attacks which they have been exposed to, and then were asked to consider a series of pre-defined statements/questions about the consequences.

In Table 5, the respondents were reporting consequences both for their political activity (in grey background) and for their private life (in white). However, there was some variation between the different groups in the prominence of the consequences. Among the parliamentarian/cabinet ministers (P&C) the most frequently reported consequences were those linked to private life. The highest proportion reported that they "became worried about the safety of people close to them" but security concerns impacted other aspects of their private and social life as well. In terms of consequences for political activity, more than one in five respondents "avoided engaging with or speaking out on particular policy issues", or "hesitated to state a particular opinion" and who felt these experiences "limited their freedom of speech around a policy issue".

Among the youth wing members (ECYW), unwanted incidents appeared to have consequences for both their political activity and their private life as well. In particular, the youth politicians were the group that was most "worried about being out in public" due to concerns about their personal safety. A large proportion also "hesitated to state a particular opinion" and pointed out other aspects of having limited their freedom of speech around political issues. Almost one out of four "considered giving up politics".

Among the mother party executive committee members (ECMP) and local politicians (LP), it was particularly consequences linked to political activity that came to the fore. The most frequent consequences mentioned among members of the executive committees was that they "avoided engaging with or making statements about a specific policy issue or field", followed by "hesitated to state a particular opinion" and "considered quitting politics". The most frequent consequences mentioned by local politicians were related to limiting their freedom of speech about (35%), or avoided engaging with or speaking out on specific policy issues (32%). Although local politicians were generally less frequently exposed to unwanted incidents than national politicians, the negative consequences were generally stronger for those local politicians who are exposed.

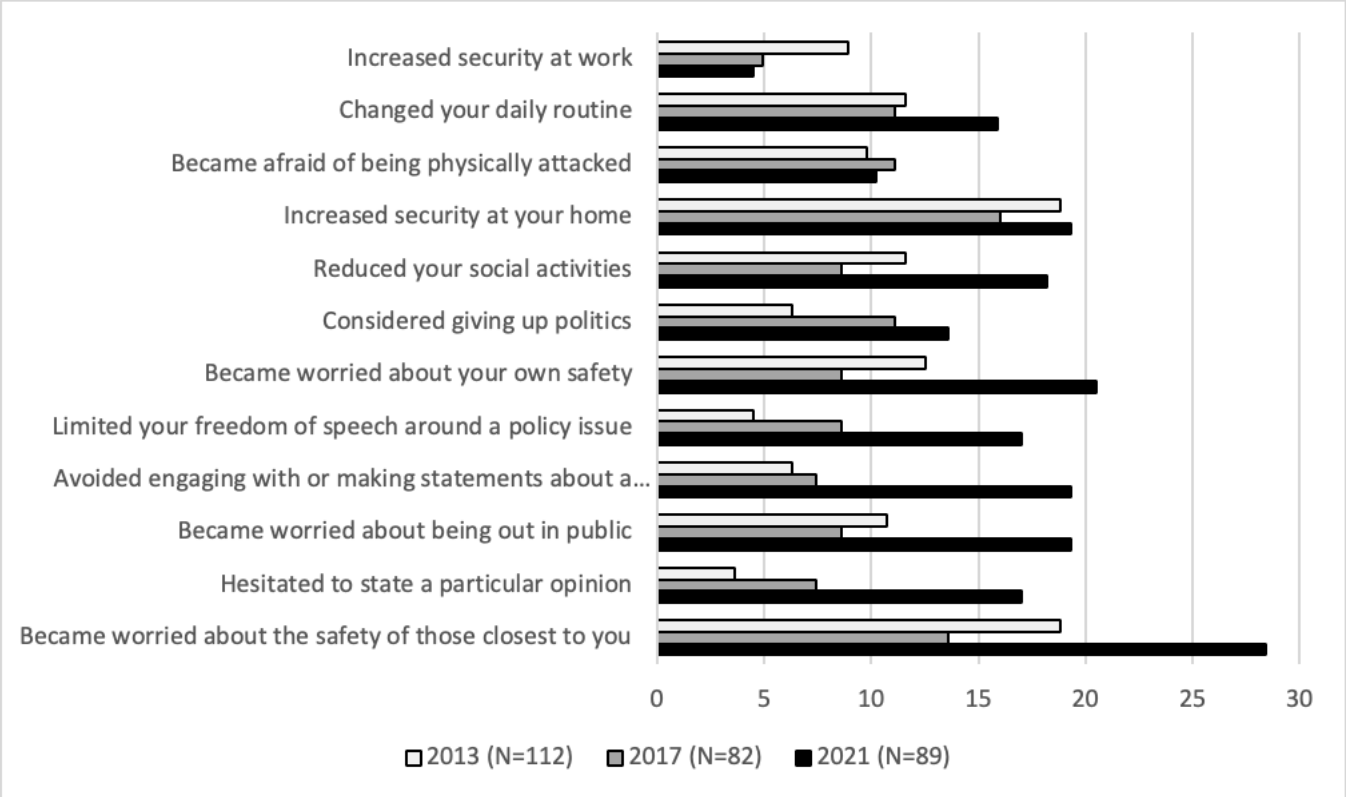
Table 5: Consequences of Unwanted Incidents
Based on Those Who Have Reported Incidents, 2020/21

	ECMP	ECYW	P&C	LP
Hesitated to state a particular opinion	22	30	20	26
Avoided engaging with or making statements about a specific policy issue or field	24	19	22	32
Limited your freedom of speech around a policy issue	17	23	20	35
Considered giving up politics	22	23	16	28
Was influenced to make a different decision	2	2	0	3
Became worried about the safety of those closest to you	17	19	33	9
Became worried about being out in public	15	30	22	11
Became worried about your own safety	9	24	24	4
Reduced your social activities	17	12	21	24
Increased security at your home	13	9	22	4
Became afraid of being physically attacked	11	14	12	4
Changed your daily routine	4	5	18	4
Increased security at work	9	5	5	2
Became worried about being home alone	2	9	4	2
Changed your telephone number	4	0	5	1
Took time off work	4	2	4	2
N=	46	43	77	1782

If we compare the data in this Table 5 with data from 2013 and 2017 (parliamentarians and cabinet ministers), there is a considerable increase in the proportion of those who reported various types of negative consequences (see Figure 7 below). In terms of consequences linked to private life, there appeared to be a certain improvement in several areas during the period 2013-2017, only for it to become considerably worse up to 2021. This is particularly true in relation to "the security of those close to them", but also when it came to anxiety linked to "personal safety". In terms of consequences for political activity there has been a

considerable increase in the proportion of those who stated that they either "limit their freedom of speech", "hesitated to state a particular opinion", "avoided engaging with a specific policy issue", and that they were even considering giving up political life. This negative development particularly gained momentum during the last parliamentary term.

Figure 7: Consequences of Unwanted Incidents 2013-2021
(Whole Sample, Parliamentarians, and Cabinet Ministers)



There is reason to believe that there is a close link between the increase in the proportion of parliamentarians and cabinet ministers who experienced serious threats in the period 2013-2021 (see Figure 5) and this negative development in consequences for the private life and political activity of politicians. In the concluding section of this article, we will further discuss how these negative trends represent a threat to democracy.

Discussion of the Main Findings

In this article, we have focused on a neglected topic within the field of research on democratic erosion and anti-government extremism, namely threats and harassment towards individual politicians. Based on a series of unique surveys among politicians in Norway, we were able to map levels of harassment and threats across different levels, types of politicians and over time.

The findings show that harassment and threats are widespread against both national and local politicians, as well as against members of the youth wing executives and mother party executives. Harassment via social media appeared to be the most common form of unwanted incidents. More severe types of incidents, such as direct threats to the politicians themselves or someone close to them, were found to be less common, but still widespread, particularly among national politicians at the top-level.

The timeline of the surveys from 2013 through 2017 to 2021 shows a very negative development in the experience of what we defined as serious incidents (i.e., threats to themselves or their family, physical attacks and damage to property or personal belongings), particularly when it comes to direct or indirect threats to harm politicians or people close to them. This increase mainly concerns direct and indirect threats posted on social media. This is undoubtedly linked to the general increase in the use of social media during the

past decade, but also to the fact that the growth of social media has provided fertile ground for an ever more hateful debating environment.

While the main picture emerging from the surveys is that elected politicians at all levels—from local politics to the youth wings and all the way up to parliament and the cabinet—risk to be confronted by intimidation and harassment. However, the surveys showed that the risk was not equally distributed. The youngest cohorts appeared to experience more harassment and threats than older politicians. For them, the negative impacts were also greater in terms of reduced freedom to express their views with more of them considering to quit politics. This is a significant finding, particularly since the surveys also show that the likelihood of being exposed correlates positively with the length of one's political career, which means that the youngest cohorts should have experienced *less* rather than *more* harassment and threats. Being less experienced, youth politicians are probably also less "thick-skinned" than more established politicians. Another possible explanation is the deep impact made on youth politicians in all parties by the extreme right terrorist massacre at the summer camp of the Labour Party's youth wing (AUF) on the Utøya island on 22 July 2011, killing 69 people. In the aftermath, AUF members, and survivors in particular, were bombarded with cruel expressions of hatred and wishes that they should also have died on the island. This hatred also left a deep impression on members of other youth parties.

Somewhat surprisingly, we found no gender differences regarding levels of exposure, while the content and consequences of harassment and threats were different for male and female politicians (see below). Moreover, the local survey did not indicate any effect linked to ethnic origin of the respondents, although the numbers are too small to make any conclusive assessment. In terms of party affiliation, we found that representatives from parties with a more extreme position on certain ideological dimensions—whether it is immigration policies, environmental issues, or the general left/right dimension—were more likely to be targeted. The right-wing populist party was most exposed, followed by the far left and the greens. Not surprisingly, the surveys also showed that the higher the position in the political hierarchy and the larger the degree of media exposure, the heavier the burden. We also found that politicians with low(er) social status were more susceptible.

In terms of drivers of, and motives behind, harassment and threats, the surveys provide a nuanced picture. On the one hand, it appears that a significant part of the harassment and threats were linked to political and ideological grievances. Most of those who harass or threaten politicians are believed to be interested in specific policy issues and, according to the politicians, they appear to be politically frustrated, expressing anger, bitterness, and hostility. The fact that parties with extreme positions on the ideological dimension were more likely to experience harassment and threats provides additional evidence for this interpretation. At the same time, it seems that harassment and threats in many cases are less linked to politics and more associated with *mental health issues*. The persons behind harassment and threats often appear confused, compulsive and preoccupied by ideas that are clearly incorrect and/or downright imbued by conspiracy theories. Finally, the surveys suggest that harassment and threats may also have been linked to *personal* grievances since the motive of an existing conflict with public services was one, if not the most important, presumed motive behind serious incidents.

Just as serious as the increase in experienced threats, if not more so, were the consequences this was having for the private life and political activity of politicians. The most striking and worrying finding concerns the negative development over time of serious threats experienced by cabinet ministers and parliamentarians, and the impact this has had. In short, over the last decade, both self-censorship and reluctance to stand for re-election due to harassment and threats have become more widespread among top politicians. Moreover, while there was a certain improvement between 2013 and 2017 as far as consequences for the private lives of top politicians were concerned, the consequences have more recently developed in a markedly negative way in areas such as anxiety about security for themselves and for those closest to them, worry about being out in public and reducing social activities.

The survey which has been conducted on threats and hate speech toward local politicians showed that even

when local politicians generally were less frequently exposed to serious threats than national politicians, it appears that the consequences for those who experienced them were regarded as more serious. One reason for this may be that locally elected politicians are to a lesser degree professional, full-time politicians. Therefore, they also had to a lesser degree security arrangements in place around them than was the case for parliamentarians and cabinet ministers. Therefore threats appeared to them more threatening since these originated from the local community.

Our study has several implications for our understanding of current threats to democracy. When politicians report that threats and harassment have negative consequences for both their private life and for their political activity, this can in turn harm democracy and democratic processes in several ways. In a democracy, both the electorate and the people they elect should be able to freely state their opinions, without fear of intimidation and violence. Our findings suggest that this freedom of speech has come under pressure. That may affect the quality of democratic processes and the political debate. We also find that the burden of threats and harassment may influence the representativeness of democratic institutions and impact on the choice to stand for elected positions. The surveys also showed that intimidation and hate speech made women more inclined to withdraw from public life than men. Findings from the local level suggest that the same is the case for young people.[16]

While threats and harassment will probably not lead to difficulties in filling the seats in parliament or in the cabinet, it can influence which type of person is willing to compete for the most important political posts, and those who do not have the stomach for it. If only the most thick-skinned citizens occupy the most important political positions, democracy may miss politicians with important life experiences who ought to have a political voice—individuals who may have experienced abuse, violence and trauma in their lives—experiences which make them less resilient towards intimidation and threats in their role as political actors.

Hate speech, intimidation and threats towards democratically elected politicians and participants in the public discourse will, to all appearances, continue to put pressure on political participation and democratic processes in the coming years, and the main trends point in a negative direction. The challenge will be to find ways to manage such hate speech so that the safety, private life, freedom of speech and political working conditions of democratically elected politicians can be safeguarded without removing the right of citizens to state their opinions—even opinions which may be both slanderous and offensive. Statements which cross the criminal threshold ought to be punished by law, while other measures must be employed to support politicians who are exposed to other forms of intimidation and harassment.

In the broader discussion on the phenomenon on "anti-government extremism", the findings of this study on threats and harassment towards politicians illustrate how mostly anonymous and uncoordinated expressions of anger and aggression towards politicians at all levels may harm democratic processes and affect the recruitment of citizens to positions of political responsibility. Although we have described some rather serious patterns and consequences of this in the context of Norwegian politics, Norway is probably a "best case". Given that Norway is a country characterized by a well-functioning liberal democracy, a low level of political polarization, and a generally high level of trust in authorities among the population, this threat to democracy is most likely even more severe in other countries.

Based on rather similar surveys in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Queensland in Australia,[17] it appears that the share of politicians who experienced at least one of 11 different incidents is almost identical in all the different places. Yet, when it comes to the experience of serious incidents, Norwegian politicians reported the lowest susceptibility (based on 2013 data).[18] See also the article by Agata Kałabunowska in this issue.

Future research should aim at developing comparable data to understand cross-national variation of harassment towards and threats against politicians, and explore what conditions and circumstances make this form of anti-government extremism more challenging to democracy.

Another pertinent issue that the current study does not address concerns the connection between online or

offline threats and actual attacks on politicians, and whether expressed threats may indicate a real violent intention. Previous research has shown that the link between threatening hate speech and violent attacks is complex and usually not direct.[19] Systematic studies indicate that only a tiny minority of those who actually attacked politicians had advertised their intentions beforehand, although mentally disturbed perpetrators more frequently did so than those who were mainly politically motivated,[20] although leakage of intentions to friends and family is common even among lone actor terrorists.[21] The link between violent hate speech and threats and actual attacks may often be more indirect: those who carry out such violent attacks might be inspired to action by those who incite to hatred and demonization of specific politicians or parties—phenomenon that is sometimes called "stochastic terrorism".[22] Thus, a high volume of hate speech and threats against politicians might signal an increased risk for actual attacks.

However, as this study has demonstrated, violent threats and incitement may not even have to lead to actual violence to have a terrorizing impact: politicians at national as well as local levels restrain themselves from engaging in, or speaking out on, certain issues or consider quitting politics altogether due to fear and strain caused by such verbal threats, in turn harming democratic institutions and processes.

About the Authors

Tore Bjørgo *is Professor at the University of Oslo and the Norwegian Police University College (adjunct), and Director of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). In the course of a long career, he has carried out research on a wide range of topics, including political violence and terrorism, right-wing extremism, extremist careers, and prevention. He also conducted the two previous rounds of this survey in 2013 and 2017.*

Anders Ravik Jupskås *is a political scientist, Associate Professor, and Deputy Director of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo. His research mainly focuses on right-wing extremism, party politics, and populism. As part of a larger project studying general working conditions of local politicians in Norway, he did a survey among local politicians, as well as several interviews, asking questions about exposure to, and consequences of, threats, hate speech and harassment.*

Gunnar Thomassen *is a political scientist and Associate Professor at the Research Department of the Norwegian Police University College. His work in the field of police research includes 'police accountability', 'police corruption', 'police recruitment', 'trust and legitimacy of the police' and 'arming of the police'. He has contributed to all the phases of this project and has, in particular, been responsible for the analysis and the reporting of the survey findings.*

Jon Strype *has a background in psychology, psychometrics and statistics and has been an Associate Professor at the Research Department of the Norwegian Police University College for many years. Jon Strype is currently attached to the Institute of Psychology at Oslo New University College. He has contributed to all parts of the project and has been in charge of the design of the web-based questionnaire and the organisation of the data collection.*

Appendix

Table 6: Share of politicians exposed to incidents and serious incidents at the national and local level across gender, socio-demographics, party affiliation, media exposure, experience and positions

	National		Local	
	Incident	Serious	Incident	Serious
Men			51	6
Women			52	5
25-	67		60	3
26-35	96		57	9
36-45	93		52	6
46-55	85		55	6
56+	74		47	5
Income -400 000			57	9
Income 400-799			49	5
Income 800-1199			49	6
Income 1200-1599			54	5
Income 1600-1999			53	7
Income 2000+			53	5
Education low (*Grunnskole*)			53	9
Education - (vgs)			55	7
Education – (fagskole)			50	5
Education – (1-4 år høyere utdanning)			49	6
Education high (4+ høyere utdanning)			51	5
Born outside Norway or one of the parents born outside			50	4
Both parents born in Norway			51	6
Rødt	80	47	55	8
SV	74	32	52	5
Ap	80	32	51	5
Sp	82	55	44	5
MDG	92	33	56	10
KrF	67	7	48	3
Venstre	67	50	62	6
Høyre	79	38	54	5
FrP	95	62	60	13
Local list			52	3
Others			66	11
One period			36	2
Two periods			53	5
Three periods			60	8
Four or more periods			67	11
Media exposure low	46			
Media exposure rather low	67			
Media exposure neither high nor low	87			
Media exposure rather high	85			
Media exposure high	100			
Position in local politics			57	7
No position in local politics			40	4

Notes

[1] For a more detailed description and analysis of the 22 July attacks, see the special July 2021 issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* on "The Long-Term Impacts of the July 22, 2011 Attacks in Norway—Ten Years After". URL: https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2021/issue-3/volume-15-issue-3.pdf

[2] De overlevde Utøya. Nå lever de med drapstrusler. (aftenposten.no) July 19, 2018.

[3] Han hadde kartlagt kjente svensker i en årrekke. I sommer pekte han ut tre navn på personer han ville drepe. (aftenposten.no) Nov. 10, 2022.

[4] Bruce Hoffman (2006). *Inside Terrorism*. 2nd ed., New York: Columbia University Press, p. 40.

[5] The original survey carried out in 2013, 2017 and 2021 was commissioned to the Norwegian Police University College by the Norwegian Police Security Service, responsible for providing protection and security advise to members of parliament and cabinet ministers. A separate survey on the working conditions of local politicians, commissioned by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development to Telemark Research Institute and Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo, included many of the same questions on harassment and threats.

[6] Brandtzæg, B.A., Magnussen, E., Vike, H., Heian, M.T., Kvernenes, M.S., Jupskås, A.R. og Ruud, S.S. (2022). *Lokaldemokrati og lokalpolitikeres arbeidsvilkår: Rekruttering, motivasjon og deltakelse i lokalpolitisk arbeid*. Bø i Telemark: Telemarksforskning. TF-rapport No. 636. URL: https://www.telemarksforsking.no/publikasjoner/lokaldemokrati-og-lokalpolitikeres-arbeidsvilkar/4078/

[7] For a more detailed description of the survey and the methodology, see Tore Bjørgo, Gunnar Thomassen & Jon Strype (2021). *Harassment and threats towards politicians: A survey of Norwegian parliamentarians, cabinet ministers and executive committee members of political parties and their youth wings*. Oslo: PHS Forskning 2021/1.URL: https://phs.brage.unit.no/phs-xmlui/handle/11250/3021765

[8] A.R. Jupskås (2021). Norske lokalpolitikeres erfaringer med trusler, hatytringer og plagsomme henvendelser: Noen resultater fra en spørreundersøkelse i november 2020. C-*REX Research report* No. 2/2021. URL: https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/publications/c-rex-reports/2021/c-rex-research-report-2-2021.pdf

[9] Ibid.

[10] However, this cannot be interpreted as one third of Norwegian top politicians having experienced serious threats, since the response rate was just below 50%. Those who have experienced serious threats may have been more inclined to respond to the survey than those who have fewer experiences of it, although a comparison of surveys at the local level suggest that this is not necessarily the case (Jupskås 2021). Moreover, the less anonymous 2013 survey with members of parliament and cabinet ministers revealed that several of those politicians who did not respond, were publicly known to have been exposed to serious threats and harassment.

[11] H.F. Bjelland & T. Bjørgo (2014). *Trusler og trusselhendelser mot politikere. En spørreundersøkelse blant norske stortingsrepresentanter og regjeringsmedlemmer*. PHS Forskning 2014:4. URL: http://hdl.handle.net/11250/226703; T. Bjørgo & E. Silkoset (2017). *Trusler og trusselhendelser mot politikere: En spørreundersøkelse blant stortingsrepresentanter og regjeringsmedlemmer*. PHS Forskning 2017:5. URL: http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2477943

[12] A.O. Larsson and E. Skogerbø (2018). Out with the old, in with the new? Perceptions of social (and other) media by local and regional Norwegian politicians. *New Media and Society*, vol. 20, issue 1. URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816661549 .

[13] The term "serious incidents" includes incidents where (1) someone has physically attacked or tried to attack the respondent; (2) that someone has threatened to harm the respondent or someone close to them; (3) that someone has vandalised the property or belongings of the respondents; or that someone through social media has exposed them to (4) direct threats, or (5) put forward indirect threats to harm the respondent or someone close to them.

[14] Jfr. Amnesty International (2018). *Kvinnelige politikeres erfaringer med netthets*. (Report dated 3 July 2018). URL: https://amnesty.no/sites/default/files/3688/Kvinnelige%20politikere_RAPPORT.pdf

[15] The numbers refer to those who responded either "to a large extent" and "to a very large extent".

[16] Jupskås (2019), note [8].

[17] James, D V., Farnham, F. R., Sukhwal, S., Jones K., Carlisle, J., & Henley, S. (2016b). Aggressive/intrusive behaviours, harassment and stalking of members of the United Kingdom parliament: a prevalence study and cross-national comparison. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, Vol. 27:2, pp. 177–197; James, D. V., Sukhwal, S., Farnham, F. R., Evans, J., Barrie, C., Taylor, A., & Wilson, S. P. (2016). Harassment and stalking of Members of the United Kingdom Parliament: associations and consequences, *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 27:3, pp. 309-330; DOI: 10.1080/14789949.2015.1124909; Ev-

ery-Palmer, S., Barry-Walsh, J., & Pathé, M. (2015). Harassment, stalking, threats and attacks targeting New Zealand politicians: A mental health issue. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 49(7), pp. 634-641; Pathé, M., Phillips, J., Perdacher, E., & Heffernan, E. (2013). The Harassment of Queensland Members of Parliament: A Mental Health Concern. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 21(4), pp. 577–584.

[18] The situation in the United States is becoming increasingly alarming. In the wake of the attack on the husband of Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the US Capitol Police reported that they have investigated 9,625 threats against lawmakers in 2021, an increase from less than 4,000 in 2017. URL: https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2022/11/01/capitol-police-more-resources-attack-paul-pelosi/8240421001/. For Germany, a pilot study conducted by the Federal Criminal Office, came to alarming results, based on a survey of the experiences of mayors receiving hate mail and threats of violence. Cf. Kirsten Eberspach, Sarah Bitschnau und Uwe Kemmesies. Kommunales Monitoring: Hass, Hetze und Gewalt gegenüber Amtsträgerinnen und Amtsträgers (KoMo). Beobachtungen und Befunde zur Ersterhebung. In: Uwe Kemmesies et al. MOTRA-Monitor 2021 Wiesbaden: BKA, 2022, pp.135–153. URL: https://doi.org/10.53168/isbn.978-3-9818469-4-2_2022_MOTRA . See also the article by Agata Kałabunowska in this issue.

[19] Every-Palmer, S., Barry-Walsh, J., & Pathé, M. (2015). Harassment, stalking, threats and attacks targeting New Zealand politicians: A mental health issue. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, *49*(7), pp. 634-641; Eke, A. W., Meloy, J. R., Brooks, K., Jean, L., & Hilton, N. Z. (2014). Threats, approach behavior, and violent recidivism among offenders who harass Canadian justice officials. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 1(3), pp. 188–202.

[20] Adams, S. J., Hazelwood, T. E., Pitre, N. L., Bedard, T. E., & Landry, S. D. (2009). Harassment of Members of Parliament and the Legislative Assemblies in Canada by individuals believed to be mentally disordered. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 20(6), pp. 801–814; Meloy, J. R., & Amman, M. (2016). Public Figure Attacks in the United States, 1995–2015. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 34(5), pp. 622-644; James, D. V., Mullen, P. E., Pathé, M. T., Meloy, J. R., Preston, L. F., Darnley, B., & Farnham, F. R. (2009). Stalkers and harassers of royalty: the role of mental illness and motivation. *Psychological Medicine*, 39 (9), pp. 1479–1490.

[21] Gill, P., Horgan, J., & Deckert, P. (2014), Bombing Alone: Tracing the motivations and antecedent behaviors of lone-actor terrorists. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 59, pp. 425–435: Meloy, J. R., Hoffmann, J., Roshdi, K., Glaz-Ocik, J., & Guldimann, A. (2014). Warning behaviors and their configurations across various domains of targeted violence. I J. R. Meloy & Hoffman, J. (Eds). *International Handbook of Threat Assessment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[22] Amman, M. and Meloy, J.R. (2021). Stochastic Terrorism: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol 15, issue 5, pp. 2–13.

Resources

Counterterrorism Bookshelf: Four 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 four recently published books.

Daniel Byman, ***Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism*** (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 288 pp., US $ 29.95 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-1975-3761-9.

This is a comprehensive account of the growth of White Supremacist militant groups who engage in terrorist activities around the world. In the United States, the author begins the account with the various Ku Klux Klan organizations that were active in the pre–1960s civil rights era, which eventually evolved into the Skinhead and related extremist movements, which also spread throughout Europe, including Russia. These militant groups operate often independently of each other around the world, and many of their violent assailants are lone actors who are inspired by them, especially in extremist Internet-based social media websites and forums. What makes this threat so significant in the current era, the author explains, is due to the fact that they have become increasingly violent, with what are primarily mass shootings by their lone actor adherents in countries such as New Zealand, Norway, and the United States. In the U.S., in particular, these groups include the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, who were involved in the attempted violent takeover of the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. What makes these militant groups' use of violence "*more* consequential than jihadist violence," the author writes, is their "targeting of minority and marginalized communities…," because unlike the jihadists, the White Supremacists "tap into deep historical roots of discrimination and prejudice, and their rhetoric and deeds are a violent echo of current cultural disputes" (p. 4). In general, the author points out, their extremist ideas focus on attacking perceived adversaries such as Jews, leftists, the Black and LGBTQ communities, and "supposedly corrupt elites" in government (p. 5). To counter the White Supremacist militants, at least in the United States, the author recommends a more "aggressive" government counterterrorism campaign, including the use of intelligence agencies to monitor them, accompanied by judiciary measures to prosecute them, and local community programs to deradicalize them (pp. 172-185). This account is recommended as an insightful overview of the threats presented by far-right White Supremacist militant groups and the measures required to counter them. The author is a professor at Georgetown University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, in Washington, DC.

Table of Contents: Introduction: Spreading Hate; A White Man's World; Becoming Revolutionaries; "Mein Kampf" to a 4/4 Beat; Europe: The Return of the Knights Templar; Terrorism in Real Time: Social Media and the Spread of White Supremacist Violence; Strategies of White Supremacy and the Weakness of the Cause; The (D)evolution of White Supremacist Violence and the Mismeasurement of Terrorism; Fighting White Supremacy.

Boaz Ganor and Liram Koblentz-Stenzler, ***Israel's Targeted Killing Policy: Moral, Ethical & Operational Dilemmas*** (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), xi, 232 pp., US $ 149.99 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-3-0311-3673-3.

This is an excellent examination of the strategical, operational, and ethical dilemmas involved in one government's targeted killings of their terrorist adversaries. As Israeli academics, the discussion of the authors focuses on the Israeli perspective on these issues, a country that has a long history of deliberately targeting the leaders and operational planners of their terrorist adversaries for assassination as a way to mitigate the

military threats presented by their organizations. All significant issues are covered, ranging from determining the legitimacy of targeted killings, such as whether it is legitimate to kill political leaders involved in terrorism attacks as well as terrorist operational planners, how intelligence is acquired to select the targets, ensuring that the primary targets are attacked with as little collateral damage to nearby civilians as possible, and assessing measures of effectiveness in assassinating terrorist leaders, even when there might be a boomerang effect in the form of revenge attacks by the affected terrorist groups. Of special note is Boaz Ganor's formulation of a decision-making model for targeted killing operations, which begins with an index listing the targeted killing purposes (e.g., "ticking bomb", deterrence, activity disruption, etc.), followed by an index listing the identity of the target (e.g., terror perpetrator, commander, leader, etc.). He lists the risks involved, possible alternative actions, and possible impacts of the targeted killings on the terrorist organization's military capability. In the concluding chapter, the authors observe that measures of effectiveness in determining the cost-benefits of targeted killings consist answering questions such as: will they "reduce the number of attacks or casualties in the future", will they lead to a "boomerang response," will they "disrupt the functioning of the terrorist organization," will they "deter other activists from involvement in terrorism," and will they "lead to a strategic shift in the terrorist organization's activities" (pp. 219-220). Such academically- and operationally-useful insights make this book one of the best accounts of the role of targeted killings of terrorist adversaries in a government's counterterrorism campaign. Prof. Ganor is Founder and Executive Director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), and Ronald S. Lauder Chair for Counter-Terrorism at the Reichman University in Israel, where Dr. Koblentz-Stenzler is a senior researcher and head of the Global Far-Right Extremism Desk.

Table of Contents: Introduction; A Historical Survey of Israeli Targeted Killings; Targeted Killings in Israel's Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Decision-Making Processes and the Intelligence Factor; The Legitimacy of Targeted Killings: A Death Penalty Under the Guise of Counter-Terrorism?; The Principle of Distinction in Targeted Killings – Who Do You Target?; The Principle of Proportionality: Are Targeted Killings Really Targeted?; The Boomerang Effect in Targeted Killings – Are Targeted Killings Effective?; A Decision-Making Model for Targeted Killing Operations; Summary and Conclusions.

Jonathan Matusitz and Elena Berish, ***Female Terrorism in America*** (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 294 pp., US $ 136.00 [Hardcover], US $ 39.16 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-3675-0667-4.

This is one of the best and most comprehensive accounts of the spectrum of women's involvement in terrorism in America. Conceptually, it discusses theoretical perspectives on the roles of women in terrorism, whether left-wing, right-wing, Islamist, or Puerto Rican. Applying Social Movement Theory (SMT), it covers how women are radicalized into joining terrorist groups, although the authors recognize that "There is no single route to radicalization, just as there is no single female terrorist profile" (p. 137). Motivations for females to join terrorist groups (much like those for males) include collective identity, political activism, religion, psycho-social drivers, and gender oppression. A highly interesting chapter discusses "The inflammatory rhetoric of female terrorists" in communiques and social media postings. In the concluding chapter, the authors present solutions to mitigate the involvement of females in terrorism, such as addressing gender issues, using women within their own communities to dissuade other females from participation in terrorism, and developing effective counter-narratives. Jonathan Matusitz is Associate Professor in the Nicholson School of Communication and Media at the University of Central Florida. Elena Berisha is an active member of the National Organization for Women (NOW).

Table of Contents: Introduction; Definitions and Background; Theoretical Perspectives; Female Terrorism in Left-Wing American Organizations; Female Puerto Rican Terrorism in America; Female Terrorism in Right-Wing American Organizations; Roles in Female Terrorism: From Leadership to More Passive Positions; Radicalization to Terrorism; Depictions in the Media; Motivations for Joining Terrorist Organizations; Muslim Female Terrorists in America; The Influence of Social Media; The Inflammatory Rhetoric of Female Terrorists; Conclusions, Implications, and Solutions.

Diego Muro and Tim Wilson (Eds.), ***Contemporary Terrorism Studies*** (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 648 pp., US $ 39.16 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-1988-2956-0.

This is one of the finest and most comprehensive edited textbooks on terrorism and counterterrorism studies. Following the editors' introduction, the textbook is divided into three parts: (i) the state of terrorism studies (e.g., how to define terrorism, applying social science concepts to examine terrorism, and using databases to examine terrorism), (ii) issues in examining terrorism (e.g., the history of terrorism, root causes driving terrorism, how terrorists select their targets, and is terrorism effective in achieving the perpetrators' objectives), and (iii) countering terrorism (e.g., the nature of counterterrorism campaigns, countering violent extremism, and programs to disengagement and deradicalize terrorists from violent activities). As a textbook, each chapter includes a summary, key concepts, case studies, discussion questions, and a guide to further reading. Also provided are links for online lectures and student resources. Diego Muro is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in International Relations at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), University of St Andrews, where Tim Wilson serves as Director of the CSTPV.

Table of Contents: Introduction; *Part One: The State of Terrorism Studies;* What are terrorism studies?; Critical Terrorism Studies; Conceptualisations of Terrorism; Terrorism in Context; The Social Science of Political Violence; Open Sources Databases*; Part Two: Issues and Debates in Terrorism Studies*; The History of Terrorism; What are the Root Causes of Terrorism?; When Do Individuals Radicalise?; Can Terrorism be Rational?; Target Selection; Longevity of Terrorist Groups; Can States be Terrorists?; Gendered and Racialised Terrorism; Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism, and Technology; Old and New Terrorism; Social Media and Terrorism; Is Terrorism Effective?; *Part Three: Countering Terrorism;* Counterterrorism Agencies and Their Work; Responding to Terrorism Non-violently; Counterterrorism and Human Rights; Foreign Policy and Countering Terrorism; International Organisations and Counterterrorism; Terrorism by Insurgents and Rebels; Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism; Disengagement and De-Radicalisation Programmes; Victims of Terrorism and Political Violence; The End of Terrorist Campaigns.

About the Reviewer: Dr. Joshua Sinai *is the Book Reviews Editor of 'Perspectives on Terrorism'. He can be reached at:* Joshua.sinai@comcast.net.

Bibliography: Accelerationism

Compiled and selected by Judith Tinnes, David Teiner and Darius Engel*

Abstract

This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on accelerationism – a specific form of anti-government extremism that aims to push the existing socio-political system toward a violent collapse. The compilation focuses on recent publications (up to December 2022) and should not be considered 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, accelerationism, anti-government extremism, right-wing extremism, Siege culture, Boogaloo movement, QAnon, Capitol insurrection, conspiracy

NB: All websites were last visited on 21.11.2022. - See also Note for the Reader at the end of this literature list.

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Note

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Recent Online Resources for the Analysis of Terrorism and Related Subjects

Compiled and selected by Berto Jongman

Most of the clickable items included below became available online between November and December 2022. They are categorized under 13 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 and 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 < www.universiteitleiden.nl/PoT > .

1. Non-Religious Terrorism

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Conference Monitor/Calendar of Events (December 2022 and beyond)

Compiled by Méryl Demuynck

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 December 2022 and February 2023 (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, Méryl Demuynck, and provide her with relevant information, preferably in the same format as the items listed below. Méryl Demuynck can be reached at <m.demuynck@icct.nl> or via Twitter: @demuynckmer.

December 2022

In-Depth Consultations on Vulnerable Targets Protection in Indonesia
United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), and Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED),
29 November - 2 December, *Jakarta, Indonesia*
Website: visit | Twitter: @UN_OCT, @UN_CTED

Berlin Security Conference - 21th Congress on European Security and Defence
Behörden Spiegel
30 November - 1 December, *Berlin, Germany*
Website: visit | Twitter: @BehoerdenNews

Beyond the 2001 Paradigm: Counterterrorism and the U.N. Security Council Since 9/11
United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Online
1 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @USIP

Middle East Panel: Insider Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
Australia Institute of International Affairs (AIIA)
1 December, *Deakin, Australia*
Website: visit | Twitter: @AIIANational

The Dark Side of the Field: Researching the Far-Right through Ethnography
Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), and Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL), Online
1 December, *Oslo, Norway*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CrexUiO, @PERIL_AU

The Far-Right Challenge in Europe, North America, and Israel
European Eye on Radicalization (EER), Online
1 December
Website: visit | Twitter: @EuroEyeRad

Women and Conflicts: What Role for Women Mediator Networks?
Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Hybrid
1 December, *Rome, Italy*
Website: visit | Twitter: @IAIonline

2022 Conference on Supremacism and Authoritarianism
Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (IRMS), Online
1, 2 and 5 December
Website: visit | Twitter: @TheIRMS

Frictiefest Leuven – Studiedag Polarisatie (Polarization Study Day) [in Dutch]
Avansa Oost-Brabant, Wij-Zij Polarisatie, Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten (VVSG), Agentschap Integratie & Inburgering (AgII), Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, City of Leuven
2 December, *Leuven, Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @vvsg, @AgII_be, @onderwijs_Vl, @stadleuven | LinkedIn: Avansa Oost-Brabant, Wij-Zij

Opening briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee on its special meeting on countering the use of new and emerging technologies for terrorist purposes
United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC), Hybrid
2 December, *New York, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @UN_CTED

Rome MED Mediterranean Dialogues 2022 – Weathering the Storms: Interdependence, Resilience and Cooperation
Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)
2-3 December, *Rome, Italy*
Website: visit | Twitter: @ispionline

A Reset? Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing World
Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Online
4 December, *Tel Aviv, Israel*
Website: visit | Twitter: @INSSIsrael

2022: A Year of European Defence
European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (EUROMIL), and Egmont Institute
5 December, *Brussels, Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @EgmontInstitute, @EUROMILeurope

Launch of Strategic Survey 2022: Exploring the Geopolitical Trends That Will Define 2023 and Beyond
Institute for International & Strategic Studies (IISS), Hybrid
5 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @IISS_org

RAN POL Webinar - Challenges of Anti-Government Extremism and New Protests for Police
Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Practitioners, Online
5 December, *Brussels, Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

The Disinformation Threat in Modern-Day Britain
Henry Jackson Society (HJS)
5 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @HJS_Org

High-Level Seminar - Cross-Regional Trends on the Nexus Between Organized Crime and Terrorism
United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), and Naif Arab University for Security Sciences (NAUSS)
5-6 December, *New York, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @UN_CTED, @NAUSS_SA_EN

Stop Hate Speech International Conference
Prosecutors' Office of Bulgaria, and the European Jewish Association (EJA), Hybrid
5-6 December, *Sofia, Bulgaria*
Website: visit | Twitter: @EJAssociation

RAN HEALTH - The 'How' and 'Why' of Hate Crimes and the Implications for Mental Health Practitioners
Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Practitioners,
5-6 December, *Berlin, Germany,*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

2022 Central Europe Week: Partners and Allies in a Time of War
Atlantic Council's Europe Center, Hybrid
5-9 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @ACEurope

A New Momentum – The Repatriation and Prosecution of Alleged European ISIS Affiliates From Northeast Syria in 2022
Counter Extremism Project (CEP), Online
6 December, *Berlin, Germany*
Website: visit | Twitter: @FightExtremism

Climate, Crisis and Security Seminar
Swedish Defence University, Hybrid
6 December, *Stockholm, Sweden*
Website: visit | Twitter: @Forsvarshogsk

Cybersecurity@CEPS Summit 2022
Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)
6 December, *Brussels, Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: CEPS_thinktank

Emerging Technologies: Implications and Prospects of their Proliferation
Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Hybrid
6 December, *Stanford, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @FSIStanford

Filling the Security Gap: International Approaches to Policing in Conflict
United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Hybrid
6 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @USIP

Homecoming? Integrating Women & Children of ISIS
Women in International Security (WIIS) Netherlands
6 December, *The Hague, Netherlands*
Website: visit | Twitter: @WIIS_NL

Reforming the Classification System: Challenges, Approaches, and Priorities
Hudson Institute, Hybrid
6 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @HudsonInstitute

Forensic Experts Forum 2022 Conference
The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL), Hybrid
6-8 December, *The Hague, Netherlands*
Website: visit | Twitter: @Europol

A Conversation with Ahmad Massoud on the Future of Afghanistan
Hudson Institute, Online
7 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @HudsonInstitute

Adapting Aid and Intervention in Yemen
Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), Online
7 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CSIS

International Symposium on Security Affairs
National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), Online
7 December, *Tokyo, Japan*
Website: visit

Looking at the Year Ahead: Intelligence Perspectives for 2023
Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Online
7 December, *Cambridge, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @BelferCenter

Russia's war in Ukraine: What does it mean for international order and the UN system
Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Hybrid
7 December, *Copenhagen, Denmark*
Website: visit | Twitter: @diisdk

Safe@Home - A Conversation on Countering Domestic Violent Extremism
Center for a New American Security (CNAS), Online
7 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CNASdc

Terrorist Content Analytics Platform (TCAP) Office Hours - Two-Year Anniversary
Tech Against Terrorism (TAT), Online
7 December, *London, England*
Website: visit | Twitter: @techvsterrorism, @TCAPAlerts

Annual Conference - Reverberations of Multiple Crises: What to Expect in 2023
Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, Online
7-8 December, *Beirut, Lebanon*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CarnegieMEC

Aligning Counter-Terrorism with Efforts to Preserve Long-Term Justice and Accountability in Afghanistan
International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), Online
8 December, *The Hague, Netherlands*
Website: visit | Twitter: @ICCT_TheHague

Hate-Motivated Acts: Intersectional Perspectives
Center for the Prevention of Radicalization leading to Violence (CPRLV), Online
8 December, *Montréal, Canada*
Website: visit | Twitter: @info_radical

Kurds Against the Iranian Regime: Internal and Regional Implications
Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Online
8 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @WashInstitute

The Primacy of Politics and the Protection of Civilians in UN Peacekeeping
International Peace Institute (IPI), and Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the UN, Online
8 December, *New York, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @ipinst, @NLatUN

The Road Ahead: U.S.-Pakistan Relations and Regional Dynamics in 2023
Stimson Center, Online
8 December, *Washington DC, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @StimsonCenter

Eastern Partnership webinar: the Winter War
Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Online
9 December, *Brussels, Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CEPS_thinktank

Frauen in Kriegszeiten: Zwischen Überlebenskampf und feministischer Außenpolitik (Women in times of war: Between the struggle for survival and feminist foreign policy) [in German]
German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)
9 December, *Berlin, Germany*
Website: visit | Twitter: @dgapev

15th Edition of the World Policy Conference (WPC)
French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Hybrid
9-11 December, *Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates*
Website: visit | Twitter: @IFRI_, @WorldPolicyConf

Hybrid Ideologies (English)
Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Practitioners, Online
12 December, *Brussels, Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement
UNDP's Oslo Governance Centre, Hybrid
12 December, *Oslo, Norway*
Website: visit | Twitter: @UNDPOGC

OSCE-Wide Event on Countering Hate Speech
Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), Office of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), Hybrid
12 December, *Vienna, Austria*
Website: visit | Twitter: @OSCE_RFoM, @osce_odihr, @oscehcnm

The Downsides of Digital Revolution: Confronting Africa's Evolving Cyber Threats
Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), and Genesys Telecommunications, Online
12 December, *Geneva, Switzerland*
Website: visit | Twitter: @AfricaACSS, @GI_TOC

The Kenya Mutual Evaluation Report: Lessons Learnt
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Online
12 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org

Webinar 3044/2022: Islamist Groups in the Syrian Armed Opposition
European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL), and The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL), Online
12 December, *Budapest, Hungary*
Website: visit | Twitter: @EU_CEPOL, @Europol

A Debate Between RUSI and France's Ecole de Guerre - 2022
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), and France's Ecole de Guerre
13 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org, @ecoledeguerre

A Resilient Europe in Uncharted Waters
Institute for International Affairs (IAI)
13 December, *Rome, Italy*
Website: visit | Twitter: @IAIonline

Book Launch: Gender Mainstreaming in Counterterrorism Policy
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Online
13 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org

Fighting Extremism and Terrorism on Social Media Platforms: The Possibilities and Limitations of the EU's Digital Services Act
German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), and Counter Extremism Project (CEP), Hybrid
13 December, *Berlin, Germany*
Website: visit | Twitter: @dgapev, @FightExtremism

Joining Forces to Protect Civilians During Conflict
Institute for Security Studies (ISS), and ICRC delegation to the African Union, Hybrid
13 December, *Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*
Website: visit | Twitter: @issafrica, @ICRC_AfricUnion

No Climate Security Without Human Security: Insights from Africa's Climate Hotspots
Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Hybrid
13 December, *Copenhagen, Denmark*
Website: visit | Twitter: @diisdk

Rebels, Radicaal of Extremist? Basisvorming Radicalisering en Extremisme (Rebelling, Radical or Extremist? Radicalization and Extremism Basic Training) [in Dutch]
Agency for Home Affairs (ABB)
13 December, *Ghent, Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @ABB_Flanders

The Yank: The True Story of a Former U.S. Marine in the Irish Republican Army
Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), Online
13 December, *Philadelphia, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @FPRI

Webinar 3045/2022: Transnational Left-Wing and Anarchist Extremism
European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL), and The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL), Online
13 December, *Budapest, Hungary*
Website: visit | Twitter: @EU_CEPOL, @Europol

A Book Talk by Tine Gade: Sunni City
Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB), and Levantine Institute of Tripoli
14 December (OIB, *Beirut*) & 15 December (Levantine Institute of Tripoli, *Tripoli*), *Lebanon*
Website: visit | Facebook: OIB Orient-Institut Beirut | Twitter: @levitinstitute

Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture 2022 with Admiral Sir Tony Radakin
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Hybrid
14 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org

Digital Literacy for Practitioners – Inspiration from Youth Work
Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Practitioners, Online
14 December, *Brussels, Belgium*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RANEurope

Women as Islamist Fighters: Current and Future Trends
Nordic Counter Terrorism Network (NCTN), and International Association for Counterterrorism & Security Professionals (IACSP), Online
14 December, *Helsinki, Finland*
Website: visit | Twitter: @iacsp | LinkedIn: Nordic Counter Terrorism Network

Year in Review: 2022 Trends in Terrorist and Violent Extremist Use of the Internet and the Online Counterterrorism Response
Tech Against Terrorism (TAT), and Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), Online
15 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @techvsterrorism, @GIFCT_official

Terrorism in Central Asia: The Threat That Does Not Seem to Come Home
Global Terrorism Trends and Analysis Center (GTTAC), Online
15 December, *Bethesda, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @DSG_GTTAC

The CIA at 75
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI),Online
15 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org

Advanced Technology: Made in Britain or Made Insecure?
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI),Online
16 December, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org

Doctoral Seminar - Chemical and Biological Weapons: International Investigative Mechanisms
T.M.C . Asser Instituut
19 December, *The Hague, Netherlands*
Website: visit | Twitter: @TMCAsser

Israel's New Government: Regional Implications of Netanyahu's Return
Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), Online
19 December, *Philadelphia, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @FPRI

Transitional Justice in Wartime Yemen
Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), Online
21 December, *Philadelphia, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @FPRI

January 2023

Mapping the Global Far-Right
Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC)
10 January, *Stanford, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @FSIStanford

Regional Outlook Forum 2023: Understanding the Drivers of Change in a Disrupted World
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) – Yusof Ishak Institute
10 January, *Singapore*
Website: visit | Twitter: @ISEAS

Militias, Coercive Brokers and Public Authority
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Online
12 January, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org

IISS Shangri-La Dialogue Sherpa Meeting
Institute for International & Strategic Studies (IISS)
15-17 January, *Singapore*
Website: visit | Twitter: @IISS_org

RUSI Latin American Security Conference 2023: Continental Geopolitics in a Changing World
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Hybrid
27 January, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org

Buddhist Nationalisms in Myanmar and Sri Lanka: Rhetoric, Responses, Challenges
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Online
30 January, *Singapore*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RSIS_NTU

February 2023 & Beyond

The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the Nuclear Age
Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC)
2 February, *Stanford, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @FSIStanford

Cyber Challenge 2023
Swedish Defence University and National Cyber Security Centre
9 February, *Stockholm, Sweden*
Website: visit | Twitter: @Forsvarshogsk

RUSI Air and Missile Defence Conference 2023: Lessons learned regarding complex air threats
Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Hybrid
9 March, *London, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @RUSI_org

Program on Cyber Security Studies (PCSS 23-03)
George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies
14-31 March, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany
Website: visit | Twitter: @Marshal_Center

Cyber Symposium
Cranfield University
21-22 March, *Cranfield, United Kingdom*
Website: visit | Twitter: @CranfieldUni

The Sydney Dialogue 2023 – Annual Summit for Emerging, Critical, Cyber and Space Technologies
Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)
4-5 April, *Sydney, Australia*
Website: visit | Twitter: @ASPI_org

7th International Conference on Hate Studies – The Challenges of Hate in the 21st Century
Gonzaga University Center for Hate Studies, and Community Colleges of Spokane (CCS)
In-person event (Hybrid options may be available).
20-22 April, *Spokane, United States*
Website: visit | Twitter: @GonzagaU, @CCofSpokane

Terrorism Studies '23 - International Conference on Terrorism and Political Violence
Eastern Mediterranean Academic Research Center (DAKAM), and BILSAS (Science, Art, Sport Productions), Online
19 May, *Istanbul, Turkey*
Website: visit | Twitter: @dakamtr

IISS Shangri-La Dialogue
Institute for International & Strategic Studies (IISS), Hybrid
2-4 June, *Singapore*
Website: visit | Twitter: @IISS_org

Summer School - The European Union, the United Nations and Global Governance
Leiden University, Hybrid
12-23 June, *The Hague, Netherlands*
Website: visit | Twitter: @fggaleiden

Program on Terrorism and Security Studies (PTSS) 23
George C. Marshall Center - European Center for Security Studies
13-30 June, *Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany*
Website: visit | Twitter: @Marshall_Center

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About the Compiler:

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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, The Hague. Now in its 16th year, PoT is published six times annually as a free, independent, scholarly peer-reviewed journal online at the following 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"). Jouroscope™, a directory of scientific journals, has listed PoT as one of the top ten journals in the category free open access journals in social sciences, with a Q1 ranking. PoT has almost 8,000 registered 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:

- use the journal as a forum for debate and commentary on issues related to the above.
- present their perspectives on the prevention of, and response to, terrorism and related forms of violent conflict; and
- submit to the journal accounts of evidence-based, empirical scientific research and analyses on terrorism.

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 members of the Editorial Board and 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.