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About

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Established in 2007, Perspectives on Terrorism (PT) is a quarterly, peer-reviewed, and open-access academic journal. PT is a publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), in partnership with the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University, and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St Andrews.

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Words of Welcome

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume XVII, Issue 1 (March 2023) of *Perspectives on Terrorism* (ISSN 2334-3745). This Open Access journal is a joint publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague, Netherlands; the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at University of St Andrews; and the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University. All past and recent issues can be found at *http://pt.icct.nl*.

The readers of our journal will have noticed the new title page and format of *Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT). This is but one of several exciting changes. Starting with this issue, I will now act as the new Editor-in-Chief, replacing Prof em Alex P. Schmid (who continues as Co-Editor). We are now joined by three new co-editors, Dr Joana Cook (ICCT), Prof Timothy Wilson (CSTPV), and Dr Graig Klein (ISGA). Ms Anna-Maria Andreeva (ICCT) will complete our editorial team, acting as Managing Editor. I have also had the pleasure of joining ICCT as a Distinguished Fellow. In addition, ICCT is now replacing, as a new parent organisation of PT, the Vienna-based Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI). Leiden University's ISGA will continue to support the publication of PT, as in the past, together with University of St Andrews' CSTPV. This new partnership between three leading institutions will further reinforce PT's central role in advancing knowledge and research in the field of terrorism studies.

There will be some additional changes as our journal enters its 17th year. The most important one being that we change from a bi-monthly to a quarterly publication format. The current issue opens with a thought-provoking piece in which a team of researchers – Colin Powers, Erik Skare, Georges Fahmi, Nouran Ahmed, Ahmad Mhidi, Myriam Ababsa, and Olivier Roy – draw on case studies in the Middle East and North Africa to explain why violent extremism does not occur despite the existence of enabling environments. Then, Emma Belton, Adrian Cherney and Renee Zahnow introduce a new open-source extremist database, the "Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA)", along with some findings from a preliminary analysis of the data.

These articles are followed by three Research Notes, beginning with a review of current research findings on the link between misinformation and radicalisation by Elise Roberts-Ingleson and Wesley McCann. Then Rita Augestad Knudsen explains why it is vital for researchers to consider issues of criminal responsibility when studying the links between individual 'mental health' and involvement in terrorism. In the third research note, Janna Mantua and Carrington Metts introduce a search engine specifically built for researchers that will enable the mining of documents retrieved from Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad in 2011.

This issue of PT also includes a Special Section on Anti-Government Extremism, guest edited by Prof Tore Bjørgo (Center for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo), who provides separately a brief introduction to the five articles in this section. These are followed by an extensive bibliography on the Islamic State, compiled by our information resources editor, Judith Tinnes. Then Joshua Sinai's latest Bookshelf column provides brief summaries of ten recently published books. These items are followed by an invitation to submit nominations for the TRI Award for Best Doctoral Thesis on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism completed in 2021 or 2022. We hope you enjoy this issue.

Prof James Forest, Editor-in-Chief

PT
PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Research Article

Why Individuals and Communities Do Not Turn to Violent Extremism

Colin Powers,* Erik Skare, Georges Fahmi, Nouran Ahmed, Ahmad Mhidi, Myriam Ababsa and Olivier Roy

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Conceptual and epistemological challenges have to date constrained the generation of scientific knowledge on violent extremism. This article inverts the field's seminal research question with an eye on furnishing a sturdier foundation for inquiry and theory building. Rather than seeking generalisable truths on why violent extremism occurs, we induce tentative propositions on why it does not, particularly within the context of enabling environments. Based on original data gathered through case studies conducted in the Middle East and North Africa, our primary findings are that the probability of violent extremism in enabling environments is reduced by three variables: i) hard interventions by the state; ii) the availability of credible ideological alternatives; and iii) the opportunity to opt out of the economy of violent extremism. At the conceptual level, we also propose that violent extremism be considered as a modality of action practiced by discrete political actors—namely, terrorist organisations—rather than as a phenomenon more diffusely pervading societies, nations, or faiths.

Keywords: violent extremism, terrorism, counter-terrorism, Middle East and North Africa

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Introduction

As an object of academic inquiry, violent extremism has proven somewhat intractable. Despite an enormity of funding mobilised and labour hours devoted, progress in theory building remains slow and uneven. The disappointing yield on investment can be partially attributed to enduring conceptual and epistemological challenges. Concerning the former, the literature on violent extremism and its cognate, radicalisation, are still marked by discord when it comes to specifying what the constitutive properties of the phenomenon actually are.[1] It is with reason that Kundnani and Hayes posit violent extremism is an "even more nebulous" concept than terrorism, the shibboleth par excellence upon which a forever-war waged on endlessly variable enemies was once launched.[2] As for epistemology, if understandable in light of the inaccessibility of relevant research subjects, the sparseness of the empirics gathered on violent extremism has, to date, nevertheless invited speculative forms of claim-making into places where scientific testing ought to be. The scarce use of gold standard methods—namely, randomised control trials and natural experiments[3]—has meant spurious correlations have often been able to pass themselves off as causalities. Indeed, the failure to establish or reference relevant base rates has allowed scholars to assign predictive power to variables without screening false positives and negatives from their results' sections.[4]

Beyond matters of conceptualisation and epistemology, the frailties of knowledge on violent extremism can also be traced to how problems are constructed at the onset of investigative processes. As a rule, scholars of violent extremism tend to formulate research questions aimed at explaining its occurrence. Functionally speaking, this choice assigns the scholar the task of inducing generalisable laws from outcomes that are (i) exceedingly rare; (ii) temporally and geographically variant; and (iii) the product of configural causality. The margins of difficulty thereby taken on are about as high as they come. That so many fail to clear the bar is only to be expected.

Cognisant of existing lacunae and where some of the hurdles to progress lie, this article adopts a different tack in hopes of gaining purchase on violent extremism. Broadly speaking, our approach is premised on two recalibrations. The first is an inversion of the field's seminal research question: rather than attempt to build a general theory of why violent extremism occurs, we will instead forward several tentative propositions on why it does not, particularly within the context of enabling environments. Here, we define enabling environments as circumstances where macro-level variables historically associated with the emergence of violent extremism—be they sociological, political or economic in nature[5]— coalesce with an individual and/or community's opportunity to engage in organised and collective praxes of violent extremism (i.e. the opportunity to join an extant terrorist organisation).

Though our efforts concentrate on unwinding the causalities that lead individuals and communities away from participation in organised and collective praxes of violent extremism, the analytical power of our study ought to extend to participation in lone-wolf expressions of violent extremism as well. We make this claim in view of an empirical record suggesting there is little basis for classifying lone-wolf forms of violent extremism as a category ontologically separate from classically organised forms of violent extremism. A wide literature establishes the "loneness" of lone wolves to be something of a misnomer, as "outside ties are considered key elements in the adoption and maintenance of the motive for lone actors, and sometimes the means

to commit terrorist violence."[6] Further, whether relevant parties ultimately carry out attacks alone or not, a preponderance of evidence indicates that lone actors are not the autonomous, self-directing agents they sometimes appear to be, but rather, actors that are anchored within a wider social milieu and/or actors animated by their internalisation of ideological content furnished from outside parties.[7]

Inverting violent extremism's classic research question can, in our estimations, be additive for several reasons. In the most immediate sense, it demands investigation of oft-neglected moderating variables—those operating at the levels of groups and communities most especially—and how they may relate to the (non)manifestation of violent extremism. Given the prevalence of macro and micro theorising, the foregrounding of meso-level causalities stands to present considerable value. Setting non-occurrence as our dependent variable also affords a novel means of engaging presuppositions which have long been put forth concerning the drivers of violent extremism. Frequently marshalled for the purpose of structuring or rationalising policy choices as these presuppositions are, their being falsified through an explanation of the "dogs that don't bark" would in and of itself constitute an important contribution to the literature.

If turning the field on its head so to explain non-occurrence represents the first recalibration of our approach, the second pertains to conceptualisation. We begin by establishing two social facts: i) the presence of active terrorist organisations constitutes a necessary precondition for violent extremism to manifest at the scale and consistency needed to either damage society's basic functionality or fundamentally challenge states' claims to authority across time;[8] and ii) active terrorist organisations do not spontaneously materialise upon the coalescence of conditions—be they social, political, economic, cultural, or ideological—often thought to be causally implicated in violent extremism. Based on these two facts, we posit that terrorist organisations—whose emergence and reproduction is always contingent and political in nature—need be conceptually considered the primary subject of violent extremism.

We develop the two tenets of our approach in full in the next sections of this article. Three propositions concerning the non-occurrence of violent extremism in the face of enabling environments are presented in Section One. Leaning on practices developed in grounded theory, each of these respective propositions was induced from original data gathered through case studies conducted in the Middle East and North Africa.[9] After developing our meso-level arguments on non-occurrence, the second section proceeds to our proposed revisions on the conceptualisation of violent extremism. From there, we conclude the article with a parting section recapitulating our main arguments, discussing limitations, and considering future research directions.

Explaining the Dogs That Don't Bark, Even When Prompted

Violent extremism's non-occurrence within contexts classified as enabling environments constitutes a puzzle of immense analytical import. If satisfactorily unwound, it can speak not only to what does and does not cause violent extremism, but to what may prevent it as well.

To engage this problem, team members collected and analysed data through the conduct of three MENA-based case studies. The first case focused on Islamist Egyptian youth and their nonengagement in violent extremism following the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.[10] The second case focused on the village of Swedan in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, and its popula-

tion's nonengagement with violent extremism following the country's descent into civil war. The third focused on the relative non-occurrence of violent extremism inside the Jordanian national theatre in the years following the emergence of the Islamic State. Though case studies evince considerable heterogeneity—be it in terms of the conditions encountered or the level of analysis employed by the researcher—they share a common dependent variable: a nonengagement in organised violent extremism amongst research subjects encountering enabling environments.

Through probing these case studies individually and comparatively, we identified three variables as having exerted a significant effect upon the outcomes in question: i) hard interventions by the state; ii) the availability of credible ideological alternatives; and iii) the opportunity to opt out of the economy of violent extremism. Designated as meso causalities, we hypothesise that these variables contribute to the non-occurrence of violent extremism by moderating the relation between enabling environments and individual/group behaviour.

Hard Interventions by the State

In terms of mechanisms, our cases suggest that hard interventions raise the probability of the non-occurrence of violent extremism in the short term through the workings of two interconnected causalities: (i) the degradation of a terrorist group's organisational and operational capacity, and (ii) the disincentivising of radicalised persons from making the jump into violent extremism.[11] At the same time, our cases also suggest that hard interventions may increase the probability of violent extremism in the long term. They do so through the promotion of environmental conditions—namely, high prevalence of state violence and high incarceration rates—known to be conducive for the occurrence of violent extremism. MENA state repression has, for example, produced unintended consequences in the past like the internationalisation of Salafi jihadism in the 1980s.[12]

Our claims on hard interventions' short-term efficacy are primarily derived from our analysis of the aforementioned Islamist youth cohort in Egypt. The members of the fifty-person cohort comprising our sample had been active participants in the uprising which took place in Egypt between January and February of 2011 as well as active participants in sit-ins staged in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the government of Mohamed Morsi between June and August of 2013. Given the locations of the sit-ins in question, the geographic composition of the cohort leans towards Upper Egypt, greater Cairo, and the Delta governorates. In terms of demographics, all members were between the ages of eighteen and thirty at the time of the events in question.

As revealed through semi-structured interviews, during the era of the sit-ins, research subjects universally evinced confidence in—and a commitment to—nonviolent forms of political contention. Deemed ethically appropriate and efficacious as both a tactic of resistance and a means of advancing their agenda, commitments to nonviolence were retained even after Egyptian President Morsi was removed from office by the Armed Forces. For months on end, principals participated in protests and sit-ins demanding Morsi's restoration to power, all the while respecting the tenets of peaceful agitation. After sit-in protests were brought to a violent end by the security forces in August of 2013, however, principals underwent a cognitive transition. Frustrated into disaffection, they not only expressed a loss of faith in nonviolent praxes as a general matter, but a specific rejection of the MB's cautious approach to post-2011 politics.

Drawing on the clarity of hindsight, the overwhelming consensus amongst them was that the party- movement had been naïve and nonstrategic during the democratic transition, and that it should have taken radical and uncompromising steps towards disempowering the networks of the old regime and consolidating its own power.[13]

Despite having reached such radical diagnoses, research subjects notably did not evince any behavioural change when it came to violent extremism. Throughout the long winter during which their party-movement was repressed as (almost) never before, they demonstrated uniformity in foregoing any engagement with violent extremism inside of Egypt. Such constancy in outcome is confounding and theoretically pertinent for any number of reasons, the most significant being subjects' expressed sympathies for what might be considered extremist politics, their evincing of warning signs thought to be associated with radicalisation, and the fact that all parties had recourse to joining any number of locally operating jihadist organisations.

Behavioural choices were necessarily informed by a plurality of inputs. The personal testimonies of the principals nevertheless make clear that that the state's hard interventions played a major role in driving them away from this form of political expression. Most saliently, subjects pointed to the power disparity structuring the contest between jihadist challengers and the state as constituting a strong, personal disincentive against engaging in violent extremism. Pass-through effects introduced by the security forces' willingness to practice collective punishment against the intimates and communities of state enemies—including social rejection and being disowned from one's family—represented a disincentive as well.[14] Equally important, foreknowledge that MB leadership would likely offer no support for a violent campaign—a fact that was itself informed by the state's superiority in arms—was also seen to dissuade principals. MB leadership circa 2013–2014 was broadly aligned in the learned belief that military confrontation with the regime would bring an end to their organisation.[15] With no material assistance forthcoming from the organisation itself—be it in the form of funding for arms' purchases or insurance policies for the dependents of those who might prospectively be martyred—a turn to violent extremism was rendered tactically, strategically and personally nonviable for a vast majority of those interviewed and analysed.[16] In the end, as would be pithily summed up by one of our interlocutors: "It is not that they do not want [to engage in violence], it is that they cannot."[17]

Validation for hard intervention's potential short-term efficacy can also be found in our case study of the Jordanian national theatre. There, a combination of juridical containment and intelligence-based repression blocked aspirants from laying down the institutional plumbing necessary to sustain organisational activity across time. Key in these regards were pre-emptive actions, ideological honeypotting most especially, designed to disrupt recruitment pipelines. This tact was put into motion through the state's quiet enlistment of jihadist clerics Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filastini, and Iyab al-Qunaybi, whose online communications were used to lure potential adherents into the webs of the mukhabarat. As in Egypt, pressures were also applied to kin networks to ensure the isolation and stigmatisation of those who did engage in violent extremism.

By dint of both interventions and the regime's turning of a blind eye to violent extremism conducted abroad, the social and material foundations required to stage a significant insurgency inside Jordan were never established.[18] It would be ahistorical, of course, to posit that this configuration of security-led interventions either prevented the occurrence of violent extremism

inside Jordan altogether, or that they alone reduced the frequency and intensity of domestic attacks. Nevertheless, that these measures contributed to Jordan's capacity to maintain a Janus-faced existence in recent years—as a country both relatively free of violent extremism at home and exporting more jihadists per capita than virtually any other[19] - is beyond dispute.

Seen in conjunction, our case studies testify to hard interventions' potential short-term efficacy in lowering the probability of violent extremism occurrence. As mentioned earlier, however, it should be stressed that the Egyptian case in particular also affirms the possibility that such measures may ultimately generate the opposite effect in the medium to long term. Indeed, there are ample grounds for thinking that the repressive conditions which our sample cited as a disincentive for engaging in violent extremism contributed, at a population level, to the resumption of jihadist violence that was witnessed in the post-2013 years.[20] Such a causality, after all, would be keeping with the robust, long-term association that state and non-state violence evince in the MENA region.[21] We may therefore tentatively induce the following synthetic proposition on hard interventions and violent extremism: the probability of violent extremism's non-occurrence may be raised through the state's administering of hard interventions. The valence and magnitude of hard interventions' effects on violent extremism, however, are likely to be subject to time variance.

Availability of Credible Ideological Alternatives

Data furnished through our case studies points to the possibility that nonengagement with organised violent extremism is impacted by the availability of credible ideological counterweights within radicalised sub-populations as well. Credibility being the operative word, our evidence suggests that the efficacy of these counterweights hinged upon their having emerged organically within the radical milieu. One should, of course, be hesitant in assigning the ideological plan undue causal power. An emerging scholarly consensus on counternarratives' efficacy (or lack thereof) in reducing violent extremism gives reason for tempering the extent of our claim-making.[22] Nevertheless, the balance of evidence presented suggests that within the context of our case studies, the counterweights in question played a non-negligible role in subjects' nonengagement in violent extremism.

As was the case with our previous hypothesis, this one too was derived from examination of our Egyptian and Jordanian cases. In Egypt, two factors were observed to have coalesced in powering an ideological current that, though radical in its nature, nevertheless ran counter to the project of violent extremism generally and the appeal of Salafi jihadism specifically. The first was research subjects' exposure to and borrowing from secular discourses of revolution. A legacy of the crucible that was the years of the Arab uprisings, the radical cohort of Islamist youth that comprise our sample spent extensive time in the trenches alongside Egypt's leftist vanguard. By virtue of these experiences of solidarity, mutual learning, and collective struggle, processes of epistemic cross-fertilisation were catalysed. To begin, subjects were brought in contact with the theories and praxes then orienting their comrades' engagement with the historical moment. Having lined up most closely with the Revolutionary Socialists and the April 6th Movement, the young Muslim Brothers would encounter a particularly diverse medley of 20th century thinkers—stretching from the grand nonviolent strategists (Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.) to the leading lights of the anti-colonial push (Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon).

After together observing the conflicts that would set the course of the transitional period, this same Islamist cohort also came to restructure the syntax of their political hermeneutics upon an edifice grounded in leftist thought: the dyad of revolution and counterrevolution.

According to research subjects' testimony, the consequence of these processes, epistemically and behaviourally, proved significant. First, they mediated how research subjects named enemy and ally: rejecting the austere and Manichean logic propagated by contemporary jihadism, principals assigned positioning within ingroups and outgroups on the basis of neither faith nor the adoption of a particular orthodoxy, but of one's relation to the regime and fidelity to the project of revolution. Materially, this disqualified the possibility of their adherence to takfiri principles and, by extension, alienated research subjects from the main organs of violent extremism in Egypt. The same processes of epistemic sharing also equipped research subjects to make sense of post-2011 antinomies in a manner that would drive them even further from violent extremism. Able to see the logic of events outside the reductivist lens of religion, subjects showed themselves able to evaluate individuals, groups, and social forces with a nuance that rendered non-discriminating violence equally absurd and impractical: deeming Coptic Christian communities and institutions problematic by dint of their having lined up behind the counterrevolution, after all, entailed a far different prescription than deeming them problematic by dint of indelible ascriptive characteristics.

Beyond effects rendered by cohabitation with the Egyptian left, there is evidence to posit that research subjects were also pushed away from violent extremism by lines of argumentation advanced from within, to wit, from claims put forward inside Brotherhood-world during the tumultuous post-2013 years. Most salient here was a document produced by a committee of scholars entitled The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup (henceforth Jurisprudence). Jurisprudence does not, as a general matter, disqualify violence's legitimacy as a political tactic. It also does not rule out the utility that anti-state violence could present to Egypt at its current juncture.

That said, the treatise does articulate what might be called defensive and highly circumscribed rules of engagement by carving out an exception for acts undertaken against members of the security forces that are personally engaged in attacks on civilians under the principle of self-defence. This is also known as the right to "repel the assailant", as it is expressed in Islamic legal theory. The authors thus implicitly reinforce the rule of a wider prohibition against violence, and exclude the use of group markers or associations in delineating targets. It is not by virtue of being a police officer that someone becomes eligible to be attacked, but by virtue of the act that this actor specifically carries out. For the radical cohort at the heart of our case study, exposure to these ideas imposed another set of limits on the application of violence to the ones already set through their engagement with leftist political theory. In view of the less discriminatory approaches adopted by active jihadist organisations inside Egypt, the consequence was to effectively take the option of violent extremism off the table.

The availability of credible ideological alternatives' possible effect on the non-occurrence of violent extremism finds tentative confirmation in our Jordanian case study. There, recall that the state discreetly requisitioned several jihadist ideologues for the official purpose of contesting the doctrines being put forth by the Islamic State, and the unofficial one of drawing jihadist sympathisers into the light of day. Due to the considerable credibility that Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filastini, and Iyab al-Qunaybi retained within the jihadist milieu at

the time, evidence gathered during our case study suggests their stage-managed appeals may have influenced a significant number of prospective recruits to turn away from participation in violent extremism. This is not altogether surprising, as myriad outside findings establish that charismatic ideologues, so long as they possess the requisite reputational capital, can exert significant effects in both pulling people in and pushing people away from violent extremism.[23] At the time of writing, the balance of evidence suggests that the Jordanian regime's shift from passively managing the domestic religious space to actively shaping it through the creation of an 'official Islam' has contributed to maintaining regime dominance.[24]

Opting Out of the Economy of Violent Extremism

The third variable that our case studies suggest may have a causal effect on nonengagement with organised violent extremism within enabling environments is a community's ability to opt out of the economy of violent extremism. Mechanistically, this can, on the one hand, be attributed to how a community's higher endowments of financial and human capital reduce its need to engage with the conflict economy. On the other hand, it looks to stem from a high-endowment community's weaker attachments to group identities as well as from the praxes of peaceful dispute resolution they develop. Both claims find corroboration in the wider literature, which has established that a community's experience with relative deprivation and material insecurity can precipitate identity crises amongst community membership, one effect of which can be to raise relevant persons' susceptibility to terrorist recruitment.[25]

These claims are derived from a quasi-natural experiment conducted by our team as part of our Syrian case study. Centred geographically upon the Deir ez-Zor governorate of the country's northeast, the natural experiment in question was set in motion due to the Deir ez-Zor's encountering of a tragic upsurge in jihadist activity from 2014 onward. The causa proxima for this upsurge was the expansive campaign that the Islamic State launched against the Assad regime and the Free Syrian Army. As result, myriad Salafi jihadist organisations bidding for hegemony both within Syria and the wider MENA region consolidated relatively durable positions within Deir ez-Zor. In the face of such an environment, social groups and communities indigenous to Deir ez-Zor would need to determine if and how they would engage the new power brokers in their midst.

Due to the vagaries of social history and decades of cynical policy choices instituted by the Ba'ath party, the tribe has long been consolidated as the dominant form of collective organisation in Deir ez-Zor. Come the 2010s, two particular tribal federations—the Ageidat and the Baggara—would therefore be the ones on the ground facing the dilemma of how to deal with the ascendant jihadist forces. For any number of reasons—ideological affinity, commercial interests, the need for security, or the desire to settle old scores, to name but a few—the tribal federations themselves as well as nearly all their constituent members ultimately decided to build relations with the relevant jihadist elements. Doing so took the form of pledging allegiance to one organisation or another (often on a highly conditional basis), reaching accommodations whereby the organisations in question could more easily conduct operations in the area, or establishing more short-term and transactional arrangements. Factions from the Shaitat, Bukamal, and Gur'an clans, for instance, all established early alliances with Jabhat al-Nusra, granting the latter's Sharia Committee temporary control over the management of local oil and gas resources. The tribal groupings and municipalities that wound up deprived from Jabhat al-Nusra's distribution of the spoils—including the Mishrif of the Bkair tribe, the city of Bu-

sayra, and the village of Zirr—meanwhile, reacted by affiliating themselves with the Islamic State. Only one village of significance in Deir ez-Zor went against this local grain so to retain full independence from Salafi jihadism for the duration of the post-2014 years: Swedan.

At the most reductive level, this outlier outcome can be attributed to causalities stemming from Swedan's unique economic situation. Located seventy kilometres southeast of the city of Deir ez-Zor, the village and its inhabitants had long benefited from reliable remittance flows issued forth from the Gulf. Amid a governorate otherwise ravaged by some of Syria's highest rates of poverty, Swedan achieved a quality of life sufficient to earn the local epithet of "Dubai." Beyond financing the village's expanding physical environment, the wealth Swedan accumulated through remittances would also be leveraged to educate younger generations to a degree well in excess of their regional peers.

The knock-on effects of Swedan's prosperity proved of profound import upon the arrival of the Salafi jihadists. Critically, the jump in the village's human capital endowment which resulted from education investments—evinced in families' relatively high numbers of doctors, engineers, and high-skill professionals—would, in conjunction with the regular receipt of financial flows sent from the GCC countries, afford the village the luxury of opting out of the contests over Deir ez-Zor's hydrocarbon assets. The welfare of Swedan's people, after all, could be sustained without access to a share of the prospective revenues generated by oil and gas extraction. With those contests having become mediated via the deals relevant parties are able to establish with different men in arms, this luxury meant Swedan faced no material imperative for engaging with the Salafi jihadists.

The existence of particular norms and praxes within Swedan—the origins of which may also trace back to the village's relative prosperity—also appear to have exerted a causal effect vis-a-vis the non-occurrence of violent extremism. Due to the Ba'ath party's strategy of indirect governance in Deir ez-Zor that was mentioned earlier, tribes had for decades been empowered to administer their own systems of justice. As most were doing so within a context defined by rampant poverty, the governorate unsurprisingly witnessed violence come to imbricate processes of dispute resolution. This was not the case in Swedan, however, perhaps as a result of the stakes being a bit lower due to the claimants being a bit less desperate. There, traditions of conflict de-escalation and peaceful adjudication prevailed, and there, the obligations imposed by tribal identity—the need to unconditionally support one's fellow tribe member if a dispute emerged—were much weaker.

Seen in full, then, Swedan was to be the beneficiary of two sociocultural variables when forced to reckon with the exigency of Salafi jihadism. On the one hand, the village could lean on a shared habitus and the presence of relatively robust socio-legal mechanisms when it came to resolving internal disputes, respectively, both of which worked to draw residents away from the fray of violent extremism. On the other, though a tribal coalition tied into the struggles of the Salafi jihadist organisations in Deir ez-Zur, Swedan and its denizens were largely immune to the kinds of the identity-based pressures which might have compelled them to rally to the side of their in-group members at any cost.

Though potentially derivative of the village's relative wealth, each of these properties of social and cultural life in Swedan made a significant contribution to the non-occurrence of violent extremism in the village. As one notable put it, "we did not need to ally with anyone to take

revenge, [and] we did not need the oil."[26] Together, these mechanisms inform why places like Swedan may observe little participation in violent extremism despite being based in a highly enabling environment.

Rethinking What Violent Extremism Is

We identified three meso-level variables in the preceding section which appear to reduce the probability of violent extremism occurring in enabling environments. Though in need of further testing, we believe our findings can provide purchase on the configuration of factors that explain why a person or community encountering trying conditions may prove resilient to violent extremism.

Important though these insights could prove to be, they do beg another question: is there an element of the enabling environment which might render the effects of our meso-level moot if taken out of the equation? To wit, is there a particular element in the enabling environment without which violent extremism will not occur at a scale sufficient to disrupt the basic functionality of societies and challenge the sovereign authority of states—an element whose removal would therefore make variables like credible ideological alternatives less consequential? If so, what might this teach us about the animating properties of more existential forms of violent extremism?

There is strong empirical evidence to suggest that there is, in fact, a single, localised element in the enabling environment whose absence alone suffices to predict significant declines in violent extremism within the MENA region: active terrorist organisations. The veracity of this claim can be validated through a fairly simple longitudinal analysis. Between 2002 and 2019, more than 96,000 people in the MENA region lost their lives directly because of non-state terrorism, which we will take as a proxy output of violent extremism of the more existential variety. The following year, however, deaths attributable to non-state terrorism dropped by nearly 80 per cent as compared to the annual average of the period in question, reaching levels not seen since before the American invasion of Iraq. In 2021, regional fatalities fell further, totalling just 1,139.[27]

In searching for what might explain this decline, it becomes clear that it cannot be attributed to any of the structural variables typically referenced as the causae ultimae of violent extremism. There were, of course, no governance-related improvements instituted in the MENA region post-2019. To the contrary, both the administrative performance and perceived legitimacy of regional governments have, almost without exception, tracked sharply downward for more than a decade running, as World Bank Governance Indicators and successive waves of the Arab Barometer attest. Nor, for that matter, has there been any course correction when it came to inequality and impoverishment trends, which have only pushed further into the global extremes in recent times.[28] Clearly, it is not as if the abusiveness of police and domestic intelligence forces has suddenly ceased either. A superficial review can also rule out the relative disappearance of violent extremism being imputable to other "population" level variables. Intergroup tensions—whether along ethnic, sectarian, or ideological cleavages—have hardly eased since 2019.

Though certain channels for extremist proselytising have been obstructed, the discursive archive of Salafi jihadism is still readily available to any who seek it. Mental health is in a far worse

state than at any point in recent memory—riddled by the effects of lockdowns and isolation, unexpected family losses, growing economic precarity, and profound life course disruption.[29] At the same time, modalities of socialisation thought to both cohere individuals within positive community and instil nonexclusive social identities have only grown more brittle due to regimes' incessant attacks on civil society.

In a context defined by mass disaffection and isolation, then, the claim that there might somehow be fewer people drawn to the jihadism's clarion call strikes as fanciful. Indeed, the current impasse in the MENA region seems uniquely propitious for those who traffic in the balms of moral certainty and promises of dignity and righteous collectivism. All of which is to say that there is little in the way of empirics from which one could trace violent extremism's decline to an improvement in environmental conditions, or to changes more generally affecting MENA populations. The drivers of the phenomenon's diminishing output must, then, lie elsewhere.

As intimated, simple chronology gives good reason for thinking that elsewhere is in the incapacitation of leading Salafist jihadist organisations. The end of 2017 saw the Islamic State relinquish what remained of its territorial holdings in Iraq. By March 2019, the organisation would lose its remaining positions in Syria as well. Though these defeats did not mark the end of the Islamic State's existence as an institutional entity—the group is estimated to retain manpower of around 10,000 soldiers plus those mobilised by foreign affiliates[30]—they did coincide with a distinct weakening in operational capacity. As of the closing moments of the last decade, the Islamic State had lost most of its experienced field commanders, and the ranks of its political leadership had thinned considerably.[31] The organisation's leading rival within the Salafi jihadist trend in Syria, meanwhile, fell upon similarly difficult times starting in 2018. Facing political headwinds in addition to attrition, Hay'at al-Tahrir al-Sham has demonstrated little ability to project force beyond a few enclaves since before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2. Finally, if still a menace in West and East Africa, al Qaeda Central too has shown itself incapable of opening a durable front within the MENA and at the time of writing, four months after the liquidation of Ayman al-Zawahiri, no successor has been announced by the organisation.

Synthesised into a single frame, the data on *actually existing* violent extremism in the contemporary MENA region present the following record: in material output, violent extremism tailed off significantly starting at the end of 2019. Concurrent with this tailing off was a reduction in the operational capacity of the leading Salafi jihadist organisations in the region. Also concurrent with this tailing off was a worsening of political, sociological, and economic conditions hitherto considered conducive to (if not causal of) violent extremism. On the one hand, then, we observe neither an association between the activity of Salafi jihadists and dynamics affecting populations at large, nor one between dynamics affecting populations at large and incidents of violent extremism. On the other, we observe a robust association between incidents of violent extremism and the operational capacity of Salafi jihadists.

This coalescence of facts has significant implications. They suggest that Salafi jihadism—in its provenance, ability to act, and ability to self-perpetuate—abides by a logic that is largely independent from the dynamics shaping the conditions of social life in the societies where it nests. As it is Salafi jihadism which evinces a strong causal relation with violent extremism, moreover, they also suggest that violent extremism is, necessarily, not *of* those societies. Put differently, the data indicate that violent extremism is less a sociological phenomenon that naturally emanates from a population upon the onset of particular conditions than it is a manifestation of

contingent and expressly political processes involving a far narrower cast of characters. Conceptually, this demands we rethink what, exactly, violent extremism of the existential variety is, and who, precisely, constitutes its primary subject.

Notwithstanding its confused etiology, the conceptualisation of violent extremism was thrust into the lexicon to capture something held to be new, distinct, and, at its core, *popular*: namely, the cultural, social, and ideological processes through which segments of Europe's Muslim community—bound into a singular category by loose and ascriptive properties—were alleged to be radicalised into animating what was viewed as "homegrown" Islamist terrorism during the early 2000s.[32] Then as now, this conceptualisation failed to identify or encapsulate dynamics salient to the MENA (if not more broadly). Far from the diffuse and apolitical processes just described, violent extremism–cum-terrorism in the MENA is, and only ever has been, an unambiguously political phenomenon. Terrorist organisations themselves of course demonstrate purposefulness, rationality—in the sense that operations follow a means-end schema, however convoluted—and unambiguous politics, evincing intentions and tactics centred on inducing changes to the policies or composition of existing states or, in the case of IS, on establishing a new state. More than that, their very being is and always has been imbricated by the state and interstate relations. It is states that furnish these organisations them their raison d'être, transmit or train their personnel, bolster their resource mobilisation capacity, patronise their efforts, or propel them across time through the dialectics of countering and causing violent extremism.[33]

This being the case, should violent extremism be retained and applied as concept in the MENA at all, it is our contention that it needs to be reformulated. Though running the risk of creating a conceptual redundancy, we would propose that violent extremism narrowly refers to a tactic and/or modality of violent political expression, one whose practice and/or activation at a more mass level requires the prior presence of a terrorist organisation. By extension, we would also propose that the principal subjects of violent extremism—the agents of the phenomenon—be reduced to terrorist organisations alone, whose formal and informal networks include organic intellectuals and jihadist ideologues, so-called lone actors, and sympathisers.

For researchers, accepting these conceptual shifts would imply a major change in investigative priorities. Instead of centring one's problem upon the places and communities where violent extremism is observed, the task would be to hone in on the phenomenon's main protagonists: terrorist organisations and their leadership. To the extent these organisations are political creatures through and through, doing so would first and foremost require the return of politics to the place it once occupied (circa the post-colonial period) for students of political violence.[34] To the extent that the state and matters of interstate relations indeed imbricate and impel terrorist organisations, doing so would also require bringing the state back in to the study of violent extremism in a big way.

Difficult as the adoption of such a bold shift in priorities would be, we believe the payoff would ultimately exceed the costs. Allowing real analytical traction to be established on one of the "wicked policy problems" of the contemporary era, it might even pave the way for the arrival of state interventions at once efficacious and limited in the negative externalities and collateral damage they engender.[35]

Conclusions

Regardless of how one might conceptualise it, it would be difficult to contest that violent extremism has proven an enormously destructive phenomenon. Beyond the harrowing body count referenced in the previous section, economic losses incurred directly or indirectly as result of violent extremism were estimated in excess of $62 billion for 2016 alone.[36] There is also the utility that violent extremism has afforded political entrepreneurs of varied ideological stripes to consider: just as the construction of immigration crises can prime voters to seek out particular kinds of solutions (and particular kinds of representatives), leveraging the threat of violent extremism has allowed certain public policy concerns to be marginalised and others promoted while simultaneously opening the space for hitherto unthinkable kinds of electoral appeal.[37]

If violent extremism itself represents a rather clear and present danger—particularly in parts of the global south—so too do many of the efforts that have been summoned by governments for the nominal purposes of countering and/or preventing it. Preventative actions (PVE) are particularly troubling in these regards. Premised upon legal ambiguities, targeted at mass publics, designed to contest the theatre of ideology, and mandating authorities to intervene prior to any illegality having occurred, PVE has to date endowed an exceedingly corrosive legacy.[38] There is little reason, moreover, for thinking this legacy won't grow even worse in the years ahead.

Given the stakes and the real-world impacts, it is critical that scholars continue to develop knowledge around what violent extremism is, why it manifests, and how one might best push back against it. It was our intention that this article might contribute in these regards. In inducing three meso-level variables that might explain why violent extremism does *not* occur within particular enabling environments, we hope to have encouraged colleagues to question the validity of some of the causal claims—both macro and micro—which have long pervaded this field of study. As a second-order effect, we hope we might also encourage those working in the policy space to stop administering initiatives built upon faulty bases. More constructively, in positing a few changes to how violent extremism is conceived and in proposing that terrorist organisations be considered the phenomenon's primary subjects, we hope to have laid the case for why future interventions against violent extremism, should they be pursued, need to be far more discrete and narrow both in targets and ends.

The explanatory power of our study is, of course, limited by some of the data collection challenges discussed in the introduction. Our findings may be swayed by biases employed in the case selection process. We have, after all, "selected on the dependent variable", and in choosing cases based strictly on the observation of violent extremism non-occurrence, we limit the extent to which ceteris paribus causal effects can be attributed to the independent variables foregrounded in our study. This being the case, our propositions constitute hypotheses in need of further testing more than they do conclusive theoretical claims. For those potentially who might be interested in validating, refining, or falsifying these hypotheses, natural experiments and carefully designed comparative analyses likely offer the best means of going about such work. Fruitful as well might be studies aimed at determining the precise point at which the valence of hard security interventions' effects on violent extremism reverse. Studies that could assemble more control variables—so as to better isolate the potential mediating effect which we have attributed to the availability of ideological alternatives within the extremism milieu

and the opportunity to opt out of the conflict economy—would naturally be of great use, too.

As a new era of great power contests looks to be upon us, it is reasonable to anticipate that violent extremism and terrorism may command less attention from social scientists in the years ahead. This would be a disappointing and potentially costly outcome should it come to pass. Both violent extremism and those policies that are created to deal with it are certain, after all, to remain deeply salient to the lives of millions for a long time to come. Let us hope the field does not go the way of the fad, and that better empirics, better conceptualisation, and better theorisation are still ahead of us.

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9 As concerns research methods, team members deployed a mixed-methods approach combining historical process tracing, discourse analysis of primary documents, and open-ended interviews with parties of relevant populations.

10 Inclusion in our study was determined by individuals having participated in the Islamist popular mobilization after 2013. Researchers followed the trajectories of 50 Islamists who were part of this mobilization after 2013 but remained nonviolent throughout. The trajectories of principals were then probed through semi-structured interviews, consultation with relevant legal representatives, and review of open source materials. Subjects were drawn from a representative sample of the Islamist milieu: Our study included persons of differing class, educational, and geographical backgrounds.

11 These mechanisms are connected in that disincentivization at the individual level is partially effectuated through policies and practices designated for the purpose of degrading the organization. By degrading the capacity of organizational outlets, after all, interventions also reconfigure the matrix of cost, benefit and opportunity which together structure a relevant individual’s decision-making.

12 See for example Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

13 These locally operating groups include Wilayat Sina’, Hasam, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, Ajnad Misr, Revolutionary Punishment, Popular Resistance Movement, and Liwa’ al-Thawra.

14 Though not yet active in violent extremism, one subject detailed being rejected by a part of his family for having been imprisoned through the state’s dragnet. On the popular front, Islamists’ denial of access to the neighborhoods where they grew up during protest marches can only have had a deeply chastening effect. See: Salih Ramadan, “al-Ahālī yuʿlinūn al-nafīr al-ʿām ḍidd ‘al-maḥẓūra’.. wa qarār shaʿbī bi-tahjīr al-ikhwān min ‘al-manṣūra’,” *al-Watan* (December 26, 2013), https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/380065.

15 The leadership generation of the 2010s had all studied how a frontal confrontation with Nasser nearly brought

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36 Mansour-Ille, "Counterterrorism Policies in the Middle East and North Africa," (2021).

37 This process is typically conceptualized as securitization. See for example Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Leonard, and Jan Ruzicka, "'Securitization' Revisited: Theory and Cases," *International Relations* 30, no. 4 (2016): 494–531, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0047117815596590; Benjamin H. Friedman, "Managing Fear: The Politics of Homeland Security," *Political Science Quarterly* 126, no. 1 (2011): 77–106, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2011.tb00695.x

38 After being pioneered by the domestic security services of the government of the Netherlands in the early 2000s, PVE's travels have been fairly ceaseless. Its initial diffusion—first to the UK, then to the United States and the world's largest international organizations—would subject western publics, and their Muslim members in particular, to increasingly expansive and invasive forms of surveillance. Bad enough already, upon spreading throughout the global south, this policy program would then proceed to empower ever less scrupulous regimes to build ever more repressive systems of control and repression. Nowhere would PVE's intensifying effects be more apparent than in the Middle East and North Africa, where the obscurities in how violent extremism is defined have been fully weaponized by authoritarian governments. Furnishing the grounds for criminalizing dissent and licensing pre-crime interventions, preventing violent extremism, like countering terrorism, is today a tool for domination as much as anything else. See for example Kundnani and Hayes, "The Globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism Policies." (2018); David Ucko, "Preventing Violent Extremism Through the United Nations: The Rise and Fall of a Good Idea," *International Affairs* 94 (2018): 251–270, https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/94/2/251/4851908; Mansour-Ille, "Counterterrorism Policies in the Middle East and North Africa" (2021); and Jrad, Eya, and Tasnim Chirch. "MENA: Regional Perspectives on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism," *Connekt Regional Report,* European Institute of the Mediterranean (2021), https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/radicalisation-and-violent-extremism-in-the-mena/.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Research Article

Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA):

Introducing an Australian Open-Source Extremist Database

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The Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA) database captures information on individuals, residing in Australia, who have radicalised to extremism and engaged in a variety of violent and nonviolent ideologically motivated behaviours. Using open-source data, PIRA comprises demographical, individual background, and contextual information and closely replicates the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States (PIRUS) database. PIRA aims to support research on pathways towards violent extremism and identify background characteristics and risk factors associated with radicalisation. This article seeks to introduce PIRA and provide an overview of its development and coding method, provides a snapshot of the backgrounds, profiles, and risk factors associated with individual radicalisation within the PIRA sample, and briefly compares these findings to existing research. Finally, future research and applications of PIRA are discussed.

Keywords: radicalisation, violent extremism, open-source data, Australia, risk factors

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Introduction

Like many countries, Australia has recorded an increase in 'homegrown' radicalisation with threats emerging across the ideological spectrum.[1] As a result, police, intelligence agencies, and government entities have pushed for a central focus on identifying individuals at risk of radicalisation and who may escalate to violence.[2] Further empirical research is required to gain a better understanding of risk factors for terrorism in order to assess and manage the risks posed by individuals who have been radicalised.

The low base rates and restrictions on access to terrorist offenders pose considerable problems for researchers.[3] To overcome these limitations, terrorism scholars have developed secondary-source data sets on terrorist incidents (e.g. Global Terrorism Database – GTD) and extremist individuals (e.g. Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States database and The European Database of Terrorist Offenders).[4] These data sets have provided opportunities to empirically investigate terrorism patterns and verify existing theories that can explain radicalisation.[5] Research drawing on open-source data has expanded knowledge on the diversity of behaviours that constitute involvement in terrorism[6] risk factors and pathways for radicalisation and violent extremism,[7] and distinguishing between various radicalisation outcomes.[8]

The Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA) database is an open-source data set capturing information on individuals who have radicalised to extremism. PIRA is modelled upon the Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in the United States (PIRUS) database[9] and contains information on the developmental, individual, and contextual factors for radicalisation and violent extremism. The database captures individuals of various backgrounds and who participate in a range of extremist behaviours across the ideological spectrum, as well those who have displayed different levels of commitment and motivations.

There are three primary aims of this article. First is to outline the development and methodology underpinning the PIRA database. This contains the inclusions criteria used, data collection process, coding guidelines, and methods of assuring data quality. The aim here is to also provide guidance and insights for similar efforts to develop open-source data sets, with work underway to replicate PIRUS in other parts of the world (e.g. Asia, Canada, and Europe). We then provide an overview of individual profiles of Australian extremists with descriptive statistics relating to background characteristics and risk factors across the sample. Due to space limitations a full overview and analysis of the PIRA data cannot be provided. Instead, we provide some general observations relating to key trends found across the sample and outline future research opportunities.

Profiles of Individual Radicalisation in Australia (PIRA)

As previously stated, PIRA is a replication of an existing US extremist database developed by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) (see Note[10] for in-depth review). The PIRUS database has provided empirical insights into individual and group radicalisation in the United States.[11] It is one of the largest data sets of its kind, capturing individual-level information on more than 2,200 extremists between 1948–2018. Rep-

licating PIRUS in the Australian context builds on an established model and approach allowing for cross-national comparisons to be made.

PIRA collects data from 1985[12] onwards on individuals residing in Australia who have radicalised to extremism across various ideologies—i.e. Islamist, far-right, far-left, and single-issue. Data are collected on a total of 122 variables. This includes information regarding ideology, sociodemographic profiles, family dynamics, plot details (if applicable), criminal history, violent and nonviolent radical behaviour, history of violence, recruitment details, group affiliation and social networks, radical associates, radical beliefs and behaviours, social media use, and radicalisation catalysts. To accommodate for context, PIRA underwent modifications on some variables relating to definitions and parameters specific to the Australian context—i.e. the term misdemeanour used in US criminal proceedings is equivalent to a summary offence in Australia. Several variables were added to increase the depth of information collected for each profile. This included information pertaining to recruitment, associations, history of social isolation, and violent behaviour.

Procedure

Case Inclusion and Exclusion

To date, a total of 254 profiles of individuals are included in the data set. These individuals are included in PIRA for either 1) committing ideologically motivated illegal violent or nonviolent acts, 2) being killed as a result of his/her ideologies, 3) joining a designated terrorist organisation, or 4) associating with an extremist group/organisation/leader. The four inclusion criteria are the same as the parameters set in PIRUS. An individual can be arrested, charged, or indicted for a crime that was ideologically motivated (i.e. stockpiling weapons for the purpose of a terrorist attack). This broad inclusion criteria offers several benefits. Firstly, it allows the data to capture a sample of radicalised individuals in Australia that reflects the heterogeneity in the population and supports a holistic assessment of factors associated with radicalisation risk across a range of behavioural outcomes.[13] It also allows for comparison across a diverse set of individuals to identify similarities and differences and helps to understand processes leading to violence.[14]

Each individual in PIRA must also have been radicalised within Australia[15] and show evidence of espousing ideological motivations, and there must be clear links between their ideological motives and behaviours. Individuals were excluded if they did not meet these criteria (e.g. if their initial radicalisation occurred outside of Australia or prior to 1985, if there is insufficient evidence, if radicalisation was speculative, or if there is an absence of clear evidence that behaviours were ideologically motivated). Following the development of similar databases, individuals are excluded based on a lack of evidence or limited access to sources.[16]

Between 2018–2022, across two exclusion phases, 78 cases were deemed unsuitable for inclusion. Of the excluded cases, 62 (79.5 percent) were removed due to lack of evidence or limited access to sources. For these cases, 75.5 percent (*n*=47) were removed because there was insuf-

ficient evidence to confirm behaviours were ideologically motivated, and the remainder were removed due to limited access to information available in open-source data.

Data Sources

To identify individuals for inclusion, publicly available sources were searched, including court documents, coronial inquest reports[17], journal articles, research reports, online news articles, terrorist blogs, newspaper archives, open-source non-government reports, terrorist monitoring research institutes or organisations (e.g. Middle East Media Research Institute) and terrorist attack databases (i.e. the Global Terrorism Database). First, to compile a list of individuals suitable for inclusion, the authors triangulated data sources. This is an important strategy when dealing with open sources, as relying on a single data source may miss many terrorist events, privilege certain attacks deemed more newsworthy[18], or lead to bias in the selection of highly connected actors. Hence this method is well suited to the scope of the inclusion criteria (i.e. not just terrorist offenders), and allowed the authors to identify individuals across different networks.[19] For instance, in Australia an individual released on a control order[20] can be subject to a range of restrictions relating to associations and contacts. Such names listed in control orders are also explored for possible inclusion for ideologically motivated individuals and behaviours.

To develop and identify information for profiles, multiple data sources were consulted. First, public access search engines including Austlii, Lexis Advance, and WestLaw AU were used to identify court records. Court documents include criminal complaints, affidavits, bail conditions, indictments, sentencing memoranda, extended supervision orders, control orders, and plea agreements. These were the greatest source of information for the individual database and out of 254 cases, 146 (57.5 percent) had an accessible court transcript(s) for data extraction. Secondly, data were collected via academic, grey literature, and books (i.e. autobiographies) that detail terrorist profiles and behaviours such as case studies and qualitative studies.[21] Finally, journalist data were collected on extremists via news search engines such as Lexis Nexus and Google News.

Where accounts conflicted, a hierarchy of data was used in which official court transcripts were considered most reliable, followed by affidavits, then metropolitan journalism, followed by national journalism.[22] Most criminal proceedings in Australia are open access, compared to other countries where access to legal documentation is more restricted (e.g. the UK), heightening reliability amongst sources used to generate profiles. There were also efforts to gather information across a wide range of sources, then revisit profiles to include more reliable information. For instance, if court documents were released after completion of a profile, they were revisited and updated using the most authoritative information. Journalistic data were included with caution, and information was required to be cited in a more reliable source or mentioned over several news sources. Court transcripts were considered the most reliable source of information and a single source was considered adequate for data inclusion. Journalistic information including news articles was considered less reliable and, in the absence of court data, four separate journalistic sources were required to verify the information before it could be included in the PIRA data. On average, each profile was compiled using 17 independent sources.[23]

It is acknowledged that there are limitations in using open-source material, specifically the use of media-based sources which present potential problems such as factual accuracy, privileging large-scale newsworthy incidents (i.e. those involving violence)[24] and the underreporting of foiled terrorist attacks.[25] It also creates the problem of missing data.[26] Hence this produces an issue of incomplete profiles, specifically if an individual's offending was not highly publicised or the individual did not have contact with the criminal justice system (i.e. there is an absence of court transcripts). However, due to the lower prevalence of terrorist-related attacks and extremist movements in Australia[27], a large portion of cases are highly publicised, often resulting in arrests or indictments (though not always convictions), whereby court proceedings can be easily accessed. In the case of the PIRA data, utilising a combination of journalistic accounts and court documents, mitigates some of the limitations associated with over-reliance on a single source of open data.

Data Collection and PIRA Codebook

Data collection began in 2018, and profiles in the current database were finalised in May of 2022.[28] Data collection and coding from open sources was conducted in two phases: (1) compiling qualitative profiles and (2) conversion into numerical data. To ensure validity and accuracy during the data collection phases a codebook was developed. Data are coded in accordance with the PIRA codebook. The codebook outlines inclusion criteria, variable information including in-depth descriptions, coding guidelines, and instructions. An excerpt from the codebook is provided in Figure 1. A version of the codebook can be accessed online.[29]

Figure 1: Example Extract of PIRA Codebook

Recruitment Details

30. *Variable name*: **active_recruitment**
Variable label: Actively Recruited
Variable type: Dichotomous
Source: PIRUS
Description: Was the individual actively recruited into an extremist movement?

0 = No
1 = Yes
-99 = Unknown

31. *Variable name*: **recruiter**
Variable label: Recruiters
Variable type: Categorical, Multiple Entry
Source: Adapted from PIRUS
Description: If the individual was actively recruited, enter who actively recruited the individual.
Note: If the individual was recruited but the name of the recruiter or type of association is not known enter '4' for other.

1 = Associate(s) or member(s) of a terrorist or violent extremist group
2 = Family Member
3 = Friend
4 = Other
-99 = Unknown
-88 = Not Applicable (individual was not actively recruited)

In stage one, qualitative data on each individual profile were collected across all variables, capturing descriptive and text-based information. Profiles were assigned to research assistants in batches. Consensus between coders was routinely checked to ensure inter-rater consistency. At the completion of profile batches, group meetings were held with research assistants and the coinvestigator (first author) to discuss general coding challenges or queries for individual cases and clarification of variable coding. To further ensure consistency across coders and reliability of case notes, every case coded by a single coder was then examined by the first author.

This was done by cross-checking the entered information for consistency, to ensure all profiles shared similar levels of detail, and that coding parameters were followed across coders. In the instance where the first coder highlighted a need for clarity to ascertain the appropriate coding for a particular variable the first author gave their input. If an agreement could not be made, this was referred to the second author for a final decision. Such consensus-based approaches to coding have been used in similar research, including developing terrorist profiles from open sources.[30] A final 'master check' was conducted of all profiles, where coders were allotted a portion of profiles and followed a coding checklist (written by the first author) that outlined common discrepancies and coding issues that were raised during the coding phases. Source checks, editing, and referencing were also addressed in this final phase.

In stage two, qualitative text-based information was converted into numeric data to allow for quantitative analysis. Data were converted into either dichotomous, categorical, ordinal, or numeric data. Again, this process was cross-checked by the first author for consistency, and coding issues were also raised in group meetings between coders and the first author. In the instance of discrepancies, following the procedure in stage one, the principal investigator (second author) was referred to for a final decision.

As a final consistency check, following the general standard for social science research[31], inter-rater reliability tests were conducted with a random sample of profiles. A total of 25 profiles (20 percent of the total sample) were double-coded blind across all quantitative variables (120) by the coinvestigator and a group of research assistants. This equates to 3,000 observations. Following a similar approach conducted for PIRUS,[32] a Krippendorff's alpha was calculated. The Krippendorff's alpha for the 3,000 observations was $\alpha = 0.872$, scoring well above the standard for acceptability ($\alpha > .70$).[33]

Dealing with Missing Data

In the initial data collection phase of the project, researchers adopted a systematic approach to handling missing data. Whenever information for a particular variable was not present in data sources, coders were instructed to treat the information as missing, even if strong logical arguments could be made for treating the values as 'No' or '0'—i.e. not present and having no role in individual radicalisation. This is most notable in relation to attitudinal variables where open-source information can often lack detail, such as personal aspirations, opinions, or emotions. In these cases, coders assigned a missing value code of '-99'.[34] While this approach protects against the possibility of erroneously coding values as absent, it also produces high rates of missing data for many variables.[35] High percentages of missing values can make statistical

tests more difficult and is an ongoing issue in the use of open-source terrorist data sets.[36] Thus, when developing PIRA some degree of missing data was expected.

The authors did, however, employ several techniques to reduce the high number of missing values common amongst open-source data sets. The codebook included clear parameters and stipulations for several dichotomous variables that allowed for the coding as '0' (i.e. not present or no), instead of '-99' (i.e. missing or unknown). For instance, an argument can be made for treating unknown values for mental illness as evidence that the individual did not suffer from mental illness.[37] Comparable reasoning can be made for criminal histories, drug use, and victims of abuse. This rationale is particularly salient due to the nature of open sources, as it is unlikely for sources to report what an individual did not do, or did not experience (i.e. the individual was *not* a victim of abuse).[38] Other non-dichotomous variables followed a similar rational for coding, whereby a "defaulting" code was specified to ensure known information was not excluded due to the strict nature of some variable categories (i.e. if fatalities were mentioned or expected as part of a violent plot, default to '1' equating to "some fatalities" [from 1 to 20]). Similar techniques have been used in the collection of other dichotomous variables in open-source terrorist databases[39] and when dealing with missing values from open-source data for analysis purposes.[40] This significantly reduced the occurrence of missing data and was considered an appropriate strategy given the sources used for data collection.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics presented here are intended to provide an overview of individuals included in PIRA. Profiles and characteristics of individuals who have radicalised to extremism in Australia are examined through sociodemographic information, ideological alignment, and extremist behaviours, as well as specific risk factors and vulnerabilities. Here a range of descriptors relating to background characteristics, both psychological and behavioural, and social networks evident across the entire sample are outlined, and which are identified to be common within the literature as presenting risk of radicalisation and engagement in extremist violence.[41] No missing data imputation was conducted on these descriptives. Across the 19 variables examined, 11 contained missing data (57.9 percent) with a total of 10.9 percent missing values.

Background Characteristics

The sociodemographic profiles of the PIRA sample are provided in Table 1. Demographic data are captured based on the information available at an individual's time of exposure.[42] Within the PIRA sample, individuals are predominately male (91.7 percent) with an average age of 27 years (*SD*=8.5). Almost half of the PIRA sample never married (44.9 percent), and one-fifth did not complete high school (23.2 percent) (excluding those where educational attainment was unknown, 30.7 percent). More individuals in the PIRA sample came from lower-class families (21.7 percent) than any other category. Prior to their radicalisation, rates of employment were relatively low, with 30.7 percent having some form of stable employment.

Ideological Alignment and Extremist Behaviours

Demographic profiles (i.e. age, gender, et al.) are measured in accordance with time of exposure (see Note 46 for definition). Across the entire PIRA sample, individuals' time of exposure mostly occurred between 2011–2015 (45.3 percent), followed by 2016–2020 (34.3 percent), 2000–2005 (11.8 percent), 2006–2010 (5.9 percent), and 1985–1999 (2.8 percent). Most individuals within PIRA aligned with Islamist or Jihadist ideologies (83 percent), followed by far-right (9.6 percent), far-left (3.9 percent), and single-issue ideologies (3.5 percent). Individuals who espoused Islamist ideologies are overrepresented in the sample.

In PIRA, violent motivations are captured by two categories of documented behaviour, either violent or nonviolent. In this instance, individuals who were actively participating in behaviour with the intention to cause injury or death (whether or not successfully achieved) were coded as violent. Nonviolent behaviour involves behaviour that was not associated with aiming for, or causing, human injury or casualties. Of the entire sample, 65.4 percent were considered to have engaged in violent extremist behaviour, and 34.7 percent participated in nonviolent extremist behaviour. Just over half (53 percent) of the PIRA sample were officially charged with a terrorist-related offence, the remainder were arrested without charge, placed under surveillance, charged with a non-terrorist-related offence (e.g. assault or arson), or cautioned without charge. Upon closer inspection of the data, a large portion of the PIRA sample was identified as foreign fighters (45.7 percent), whereby they attempted, planned, or succeeded in travelling to an overseas conflict zone (in this instance mostly to Iraq or Syria) to join or support a terrorist organisation.

Table 1: Demographic Profiles and Characteristics of Individuals who have Radicalised to Extremism in Australia

Variable	Category	Distribution (%)	N	Missing Values (%)
Gender	Male	91.73%	233	0.0%
	Female	8.27%	21	
Age	<18	10.24%	26	5.12%
	19–25	39.76%	101	
	26–30	19.29%	49	
	31–35	9.84%	25	
	36–40	5.51%	14	
	41+	10.24%	23	
Marital Status	Single	43.31%	110	5.51%
	Married	43.31%	110	
	Divorced/Separated/Widowed	7.87%	20	
Education	Did not complete high school	23.23%	59	30.71%
	Completed high school	20.86%	53	
	Completed vocational training	4.33%	11	
	Some tertiary education	13.39%	34	
	Tertiary education or higher	7.48%	19	
Socioeconomic Status	Lower class	11.81%	30	58.66%
	Low-middle class	9.84%	25	
	Middle class	15.75%	40	
	Middle-upper class	3.54%	9	
	Upper class	0.39%	1	
Employment History	Never employed	13.39%	34	26.38%
	Long-term unemployment	9.06%	23	
	Underemployment	6.30%	16	
	Serially employed	14.17%	36	
	Regularly employed	30.71%	78	
Year of Exposure	1985–1999	2.76%	7	0.0%
	2000–2005	11.81%	30	
	2006–2010	5.91%	15	
	2011–2014	45.28%	115	
	2015–2020	34.25%	87	
Violent Motivations	Violent	65.35%	166	0.0%
	Nonviolent	34.65%	88	
Ideology	Islamist	83.07%	211	0.0%
	Far Right	9.45%	24	
	Far Left	3.94%	10	
	Single-Issue	3.54%	9	

Note: N = 254

Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities

Historical background characteristics capturing behavioural and psychological attributes are important for studying extremist-related behaviours.[43] Results show that indicators of high-risk behaviours and psychological distress were evident across the sample (see Table 2). Radicalised individuals in the sample showed evidence of mental illness (31.1 percent), an arguably high figure compared to other studies based on open-source data (e.g. prevalence of 9.8 percent).[44] While one must be cautious in making direct comparisons given the reliance on secondary sources, it is worth noting that this prevalence of mental illness across the PIRA sample is higher compared to the Australian population (20 percent according to ABS).[45] A history of violent and criminal behaviour has also been linked to violent radicalisation.[46] One quarter of the PIRA sample had a history of violent behaviour which included threats of violence, being charged with a violent crime, or reported incidences of violence. A total of 85 individuals (33.5 percent of the sample) had a criminal history, which includes juvenile offending; this is significantly lower than the prevalence of criminal activity amongst other radicalised populations (54.1 percent) (see Note 24). The misuse of alcohol and illegal substances was found in 26.4 percent of the sample. This result does reflect findings from existing studies and highlights that for some individuals (but not all), previous involvement in deviant behaviour is linked to participation in violent extremism.[47]

Consistent with the broader scholarship on radicalisation risk[48], across the PIRA sample a large proportion of individuals (69.3 percent) expressed some type of grievances—that is, they indicated being under threat (real or imagined) or perceived they had been subject to an injustice. Feelings of social exclusion have also been associated with risk of radicalisation.[49] In the PIRA sample, this is illustrated through the experience of social isolation as shown by keeping to themselves, detaching from friends or family, or having a general absence of social interactions. Preceding their radicalisation, just under a quarter of the sample experienced social isolation (24.8 percent).

The impact of social networks on the process of radicalisation is well established.[50] Results indicate the high prevalence of social networks (both online and offline) across the sample (see Table 2). Online social media is fast becoming a gateway for exposure to radical ideologies. The role of online social media across the PIRA sample was common (i.e. involving—for example—the use of Facebook, Surespot, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp). These data were coded as to whether it had a major or minor role (see Note [51] for definition), and results indicate that online social media use contributed in some way to a person's radicalisation for more than 50 percent of the sample. Results from descriptive analysis of social networks across the sample found the majority had a close friend who was radicalised, and just over a quarter of the sample had a radicalised family member. Further, the number of connections with other known extremists averaged six (*SD*=5.7) with the number of associations for each individual's radical social network ranging from 0 to 32. These can encompass associations with radical friends, leaders, family members (immediate and extended), and incidental associations.

Table 2: Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities of Individuals who have Radicalised to Extremism in Australia

Variable	Category	Distribution (%)	N	Missing Values %
Presence of Mental Illness	Yes	31.10%	79	0.0%
	No	68.90%	175	
Alcohol and Other Drug Use	Yes	26.38%	67	0.0%
	No	73.62%	187	
Absent Parent	Yes	25.19%	64	29.13%
	No	45.68%	116	
Social Isolation	Yes	24.80%	63	21.65%
	No	53.54%	136	
History of Violence	Yes	24.80%	63	0.0%
	No	75.20%	191	
Criminal History	Previous (nonviolent) minor criminal activity	11.81%	30	0.0%
	Previous (nonviolent) serious criminal activity	4.72%	12	
	Previous violent criminal activity	16.93%	43	
	No criminal history	66.54%	169	
Grievances	Yes	69.29%	176	22.05%
	No	8.66%	22	
Social Networks[a]	Number of radical associates (Numerical)	5.66 (6.54)	248	2.36%
Social Media Influence	No social media influence	29.92%	76	14.96%
	Social media played a minor role in radicalisation	42.52%	108	
	Social media played a major role in radicalisation	12.60%	32	
Radical Peers	Yes	76.38%	194	12.99%
	No	11.42%	29	
Radial Family Member	Yes	28.74%	73	26.77%
	No	44.49%	113	

Notes. N = 254, [a]Mean and standard deviation reported in distribution social networks variable

Discussion and Conclusion

PIRA aims to contribute to emerging efforts to develop open-source terrorist and violent extremist data sets. By including individual and contextual information related to an individual's radicalisation, studies can empirically examine theories and risk factors linked to the process of radicalisation and further develop the knowledge base on factors that lead to terrorist involvement. In this paper we have outlined the development of the PIRA data set and demonstrated the utility of open-source data collection methods for generating knowledge on hard-to-reach populations. We also highlighted characteristics of an Australian sample of radicalised individuals. Below we further examine similarities and differences between the PIRA sample and findings of previous examinations of extremism and conclude by noting the key characteristics of the PIRA sample and compare this with research using PIRUS.

From the overview of the data presented here we see several trends. Sociodemographic characteristics do not appear to define factors common amongst individuals who have radicalised in Australia, as the sample varied across marriage, education, and socioeconomic status, consistent with existing research.[52] Key features amongst the sample are that individuals are most commonly male, with a slight downward trend in age aligning with other research that suggests younger populations are at heightened risk of radicalisation and involvement in violent extremism,[53] although slightly differing from the average of 28–29 years reported in other Australian Islamist populations.[54] While our findings differ from early profiles of Australian terrorist offenders (in which they are described as older, well educated, male, and with strong social bonds via marriage and employment),[55] they align with recent research.[56] This suggests that the cognitive vulnerability of Australian Jihadists decreases with age and education levels, as found in other samples of Australian Jihadists.[57] Comparing our sample to the PIRUS data set also reveals similarities. All background factors show similar patterns across the two national samples, with two exceptions: terrorist offenders in PIRUS tend to have higher levels of educational attainment (43.3 percent had a college degree or higher in PIRUS compared to 7.5 percent in PIRA),[58] and are older, averaging 34 years old.[59] Findings from this study using PIRA indicate pre-existing personal connections as important, reflecting similar patterns observed among Australian terrorist cells.[60] The presence of radical peers was higher compared to radicalised individuals in PIRUS, but those in PIRUS have been found to be almost twice as likely to have a radicalised family member (58.5 percent vs. 28.7 percent) compared to the current PIRA sample. The results reported here suggest a pervasive influence of social networks amongst Australian extremists, with a large proportion of individuals having radicalised peers, as well as prevalent social connections via family and wider associations with extremists, both online and offline.

Feelings of injustice and experiences of social exclusion are common among the PIRA sample. This aligns with scholarship noting that grievances and experiences of injustice coupled with social isolation can initiate radicalisation pathways and subsequent involvement in terrorism.[61] However, contrary to previous studies, the PIRA sample demonstrates high levels of substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal involvement.[62] When compared with PIRUS, the PIRA sample demonstrates higher rates of mental illness (31.1 percent vs. 8.6 percent) and substance abuse (26.3 percent vs. 7.6 percent).[63]

Meanwhile, criminal histories are more prevalent in the PIRUS sample, with more than half of the sample having a history of criminal activity compared to a third in PIRA. The overall trend towards high-risk behaviours, as reflected in PIRA and other equivalent data sets, suggests that radicalisation may have a strong criminogenic element associated with it.

Results indicate diversity in ideological alignments with the emergence of different political and grievance-fuelled motivations, including far-right and single-issue ideologies. Previous explorations of Australian terrorist populations have been almost exclusively al-Qaeda and Islamist inspired,[64] as these populations were considered to pose the most risk. While the sample remains disproportionally Islamist, PIRA data indicate more heterogeneity of ideological positioning among individuals who are at risk of radicalisation and terrorist involvement. Further, a large portion of individuals in the sample demonstrated violent intent or behaviour, suggestive of violent motivations, and inclusive of this was a significant number of extremists (just under a third of the entire sample) who entered a foreign conflict zone. Yet, over a third of the sample was found to participate in funding and logistical support for terrorist organisations, categorised as nonviolent behaviour. Australian extremists involved in ideologically motivated activities are not always characterised by violence and hence behavioural outcomes associated with radicalisation risk vary.[65]

We have acknowledged above the limitations inherent in PIRA. Challenges associated with the development of open-source data sets include the inherent nature of open-source information resulting in large percentages of missing data, poor inter-rater reliability, and variability of source information. Many of these issues have been addressed in the development of PIRA by triangulating resources, narrowing coding criteria, and conducting reliability tests. Improving the reliability of and transparency in the development of open-source databases is also important for avoiding misleading findings.[66]

Due to space limitations, we have not been exhaustive in the reporting of trends and associations found in the PIRA sample.[67] Our analysis has simply looked at associations without demonstrating causation. Due to the high number of variables used to collect data in the PIRA database and the inclusion of violent and nonviolent offender groups, future analysis of PIRA will include comparisons between different terrorist offenders (violent vs. nonviolent), ideological affiliations (e.g. Islamist vs. far-right), and group memberships (e.g. lone actors vs. group actors). Analysis can include testing current theoretical perspectives within the literature and their capacity to differentiate between violent and nonviolent outcomes of radicalisation.

Finally, PIRA is unique in that it replicates the format of an existing database (PIRUS) allowing for future comparative research on individual radicalisation between Australia and the United States. The replication of large-scale data sets based on open-source data enables future comparative research to explore possible similarities and differences across extremist populations. It also provides the possibility of replication studies given that access to data is more widely available. Thus, the future aim is to also make the PIRA data set openly available for public use.

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PT
PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Research Note

The Link between Misinformation and Radicalisation:

Current Knowledge and Areas for Future Inquiry

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Does misinformation lead to radicalisation? This Research Note explores the theoretical link between consumption of misinformation and radicalisation to violent extremism. Drawing from insights from communication studies, criminology, and psychology, it is argued that some unique characteristics of misinformation are likely to facilitate radicalisation among individuals with self-uncertainty, low cognitive flexibility, and grievances, who also experience social exclusion. This exploration concludes with a summary of findings and offers recommendations for both policy makers and practitioners.

Keywords: misinformation, propaganda, radicalisation, extremism, social media

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Introduction

In today's online environment, misinformation and propaganda supporting violent extremism are easy to find. Yet, we know little about the relationship between misinformation and support for violent extremism. This Research Note seeks to address this gap in our understanding. First, it outlines the different types of information that fall under the umbrella of misinformation. Second, it discusses radicalisation and the characteristics that may make an individual more susceptible to radicalisation based on exposure to extremist misinformation. Specifically, it argues that individuals who have self-uncertainty, low cognitive flexibility, perceived grievances, and low social integration may be more vulnerable to radicalisation via extremist misinformation. Third, the Research Note discusses how the online environment may support radicalisation as a result of misinformation. It concludes with a summary of our argument and suggests three areas for future research: (1) addressing selection effects, (2) testing the cognitive factors associated with vulnerability to misinformation and radicalisation, and (3) extending the research on media literacy to radicalisation mitigation.

Connecting the Dots between Misinformation and Extremism

What Is Misinformation?

Scholars, journalists, and policy makers often use the term misinformation to describe a broad category of information that relevant experts would consider incorrect based on the best evidence available at the time.[1] Several types of false or misleading information exist under the umbrella of "misinformation," including misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda. These subcategories often overlap, but each possesses distinct characteristics. Misinformation describes false information that was not created with the intent to manipulate or harm, while disinformation describes false information that was created with the intent to manipulate or harm. Malinformation describes information that is partially true, but is used out of context with the intent to manipulate or harm.[2] Each of these constructs describes information that is false or misleading, in part or in whole, that is disseminated for various reasons. For the rest of this Research Note, we use the umbrella term "misinformation" to be inclusive of all forms of false or misleading information discussed here.

Much of the misinformation we encounter on a day-to-day basis is not extreme or radical. However, some misinformation is designed to elicit strong emotions and legitimise extreme beliefs, including propaganda and conspiracy theories. Propaganda is false or misleading information that has been specifically designed to manipulate its consumers' beliefs and preferences to achieve a political goal.[3] Propagandists often play on prejudices or emotions to strengthen the persuasiveness of their messages.[4] Conspiracy theories are information statements that incorrectly attribute political or social phenomena to specific people or institutions.[5] These forms of misinformation often form the "evidence" supporting violent extremist ideologies.

Misinformation may spread for several reasons. In most cases, people are likely to believe information when they first hear it. Unless individuals are alert and devote a high degree of attention

to evaluating statements as they reach them, it is likely that misinformation will be accepted as true until corrected. Information evaluation typically involves the following considerations: (1) whether the information aligns with what you already believe to be true; (2) whether the information is internally coherent (i.e. it does not contradict what you believe about how people are motivated and act); (3) whether the source of the information is credible, and (4) whether other people believe it.[6] Misinformation that employs divisive rhetoric and elicits strong emotional responses can impact this process of information evaluation. Affective information processing is often more immediate than cognitive processing, making people less likely to engage critically with what they are reading, hearing, or viewing and more likely to rely on existing biases.[7] The emotional aspect of misinformation also impacts its spread: studies have found that misinformation inspires strong feelings of surprise and disgust, and that these emotional reactions encourage greater engagement in the form of sharing, "likes", and comments.[8]

What Is Violent Extremism?

Violent extremism is characterised by the support for, or use of, violence to achieve political, ideological, social, religious, or economic goals. A more refined definition of extremism is "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group. The hostile action must be part of the in-group's definition of success".[9] As such, violent extremism can run the gamut from verbal threats and discrimination all the way to genocide. More commonly, acts of violent extremism include terrorist attacks, hate crimes, and other violent incidents motivated by a specific goal.[10] Individuals come to support or perpetrate acts of violent extremism through a process of radicalisation, in which the use of violence to achieve a goal is increasingly seen as legitimate.[11] It must be noted, however, that radical attitudes and beliefs alone are poorly correlated with actual violent behaviour.[12] Nevertheless, radicalisation can occur via an increased exposure to messages that support extremist ideologies and the use of violence.[13] This process is often motivated by powerful emotions like insecurity, shame, and anger, which can be transformed into feelings of resentment and hatred of other groups.[14]

Conceptualising the Link between Misinformation and Radicalisation

Violent extremist group leaders are savvy Internet users who deploy a variety of tactics to expand consumption of their material and recruit new members. For example, extremists may use common hashtags when commenting on topical issues or embed news reports into their propaganda to lure users from mainstream to extremist content.[15] Extremist group members work to identify potential new recruits in online spaces and slowly introduce them to extremist ideologies.[16]

Extremist misinformation is unlikely to radicalise individuals who come across it inadvertently; rather, it is more likely to support radicalisation to extremist violence among those who seek it out.[17] For these individuals, misinformation can be a powerful tool of radicalisation due to its propensity to arouse strong emotions, particularly anxiety and anger. Threat messages that arouse anxiety can be highly persuasive—messages that point to a threat, particularly one

that is unknown, create a psychological drive for more information about that threat and generate support for responsive action.[18] Significantly, research shows that once anxiety has been aroused, individuals are more likely to process information in accordance with their pre-existing beliefs. This effect is compounded by the tendency of high-anxiety individuals to seek out threatening information.[19] Messages that elicit anger may also lead individuals to seek out attitude-confirming information. Feelings of anger are also associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in online debates.[20]

Drawing from communication studies, criminology, and psychology, we present the following theoretical argument regarding how misinformation may be linked to radicalisation. We argue that individuals with self-uncertainty, low cognitive flexibility (e.g. rigid, or black-and-white thinking), grievances—real or perceived—and those who experience social exclusion may be more susceptible to extremist beliefs and radicalisation via misinformation than others.[21]

The Role of Self-Uncertainty

People face uncertainty every day: lack of clarity about why the world works in a certain way, why unpleasant things happen in one's own life, and insecurity about one's own identity. This uncertainty can produce high levels of anxiety, particularly uncertainty about who one is and what one's role in society is. Individuals experiencing this type of uncertainty often feel a strong need to find a fitting individual purpose.

Violent extremist belief systems and groups may present attractive opportunities to fill this need. High levels of self-uncertainty may lead people to search for ideologies that are "distinctive, unambiguous, all-encompassing, explanatory, and behaviourally prescriptive".[22] Extremist content that presents a black-and-white explanation for the world and offers clear guidance on social hierarchies may provide comforting clarity.

Identifying oneself as a member of a particular group can also help reduce anxiety stemming from uncertainty. Identification with a group that has clear boundaries, one that unites its members around shared goals and a belief in a common fate may be particularly attractive to individuals experiencing high uncertainty: such groups strengthen perceptions of an "in-group" and an "out-group", and identifying oneself as a member of the "in-group" can help provide identity seekers with a clearer sense of self and one's purpose in life.[23]

Extremist group membership may also address one's need to find an individual purpose. The *quest for significance* theory of radicalisation argues that extremists fulfil their basic identity and psychological needs by conforming to the group identity, thereby allowing them to find purpose and meaning via the group.[24] This serves as a replacement for individual uncertainty at the identity or cognitive levels. For example, research on radicalisation pathways of violent extremists in the United States has found that many did indeed experience a loss of significance at some point in their lives.[25]

There is also some evidence that uncertainty about one's identity and purpose in life serves as a major problem that pushes an individual to join an extremist group or movement to meet

these basic needs. In this sense, uncertainty is reduced by adopting a group's identity as well as the attitudes and behaviours that go with it.[26] Those studying white supremacist pathways found something similar: adopting a collective identity gave many extremists a strong sense of individual purpose and direction; thereby improving their sense of agency.[27]

The Role of Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive flexibility describes an individual's ability to switch between modes of thinking and adapt to changing rules or information collection. Individuals who look for clear answers to questions and avoid ambiguity or, in other words, have a high need for closure, are likely to have low cognitive flexibility.[28] People with low cognitive flexibility are less likely to understand the limits of their own understanding of an issue, which often means they are less likely to accept new information that challenges their pre-existing viewpoints.[29] Rather, they are likely to use directionally motivated reasoning to dismiss or counterargue that information in support of their prior beliefs. This tendency to prioritise attitude-congruent information may lead to greater acceptance of misinformation that reinforces pre-existing beliefs.[30] In contrast, people with high cognitive flexibility may be better able to use analytical thinking to identify misinformation as such, even if the information favours their pre-existing beliefs.[31]

Cognitive flexibility is also related to propensity towards extremist attitudes. A recent study found that cognitive inflexibility was positively linked with in-group identity fusion and a willingness to endorse violence against out-group members. Individuals with low cognitive flexibility also showed higher levels of attachment to their ideological beliefs and a willingness to sacrifice themselves to protect their in-group.[32] These theoretical connections are buttressed by the social-psychological literature which shows that more close-mindedness (e.g. expressed in black-and-white thinking) is correlated with how we view and engage with other social groups.[33]

Misinformation that simplifies and explains why bad things occur, such as conspiracy theories or propaganda, may be especially potent. Put simply, cognitive rigidity, black-and-white thinking, and an inability to entertain multiple viewpoints or perspectives are already related to radicalisation processes, irrespective of whether misinformation was a proximate cause. This is one of the assumptions undergirding many existing preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs. For example, a promising prison-based program within the United Kingdom—the Healthy Identity Intervention (HII)—targets cognitive rigidity while promoting a healthier identity.[34] Other programs operating within the community engagement space such as Being Muslim Being British and Being Muslim Being Scottish target this same construct with a fair amount of success.[35]

The Role of Grievances

Extremist groups often craft narratives to exploit a sense of injustice or perceived grievances. To do so, they often rely on conspiracy theories to identify a scapegoat for why this injustice exists and blame specific out-group members for it.[36] For example, the literature on white supremacist radicalisation pathways shows that groups prey on vulnerable individuals who need

a cause to act upon their grievances.[37]

Perceptions of personal or group injustices can lead to an array of negative emotions associated with the adoption of extreme beliefs. Perceptions of personal injustice often involve the sense that one's life circumstances are not right, or fair, while group injustice often involves comparison between the circumstances of one's own social group and the circumstances of others. These perceptions can lead to support for violent extremist ideologies through a process of attribution, in which another group is held responsible for these injustices.[38]

Individuals may be more predisposed to believe misinformation about groups if they already distrust them. In these cases, the alignment of accusatory and hateful fake news with their pre-existing beliefs bolstered their confidence in these messages.[39]

The Role of Social Exclusion

Isolation can greatly facilitate the radicalisation process. One study of lone-actor extremists found that a majority experienced social isolation.[40] Social exclusion may manifest itself differently for different groups. For example, a study on the correlation between military service and radicalisation found that veterans were more likely to face social exclusion.[41] How this manifests itself in, or translates to, online behaviour is, however, unclear.

Misinformation from hate and extremist groups that highlights in-group membership may be attractive for people who lack strong social bonds and a sense of community. For these individuals, language offering community and acceptance within the extremist group may present longed-for opportunities for belonging. The activation of in-group identity may also make extremist misinformation seem more credible: when in-group identity is strong, individuals are likely to discount information that challenges in-group/out-group divisions.[42]

Social exclusion may also contribute to radicalisation by reducing the availability of protective factors associated with pro-social connections.[43] Such processes may be particularly acute for youth populations. For example, one study found that people become less likely to hold extremist attitudes conducive to violence as they age, due in large part to growing maturity, improved coping skills, improved self-control, and—significantly—connections to pro-social peers.[44] Younger people who lack these personal and social protective factors are therefore at a higher risk.

People, particularly youth, who experience anxiety and social exclusion are more likely to turn to the Internet for guidance. In many cases, the Internet can provide positive benefits. However, people who experience social exclusion and loneliness may be more likely to engage in a problematic way with social media, prioritising online connections over in-person relationships.[45]

Social Networks Can Serve as Proximate Cause or Reinforcement

The literature on extremist pathways shows that social networks—both pro- and anti-social—are influential protective and risk factors respectively, for radicalisation processes in general.[46]

There is no strong reason to doubt that these connections may influence *online* behaviour. In fact, the evidence to date strongly suggests that the dichotomy between online and offline behaviour is a false one.[47] Offline social network homogeneity (i.e. a lack of diversity with regard to individual backgrounds and viewpoints) is very important for fostering online "echo chambers" for a variety of reasons: how algorithms prioritise the diffusion of information online, how individuals are provided content that is also consumed or shared by other users in their local area, and how individuals self-select into various domains.[48] A major analysis of online social networks found that social homogeneity in online echo chambers was the primary driver of the spread of misinformation.[49]

Socially homogeneous connections serve as reinforcement mechanisms. Michaela Del Vicario and her colleagues have described how "Users tend to aggregate in communities of interest, which causes reinforcement and fosters confirmation bias, segregation, and polarisation. This comes at the expense of the quality of the information and leads to proliferation of biased narratives fomented by unsubstantiated rumours, mistrust, and paranoia."[50] Whether radicalisation originates online or offline, social networks play an important role in steering individuals into, and out of, extremism pathways. However, the strength of impact of various relationships on radicalisation is tenuous and varied. Some argue that family members intentionally socialise each other into extremist movements, whereas others contend that individuals pursue extremist movement membership to avoid cognitive dissonance and foster groupthink. Peer pressure can also be an important factor in one's decision to stay in, or leave, an extremist movement.[51] In one study on ISIS members, connections with friends was the number one recruitment source.[52] Similarly, a study on far-right actor disengagement found that having radical family members was an important factor influencing the impact of other push and pull factors.[53] A recent examination of Islamic extremist pathways found that having radical friends was an important pull condition into violent extremism, whereas being married was an important pro-social condition mitigating violent extremism.[54] While more work is needed to discern how offline social networks influence online radicalisation, it is likely the case that online social connections function similarly to offline connections, given the seemingly false—or at any rate diminishing—dichotomy between offline and online radicalisation mechanisms.

The Role of the Online Environment

For those seeking it out, misinformation and propaganda in support of violent extremist causes is easy to find. Internet searches allow individuals to access websites and social media posts and find groups dedicated to sharing violent extremist ideologies. Studies have shown that exposure to this content is common, even for those who are not actively searching for it.[55] One study of Belgian youth found that nearly 25percent of participants had encountered Salafi-jihadist content by accident while online.[56]

Social media platforms offer significant opportunities for individuals to seek out information about extremist ideologies and create connections with violent extremist groups. Some studies have found evidence that the algorithms that determine which content social media users are exposed to may direct users towards increasingly extreme content.[57] This, in turn, can lead to more information silos and subsequently stronger homogenous social echo chambers, in line

with the foregoing research.

Online behaviours such as doxing (i.e. publishing private information about an individual online with malicious intent), trolling (i.e. using inflammatory or offensive language online to provoke others), and cyber-bullying are associated with support for violent extremist beliefs. Individuals who are part of online communities that promote these types of behaviours are likely to be especially vulnerable to radicalisation.[58]

Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite the apparent lack of empirical research on the connection between misinformation and radicalisation, there are strong theoretical reasons to believe that the former may facilitate the latter. In this Research Note, we offered a framework to help explain why some people may be more vulnerable to radicalisation via misinformation than others. This framework is intended to be a starting point for future research. Many important questions remain; addressing them will be critical to advancing our understanding of this phenomenon. Three important areas for future research include: (1) addressing selection effects, (2) testing the cognitive factors associated with vulnerability to misinformation and radicalisation, and (3) extending the research on media literacy to radicalisation mitigation.

Addressing Selection Effects

One area that needs to be examined further is the "chicken and egg" scenario of media selectivity. Put another way, do people who are either *already* radicalised or more *susceptible* to radicalisation select media or content forums and platforms with extremist content, or do these forums and platforms radicalise people? If the former is true, are people with specific risk profiles more likely to engage with specific content or forums that increase their radicalisation risk? The extant literature suggests that individuals who hold specific cognitive inclinations are more likely to engage with content that affirms or relates to those inclinations (e.g. an aggressive person seeking out violent material). However, this question remains largely unanswered regarding radicalisation in general, and the exposure to, and spread of, misinformation specifically.[59] Scholars should examine this question by way of using case-control and longitudinal designs to understand how people interact with misinformation after understanding their risk profiles, support for, or adherence to, radical ideologies, and support for violence more broadly. Understanding this link is crucial for developing appropriate policies or programs to respond to this issue.

Testing the Cognitive Factors Associated with Vulnerability to Misinformation and Radicalisation

In this Research Note, we have presented some cognitive factors that are theoretically linked to radicalisation via misinformation, including self-uncertainty, self-esteem, and analytical thinking. In recent years there has been a steep growth in the study of the factors associated with radicalisation.[60] While many of these factors have yet to be adequately tested empirically

on susceptibility to misinformation, we have highlighted some of the theoretical connections between several of these factors and radicalisation more broadly in an effort to connect the dots between underlying risk factors, susceptibility to misinformation, and radicalisation.

Recent work in this domain supports the linking of the cognitive factors laid out in this Research Note and susceptibility to misinformation. A recent review showed that many cognitive, social, and affective factors are related to susceptibility to misinformation and serve as barriers to revision once information has been corrected.[61] For example, corrections to misinformation that attacks a person's worldview, which is grounded in their identity, may result in further cognitive dissonance or discreditation of the source. A related study examined the relationship between cognitive factors and the question of whether media is consumed critically.[62] They founded that *need for cognition* (i.e. reliance on analytical thinking when processing information) was positively related to critical consumption, as was the level of engagement on social network sites, with the interaction thereof being particularly predictive of consumption patterns. Put simply, people with low analytical thinking skills and less online social media engagement are much more likely to uncritically engage with content—something arguably connected to the potential for misinformation to spread. Continuing this research to identify the factors associated with vulnerability to misinformation and radicalisation will allow scholars to identify promising interventions that may bolster resiliency among this population.

Can Interventions Mitigate Radicalisation from Misinformation?

Many types of interventions have been employed to mitigate the spread of misinformation, such as information or media literacy efforts, pre-bunking initiatives (e.g. adding a disclaimer debunking information before it is consumed), and argument-based forms of inoculation to specific messaging.

Media literacy initiatives are a growing and often useful method for preventing the spread of misinformation among the general population. These initiatives are based on the premise that people desire accuracy and that providing information consumers with skills to improve misinformation identification will reduce their likelihood of believing it. There is some evidence to support this: studies have found that people look for cues about the accuracy of what they are reading, and that even simple interventions can improve their ability to detect misinformation.[63] However, these initiatives range widely regarding how media literacy is forged. While some initiatives merely provide a forewarning or scripted explanation to prime the reader to be aware of what misinformation looks like, others consist of multicomponent educational initiatives designed to improve resilience to misinformation. It has, for example, been found that exposure to a news media literacy intervention via a scripted forewarning (on immigration and crime) has benefits for improving perceived accuracy of information, although it did not improve issue agreement amongst participants.[64] Related work has found that information literacy—or someone's ability to navigate and find viable information—was more predictive of spotting fake news than mere media literacy, albeit these types of literacies are influenced by one another.[65]

Another line of research has examined the use of inoculation messaging, which involves exposing

information consumers to the types of appeals that misinformation is likely to make, so that they are less likely to believe misinformation when they encounter it. A recent experimental study used a randomised control trial to study whether misinformation from either Islamophobic or radical-Islamist videos were more likely to be shared after exposure to inoculation messaging. Those who were exposed to the neutral (i.e. not topic-specific) inoculation video—which was based on an analysis of rhetorical devices used by those pushing disinformation online (e.g. hasty generalisation; appeal to emotions)—had less agreement with the contents of the subsequent video containing misinformation, viewed the source as less reliable, and were ultimately less likely to share it than those who did not receive the inoculation video. Put simply, neutral interventions to pre-empt the acceptance and spread of misinformation may be useful in combatting radicalisation processes as well. Yet, more work is needed in this area.
Thus far, studies of media literacy and misinformation have focused on the general population. It is unclear if these interventions—or the other types of initiatives described—would have similar effects on individuals who are radicalised or are at risk of radicalisation. Given the previously discussed work on cognitive inflexibility and radicalisation susceptibility,[66] future work should focus on the lack of critical thinking (examined in the aforementioned study using a focus on personality and critical thinking) when examining the relationship between vulnerability to misinformation and radicalisation.

Greater research into these areas is needed to craft effective initiatives for these populations, especially when selection effects are considered. Furthermore, it is not clear whether anti-misinformation initiatives have sustained or long-term benefits since most studies do not compare the relative benefits of one type of intervention compared to other types.

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PT
PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Research Note

Why Terrorism Researchers Should Care about Criminal Responsibility

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Criminal responsibility is a basic principle in holding individuals to account for criminal actions. Making exemptions to criminal responsibility when individuals cannot be held responsible for their actions is equally central, and most countries have frameworks allowing for such exemptions for reasons of serious mental health problems. However, despite the recent years' enormous interests in the possible links between individual 'mental health' and involvement in terrorism, the issue of criminal responsibility has apparently so far not been the subject of much interest in the field of terrorism research. This Research Note makes the simple point that criminal responsibility should be of particular interest to terrorism researchers, for two main reasons: the centrality of (political, religious, ideological) motivations for defining a crime as terrorism-related and the sometimes-difficult boundary-setting between such motivations and (psychotic) delusions; and the political nature of terrorism-related crimes.

Keywords: criminal responsibility, diminished responsibility, mental health, terrorism legislation, terrorism sentencing

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Introduction

This brief Research Note seeks to make the simple point that the issue of criminal responsibility should be of special interest to terrorism researchers. Strikingly, the recent years' enormous interest in the possible links between terrorism and perpetrators' "mental health" problems (defined in different ways or sometimes not defined at all) has so far not really led to much scholarly work examining where this potential connection—in the worst-case scenario—might end up: with someone with an apparently serious mental health disorder being charged for a terrorism-related offence, and there being subjected to a forensic assessment seeking to determine whether they could be held responsible for the act in question. In such a case, the issue of criminal responsibility, the forensic assessment involved, and the final determination on the matter by sentencers are likely to pose some particular challenges compared to non-terrorism-related cases. While a few studies on specific terrorism-related criminal cases have been conducted,[1] the topic has generally been absent from the scholarly radar of most terrorism research, leaving the topic to be dealt with in the main by professionals in the fields of law and psychology.[2]

In seeking to explain why terrorism researchers should care (more) about criminal responsibility, this Research Note will first outline the basics of the concept of 'criminal responsibility' and, most importantly, what most commonly qualifies as grounds for exemptions to individual criminal responsibility. This Research Note will then make a couple of points explaining why this issue poses some particular challenges in terrorism-related cases compared to non-terrorism-related ones, and why it should be of special interest to terrorism researchers as well as to counter-terrorism practitioners. The legal framework and practices of the UK and Norway will be used to concretise and exemplify the matter. While certainly different in their sizes, legal systems, and terrorism-related histories, these are both European countries outside the EU with only slightly different frameworks for criminal responsibility which together serve to expose some of the key issues at stake.

Criminal Responsibility and Exemptions to Mens Rea

Holding individuals responsible for their actions when they do harm in a way that violates the law is still a crucial concept of law, morality and security in terrorism-related cases as well as in other types of cases. In most legal systems, to simplify somewhat, this would usually mean to identify, arrest, prosecute, and sentence individuals who have provenly committed crimes. Doing so in a fair, just, judicious, and transparent way is a requirement for a functioning rule of law regime. It is also key to upholding public trust in core institutions of the state.

In legal terms, two elements are necessary for holding someone criminally responsible: the carrying out of a criminal, punishable act—that an offence has taken place—and a 'guilty mind', what is in legal parlance taken from Roman Law known as mens rea. The 'act' part is not difficult to understand: it involves an agent having committed an act (or having blameworthily failed to act) in a manner that violates the law. A criminal mind, meanwhile, can broadly speaking be said to involve intent to cause harm, break the law, or knowing or understanding or should have been able to know or understand that the act or omission was wrong, criminal, and/or harmful,

when it was committed. One could say that, according to the law, a criminal offence does not exist if you don't have both the act and a culpable mind. If damage of some kind has been caused by accident, there is no criminal responsibility, unless the accident was intended to happen or happened due to culpable negligence.

This Research Note is not concerned with the 'act' part of this definition of a criminal offence and criminal responsibility, but with the 'mind' part of it. To establish that a damaging or apparently criminal act has been committed tends to be quite straightforward. But to demonstrate that the act was committed with a criminal mind is usually more complicated. Often this is the question around which prosecutions are centred—with prosecutors trying to demonstrate not only that the defendant did commit the act, but also that they intended to cause harm, knew that the act would do harm, or should have been able to know this.

Most important for the present purposes is that the 'criminal mind' part of a legal process is where the key exemptions to criminal responsibility are centred. Because not punishing someone who is mentally not responsible for his or her actions is equally central for a functioning rule of law system, and for principles of justice, morality, and fairness. In other words, in most jurisdictions some people who demonstrably have committed the act of which they are accused can still be exempt from criminal responsibility if they do not meet the threshold for possessing a criminal mind. In such cases, the outcome could be that the defendant is not sent to prison, but instead to a different institution such as to a hospital for treatment—or that the defendant gets a reduced prison term, sometimes in combination with medical treatment. In some cases, exemptions to the principle of criminal responsibility can lead to a crime not being prosecuted at all. Especially in the UK context, there is strong scholarly literature on exemptions to principles of criminal responsibility at earlier stages of the legal process—notably around fitness to plead.[3] However, the focus of this Research Note is on (exemptions to) criminal responsibility at the sentencing stage, and the special relevance of this issue at this stage to terrorism-related cases in particular.

The most straightforward and widely accepted exemption to criminal responsibility is age – or 'infancy' as it is sometimes referred to by legal practitioners and scholars. Most jurisdictions do not prosecute or sentence very young children the same way as they do adults, although the precise minimum age for criminal responsibility varies significantly between countries—and is in itself a topic of much controversy and debate.[4] Although the issue of minimum age for criminal responsibility could be said to also be an issue of particular interest for the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism research, this 'infancy exemption' will not be discussed further here. Instead, the present focus is on the second main category for exempting individuals from criminal responsibility: 'mental health'—mental state, mental capacity; sometimes, but not always, involving mental disorder.

In both the jurisdictions of Norway and the UK (as well as in many others) a certain threshold for mental capacity needs to be met for holding an individual criminally responsible. The principle is in some ways the same as with infancy; if someone does not have the mental capacity for mens rea (possess a guilty mind), she or he cannot be held (fully) criminally responsible.

However, countries have different laws and practices as to how such distinctions and thresholds

are made and implemented in practice. Norway has three quite-specific criteria regarding who can qualify for such a "mental health exemption".[5] These are (i) a "severely deviant state of mind", (previously referred to as "psychosis"—but the law removed this language in 2020);[6] (ii) a "high-level" developmental disorder, with an IQ of below 60; (iii) a "strongly altered" consciousness—which should be involuntary and usually temporary, such as in cases of automatism or sleepwalking—but notably not when it involves self-intoxication. The UK, meanwhile, seemingly has a broader definition (but at the same time possibly a higher threshold for defendants to qualify—although space does not allow here for a full elaboration on this matter). Rather than formulating very-specific criteria as Norwegian law has done, the core question in the UK is "At the time of the offence, did the offender's impairment or disorder impair their ability, to exercise appropriate judgement, to make rational choices, and to understand the nature and consequences of their actions?"[7] In both Norway and the UK, forensic experts—psychologists and/or psychiatrists—are called upon to render their professional opinion on the defendant's mental state at the time of the crime.[8]

Criminal Responsibility in Terrorism-Related Cases

This is a good point at which to explain why the mental health exemption to criminal responsibility is especially pertinent in terrorism-related cases. Two points in particular should be made. One has to do with what one could call the 'psychological' dimension both of the mental health exemption to criminal responsibility, and of terrorism, and the second point has to do with the legal positioning of terrorism cases, which seem to sometimes place terrorism defendants in a position where they might be exempt from the exemption on criminal responsibility.

To take the 'psychological' dimension first: the law frames the mental health exemption to criminal responsibility as a matter of not only law, but also of psychology and psychiatry—since it is asking for a forensic mental health assessment from qualified experts, who then set a diagnosis if they find it relevant. Strictly speaking, in the present systems in both Norway and the UK, the mental health experts are not asked to advise on the precise applicability of the law or directly discuss the relevance of a possible mental health exemption to criminal responsibility in individual cases; rather they are asked for their mental health expertise in relation to the condition of the defendant at the time of the offence. However, if these experts find that certain psychological or psychiatric conditions were present at the time of the act to an extent or intensity seemingly meeting the threshold for an exemption, the sentencers—judges and juries—are likely to give weight to the expert assessment and could come to the conclusion that the individual's culpability and hence criminal responsibility was reduced or absent.

In practice, therefore, determinations around the applicability of the mental health exemption involve not only a legal assessment but a psychological and medical assessment by a mental health practitioner. That such an assessment is called upon, and usually given weight, in settling questions on criminal responsibility to some extent, removes the question of criminal responsibility from the domain of "pure law" and places it within the purview of psychology, psychiatry, and medicine.

To make this a bit more concrete: one common reason for defendants meeting a mental health

exemption to criminal responsibility is if they are psychotic. The centrality of psychosis to this question is illustrated by the fact that, as mentioned, Norwegian law until 2020 explicitly cited "psychosis" as the first basis for a criminal responsibility exemption for mental health reasons. The medical diagnostic manuals DSM-5 and ICD-11 define psychosis quite similarly, in terms of: "delusions, hallucinations, formal thought disorder, grossly disorganised or catatonic behaviour."[9] Of these, it could be especially worth citing the ICD-11 definition of delusions: "A belief that is demonstrably untrue or not shared by others, usually based on incorrect inference about external reality. The belief is firmly held with conviction and is not, or is only briefly, susceptible to modification by experience or evidence that contradicts it. The belief is not ordinarily accepted by other members or [sic] the person's culture or subculture (i.e. it is not an article of religious faith)."[10]

For terrorism researchers, it might by now have become clear how terrorism-related cases might be particularly relevant and challenging with regard to issues of criminal responsibility—and especially tricky for judges and juries deciding on a possible mental health exemption based on the defendant possibly having delusions. Terrorist acts are, in law, in Norway, in the UK, and also elsewhere conventionally defined by their intentions to advance a political, religious, racial, or ideological cause, the intention to make authorities do something or omit doing something for political, religious, racial, or ideological reasons, and to aim to intimidate and scare the public.[11]

In some cases, a defendant's political, religious, racial, or ideological cause might indeed amount to a "demonstrably untrue belief...", "held with a conviction" not "susceptible to modification"—that might seem "insane" to many, including to judges and juries. In such cases it might be difficult for sentencers who are not mental health experts to distinguish what is a psychiatric delusion and what is part of ideological convictions. And it could be difficult for forensic psychology or psychiatry professionals who are not experts on terrorism-related ideology, terminology, references, or presentation to settle precisely what could for instance be an "overvalued idea" and what could be a delusion. Indeed, in terrorism cases there seems to be a particular kind of risk that ideology could be being mistaken for psychotic delusions. Or perhaps even more so in the reverse: since terrorist actors themselves rarely want to be seen as mentally ill, and rarely themselves seek a mental health exemption—there could be an even greater risk that psychotic delusions are being mistaken for ideology. Clearly this could pose a significant problem to not only actual cases and prosecutions, but to the principle of criminal responsibility as such, as well as to perceptions of justice, fairness, trust in rule of law institutions. It could also very concretely represent a risk that the outcomes of trials and verdicts are later challenged and/or overturned since the issue at the time was not settled in an appropriate way.

It is worth underlining here the obvious points that delusions are not the only way a psychosis can present itself—other symptoms might be more important in individual cases, such as hallucinations or a thought disorder, defined as "involving the logical sequence and coherence of thought, typically manifest in speech ... and including flight of ideas, neologisms, and thought blocking."[12] Furthermore, there are of course also many mental health conditions other than psychosis that could provide the ground for a mental health exemption to criminal responsibility. And highly significantly, someone with a psychotic delusion can also be ideologically

motivated—and delusions themselves can have an ideological content, and could again influence the content of terrorism-related ideology. However, psychosis with delusions remains a common ground for a mental health exemption to criminal responsibility, with several concrete cases demonstrating the challenge involved in drawing precise lines and distinctions.

The sometimes-difficult categorisation of a terrorism-related defendant's thought content as either ideological, psychotically delusional, or both became a central issue in the best-known case involving questions around a possible mental health exemption to criminal responsibility, namely the prosecution of Anders Behring Breivik after the 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway.[13] In that case, initially, two court-appointed forensic psychiatrists having assessed the defendant found him to have suffered from paranoic schizophrenia at the time of the attacks. According to Norwegian law at the time, if this conclusion were to be followed by the court, Breivik would have been found not criminally responsible, and would have been sent to a hospital rather than to prison. These implications of this first diagnosis thus led to such an outcry from Norwegian media, politicians, and a number of other psychologists and psychiatrists, that the court extraordinarily chose to appoint a second team of experts to assess the defendant's mental state at the time of his attacks. When this second team found him to rather suffer from two personality disorders, the court took this on board and gave the defendant Norway's strictest prison sentence at the time. The question of whether Breivik's thoughts were (psychotically) delusional, ideological—or indeed both at the same time—became a core issue of contention in the case.

To turn to the second issue that places terrorism-related cases in a special category with regard to mental health exemptions to criminal responsibility: simply put, terrorism-related cases in Norway, the UK, and elsewhere, are legally categorised as more serious than non-terrorism-related crimes. The same act carried out with terrorist intent would normally carry a higher sentence than a similar, non-terrorism-related crime. This notably includes murder, where also having a terrorist intent would count as an aggravating circumstance carrying a higher sentence than a murder carried out, for instance, for purely interpersonal reasons. The historical, political, and legal background issues that have placed terrorism in this 'special category' between crime and national security could be the subject of an article of its own. It is at the same time a fact that a terrorist crime—both in its intentions and in its effects—would typically reach beyond the individuals immediately affected, and would have a wider societal, political, and security 'ambition' as well as resonance than a non-political crime. Acts of terrorism target and impact society, politics, and state security. Both authorities and the public would often be more interested—and would perceive to have a greater 'stake'—in terrorism cases and their resolution than in other forms of crime.

This is reflected in how terrorism cases are handled in the criminal justice system, and apparently also in how the mental health exemption is being applied in terrorism-related cases. Since terrorist crimes are placed in a special—and more serious—category than ordinary crimes, they are not only punished more severely but also seem to raise the threshold for applying the mental health exemption. In the UK, these aspects appear more formalised than in Norway. For instance, UK sentencing guidelines state explicitly that a court must—and this is regardless of any aspect of a defendant's mental health or any forensic assessment—deal with an offender suffering from a mental disorder in the manner it considers to be most appropriate under all

circumstances.[14] One of the key elements that should be taken into account when possibly setting aside any or all aspects of a defendant's mental health, is that the sentence must reflect the seriousness of the offence. In practice then, the fact that terrorism cases are considered particularly serious criminal offences may then lead to the mental health exemption being set aside in terrorism-related cases exactly because they are cases of terrorism.[15]

While it would indeed seem reasonable to allow for some judgement to juries and judges in their weighing of this complicated issue, this also raises the questions of the fundamental purpose of the mental health exemption, as well as of the special legal, psychological, and security status of terrorism-related cases. Is the purpose of the mental health exemption to criminal responsibility to allow for sentencing to be scaled and adjusted to an individual's capacity to act responsibly and understand their own actions—and to get those suffering from serious mental illnesses into mental health treatment rather than imprisonment? If so, there would seem to be little reason to set a mental health disorder or impairment aside for reasons that have to do with the offence rather than the seriousness or intensity of the disorder or impairment. If instead, the mental health exemption exists to protect public trust and perceptions of justice and indirectly enforce national security, it would make more sense to scale the principle according to the nature of the offence.

Conclusion

The issue of "mental health exemptions" to criminal responsibility hence serves to illuminate both the "special status" of terrorism-related cases, and how terrorism-related cases bring forth particular challenges when settling questions around such possible mental health exemptions. It is also a field in which considerations around law, politics, psychology, and security—as well as justice, morality, medicine, and care—collide. How such cases are dealt with in practice can say much about how societies weigh these concerns and values against one another. This field of study should certainly be of much greater interest to terrorism researchers than it appears to have been thus far.

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Endnotes

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Research Note

An Easy-to-Use Search Tool for the Abbottabad Compound Material Archive

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Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan was raided following his death in 2011. The documents retrieved from his compound became known as the Abbottabad Compound Material (ACM). The majority of ACM documents were declassified and released to the public in 2017. However, these documents have not been thoroughly mined by academic researchers despite potentially important information that may exist in the ACM. Academic researchers may be deterred from using the ACM because the documents are not easily accessible or because the documents are predominantly in Arabic. This paper presents a search engine specifically built for researchers that will enable the mining of ACM documents. The ACM search tool may facilitate critical terrorism- and extremism-related research related to al-Qaeda and related terrorist groups.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, Abbottabad Compound Material, data mining, search tool

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Introduction

Al-Qaeda is a violent non-state extremist group that was founded by Osama Bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam in 1998. After its founding, the Saudi-led group quickly garnered religious extremist followers across North Africa and Central Asia and eventually headquartered in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The group is most notably known for its September 11th (9/11) attacks against the US, but the group committed smaller terrorist attacks prior to 9/11 and continues to commit attacks in North Africa and Central Asia. Under Taliban rule in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and extremist groups that have stemmed from al-Qaeda (e.g. the Islamic State) have made a resurgence. Consequently, al-Qaeda and affiliated groups remain a threat to those who oppose them.

In 2011, Osama Bin Laden was killed by US forces in a bunker in Abbottabad, Pakistan. All documents from the bunker, including computer files, flash drives, images, and videos, were archived. These documents included mundane items, such as software manuals and newspaper clippings, but they also included potentially important items, such as correspondence between Bin Laden and his followers and propaganda-related documents. In 2017, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) declassified a large portion of the documents found in the bunker and released them in an archive called the Abbottabad Compound Material (ACM).[1] Tens of thousands of documents from the ACM are now available for public use.

Despite a great wealth of information that may exist in this collection of documents, few academic researchers have utilised these data to quantitatively or qualitatively explore issues of critical importance (despite a few exceptions).[2] It is possible that researchers have been deterred from using this material because the documents are not easily accessible. The documents are in individual files on the CIA/ODNI website, and there are no tools available for searching through the documents. To use the files, one must either manually search through them or attempt to use improvised search tools (e.g. the often-poor search feature built into a computer's operating system). Mining the documents in this manner is impractical for researchers and may be a slow process. A search tool that facilitates this process would make the ACM more accessible to researchers.

Furthermore, researchers may be deterred from using the ACM because the documents are predominantly in Arabic. Individuals who do not have knowledge of Arabic may need to rely on translations to determine the contents of each document. In theory, this could be accomplished by feeding the documents through a translation portal (e.g. Google or Amazon Translate), searching for keywords or phrases in translated output, and trying to extract data from documents that seem relevant. However, this approach is not advisable, as it has recently been shown that feeding a large amount of text into freeware translators can result in "critical" information gaps in the translated output.[3] A more practical approach would be to identify a subset of documents that contain specific Arabic keywords and to subsequently perform a translation. This approach would ensure keywords of interest are not "translated away." A search tool that can screen all documents for specific Arabic keywords would enable this approach.

This article presents a newly developed ACM search tool (ACMST) that enables researchers to quickly and systematically mine Arabic ACM documents for keywords or topics of interest.

Features of the ACMST

- Speed. The CIA/ODNI website houses 18,500 ACM documents. The documents range from one page to several hundred pages in length, totalling over 20GB of data. The ACMST can search all documents for keywords in a matter of seconds to minutes.

- Savable search results. Thousands of documents may match a desired search term. The ACMST includes a feature that enables the user to download a list of document titles that matched search terms. This feature supports the systematic processes necessary for rigorous research.

- Searches for exact and similar search terms. Most Arabic words have a "root" or "base" word that represents a core concept. Derivatives of the word are different versions of the root word. For instance, in Arabic, "he wrote" and "book" are derivatives of a common root word that relates to writing. The ACMST allows the user to search for their exact search term and derivatives related to the chosen word. In other words, searching the Arabic word for "he wrote" will also identify documents with "book" and "I wrote." Researchers who are not familiar with Arabic syntax and sentence structure may benefit from searching derivatives of their primary search term. Doing so would reduce the likelihood of missing potentially important documents.

- No coding required. Many political or social scientists do not have the opportunity to develop coding skills. Although the ACMST is based on Python coding, the user does not need to have any knowledge of coding in order to use the search tool.

How to use the search engine

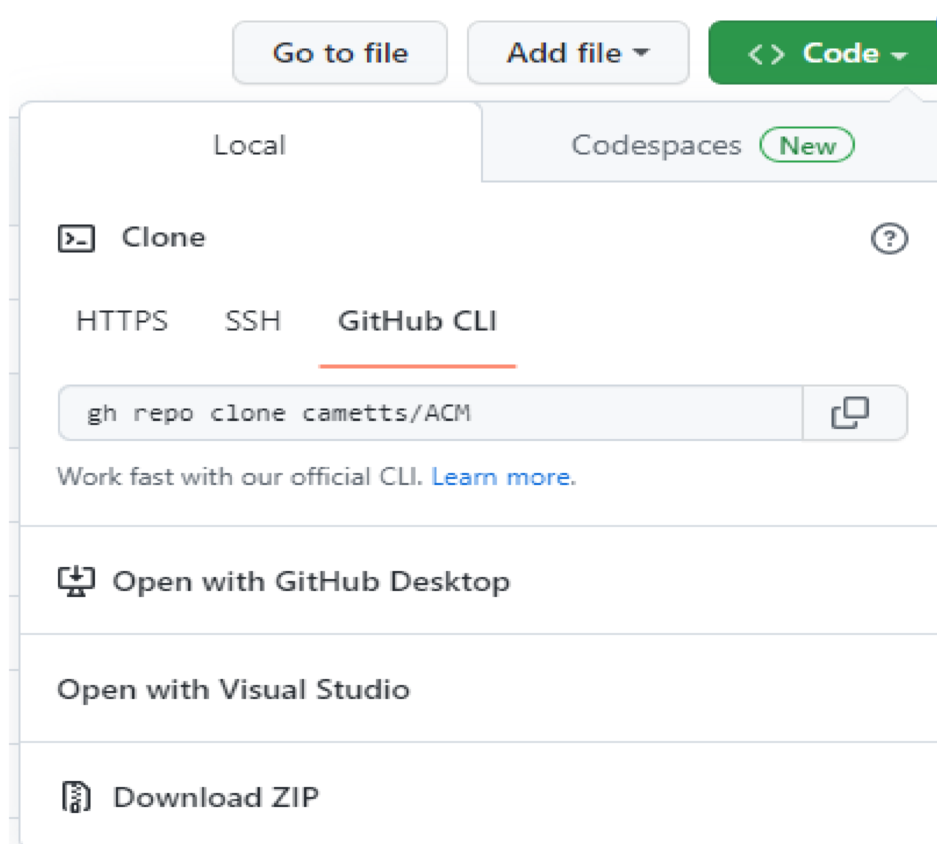
The instruction manual for the search engine is in Appendix 1.

Appendix 1: Installation Instructions

First-Time Installation

1. Be sure your computer is connected to the Internet for the duration of this process.

2. Open your Internet browser and navigate to the file location at https://github.com/cametts/ACM. Click the green "<> Code" button (near the top right corner) and click "Download ZIP". Save the files to your Desktop, or another convenient location. Depending on the speed of your internet connection, this may take several minutes.



3. On your Desktop, find the file that was just downloaded and double-click it. When prompted, unzip the files to your Desktop. Depending on your system configuration and other previously installed software, you may be prompted to "unzip the files to Desktop", "Extract to folder", or similar command. Wait several minutes while the files are unzipped.

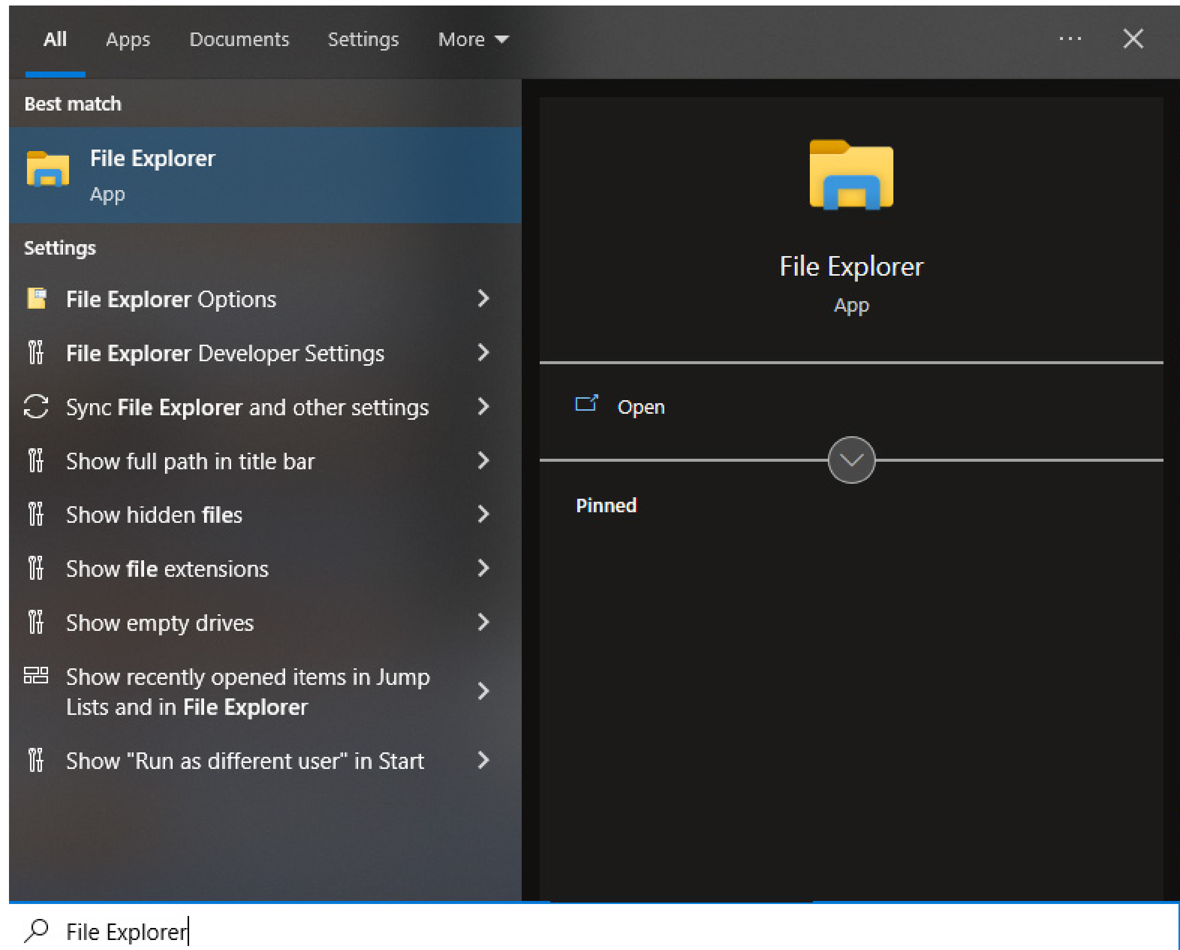
4. On your desktop, find the folder that was just created, which should be represented with a manilla folder icon. Hover the mouse over it and right-click. Select "Rename", and rename the folder to "dashboard_dist" (without quotation marks).
   a. If you like, you may move the dashboard_dist folder to a new location. However, do not remove any files from within the folder. Doing so will cause the search engine to become inoperable.

5. If you do not have Python installed on your system, download and install it from https://

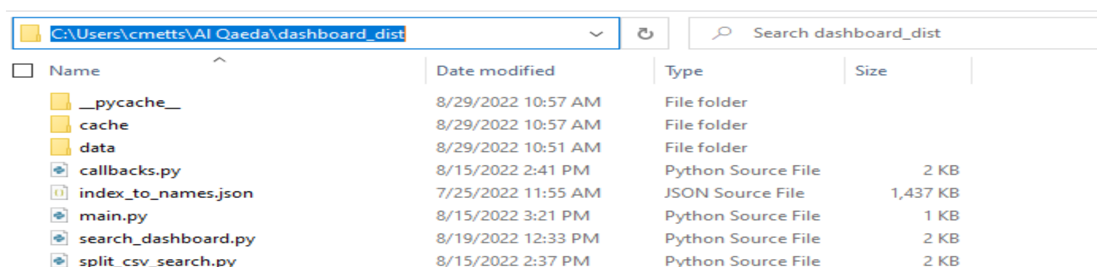
www.anaconda.com/products/distribution. Follow the instructions to install "Anaconda." Installing Anaconda may take up to 20 minutes.

- NOTE: the search engine has been tested on Windows with Python versions 3.8 and 3.9. Other operating systems and Python versions may work, but they have not been tested.

6. Click on the magnifying glass icon in the lower left corner of your desktop (directly next to the Windows icon), or press the Windows key on your keyboard, which will pull up the search bar automatically. Enter "File Explorer" into the search bar (outlined in red in the image below). Open the File Explorer app.

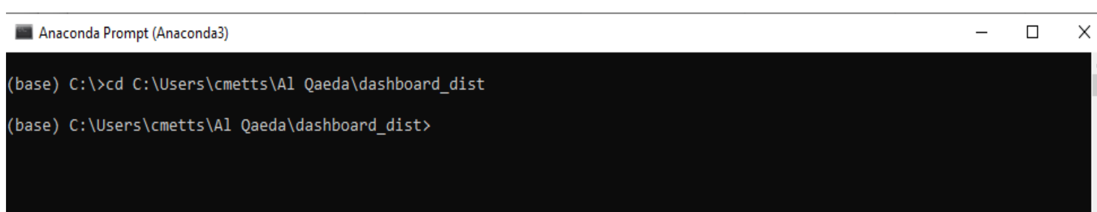


7. Navigate to where you saved the dashboard_dist folder within File Explorer. If you followed steps 1-4 above and did not move the folder, it should be saved to your Desktop. Click anywhere inside the address bar (highlighted in red in the image below). The path to the folder will appear highlighted in blue. Copy the full path to the folder. This path should have the format of "C:\....\dashboard_dist."

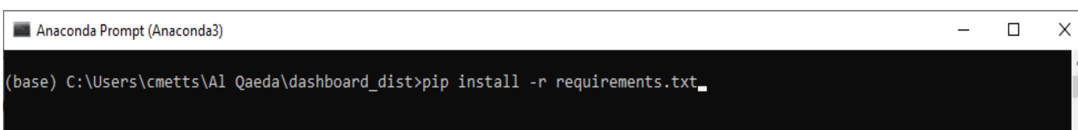


8. Click on the Start/Windows button (indicated with the Windows icon) and find the newly installed "Anaconda3" folder. Open the folder and click "Anaconda Prompt (Anaconda3)." Other Anaconda programs in that folder (e.g. "Anaconda Powershell Prompt") will not work.

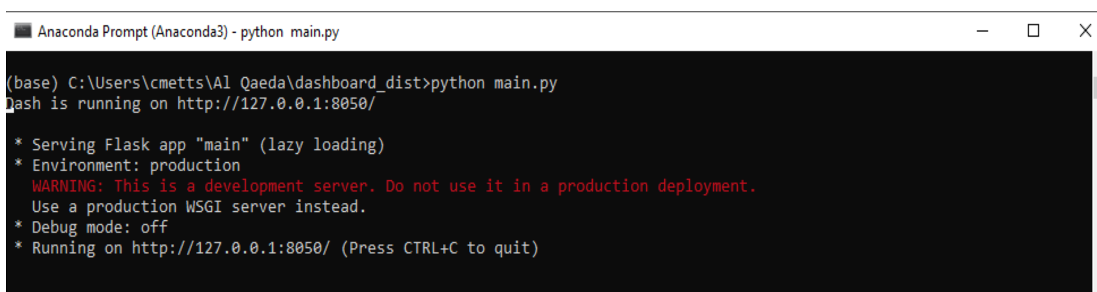
9. Find your cursor in the Anaconda program. Enter the text "cd" and paste the path that you copied in Step 2. Be sure there is a space between "cd" and the path that you are pasting (pictured in the top line below). Press Enter. A new line will appear (pictured in the bottom line below).



10. Enter or paste the text "pip install -r requirements.txt" (see picture below). Press Enter. After a short time, a number of new lines will appear on the screen as the packages install. This may take up to a few minutes. When installation has completed, your cursor will reappear.



11. It is now time to launch the search tool. To do so, enter or paste the text "python main.py". Press Enter. After several minutes, the window will print a message, including a web address (pictured on the bottom line below). This address will begin with http://. Copy the web address and paste it into a web browser. Press Enter to navigate to the web page.



12. The search engine will appear in your browser window. There will be a blue status bar moving back and forth. The search engine is now ready to use. You can enter or paste any Arabic-language search term into the search bar (see image below). Names of files containing the word you searched (or related root words) will appear in a list below the search bar. You must leave the Anaconda Prompt window open while you are using the search engine. Closing it will cause the search engine to quit.
    a. You will know the search engine is working when the "Search" button is faded grey. It may take several minutes for a search to complete. If the search engine appears frozen for an extended period of time (more than 10 minutes), you may restart it by refreshing your browser.
    b. If there are no files matching the search terms, a blank row will appear rather than a list of file names. If there is a long list of results, you can toggle through multiple pages using the arrows on the bottom left side of the page.
    c. File names can be exported by clicking the "Export" button. The file names will automatically download into an Excel spreadsheet.

13. When you are finished searching, you may close your browser window and the Anaconda Prompt.

14. Now that you have identified files that contain your search words or phrases, return to the CIA/ODNI website and download those files using the identified title of the document.

Launching the search engine during subsequent sessions

Once you have completed the steps above, your computer is configured to run the search engine. To use it at any future time:

1. Follow Steps 6–9 in the instructions to navigate to the dashboard_dist folder.
2. Enter the command python main.py to launch the search engine (Step 11 in the instructions above). Navigate to the web address that is printed in the Anaconda Prompt window.

Troubleshooting

1. I was able to download Anaconda and install all requirements, but running “python main.py” is not working.

First, make sure you have navigated to the correct folder. The file path shown in Anaconda Prompt to the right of the “>” should contain the file path where you have saved dashboard_dist. If that still does not work, try replacing “python” with “py”, “python3”, or “py3”. Different versions and system configurations have slightly different syntax.

2. I entered a command into Anaconda Prompt, but nothing is happening.

Try pressing Enter. You will know that your command finished running successfully when you see your cursor blinking to the right of the > symbol. If nothing happens after pressing Enter, be patient! It may take several minutes to install the requirements and launch the search engine.

3. The search engine appears to be frozen.

If you see the blue status bar moving back and forth and the “Search” button is faded, that means the search engine is working. Be patient! It may take several minutes to find all results for a given word. If that is not the case, try refreshing the web page in your browser.

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Carrington Metts is a data science fellow at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA). She has a Master of Science degree in business analytics from the College of William and Mary. Her work at IDA encompasses a wide range of topics, including modelling and simulation, natural language processing, and demographic analyses.

Endnotes

1 Online at https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/index_documents.html.

2 For example: Jacopo Bellasio, Sarah Grand-Clement, et al., "Insights from the Bin Laden Archive," RAND Corporation (2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA109-1.html; Emma Grace, "A Dangerous Science: Psychology in Al Qaeda's Words," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11, no. 1 (2018): 61–71; Nelly Lahoud, "Al-Qa'ida's Contested Relationship with Iran." *New America Foundation* (September 7, 2018), https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/al-qaidas-contested-relationship-iran/; Bryce Loidolt, "Al-Qaeda's Iran Dilemma: Evidence from the Abbottabad Records," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020): 1–28, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1780011?journalCode=uter20; and Bryce Loidolt, "Were Drone Strikes Effective? Evaluating the Drone Campaign in Pakistan Through Captured al-Qaeda Documents," *Texas National Security Review* (Spring 2022), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/97115.

3 Zakaryia Almahasees, Samah Meqdadi, and Yousef Albudairi, "Evaluation of Google Translate in Rendering English COVID-19 Texts into Arabic," *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies* 17, no. 4 (2021): 2065–2080, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1325432.pdf.

PT
PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Special Section: Anti-Government Extremism

Introduction to the Special Section on Anti-Government Extremism

Tore Bjørgo*

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The term “anti-government extremism” (AGE) refers to movements, groups and individuals who express deep distrust and hatred towards the government and democratic institutions and processes and condone or show willingness to use violence to undermine the democratic legal order. This section is a follow-up to the December 2022 special issue of PT on anti-government extremism. The call for papers a year earlier resulted in so many contributions that we had to divide them across two issues of the journal.

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Due to recent events, anti-government extremism is obviously a relevant topic that has attracted attention and interest among scholars and security services alike. Even during the three-month period between the final editorial deadline of the previous special issue in early December and the current March issue, two very serious events occurred:

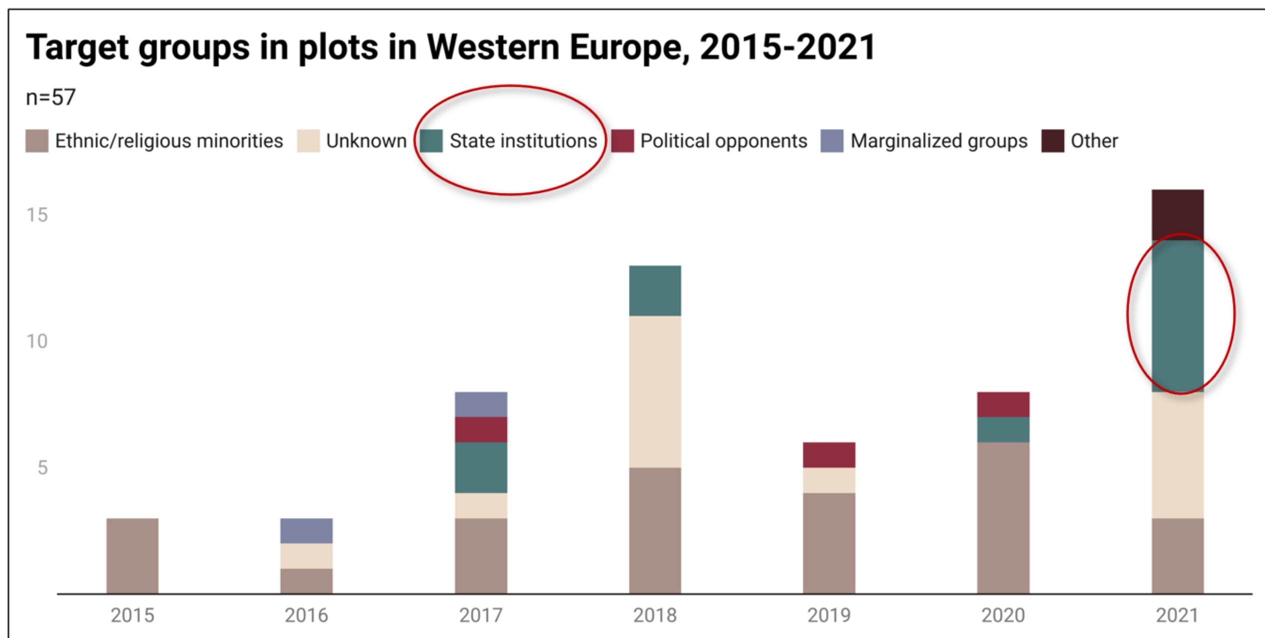
- On December 7, 2022, German police arrested 25 people affiliated with the Reichsbürger movement, allegedly plotting a coup d'etat. More than 50 persons have been investigated in the case, many of whom belonged to the higher echelons of society—including an aristocrat designated to become the future monarch, a former judge and member of the Bundestag, and several former military officers and members of the special forces. A similar plot involved five members of a different group that had been arrested in April 2022. In January 2023, they were charged with treason over their plot to provoke a civil war, abduct the health minister, and overthrow the government.[1]
- On January 8, 2023, supporters of Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro, who had been defeated by Lula da Silva some weeks earlier, stormed federal buildings in Brasilia (including the Supreme Federal Court, the national Congress, and the presidential palace) in an attempt to violently undo the democratic election of the new president – an event echoing the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Congress by supporters of Donald Trump[2].

These events are examples of what appears to represent a significant shift and increase in anti-government movements and activism during the last few years. Plots and insurrections to overturn democratically elected governments by storming governmental institutions is nothing new, but it is quite unprecedented – or at least unusual – when it happens today in established democracies like the US, Germany and Brazil.

The pandemic crisis and repressive governmental measures such as lockdown, obligatory facemasks and vaccine requirements provoked widespread resistance, with new constellations of protesters who—despite very diverse ideological backgrounds—often adopted the same conspiracy theories, like QAnon. During the pandemic, there have been several violent attacks (some fatal) in response to COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine policies, and an increase in violent (disrupted) plots against state institutions during the pandemic. The RTV dataset, covering right-wing terrorism and violence in Western Europe since 1990, also includes violent plots that have been detected and disrupted since 2015. When it comes to targeting, a striking development is the increase of plots against state institutions and elected politicians during 2021, the second year of the pandemic. In the RTV trend report[3] published in Summer 2022, the research team was uncertain whether this sudden surge in cases was mainly the result of increased attention and surveillance activities from the police and security services, or if it represented a real statistical increase. Most of the plots were not very mature or developed, and were disrupted at a very early stage. Some might never have actually materialised into real

attacks. Similar RTV plot data covering 2022 is not finalised and available yet (the 2023 Trend report will be released by early summer 2023), but the preliminary findings indicate a similar number of disrupted plots against state institutions as in the previous year. Germany stands out as the country with the highest number of anti-government plots, and also experienced two shoot-outs by Reichsbürgers against the police during 2022. This might indicate that there has been a real increase in such violent plots against government institutions (see Figure 1) during the pandemic – particularly in Germany.

Figure 1: Extreme Right Violent Plots



Source: RTV Trend Report 2022

About the Contributions to the Special Section

This special section of *Perspectives on Terrorism* contains five papers addressing different aspects of AGE, with a number of overlapping themes. First, Kaitlyn Robinson, Iris Malone, and Martha Crenshaw discuss how far-right AGE can be countered in the context of the United States. They argue that counter-terrorism tools the U.S. government has developed to dismantle terrorist threats abroad are inappropriate in a domestic context. Given the deep-seated ideological roots, the fluid organisational structures and the mix of violent and non-violent tactics and groups, measures like proscription of domestic extremist groups have been tested – with mixed results – in countries like Great Britain and Germany. Such measures need to be explored further, they argue, along with other approaches to find a balance between repression and freedom of speech, assembly, and association.

In the next article, Jelle van Buuren examines two dimensions of anti-government extremism in the Dutch context. The potential for violence and harassment against representatives of the

"system" has received considerable attention but another tendency has been overlooked: The strategy of "Exodus" or withdrawal from dominant societal institutions, creating their own structures independent from the state. An important question is whether building such parallel societies constitutes a threat to democratic order or is possibly even a security threat. The author analyses these issues with the case of the Forum of Democracy party, which is promoting a withdrawal strategy as well as anti-government conspiracy theories and rhetoric and hinting at the possibility of violence.

Next is an article by Bethany Leap and Michael Becker that analyses the content of discourse among anti-government online communities before and after the 2020 U.S. presidential election.[4] They present new empirical evidence on the key themes (including "voter fraud", "election conspiracies", "civil war" and "QAnon") discussed across communities on social media platforms that endorsed violent anti-government rhetoric leading up to the attack against the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. Their research shows how calls for anti-government violence increased in the leadup to both the presidential election and the insurrectionists' attack.

This is followed by Florian Hartleb, Paul Schliefsteiner, Christoph Schiebel's analysis of the Querdenker and Reichsbürger movements in Austria and Germany, and the interaction between these two movements. The Querdenker movement was a loose network of people and groups arguing with and "fighting" against government measures to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic in both nations, organising massive protests with tens of thousands of protesters from a broad range of backgrounds. The Reichsbürger milieu rejects the legitimacy of the current German democratic order as a matter of ideological principle, and adherents of this ideology declare themselves independent of the state.[5] The authors analyse how anti-state ideas from the Reichsbürger milieu influenced the far broader Querdenker movement, and how some participants have become more radical and increasingly ready to engage in acts of violence or sabotage. They have joined the ranks of anti-state extremism and most likely will remain there.

And in the final article of this section, Lydia Khalil and Joshua Roose explore similar types of anti-government extremism and radicalisation among the "anti-lockdown" freedom movement in Australia. They analyse how this protest movement developed into a complex form of anti-government extremist movement that combines and conflates anti-institutional, anti-elite sentiments and anti-government attitudes and beliefs through conspiratorial narratives. This included anti-vaxxers, religious communities, wellness influencers, QAnon and other conspiracists, sovereign citizens and well-known far-right activists. Similar to what occurred in Germany and Austria, the pandemic crisis and ensuing state of emergency declarations in Australia brought about the convergence of disparate actors from varied ideological and philosophical backgrounds. The question remains as to what extent these radicalised and violent elements of this social movement will outlast the pandemic restrictions and its aftermath.

Tore Bjørgo, Special Section Editor, is Professor and Director of the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo. 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.

Endnotes

1 Accounts of this incident can be found online at: https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/heinrich-xiii-prinz-reuss-und-das-innenleben-der-reichsbuerger-truppe-codename-krone-a-1538ccf9-d531-4969-9e9b-0f6bba4b9a52 and https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/panorama/kriminalitaet/id_100116770/terror-quintett-diese-gruppe-wollte-karl-lauterbach-entfuehren-und-putschen.html.

2 "Bolsonaro supporters storm Brazilian Congress," BBC News (8 January 2023), https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0dv0dkr.

3 Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Madeleine Thorstensen, Anders Ravik Jupskås and Graham Macklin, "RTV Trend Report 2022: Rightwing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe 1990-2021." Oslo: Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), University of Oslo, 2022, https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/publications/c-rex-reports/2022/rtv_trend_report_2022.pdf. The RTV dataset is available for free download, and is made highly accessible by the new RTV Map Tool: https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/rtv-dataset/

4 See also Julia Ebner, Christopher Kavanagh, and Harvey Whitehouse, "The QAnon Security Threat: A Linguistic Fusion-Based Violence Risk Assessment," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, No. 6 (December 2022), https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2022/issue-6/pot-xvi-6-a6-ebner-et-al.pdf

5 See also Jan Rathje, "Driven by Conspiracies: The Justification of Violence among 'Reichsbürger' and other Conspiracy-Ideological Sovereignists in Contemporary Germany," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, No. 6 (December 2022), https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2022/issue-6/pot-xvi-6-a5-rathe.pdf; and Verena Fiebig and Daniel Koehler, "Uncharted Territory: Towards an Evidence-Based Criminology of Sovereign Citizens Through a Systematic Literature Review," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, No. 6 (December 2022), https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2022/issue-6/pot-xvi-6-a4-fiebig-koehler.pdf

PT
PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Special Section: Anti-Government Extremism

Countering Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States

Kaitlyn Robinson,* Iris Malone, and Martha Crenshaw

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The far-right anti-government extremist movement poses a significant threat in the United States. The January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol illustrates the capacity of this movement to plan and mount violent attacks against government targets and democratic institutions. In this article, we explore how the organisational and tactical characteristics of the far-right anti-government movement in the United States enable it to thrive despite the dangers it poses to the public. We argue that its deep-seated ideological roots, fluid organisational structure, and mix of violent and nonviolent tactics make the movement difficult for federal and state authorities to proscribe, prosecute, and ultimately eliminate. US policymakers need to develop an informed response that accounts for the fluid, decentralised, and public-facing nature of anti-government extremism, as well as the pervasive distrust of federal authority that it reflects. We suggest that this approach will likely differ from the modern counter-terrorism tools that were initially designed to combat terrorist threats emanating from abroad, such as those posed by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. We ground our arguments in evidence from cases of anti-government extremist groups and followers active in the United States over the past three decades.

Keywords: anti-government extremism, counter-terrorism, political violence, far-right extremism, militia groups

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Introduction

On January 6, 2021, a violent mob stormed the United States Capitol. More than 800 people entered the building after members of the crowd broke down barricades and burst through locked entrances. A massive anti-government conspiracy inspired hundreds of individuals—some members of domestic extremist groups, such as the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters—to attack police officers with flagpoles, sledgehammers, baseball bats, and other weapons.[1] Five people were killed, and four police officers died in the months following the riot.

Anti-government extremists—those who view the government as responsible for a perceived crisis and, in response, threaten or use violence against it[2]—pose a major threat in the United States. According to the White House, anti-government or anti-authority extremists are one of the "most lethal elements of today's domestic terrorism threat."[3] In particular, extremists associated with the far-right[4]—including followers of home-grown militias, online conspiracies, the Sovereign Citizens movement, and national anti-government groups—have gained significant traction in the past decades, breaching mainstream political discourse and attracting new followers to their cause. The United States is not the only country to harbour a growing anti-government movement within its borders. Rather, global anti-government and anti-authority mobilisation in recent decades has led to the emergence and growth of several extremist groups and movements around the world, including the Reichsbürger Movement (Germany), One Nation (France), Uyoku dantai (Japan), Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging Movement (South Africa), and Freemen on the Land (Canada).[5]

The resilience of anti-government extremist threats in these states is puzzling. Many of these governments have developed a set of counter-terrorism and counterextremism tools with a successful track record for curbing other extremist threats, such as jihadist terrorism. Yet, anti-government extremism continues to pose a persistent and pernicious challenge for law enforcement. Why is the anti-government threat so difficult to combat?

In this article, we aim to answer this question in the context of the United States. We argue that the organisational and tactical characteristics of the anti-government movement in the United States—namely its deep-seated ideological roots, fluid organisational structure, and mix of violent and nonviolent tactics—make it difficult for federal and state authorities to undermine. The ultra-nationalist rhetoric by the anti-government far-right provides an appealing patriotic narrative that can command broad social appeal and is difficult to proscribe as extremism. Moreover, the decentralised and fluid nature of the movement's organisation can make it difficult to track. Individuals possess significant autonomy and can be members of multiple organisations, creating diffuse networks of loose ties that are challenging to thwart. Finally, the tactics employed by the anti-government movement are largely legal and thus are difficult to proscribe or prosecute. Though extremists' actions are often intended to provoke violence or intimidate opponents, the US Constitution protects their freedoms of speech, assembly, and to bear arms.

The modern counter-terrorism tools typically employed by the United States do not enable federal and state officials to overcome these challenges. Rather, the methods developed to combat the post-9/11 terrorist threat are largely kinetic and designed for international contexts. We

suggest that a more effective domestic counter-terrorism strategy should exploit a key vulnerability in the anti-government movement's organisational design: its lack of cohesion. However, implementation of such recommendations will remain difficult given the highly adaptable and fast-moving nature of the anti-government threat in the United States, as well as the deep-seated, pervasive distrust of federal authority on which it feeds.

Anti-government extremism is a "slippery" concept.[6] It is difficult to define and measure, making the study of individuals, groups, and movements associated with anti-government ideology particularly challenging. In an effort to add shape to this conceptual murkiness, this manuscript contributes a new framework for the analysis of the organisational dimensions of far-right anti-government violence and militancy. We build upon existing ideological and sociological frameworks examining the far-right and establish a set of dominant organisational forms—focusing on organisational structures, tactics, and identities—employed by anti-government extremists in the United States.[7] We then draw on this framework to identify key vulnerabilities and assess whether modern US counter-terrorism tools can exploit these weaknesses. This work has implications for the large body of research on the efficacy of US counter-terrorism policy and pushes scholars to evaluate how these tools might perform in a domestic context.[8]

Our article proceeds in three parts. First, we evaluate the ideological, organisational, and tactical characteristics of the anti-government threat in the United States. We then examine how these traits may impact the effectiveness of modern counter-terrorism tools. We conclude with a brief discussion of implications for and extensions to other contexts, such as Western Europe.

Far-Right Anti-Government Extremism in the United States

In the last fifty years, a broad spectrum of domestic actors—including left-wing student activists, Puerto Rican nationalist separatists, racially motivated extremists, and far-right anti-government militias—have used or threatened violence against the US government. The anti-government far-right in particular has grown significantly over the past three decades, gaining new traction in the early 1990s with the advent of the "patriot" militia movement and breaching mainstream politics in 2020 with conspiracies about the COVID-19 pandemic and election fraud. Compared to the far-left, actors motivated by far-right ideologies are more likely to employ violence in pursuit of their objectives and cause more fatalities with this violence.[9] In recent years, the anti-government far-right has posed a growing challenge for federal and state police. In a 2013–2014 survey of law enforcement personnel, respondents ranked anti-government Sovereign Citizens and militia/patriot groups as the first and third most serious terrorist threats in the United States, up from seventh and sixth place in 2006–2007.[10]

Why is this strand of anti-government extremism so dangerous and challenging to combat? We argue that the far-right anti-government movement's deep-seated ideological roots, fluid organisational structure, and mix of violent and nonviolent tactics make it difficult to proscribe, prosecute, and ultimately eliminate. We discuss each of these characteristics in turn, focusing specifically on the far-right anti-government extremist movement that has developed in the United States since the early 1990s.

Ideological Origins and Development

The modern anti-government movement in the United States is comprised of several elements, including patriot/militia groups (e.g. Michigan Militia), Sovereign Citizens, online conspiracy theorists (e.g. QAnon), and national organisations (e.g. Oath Keepers). Though organisationally diverse, these components of the movement are largely motivated by the same three ideological tenets: mistrust of federal authority, fear of foreign influence, and the need for paramilitary self-defence.[11]

Anti-government extremists harbour a deep-seated mistrust of government. They believe the government is actively seeking to undermine their constitutional rights, sometimes through a hidden network of "Deep State" actors. For example, some followers believe that the US government stages "false flag" terrorist attacks to justify policies that restrict freedom of assembly or access to firearms.

US anti-government extremists also fear foreign influence in domestic politics.[12] This belief is grounded, in part, by apprehensions about the coming of a "New World Order" whereby the federal government will merge with a global government to subjugate all Americans. Believers in these conspiracy theories claim that the federal government will attempt to seize firearms, occupy private land, and invite foreign actors to conquer the United States. For example, Jessica Watkins, a leading member of the Oath Keepers, testified at trial that the group's greatest fear was a Chinese invasion from Canada.[13] Such concerns have contributed to violent actions by militia groups, such as the Michigan Militia Corps' planned attack against a US military base.[14]

Given these perceived dangers, it seems logical to many adherents that preparation for self-defence is an existential need. For the modern anti-government movement, these beliefs were seemingly solidified by deadly confrontations with federal authorities in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 and Waco, Texas, in 1993. In both cases, US officials used force to assert government authority, leading to prolonged and sometimes fatal standoffs with extremists. Fearing future confrontations with what was perceived to be a hostile and pugnacious federal government, individuals organised the first components of the "patriot" or militia movement in self-defence .[15]

Many of the core beliefs of the anti-government far-right are deeply rooted in American history. America's rebellious origins nurtured a cultural tradition of questioning authority, protecting individual freedoms, and resisting perceived tyranny. A mythological reverence for American patriotism during the Revolutionary War—and to a lesser extent Confederate resistance to the federal government during the US Civil War—inspired followers to stand up for principles of freedom and justice as they saw them. A romanticisation of American history permeates the modern anti-government extremist movement's rhetoric and iconography, helping to justify and market their cause. For example, the Sovereign Citizens movement is an anti-tax protest movement stylised as a modern successor to the colonists' Boston Tea Party movement.[16] The Three Percenters derive their name from the myth that only three percent of colonists were willing to resist British rule.[17] The name "Oath Keepers" refers to the oath taken by members of the military and law enforcement to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic."[18]

The anti-government far-right has expanded significantly over the past thirty years. Local militias, such as the Michigan Militia and the Montana Militia, emerged in the aftermath of Ruby Ridge and Waco and were formed to prepare a collective defence for individuals fearful of violent government overreach. These local organisations integrated existing anti-government ideologies, such as the belief in "common law" propagated by the Sovereign Citizens movement. An estimated 224 patriot groups were active in the United States in 1994. By 1996, this number had more than tripled; more than 850 groups associated with the movement were in operation.[19]

However, this rapid expansion soon crumbled under significant pressure from US law enforcement. Timothy McVeigh's 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City attracted significant attention to the movement and its dangers to the US homeland. McVeigh viewed himself as a martyr in the larger anti-government resistance movement. He saw an act of violence—and in particular a high body count—as necessary to draw attention to the government's corruption. After the bombing killed 168 people, federal authorities began to take the threat of anti-government extremism more seriously. Domestic law enforcement authorities took greater steps to dismantle and disrupt multiple violent plots inside the United States by the patriot militia movement, leading to its decline in the late 1990s. By 2000, there were fewer than 150 active patriot groups.[20]

While successful in preventing additional mass-causality violence, law enforcement efforts did not root out anti-government extremism entirely. Elements of the movement continued to operate in the United States and engage in actions—such as organising large-scale meetings and paramilitary training sessions—that fell short of criminal activity. In 2008, the movement gained renewed momentum with the election of Barack Obama. Mike Vanderboegh, a member of the older patriot movement's Alabama militia, blogged that it was time to get the "band back together" to protest the election and Democratic Party dominance.[21] His announcement contributed to the formation of two organisations that lead today's movement: the Three Percenters, which modelled itself on the patriot militia movement, and, shortly after, the Oath Keepers founded by Stewart Rhodes.[22]

Over the next few years, anti-government extremism grew as social media networks provided new ways to spread misinformation and far-right conspiracy theories.[23] Donald Trump's candidacy and later election in 2016 provided ideological reinforcement for the cause.[24] The events of 2020 fueled further anti-government mobilisation in the United States, triggered by COVID-19 lockdowns, QAnon conspiracy theories, and concerns about election fraud.[25]

Organisational Dynamics

Although driven by a common distrust of the federal government, the groups and networks that comprise the modern US anti-government movement vary in terms of how they organise.[26] Three types of organisational structures dominate: self-identified followings, local groups and clusters, and national organisations.

The most fluid and transitory organisational structures are those comprised of self-identified followers of the anti-government movement. These individuals are typically self-radicalised and act independently without formal organisational memberships or structures. In recent years, individuals have increasingly used emerging information and communication technologies to learn about and participate in these movements online. Websites such as mymilitia.com, Gab, Telegram, and Parler help individuals spread anti-government ideology and radicalise new followers.[27] QAnon, for example, has grown rapidly since its emergence in 2017 after its anti-government conspiracy theories began gaining popularity on well-trafficked websites and forums.[28] One Telegram channel dedicated to the New World Order conspiracy and Holocaust denialism gained 90,000 users between February 2021 and October 2021.[29] Participants in the January 6 attack also used private Telegram channels to connect "patriots that are going to DC" and coordinate activities between members who had never formally met before.[30]

When individuals begin to coordinate more systematically with each other, they may form local clusters or groups. This second type of organisational structure is comprised of anti-government extremists who display some degree of cohesion and coordination, often forming small, local paramilitary organisations. These groups have designated leaders, formal members, and potentially even hierarchical organisational structures. Members are drawn from a common social network or community and typically operate in a limited geographic area. Examples include the Idaho Light Foot Militia or the Ohio Defence Force, both of which are relatively small in size and are based in their respective states.[31]

A third type of anti-government extremist organisations in the United States are national groups, such as the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters. In these organisations, a national leadership provides general ideological and strategic direction, but chapters largely remain independent of each other and carry out their own operations. In the Oath Keepers, for example, a national board of directors manages the group's online presence, while individual Oath Keepers chapters organise and carry out their own activities.[32] Sometimes these chapters seek more autonomy, including the ability to build their own reputations independently from the national group brand. For example, after January 6, the North Carolina chapter of the Oath Keepers broke away from the central leadership because it disagreed with the national group's beliefs in election fraud and participation in the riot.[33]

Even among these more structured anti-government groups, organisational identities and ties can be highly fluid. Individual members possess significant autonomy and can belong to multiple movements and organisations at once. A group member can, on their own initiative, choose to attend public rallies, meetings, and training camps with other like-minded individuals who may or may not share their same organisational identity. This individual autonomy facilitates the formation of "loose ties" among followers and unsystematic relationships between groups.

For example, members of the Three Percenters participated in the 2014 standoff between Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy and federal authorities. In 2016, some of these individuals returned to support members of the Bundy family in seizing the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. Other participants included members of the Oath Keepers, West Mountain Rangers militia, and Southern Nevada Militia, as well as several individuals not associated with any spe-

cific anti-government organisation. More than half of these participants had also taken part in the 2014 Bundy Ranch confrontation.[34] In response to the occupation of Malheur, the Idaho and Oregon chapters of the Three Percenters chapter distanced themselves from individual participants that claimed association with the Three Percenters, publicly stating that they "in no way condone nor support these actions."[35] Though condemned by the state chapters, individual members of the Three Percenters chose to participate in the standoff and to independently build ties to other anti-government extremists that shared their beliefs.

Violent and Nonviolent Tactics

A final defining characteristic of the US anti-government movement is its varied set of violent and nonviolent tactics. Most follower actions are relatively nonviolent. For example, some extremists use "paper terrorism"—the filing of frivolous liens, lawsuits, and false financial claims—to overburden the federal government, drain financial resources, and clog court dockets.[36] Anti-government groups also regularly participate in legal public events, assemblies, and protests, including school board meetings and political elections. Multiple Oath Keepers members have run for and been elected to state political offices.[37] Other actions prepare followers to engage in violence, though they are often geared towards a future potential conflict and not the immediate use of force.[38] Many anti-government groups regularly organise and participate in paramilitary training sessions aimed at teaching self-defence and survivalist skills, which may include drills in using firearms, engaging in combat operations, and providing emergency medical aid.[39]

To the extent that anti-government extremist tactics involve the explicit use of force, they typically revolve around acts of political intimidation or low-level violence targeting ideological opponents.[40] This includes attacking counter-protesters, brawling, and street-fighting, or maintaining an armed presence at standoffs. Individuals associated with groups like the Oath Keepers and Three Percenters are open, even braggadocious, about their presence in public. Members identify themselves by easily recognisable and symbolic attire including battle patches, patriotic flags, and military garb. They also publish details of their operations and meetings online. Often, members openly and legally carry high-powered weaponry. This behaviour usually amounts only to a show of force, though individuals have been injured, arrested, and, during the January 6 attack, killed.[41]

In recent years, claims of election fraud and unpopular coronavirus regulations imposed by the government have further motivated members of anti-government groups to seek out—and potentially provoke—conflict with state and federal officials. Anti-government extremist violence has the potential to escalate into a broader and more indiscriminate conflict. Generalised acceptance of the legitimacy of violence can inspire attempts at vigilante justice, such as the 2020 Wolverine Watchmen militia plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Witmer.[42] Moreover, violent confrontations can inadvertently escalate. For example, heavily armed members of the New Mexico Civil Guard militia engaged in violent clashes with protestors over the removal of a statue in Albuquerque, leading to one protestor being shot by a counter-protestor unaffiliated with the militia.[43] In coming years, anti-government violence could become more widespread and deadly both in its current form of street-fighting, paramilitary demonstrations, occupa-

tions of government buildings, standoffs, and mob assaults, and it could lay the groundwork for conspiratorial or clandestine violence and the possibility of mass casualties.[44]

Combatting the Anti-Government Extremist Threat

We argue that these characteristics—a strong ideological resolve of resistance, a fluid organisational structure, and a set of provocative but legal tactics—make the US anti-government movement a particularly challenging target for law enforcement. Historically, the United States has not been able to mount a widespread response to terrorism threats posed by its own citizens. During the Cold War, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) began to develop some tools to identify, surveil, and deter threats by domestic extremists (e.g. the creation Joint Terrorism Task Forces to facilitate cooperation between local and federal law enforcement agencies). However, much of the FBI's power to investigate and eliminate domestic terrorism was hamstrung by broader public unease concerning the government's ability to collect intelligence on the activities of US citizens.[45]

After 9/11, the US government invested significant resources into developing counter-terrorism tools to address terrorist threats emanating from abroad. The War on Terror became rooted in an ideological narrative which painted counter-terrorism operations and civil liberties restrictions as necessary to protect the American people and their democratic way of life from violent jihadist threats.[46] Motivated by this narrative, modern US counter-terrorism tools have been crafted specifically to combat an international threat—not a domestic one. For example, US authorities have the power to conduct warrantless surveillance of foreign terrorist suspects but not domestic terrorists. Similarly, Executive Order 13224—which allows the US State Department to designate and freeze the financial assets of foreign individuals and groups seen as terrorist risks—has no parallel for domestic terrorist threats.[47] The tools developed to address terrorist threats in the post-2001 era adopted a kinetic approach—relying heavily on the use of force—that would not be acceptable for countering domestic threats.[48] For example, an important component of US counter-terrorism operations since 2001 has been the 'decapitation' of terrorist networks, using targeted military strikes to eliminate high-ranking terrorist leaders of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.[49] In the domestic context, it would be legally questionable for US law enforcement to use similarly forceful tactics to kill US citizens leading major anti-government organisations or militias.

Moreover, the effectiveness of modern counter-terrorism tools—such as tracking money flows, surveilling communications, or arresting high-value targets—are likely to be less effective against highly decentralised and fluid organisations. By eschewing traditional hierarchical command and control structures, anti-government extremism is highly resilient to leadership changes. Even after national leaders of the Oath Keepers were arrested, local and state chapters persisted. The fluid and ill-defined nature of membership also provides followers plausible deniability and makes it harder to establish deliberate coordination or direction. By following a common ideology, the movement can endure the removal of any one communication platform or critical nodes connecting followers. Dispersed and loose organisational ties thus provide an added a form of security.

Social media further exacerbates these challenges. Security encryptions, anonymous communications, and dark web platforms can reduce an extremist's visibility, making it difficult to detect and disrupt violent plots. Efforts to deplatform controversial figures and moderate content can limit the movement's growth, but they may not be sufficient to deal with a set of highly adaptable followers who migrate to alternative technology platforms or generate new accounts to share more toxic and radical content. Further, while private platforms like Meta, TikTok, and Twitter have the authority to circumvent freedom of speech laws to moderate and deplatform hate speech under Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act, these companies have been reluctant to engage.[50]

Additionally, the nonviolent tactics employed by anti-government groups to intimidate, provoke, and threaten violence are often legal and protected under the US Constitution. Freedoms of speech, assembly, and association allow groups to publicly organise, spread extremist ideology and misinformation, and implicitly threaten violence. Protections for Second Amendment rights create additional legal challenges for efforts to prohibit anti-government extremists from securing arms and ammunition.[51] Though laws in all fifty US states prohibit the operation of private militias, these laws are rarely enforced. It is not illegal to be a member of an armed extremist militia, and it is often difficult for law enforcement to establish that militia activities—such as meeting, training, and carrying arms—meet the required legal threshold for criminal charges.[52]

Even when law enforcement intervenes, efforts are often limited in scope and fail to address the broader, entrenched ideological roots of extremism. Arrests and takedowns may only feed support for anti-government sentiment by reinforcing beliefs about the government's untrustworthiness and vindictiveness. There is a high potential for unanticipated, counterproductive effects. For example, confrontations with the authorities create a risk of violent escalation in subsequent drives for vengeance, such as the repercussions of the Ruby Ridge and Waco standoffs that motivated the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.[53] After participants in the 2016 Malheur occupation were acquitted in court, there were significant concerns that the outcome of the trial could embolden anti-government extremists to target other federal land and government officials in the future.[54]

Efforts at prevention, typically known as countering violent extremism (CVE) may also struggle to succeed. CVE policies developed for jihadist sympathisers often rest on the assumption that individual perpetrators show pre-mobilisation signs that friends and family can recognise and report to the appropriate authorities. This may not be the case in an environment dominated by partisan polarisation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. Surrounding communities may be sympathetic to the extremists' underlying beliefs about an overbearing federal government and see little cause for alerting authorities.

There are, however, positive considerations. Decentralisation can be a disadvantage as well as an advantage. By advocating a big tent ideology and encouraging individuals to carry out stochastic acts of violence, or inspired individual acts of terrorism, such networks can attract a wide and unvetted range of followers.[55] Lack of control from the top can create a moral hazard if followers use violence in shockingly reprehensible ways. For example, the highly destructive

Oklahoma City bombing triggered a profound backlash among militia members who worried that Timothy McVeigh's association with the anti-government movement ruined their credibility and gave outsiders reason to see them as radical extremists.[56] Unsanctioned or morally transgressive violence can undermine the movement's ability to retain existing members, attract new followers, raise funds, and remain a viable threat.

Another weakness results from the poor cohesion and mistrust among the rank and file. Informers are a constant risk, even in an environment dominated by anonymous social media. Members can come to suspect each other's loyalty and render the movement vulnerable to fragmentation, splintering, and infighting. Law enforcement can infiltrate local or national groups or co-opt existing members to become informants. Notably, former Oath Keepers vice president Greg McWhirter reported on the group's activities to law enforcement for months before group members travelled to the US Capitol to participate in the January 6 attack.[57] Similarly, in Virginia, a member of the Blue Ridge Hunt Club militia served as an informant for federal authorities and helped them collect the information necessary to arrest group members that planned to carry out violence.[58] In Michigan, an FBI agent infiltrated the Hutaree Militia to disrupt its plot to target police offers and inspire an anti-government uprising.[59] Though the anti-government movement has many organisational, ideological, and tactical strengths that make it difficult to undermine, it also possesses serious vulnerabilities that should be the focus of future counter-terrorism approaches.

Directions for Future Work

Far-right anti-government extremism poses a major threat to the stability of the United States. Its turbulent, even chaotic, nature should not disguise the real dangers of further escalation. The US government should be wary of relying on counter-terrorism tools developed to dismantle terrorist threats abroad. Assumptions about what works should be examined critically with an eye to both operational effectiveness and political legitimacy. An informed response should account for the varied, fluid, decentralised, public, and sometimes nonviolent nature of anti-government extremism, as well as the deep-seated and pervasive distrust of federal authority on which it feeds.

Moving forward, US officials should look to the experiences of other democratic states facing similar anti-government threats. In response to the proliferation of violent far-right groups, several democracies have begun developing tools to proscribe these organisations—a process that the United States currently lacks. In December 2016, the United Kingdom took an unprecedented step in banning the far-right domestic political organisation National Action. Since then, the United Kingdom has proscribed four other anti-government extremist groups. Germany banned part of the Sovereign Citizens–inspired Reichsbürger Movement in March 2020. Canada banned the Proud Boys in 2021; New Zealand followed suit in 2022. Have these steps worked?

Results are mixed. An assessment of the United Kingdom's banning of National Action found that it was "undoubtedly successful in its primary aim of dismantling NA organisationally."[60]

However, the slow-moving process of proscription and banning neither keeps pace with group dynamics nor addresses the ideological roots of the threat.[61] The far-right US group The Base was proscribed by the United Kingdom and New Zealand more than a year after US authorities had effectively dismantled its network operations in Georgia and Michigan. Proscriptions and other litigation efforts may be too late to deal with the highly adaptive nature of these groups. Moreover, these bans are "relatively blunt instruments" if they are not uniformly and consistently enforced across subsidiary organisations.[62] Many groups exist primarily online and can easily reform, and proscription often encourages members to shift to alternative groups. Members of National Action, for example, joined different groups or reorganised as the System Resistance Network, which has not yet been banned.

The degree to which modern counter-terrorism tools—including proscribing domestic extremist groups—can undermine the growth, activity, and lethality of the anti-government far-right is an important question for both scholars and policy makers. In democratic states, governments that may wish to employ these methods must also balance their desire to uphold crucial freedoms of speech, assembly, and association. Future work should focus on these considerations and explore how democratic states have attempted to counter the anti-government threat posed by their own citizens. The global reach of anti-government extremism creates promising opportunities for scholars to examine the effectiveness of state responses in historical and comparative contexts. Such an analysis could provide new insight into the unique challenges of combatting homegrown extremism in a democratic context.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

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Breaking (with) the System: Exodus as Resistance?

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Anti-government extremism is frequently characterised by its violent potential such as harassment and violence against politicians, government officials, experts, and journalists. Although understandable from the perspective of radicalisation and terrorism scholars, another tendency within the fluid anti-government movements is sometimes overlooked: 'internal migration', in which parallel enclaves are created in order to escape the perceived repressive order of the system. It signals attempts to build 'free zones' within society on the base of a discourse denying the legitimacy of the political order. In this article the author will assess whether or not exodus as a distinctive, usually nonviolent form of anti-government politics should be understood as relatively harmless or as the forerunners of more confrontational practices, such as deliberately undermining the liberal order by fuelling anti-system sentiments or preparing for resistance in a later stage, that in the long term could have security implications. This article will propose an initial, tentative analytical model to answer these questions, and then the Dutch political party Forum for Democracy will be used as a case to demonstrate the argument and explore the strengths and limitations of the proposed model.

Keywords: prefigurative politics, anti-systemness, anti-government extremism, conspiracy theories, sovereign citizens

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Introduction

In 2016, sociologist Majken Jul Sørensen stated that "surprisingly little" had been written about exodus as resistance; in his analysis, practices of withdrawal are "widely practiced, yet hardly any theory exists in this area."[1] In the academic field of radicalism, extremism, and terrorism, the study of exodus indeed has little prominence. Of course, that is understandable, as direct political confrontations and political violence are at the heart of the discipline. However, although the strategy of withdrawal (for example, as witnessed in the Netherlands) may currently represent nothing more than weak signals, one could argue that focusing only on violent means runs the risk of missing phenomena that potentially could undermine democratic order. This question fits the current debate on the threat emerging from radical right (and other) movements. Is it the violent potential that is at the heart of the threat, or should the nonviolent hollowing out of democratic order or democratic core values be of greater concern?[2]

This article will briefly describe the phenomenon of exodus and its different manifestations, illustrating how it is not a new phenomenon and can be part of strategies of different political affiliations. Then an initial, tentative analytical model will be proposed that can be used to assess whether or not manifestations of exodus could have ramifications for democratic order. The Dutch political party Forum for Democracy (FvD) will serve as a case study to demonstrate the use of the model. This is a uniquely relevant case since its leader, Thierry Baudet, recently and very explicitly announced a strategy of exodus as the new political objective of the party. Further, FvD has emphasised that creating a bottom-up political movement is more important than parliamentary work. And the party played an important role in the coronavirus protests in the Netherlands, in which strong anti-government sentiments were evident. Finally, the article will conclude with a review of the current debate within the Netherlands about whether FvD should be considered a threat to democracy and should be banned.[3]

Desired Futures

Strategies of 'exodus' and strategies of 'withdrawal' are not new phenomena. Sørensen refers to these strategies as 'constructive resistance': initiatives in which people start to build the society they desire independently of the dominant structures already in place. A variety of practices all try to construct "the desired future within the shell of old society."[4] Vinthagen describes constructive resistance as resistance that can "transcend the whole phenomenon of being-against-something, turning into the proactive form of constructing 'alternative' or 'prefigurative' social institutions which facilitate resistance…"[5]

Strategies of exodus, for instance, have a long tradition in radical left movements in Europe.[6] The strategy reflected the leftish notion that changing social relations was a premise of political change, instead of the other way around. It also reflected political impatience: as a form of practice, it refused to wait for the 'right class conditions' or taking over political institutions before experimenting with new forms of community or utopia.[7] By refusing to speak the 'language of power' and engage in political experimentation, the concept of exodus should unleash the "desire for freedom" and open up fields of innovation and creativity.[8] Desertion, a "mass defection from existing institutional arrangements," should open the route to develop alternative

arrangements.[9] In the 1980s, variations of the same discourse were articulated in an influential essay by Hakim Bey, who conceptualised “temporary autonomous zones” as a “perfect tactic for an era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful.” A temporary autonomous zone was thought of as a “microcosm of the anarchist dream of a free culture.” Bey argued that “disappearance” formed an “always-ongoing revolution of everyday life” in which some of the benefits of free culture could be experienced “here and now.”[10]

In 2000, the strategy of exodus was revitalised by Negri and Hardt in their influential book *Empire*.[11] According to the authors, the ‘enemy’ had become invisible and all known resistance strategies could no longer be viewed as a critical ‘outside position’. “If we cannot recognize any position as being in opposition to the system, we have to be against everything, everywhere, all the time, and abide to the oldest republican principles: desertion, exodus and nomadism. As in the disciplinary area, sabotage constituted the elementary notion of resistance, in the area of imperial control probably it has to be desertion.”[12]

Elements of desertion as a strategy emerged in social movements like the Five Star Movement in Italy (2009), Occupy (2011), or the Indignados movement in Spain (2011). In social movement literature these movements and their activities are dubbed ‘prefigurative politics’. Prefigurative politics replace conventional politics with direct social action addressed to society rather than the state or power holders.[13] The objective is to craft alternatives in the here and now, circumventing relations of domination. Instead of proclaiming a political program, or fostering alliances with potential allies or institutionalised actors, activists tried to build an alternative and better society as a work in progress.

Sometimes the predicted total collapse of society is the driving force for building free zones. ‘Collapsologists’ are nicknamed ‘survivalists of the left’.[14] They believe that a range of environmental crises will lead to a breakdown of society’s institutions, production, and services and destroy social and political structures. ‘Self-sufficient’ communities are being organised on small plots of land, fostering an eco-conscious lifestyle and advocating an ‘internal journey’ away from mass consumption. In the words of Paul Charbonnier, “Like born-again Christians racked by guilt, belatedly reconciled with Christ, collapsologists are shepherded through the universe of Mad Max to that of Little House on the Prairie.”[15]

Ford pointed at the similarities in apocalyptic perspectives that can be found between survivalists from the left and the right. The source of the apocalypse as such differs. For progressive ‘self-sufficient’ citizens, climate change is the most important horseman of the apocalypse, and therefore they drop out of systems believed to be unjust, unsustainable, or ineffective. For conservative self-sufficient citizens, the inevitable collapse of society is the result of policies of the climate change hoax, mass migration, and the totalitarian aspirations of the globalist elite. Regardless of these different views, however, survivalists from the left and the right engage in a form of ‘purifying disintegration’ from the system, and participate in “subcultural practices organised around the ideal of self-sufficiency, a state of individual or household independence from the institutions that otherwise organise modern material life.”[16]

Sovereign Citizens and the Cultic Milieu

The strategy of exodus can also be witnessed in the sovereign citizens movement. In its essence, sovereign citizens (a.k.a. Freemen) reject the authority of the state and its institutions, as well as the financial system. A belief that the state is illegitimate, based on alternative readings of history, leads sovereign citizens to argue that it has no legal authority over them. For example, sovereign citizens in the United States believe that the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 introduced a second-class citizenship compared to the original form of citizenship as written down in the Constitution. As a result, sovereign citizens believe that the US in fact ceased to be a democratic republic that reflects the will of the people. It has been estimated that the US has some 300,000 sovereign citizens.[17]

Certain countries in Europe have comparable movements denying the legitimacy of the state, claiming their independent sovereignty and creating parallel societies. All these movements refer to various kinds of 'pseudo law' that shifts the balance of authority and obligation in favour of individuals and away from government and institutional actors.[18] In France, for instance, the movement One Nation, led by Alice Pazalmar, tried (but failed) to buy a village in the Lot (in southwest France). One Nation has more than 32,000 social media followers and some 3,000 members who refuse all 'illegitimate authority' and are distancing themselves from the legal and administrative structures of society. A 200-hectare estate was meant to be the "perfect place for deconstructing old structures, for being born and reborn, for blooming and growing old together," according to their YouTube video.[19] One Nation is considered to be a cult by the French authorities.

The French sovereign citizens movement is also interwoven with militant extreme-right activists. Eric Fiorile, a self-proclaimed 'natural healer', called for a coup d'état and was later arrested for his involvement in the 'Barjols', an extremist identitarian group planning a violent attack on President Macron.[20] Another extremist involved in the French sovereign citizens movement, Rémy Daillet, was arrested and accused of plotting a series of attacks against COVID-19 vaccination centres, a masonic lodge, and journalists, as well as planning to overthrow the French government.[21]

In Germany, the so-called *Reichsbürger* claim the Federal German Republic is not legitimate, as in their view the old German Empire never ceased to exist. They try to separate themselves from official structures by not paying taxes or not carrying government-issued identification, and have declared their own small 'national territories', which they call the 'Second German Empire', the 'Free State of Prussia' or the 'Principality of Germania'. There is a nexus between the Reichsbürger movement, the *Querdenken* anti-lockdown movement, QAnon adherents, and right-wing extremist organisations. Germany's domestic intelligence agency estimates that there are some 21,000 Reichsbürger in Germany, and that the movement is growing.[22] On December 7, 2022, German police arrested 25 persons accused of plotting to overthrow the German government. The group apparently was closely associated with parts of the Reichsbürger movement.[23]

The overlap between sovereign citizens, right-wing organisations, and spiritual communities in a 'cultic milieu' is nowadays a common experience. The spiritual New Age communities, empha-

sising alternative lifestyles and health practices as alternatives to the existing institutions, resemble (in both a progressive and a conservative way) ideas about 'awakening', transformation and a longing for alternative knowledge, truth, community, and practices. According to Baker, the milieu has "a common ideology and distrust of institutional authority – the government, the pharmaceutical and vaccine industry – which they see as promoting compliance, obedience and surveillance. Their subject matter may vary, but the underlying logic of constructing an evil enemy and heroically seeking to restore truth, freedom and justice is remarkably similar."[24] No matter the differences in political orientation, the conclusion is the same: one must prepare for exodus and build a parallel society, free from state control.

Of course, there are some important differences between strategies of exodus based on right-wing or left-wing affiliations, but key similarities include the belief that there exists an 'omnipotent and all-powerful state' that is difficult to confront. Also, political impatience is common across the ideological spectrum, the core idea being "don't wait for political solutions, start today." The idea that changing cultural values is essential for provoking real, revolutionary change—'meta politics' in the lexicon of the conservative nationalists—mirrors earlier Gramscian notions of hegemony.

Anti-Government Extremism?

Can building parallel societies be considered a threat to democratic order, or maybe even a security threat? In other words, is it a dangerous form of extremism—running against the core of the democratic order and democratic values—in terms of means, objectives, or outcomes? Bötticher argued that radicals can withdraw from mainstream society into a niche culture, co-existing with plural societies and not seeking confrontation with mainstream society.[25] One could even argue that the strategy of exodus has little transformative potential and is in itself a form of depoliticisation that sustains the current order, as it more or less surrenders the ambition to "collectively mobilise for large-scale societal change in the public space."[26] From a principled point of view, one could argue that an 'anti-government' stance reflects legitimate and critical questions about the limits of state intervention in daily life and how much free space individuals and communities are entitled to in democratic societies—including the option to not participate in the political system, or to seek other ways of participation. Being critical of conventional ways of political participation and representation should therefore not be considered *a priori* the same as promoting extreme agendas.

While the literature on strategies of withdrawal does not offer clear insights about the question of potential threat, it gives some pointers to work with. Further, we can gain some clarity by looking at select (current) practical examples of individuals and organisations that withdraw from the system, as well as assessments made by security organisations. Based on these insights, what follows is a proposed initial, tentative analytical model enabling an analysis of the anti-government extremist threat emerging from strategies of withdrawal. In this way, perhaps we can elaborate on the work of Vinthagen and Johansson, who stated that it will depend on "context, the way the escape is done and the particular power relation that is (un)affected, whether or not democratic power is undermined or attacked."[27]

Delegitimising Democratic Order

Sørensen argues that one must look at the delegitimising narratives and practices in order to decide whether or not 'strategies of exodus' can be considered to be a potential threat. If resistance is merely inspiring others, or functions as a "supplement to the dominant way of doing things," there is hardly a threat; however, if initiatives "replace parts of what is undesired," and the constructive alternative becomes the norm, this can ultimately lead to a "complete collapse of the previous dominant structure."[28] Vinthagen and Johansson argued that avoiding or escaping power relations might be a form of active resistance, since avoidance makes the "exercise of power on that specific individual or group (temporarily) impossible," and through that, it is undermining power; especially, if individuals are needed for the power exercise, then escape does indeed undermine in itself.[29]

Further, as Gest argues, if actors withdraw from the system, but use "tactics that circumvent the system's established channels for influence," they undermine its capacity to reflect popular will. Campaigning for civic abstention, intimidation, or spreading disinformation can be examples of the "active anti-system individual or group" trying to undermine or topple the democratic system; the crucial distinction is engagement in movements, clubs, or other political efforts that become "substitutes for the democratic political system or are detrimental to it."[30] Capoccia refers to this as "ideological anti-systemness: whether or not the ideological foundation of a party or movement includes an agenda to alter or destroy the system as it does not share the values of the political order."[31]

In other words, it matters only if alternatives are being constructed, or that established structures are also actively being challenged, and how: for instance, denying essential elements of the constitution, sabotaging the functioning of state institutions, denigrating the democratic decision-making process, denying the legitimacy of the state, and advocating that people ignore laws and rules.[32] Of course, the act of constructing alternatives also has a delegitimating effect in itself —for instance, if the message between the lines reads that alternatives have to be constructed because the current political order is corrupt, responsible for the 'Great Replacement' or white genocide, or plans to enslave the population. One could argue that denying the legitimacy of the current political order and depicting the system as a dictatorship creates a sense of urgency and indirectly legitimises more extreme political actions to 'rescue' freedom.

From Defensive to Offensive Social Practices

There is also another reason not to dismiss the possible consequences of exodus strategies in terms of undermining democracy or security challenges. Vinthagen and Johansson, who refer to exodus as 'avoidance', argue that 'avoidance' can be understood as preparing for resistance at a later stage. It has generally been accepted that 'free spaces' are important to foster shared collective identities and provide activists autonomy from dominant groups where they can nurture oppositional movement identities.[33] Alex Schmid, for instance, argues that the absence of violence might be only a "temporal tactical consideration,"; the nonuse of violence can be based on merely pragmatic, tactical, or temporal considerations, "not on a principled political philosophy that seeks to hold the moral high ground."[34]

Further, experience shows that there is a fine line between retreating from the system—as a defensive move—and attacking the system, especially its institutions and representatives. In the earlier discussion on 'sovereign citizens and the cultic milieu', some examples have been provided. In the United States and other countries, sovereign citizens today are considered to be an extremist and sometimes terrorist threat.[35] The German security service stated that encounters with *Reichsbürger* have a "high potential for escalation." The German security services consider them to be 'extremists' and 'enemies of the state'. Part of the movement is believed to be willing to use violence to defend their ideas and practices, convinced that they are entitled to self-defence.[36]

Therefore, it does matter if calls for exodus also refer to the necessity and legitimacy of self-defence against authorities, the legitimacy of acquiring weapons, and whether nonviolent action repertoires are based on a principled democratic stance or framed as a more pragmatic consideration.

Democratic Norms and Governance Inside the Free Spaces

Finally, even without the direct use of violence or offensive actions against state authorities, disruptive and sometimes violent repertoires have been connected with individuals and groups that have isolated themselves from the system, such as child kidnapping, extortion, sexual abuse, fraud, money laundering, and tax evasion. In particular, the well-being of children is frequently mentioned as a risk of cult-like movements that isolate themselves from society. Even when 'free spaces' are not meant to be a base for actively confronting the system, there can still be democratic risks in terms of violation of essential democratic norms, such as inclusion, diversity, protection of minority rights, and the democratic quality of its governance structures.

With these complexities in mind, it is useful to apply the proposed model to a specific example—in this case, the Forum for Democracy—in order to demonstrate the argument and explore its strengths and limitations.

'Forumland': A Nation-in-Diaspora

Forum for Democracy (FvD) was founded in 2017 as a political party that combined a radical democratic agenda with conservative-liberal and nationalist ideas. At the beginning of 2022, FvD had nearly 60,000 members, making it the biggest party of the Netherlands in terms of membership, and won 8 out of 150 parliamentary seats during the 2021 general elections. FvD describes itself as the "largest political and cultural movement" in the Netherlands, with a strong emphasis on the values of conservatism and nationalism. "It is the belief in the possibility of a European Renaissance that drives us."[37] Political scientists frequently characterise FvD as a populist, radical-right party. FvD has been accused of tolerating antisemitism and Islamophobia, and spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories inside and outside Parliament.[38] FvD positioned itself in the front line of the movement in the Netherlands against the coronavirus policies, integrated conspiracy theories about the Great Reset launched by the World Economic

Forum in its narratives, and sided with the position of Russia's President Putin in the Ukraine war.

In the first edition of 'Dissident' (December 2021), the glossy magazine of the youth movement of *Forum for Democracy*, political leader and member of Dutch Parliament Thierry Baudet stated that "becoming a strong minority" was his new political objective.[39] Trying to get a majority position (or coalition) in Parliament, in order to change the political course of the Netherlands, was no longer an option, according to Baudet, as this would never be accepted by the "real globalist powers that pull the strings behind the screens." If FvD would triumph in elections, these globalist forces would invade the Netherlands, impose financial sanctions or falsify the next elections, and install a 'deep state puppet'. "We have to become a nation-in-diaspora that is able to operate completely autonomous, like the Amish in the United States, so to speak. It is about pure survival. So, currently I'm foremost preparing for the exodus."[40]

Baudet therefore propagates the foundation of 'Forumland', a (mainly) digital connected parallel society with its own rules, schools, (dating) apps, cryptocurrency, QR-free zones, housing departments, businesses, and entertainment sector. By now, the first concrete proposals for establishing 'Renaissance schools' have been launched. "Education is being disturbed by fashion whims like iPad-schools, untimely sexual education, climate hysteria and coronavirus panic (…) Indoctrination with a one-sided worldview as advocated by the government and the EU blocks critical thinking."[41]

Delegitimising Democratic Order

Forum for Democracy participates in elections and is represented in Parliament. However, at the same time they are delegitimising the political order in a systematic manner. The arguments used by Baudet and other FvD representatives to articulate the need for exodus reflect a fundamental delegitimisation of the current Dutch political order: the real political power is said to be in the hands of 'globalist powers' and the outcome of elections will not be accepted by the globalists. FvD representatives structurally delegitimise the democratic order by stating that it has become a 'tyranny' in which an "anti-democratic wind is blowing" and opposition is banned; the Netherlands is the 'new Weimar'.[42]

Member of Parliament Gideon van Meijeren explained in an interview that the main objective of FvD is not to become stronger in Parliament, but to build a bottom-up political movement. He added that history showed that when regimes became tyrannies, they were toppled by the population. "We have the numbers and if the movement becomes so strong that it transcends into a revolutionary movement, I can imagine that the population will move to the parliament and will not leave before the government has resigned. That is what I hope for."[43]

Within Parliament, FvD representatives are using disruptive techniques to attack their political opponents and the parliamentary system. One member, for instance, accused the government of being criminal and totalitarian, and promised that in the future they will be held accountable during special tribunals. FvD leader Baudet suggested that Finance Minister Kaag was recruited by foreign secret services during her study at St. Antony's College in Oxford. This fits the idea

discussed during a FvD meeting in April 2022 on 'Plan B for a Parallel Society', in which electoral policies were redefined as a tactic to "battle against the system and the state."[44]

FvD also delegitimises other institutions, such as the 'mainstream media'. Reporters of 'mainstream media' are depicted as 'sewer rats'. Their own media ecology of alternative media platforms provides their public with a continuing stream of (dis)information and opinions about COVID-19, 5G-technology, the World Economic Forum, Ukraine, trans-humanism, and other (often conspiracy-related) narratives. Medical professionals critical of the coronavirus policies have founded their own professional organisations, and networks of 'free' business initiatives are being formed. The launch of 'Forumland' seems to be an initiative to connect this variety of parallel structures under the political lead of FvD.

Further, FvD also advocates escaping power relations. During the same meeting in April 2022, attendees were encouraged to pay only with cash, in order to obstruct the future cashless society, and learn how to technologically bypass the coming European digital identity card. "That way we can reduce the power of the state. Don't wait for a political solution, solve it yourself, rather yesterday than today."[45] QR-free zones in Forumland are deliberate initiatives to escape the regulations of the government to protect public health in a crisis situation such as the coronavirus pandemic.

It shows that FvD is not just trying to survive in a 'niche culture' without seeking confrontation with mainstream society and the political system. Instead, it is looking for ways to escape, undermine, or disrupt power relations. It shows, in other words, the ideological anti-systemness of FvD.

From Defensive to Offensive Social Practices

In the same interview in which Member of Parliament Gideon van Meijeren explained that the objective is not to become stronger in Parliament, but to build a bottom-up political movement, he called for civil disobedience. "We really are dealing with a tyrannical government that opposes the population and only serves the interest of the globalist elite. At the end of the day, this main problem with our system cannot be solved by abiding to the rules of the system. That is why massive, militant and powerful civil disobedience is necessary, and yes, this implies breaking the law."[46]

This statement illustrates how it is hard to discern between the 'defensive' strategy—the exodus into Forumland—and the more offensive strategy, actively disrupting the system and building a 'revolutionary' movement bottom up. Further, in his plea for civil disobedience, Van Meijeren emphasised the importance of nonviolence, but based on pragmatic arguments: "I'm convinced that we will accomplish more by non-violence then by using violent means."[47] However, during a speech for farmers resisting the nitrogen policies of Dutch government, Van Meijeren stated that it is "not always healthy if there is taboo on the use of violence," as "the state is using violence, brute violence against you."[48]

He suggested that farmers could legitimately use violence if the authorities were to expropriate their farms, and pointed at the Second Amendment of the American Constitution:[49] the right to carry guns was interpreted as a form of 'countervailing power' to defend oneself against the omnipotence of the state. 'It is time to start the discussion on a Dutch version of the Second Amendment', a fellow forum member replied on Twitter.[50] By not refusing violence based on principled, democratic arguments, and by flirting with an argument for 'violence as legitimate self-defence', FvD leaves open the option that in the future more offensive practices are legitimate to topple the 'tyrannic regime'.

Recently, networks of sovereign citizens have emerged in the Netherlands. A network of websites, Facebook pages, and Telegram channels lure people with the promise that they can disconnect themselves from the system by filling in some quasi-legal documents, allowing them to claim immunity from the law. People can buy diplomatic passports as new identity papers, a certificate that turn their properties into embassies that cannot be entered by the authorities; alternative license plates; or documents to deregister from the electoral register and other administrative registers, in order to withdraw their 'approval' to be governed by state institutions.[51] Nearly 8,000 Dutch citizens have sent legal documents to the tax authorities by which they declared themselves 'sovereign' and demanded access to the money in their Birth Trust.[52]

Experiences in the US, France, and Germany show that there is a high potential for escalation between sovereign citizens and the authorities. There have been some recent incidents between authorities and sovereign citizens in the Netherlands, but the potential for escalation has not yet materialised. However, one can argue that this an accident waiting to happen, especially combined with the call to self-defence against a 'tyrannical system'. Although it is impossible to know whether sovereign citizens are subscribing to the concept of 'Forumland', the overlap in terms of ideas, ideals, and grievances is rather high.

Democratic Norms and Governance Inside the Free Spaces

It is a challenge to assess whether Forumland will reflect and practise democratic norms of inclusion, diversity, and respect for minority rights. During the meeting on 'Plan B for a Parallel Society', a romantic picture was painted of the 'older parallel societies' of family, neighbourhood, and local community, based on three pillars: a strong social fabric; decentralised, local and organic; and based on reciprocity instead of compulsion by the centralised state. A perfect society was portrayed, one that had been ruined by the 'rampant system' of banks, big business, mainstream media, universities, and politicians, that "deeply hated freethinkers and ordinary men and women."

However, FvD—and the far right in general—is also known for exclusionary politics in which, for instance, migrants and refugees are seen as out-groups that have no place in the imagined alternative societal structure. The plea for skipping 'untimely sexual education' at the Renaissance schools can be considered to be a dog whistle against the emancipation of LGBTQ+ communities. Baudet referred to Russia as a country with a 'virile male leader', in "stark contrast with the womanish, often sexual deviant politicians of the West."[53] The youth movement of FvD is constantly agitating against gender equality, LGBTQ+ empowerment, 'woke' ideolo-

gies, migrants, and asylum seekers. After right-wing extremists projected racist and neo-Nazi slogans—such as 'White Lives Matter', the 'fourteen words,' and 'we wish you a happy white 2023'—on the Erasmus bridge in Rotterdam during a live broadcast on New Year's Eve 2023, the youth movement of FvD tweeted: "Nice! This is a great start of the new year for Rotterdam." FvD has been accused of tolerating antisemitism and Islamophobia and spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories inside and outside Parliament.[54]

A report showed that politicians of FvD retweeted antisemitic accounts on social media networks (where antisemitism is already commonplace) on a regular basis, promoting conspiracy theories about George Soros and hate messages about Jews drinking the blood of children. Another report showed that antisemitism is prominent in comments under videos of FvD.[55]

Another indicator of the democratic quality of Forumland is the way FvD is being governed as a political party. Thierry Baudet is said to have almost absolute power, and it has been questioned if FvD would survive beyond the political lifespan of its founding leader. Decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a small circle of party elites. The party organisation of FvD is considered to be "deeply hierarchical and completely undemocratic."[56] However, according to current research by Dutch investigative journalists, while FvD members of Parliament are withdrawing from parliamentary debates and activities, they are repositioning themselves in an alternative world in which their constituency has become more active.[57] It suggests that interactions between the party elites and their constituency cannot only be assessed from the functioning of more traditional party structures but also should be assessed from the perspective of interactions in digital cultures.

Conclusion

Naturally, this initial, tentative sketch of an analytical model for potentially assessing whether strategies of withdrawal can be understood as a form of anti-government extremism has some limitations, both in terms of the level of sophistication of the model and the limited empirical data on Forumland. One important takeaway is that the dimensions of 'delegitimising democracy', 'defensive versus offensive practices,' and the 'democratic quality of free spaces' should be understood as a matter of degree—more a continuum than binary categories. Other dimensions, such as geography (it is quite difficult to 'hide' in a physical free zone in a small country like the Netherlands) and access to weapons, must also be included in future assessments.

By introducing an analytical model, this article proposed some important dimensions that can be used to assess levels of anti-government extremism of (nonviolent) groups. Second, it shows that specific strategies that are usually not seen as examples of anti-government extremism may very well be conceptualised as such. The structural delegitimisation of the current liberal democratic order and the disruption of institutions, the fine line between defensive and offensive practices (including references to the legitimate use of violence as self-defence), and the exclusionary ideas and practices of FvD violating fundamental democratic norms of inclusivity, equality, and non-discrimination, all demonstrate extremist tendencies. Third, the model offers a novel analytical perspective on FvD. The political party should not only be assessed by tradi-

tional notions of 'anti-system' parties, but also in its objective and capacity to disrupt democratic values and institutions by strategies of withdrawal. In the words of Vinthagen and Johansson, it sheds light on the way the escape is done and the particular power relation that is affected.

Finally, in terms of the 'context' Vinthagen and Johansson are referring to: FvD is part of an (international) eclectic milieu, or a bricolage of conspiracy theories, anti-government sentiments, conservative nationalism, libertarianism, orthodox Christianity, right-wing extremism and New Age.[58] Soft, friendly, spiritual narratives about love, freedom, and mutual connection coexist with hard, aggressive and intimidating narratives about satanist pedo-sexual elite networks, future tribunals to convict the 'coronavirus culprits', and (death) threats against politicians, journalists, and scientists. Right-wing extremists try to jump on the bandwagon of the anti-governmental sentiments, posing as freedom fighters. Apocalyptical and dystopian images of the future articulate an urgent call for self-defence and action.

This 'messiness of the categories of cultural practice' are hard to capture by sticking to established concepts and assumptions.[59] Therefore, for the time being it will continue to be a challenge to unravel the anti-government milieu in order to assess if and when strategies of withdrawal will be a risk in terms of undermining democracy, or even in terms of security threats. Analysing and understanding the phenomenon and dynamics of anti-governmental movements therefore remains a multidisciplinary challenge for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners alike.

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Special Section: Anti-Government Extremism

The Not-So-Silent "Majority": An Automated Content Analysis of Anti-Government Online Communities

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The United States is facing an ongoing threat of political violence due to widespread anti-government sentiment that has proliferated across social media platforms. Most saliently, these violent sentiments manifested in the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol during the certification of the 2020 general election. This research extends prior work on the online mobilisation to offline violence by analysing the text of online discussions leading up to the January 6 attack. We focus this examination on two central questions. First, what are the key themes and topics discussed within and across two social media platforms? Second, how did these themes and topics change over time? Focusing on two far-right anti-government online communities, we explore how support for political violence, disinformation, and electoral outcomes emerge and change over time. Our findings provide insight into possible strategies to counteract misinformation and the temporal trajectory of escalating violent sentiment within and across online communities. Further, this study highlights the importance of collecting data prospectively and demonstrates the value of automated content analysis and text data in understanding anti-government extremist sentiments.

Keywords: social media, political violence, content analysis, text analysis, computational social science

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Introduction

The attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, while shocking, was not surprising. Despite congressional testimony by law enforcement shortly after the attack, there was ample evidence that violent anti-government sentiment had been brewing online in the weeks before and after the 2020 election in both public-facing and insular online communities.[1] As journalistic reporting,[2] congressional hearings,[3] and courtroom documentation have shown,[4] online communities in recent years have served as an important platform for the polarisation of individuals sympathetic to anti-government violence. On extremist web forums, these communities took shape over time and fuelled the January 6 attack as well as others.[5] The evolving role of online communities has highlighted an important shift in the threat landscape for political violence and extreme anti-government sentiment alike.[6] Since the January 6 attack, extreme anti-government attitudes have continued to manifest in online spaces, contributing to the so-called "freedom convoys" in Canada and the United States, and the violent attack on the federal government in Brazil.[7]

Though Telegram channels and other online gathering spaces have seen increasing use by social movements and political extremists alike,[8] the January 6 attacks were most widely (and openly) discussed on two public web forums—Reddit, and TheDonald.win (hereafter, TheDonald).[9] Prior research has identified these and similar web forums as sources of anti-government sentiment, as well as the proliferation of violent rhetoric linked to acts of extremist violence.[10] While important prior research has focused on individual-level risk and posting behaviours,[11] few studies have examined broader patterns of online community rhetoric, and in particular, how rhetoric may shift before and after an incident of anti-government political violence.

Given the importance of online communities in forming collective identities and shaping attitudes and behaviours,[12] it is crucial to consider how community-level trends may shape views towards political violence. Analysing these communities using automated content analysis, specifically the Structural Topic Model (STM), allows us to identify prevalent topics of discourse in these communities and describe how these topics change over time. Likewise, describing shifts in how online communities discuss violent anti-government topics may yield insights for moderation on more closely monitored platforms, and suggest avenues for de-escalation or off-ramping resources on less restrictive platforms.

To better understand how users experienced the escalating sentiment leading up to the January 6 attack, we focus on answering two questions here. Firstly, what were the key themes and topics discussed within and across relevant communities on Reddit and on TheDonald? And secondly, how did these themes and topics change over time?

This study aims to expand this literature by exploring the key themes and topics discussed on two social media platforms home to individuals who hold anti-government views. To do so, we examine original data collected on more than 1.3 million posts across three discrete time periods. After conducting an automated content analysis of the user-generated posts, we draw comparisons of the key thematic findings over time. During this 122-day period, we identified several commonalities between the online communities; however, over time the rhetoric in these communities diverged. Key topics revealed included assertions of voter fraud, references

to the veracity of news media, conspiratorial claims, and discussion about a possible civil war. These findings yield insights into possible strategies to counteract misinformation and serve as a study of the temporal trajectory of escalating violent sentiment within and across online communities. Further, this study highlights the importance of collecting data prospectively and demonstrates the value of automated content analysis and text data in understanding anti-government extremist sentiment.

Background Literature: Extremist Use of the Internet

Since the widespread adoption of the Internet, extremist groups and violent social movements have exploited the newfound enhanced connectivity. For decades, extremists have coordinated members, entangled interested individuals, and mobilised to action.[13] In the United States, this set of strategies was famously adopted by neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and anti-government extremists on the website "Stormfront".[14] Like other shifts in the adoption of technology since the 1980s and 1990s, the use of the Internet has spread across movements that endorse violence and researchers have continued to examine the role of the Internet in extremist violence.[15] To wit, extremist movements of diverse ideological milieu have taken advantage of the anonymity and ease of communication that the Internet offers.[16]

Scholars studying the overlap between extremism and the Internet have made significant progress in recent years.[17] Studies have examined not only how the online activity of violent extremists may systematically differ from non-violent extremists,[18] but computationally advanced tools have been developed to systematically analyse individual user activity for specific violent sentiment.[19] Still other studies have examined user behaviour on forums associated with violent political and social movements.[20]

Research has shown that extremist movements have already taken significant steps to find a place in more conventional online, and real-world spaces.[21] As Miller-Idriss states, [22] the extreme has 'gone mainstream'. Not only have anti-government views proliferated on forums dedicated to violent movements, but also within communities on mainstream platforms such as Reddit.[23] Moreover, Gaudette and colleagues found that Reddit's algorithms that facilitate user engagement (indicated as sharing and endorsing posts and content) were leveraged to promote extreme views and content directed at perceived outgroups.[24] In other words, extremist views are present and popular on mainstream sites.

In addition to the value of studying extremist forums, we suggest that the significantly greater traffic observed on mainstream platforms presents an important opportunity to understand the process of socialisation to violent anti-government extremist beliefs.[25] To a large extent, web traffic on password-protected communities is limited, and those communities 'select out' individuals who do not already hold extreme views.[26] To this end, the process of socialisation and the adoption of extremist attitudes has yet to be captured. While prior work has yielded important contributions to our understanding, it presents a logical point of departure to examine how public online communities collectively form environments that facilitate the production of anti-government political violence.

Publicly accessible forums provide an 'introductory course' in anti-government sentiment and the far right, sensitising users to the arguments that form the ideological basis of these movements—an essential step in forming communities that endorse political violence.[27] Accordingly, shifts observed in the focus of these communities may demonstrate the process of collective identity formation, rather than the consolidation of already-held views.[28] To this end, research has yet to examine the ways that salient anti-government themes permeate an online community's discourse and how these communities react to the perpetration of anti-government violence.

The present study aims first to understand the key themes and topics discussed within, and across relevant communities on Reddit and TheDonald. Secondly, we describe how these themes and topics changed over time.

Automated content analysis is a valuable tool for accomplishing such tasks. Described in Grimmer and Stewart,[29] automated content analysis refers to the machine analysis of the content of texts. Briefly, in lieu of manual examination of documents and coding of salient themes, automated content analysis allows researchers to analyse documents, extract themes based upon the frequencies of key terms as well as the proximity of key terms and phrases in each document, and classify those documents using their linguistic similarities to other documents.[30] While automated content analysis does not fully replace human coding of topics, it is an extremely useful tool for topic experts to summarise large amounts of text without the costs associated with traditional content analysis.

Data

Data Sources and Extraction Methods

To address these two questions, we use data that were collected in real time from two web forums known for hosting incendiary and violent anti-government views (namely, Reddit and TheDonald). These data were collected prospectively beginning October 14, 2020, and continuing across three distinct phases: (1) in the weeks leading up to the 2020 US presidential election (October 2020–November 3, 2020), (2) the period between election day and the January 6 insurrection at the US capitol (November 3, 2020–January 6, 2021), and (3) the period following the insurrection through the first days of the Biden presidency (January 6, 2021–January 31, 2021).

Reddit

Reddit is one of the most popular websites on the Internet, reporting more than four billion site visits in March 2022 according to a third-party digital advertising firm.[31] The website is structured as a collection of individual communities, or *subreddits*. Users can choose to subscribe to subreddits, and they interact with the forums by posting links to images/videos/news stories/websites, commenting on the content posted by others, and by 'upvoting' or 'downvoting' links

and comments of other users.[32] The site is home to over 100,000 active subreddit communities ranging in interest from political engagement to sports, food, and entertainment.[33]

The data for this project include text scrapes from four subreddits communities that, at the time of scraping, held politically conservative, conspiratorial, and anti-government political viewpoints related to the 2020 US presidential election (r/Conservative, r/Donald_Trump, r/DonaldTrump, r/Trump). Specifically, the data collected included the front-page posts of each subreddit, and user comments associated with each of those posts. This constituted 24–30 posts and thousands of comments per day. In total across the period, we collected 6,085 posts and 420,902 comments. Collectively, these data provide an initial impression of how modal users experienced the subreddit communities on a day-to-day basis.

TheDonald

By comparison, TheDonald is a smaller, more insular, and more ideologically extreme community than Reddit.[34] Structured as a link-aggregator (like Reddit), TheDonald was originally founded as the off-Reddit forum for individuals who were members of the r/The_Donald community and found Reddit's moderation and policies too restrictive.[35] As with the Reddit community data, data from TheDonald were automatically scraped daily from October 14–January 31 and include the posts that appeared on the front page of the website and all associated comments.[36] Across the period, this amounted to 6,062 posts and 928,759 comments.
In total, our data represent more than 1.3 million comments across the two web forums. In this study, we focus on aggregate trends in user comments using automated content analysis and generating longitudinal structural topic models (STMs).

Methods

Before analysing user comments, we applied pre-processing steps to the data to ensure standardisation among the documents. This pre-processing is necessary to satisfy the Bag-of-Words (BoW) assumption that underlies all unsupervised text classification methods; mainly, each document is composed of a set of words, where the order and structure of those words are not as important as the words themselves.[37] The pre-processing steps include: tokenisation, which breaks each text into a string of individual words; transforming all words to lowercase; removing punctuation and stop words, or common words which can negatively impact the classification process; and lemmatisation, which reduces each word to its linguistic root.[38] After the texts have been pre-processed, we created a document-term matrix (DTM), which is a sparse matrix representation of the word frequencies within *each* document, using the dictionary of words found across *all* documents. Because analysing documents at the "word" level omits valuable context information on the relationships between words, we tokenised words into bigrams (two-word pairs).

For the analysis of these data, we use the structural topic model (STM) originally developed by Roberts, Stewart, Tingley, and Airoldi.[39] STMs allow researchers to include metadata as covariates, which helps to explain topic prevalence and content;[40] this is particularly useful in our

case as it allows us to account for changes in topic content and topic importance over both the sampling period and original data source. All pre-processing and data analyses were conducted in R using the quanteda and STM packages, respectively.[41]

Results

Descriptive Results

Figures 1 and 2 present the top twenty-five bigram phrases for the four subreddit communities and TheDonald respectively. Unsurprisingly, during this period both forums focused on the 2020 general election and the electoral prospects of Donald Trump. Likewise, the phrase "fake news" was present on both forums hinting at a shared lexicon among users across websites. While these figures show the similarities across the top bigrams of the two corpora, they remain a coarse tool for analysis. To examine the higher-order themes within each community and over time, we conducted a series of longitudinal STMs.

Figure 1. Top 25 Reddit Phrases, weighted by tf-idf

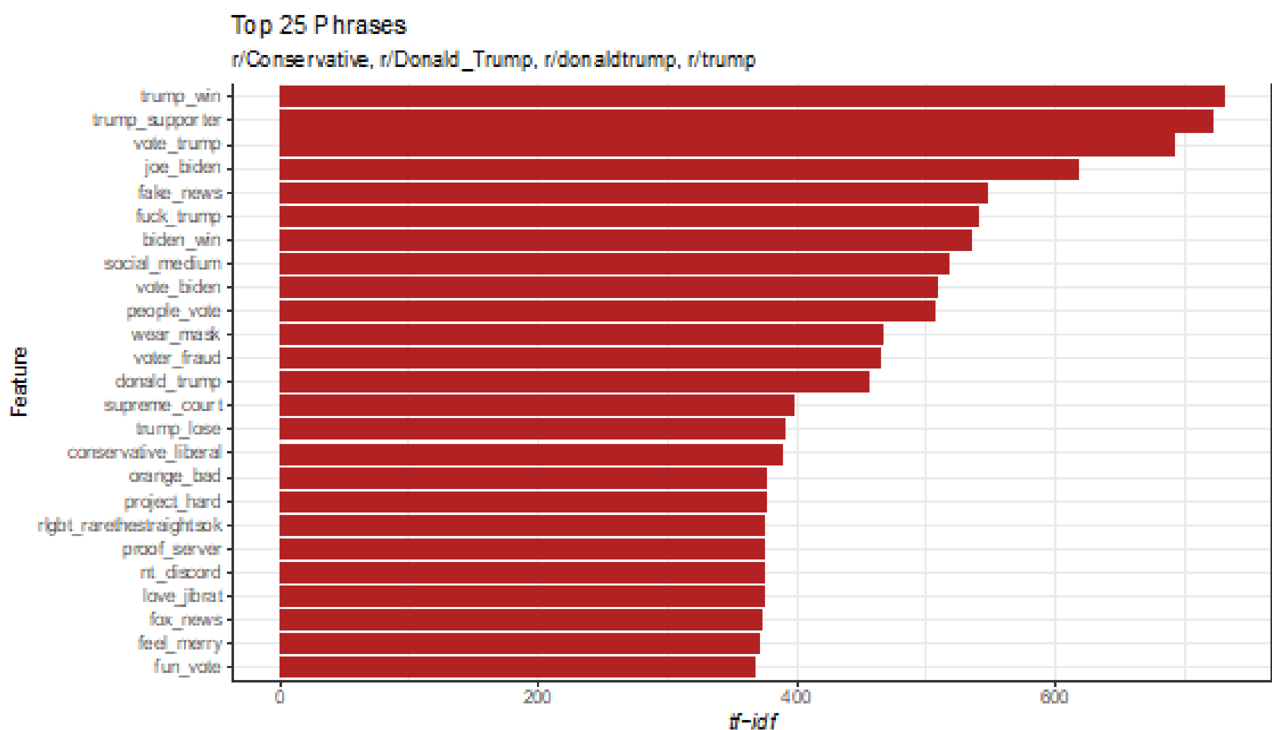
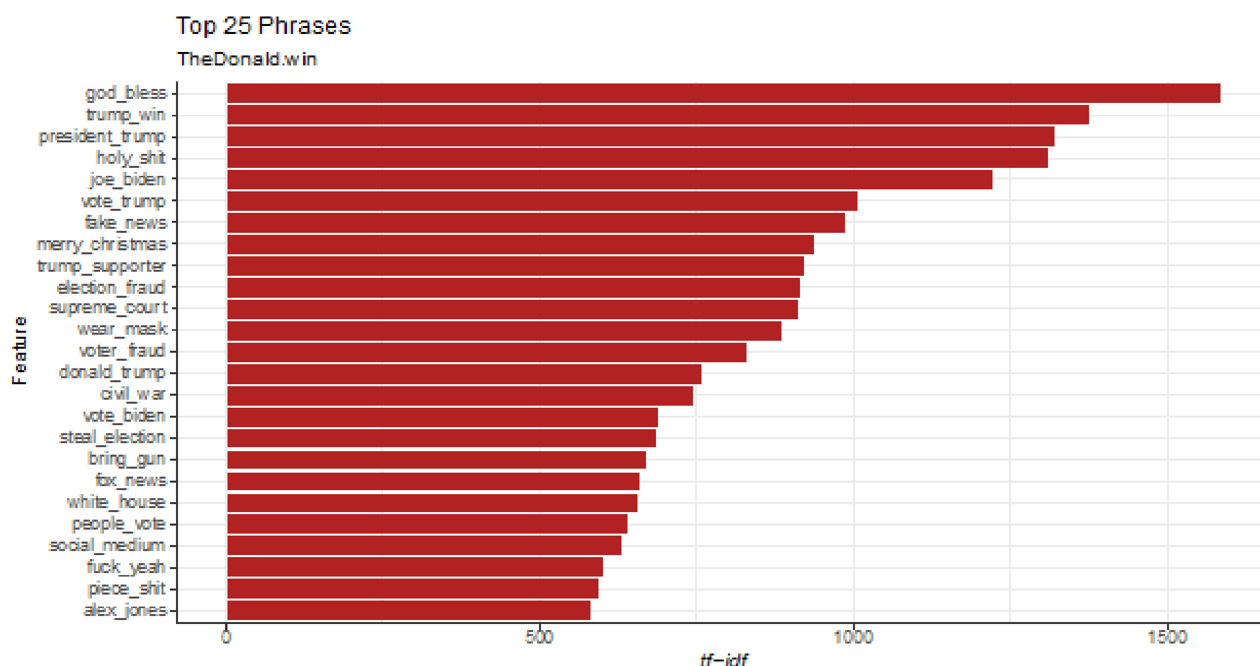


Figure 2. Top 25 TheDonald Phrases, weighted by tf-idf



Topic Model Results

The research questions in this study focus not only on specific terms, but on broader topics discussed on the respective forums and shifts in those topics across the three periods. After running preliminary diagnostic analyses on the number of topics to include for the STM, the best values of metrics associated with model fit (held-out likelihood and residuals) and topic quality (semantic coherence and exclusivity) were achieved for both data sources when K = 10. Models for each data source reached convergence, and topic content was stable across several iterations.

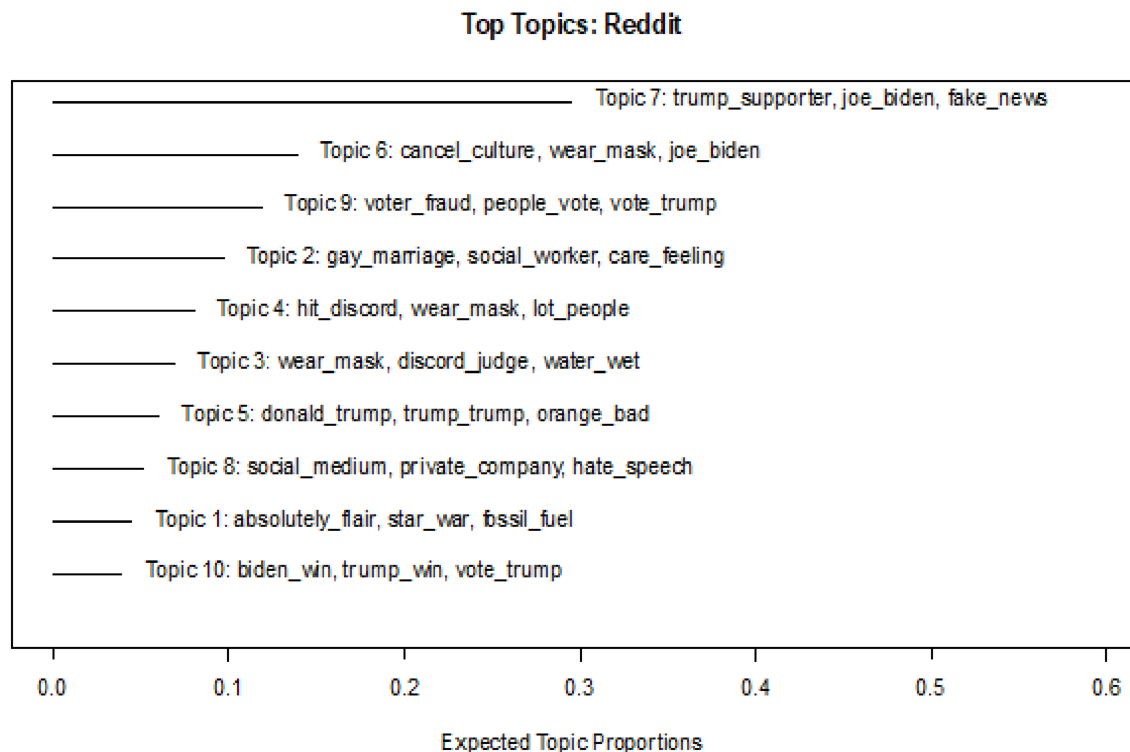
Reddit

Table 1 shows the contents of the ten topics found in the Reddit data,[42] and Figure 3 shows the average topic proportions of the corpus. Topic 7, labelled Election (Pro-Trump), is the most prevalent topic, expected in nearly 30 percent of the corpus. Given that the data sources making up the corpus are conservative subreddits, it makes sense that the largest proportion of texts would fall into this category.

Table 1. Reddit Topics, Themes, and Keywords

Topic	Label	Key Words
1	Environment	absolutely_flair, star_war, fossil_fuel, gender_program, solar_wind, lot_money, white_house
2	Social Policies	gay_marriage, social_worker, care_feeling, project_hard, vote_american, marriage_legalize
3	Covid Restrictions	wear_mask, discord_judge, water_wet, white_privilege, public_school, strip_club, son_bitch
4	Democrat Rule	hit_discord, wear_mask, lot_people, middle_east, trump_supporter, climate_change, white_house
5	Left's Obsession with Trump	donald_trump, trump_trump, orange_bad, mail_ballot, election_day, vote_trump, trump_win
6	Cancel Culture	cancel_culture, wear_mask, joe_biden, lot_people, read_article, supreme_court, ted_cruz
7	Election (Pro-Trump)	trump_supporter, joe_biden, fake_news, support_trump, trump_win, white_supremacist, fox_news
8	Social Media Censorship	social_medium, private_company, hate_speech, freedom_speech, twitter_facebook, facebook_twitter, medium_company
9	Voter Fraud	voter_fraud, people_vote, vote_trump, supreme_court, trump_win, vote_biden, biden_win
10	Election (General)	biden_win, trump_win, vote_trump, people_vote, wear_mask, vote_biden, voting_machine

Figure 3. Average Topic Proportions of Reddit Data



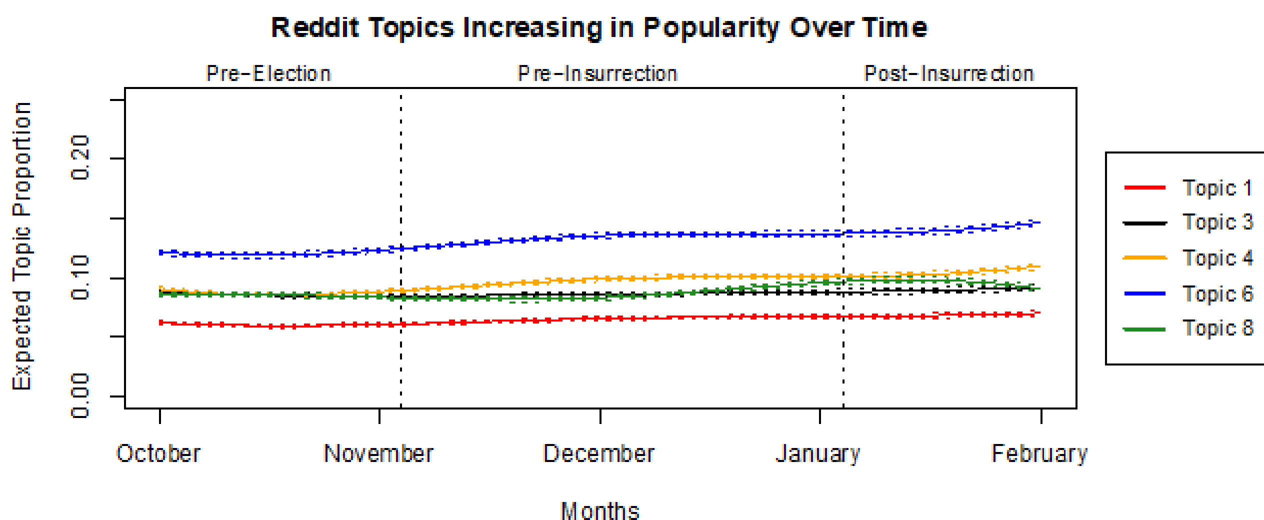
Topic 6, labelled Cancel Culture, has the second-highest average topic proportion, albeit at 15 percent, which is roughly half the prevalence of the leading topic. Cancel Culture is followed by Topic 9, Voter Fraud, which is expected in around 13 percent of the comments.

Topic 2, labelled Social Policies, and Topic 4, labelled Democrat Rule, were the fourth- and fifth-

most prevalent topics, each expected in roughly 10 percent of the corpus. These two topics appear similar on the surface; without additional context, terms related to same-sex marriage could plausibly fall into a topic about society under a Democrat-controlled government. However, the comments focused on gay marriage almost exclusively referred to the nomination and confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court and the hope that a conservative supermajority would overturn the precedent set by Obergefell v. Hodges. Conversely, the terms in Democrat Rule were overwhelmingly used in a fearmongering context, with comments threatening mask mandates, criminalising red meat, gun control leading to anarchy, and weak foreign policy if the Democrats gained power. The remaining five topics and labels are outlined in Table 1.

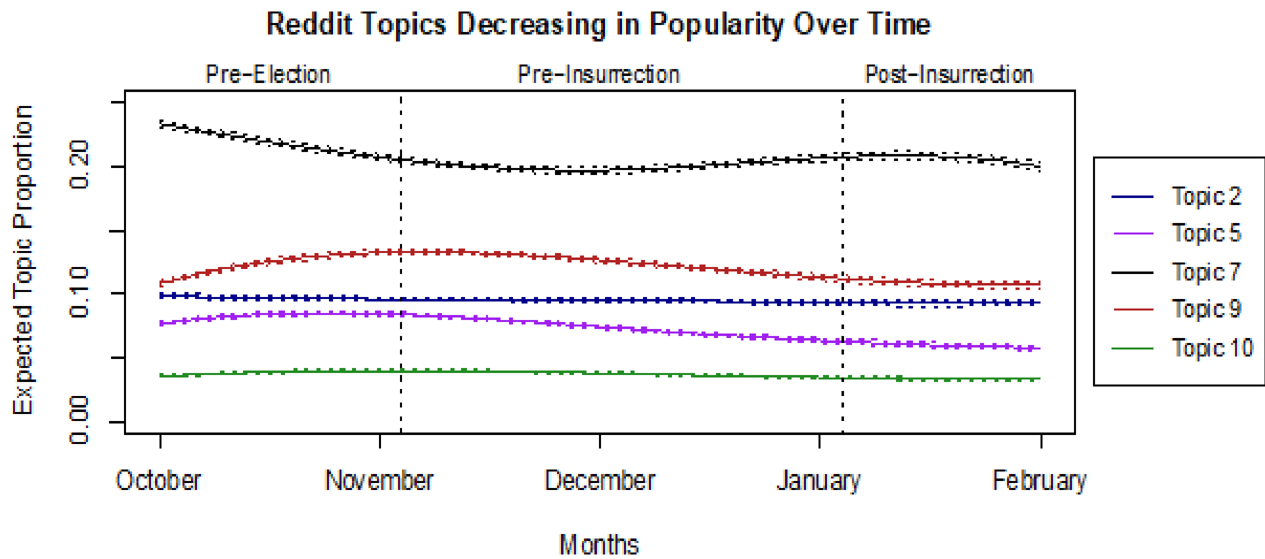
Figures 4 and 5 show the popularity of the identified trends over time. For all figures, the first vertical line indicates the 2020 general election, and the second vertical line indicates the January 6, 2021, attack.

Figure 4. Reddit Topics Increasing in Popularity Over Time



As expected, Topic 7 (Election (Pro-Trump)) peaks in the month of October, dips in the weeks following the election, and increases slightly in the leadup to the January 6 insurrection. Topic 8 (Social Media Censorship) also trends how we anticipated, reaching its highest expected topic proportion value immediately following the mass removal of accounts believed to have contributed to the January 6 attack. In contrast, Topic 6 (Cancel Culture) steadily increases over the three periods, reaching its peak at the end of the sample period. This echoes several statements made by Republican politicians in the period following the January 6 insurrection, namely Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, Congressman Jim Jordan, and Senator Ted Cruz. Voter Fraud (Topic 9) was a very popular theme in the weeks leading up to and following the 2020 election, but its popularity tapered off towards the end of December.

Figure 5. Reddit Topics Decreasing in Popularity Over Time



TheDonald Results

Table 2 and Figure 6 show the detailed content makeup and average proportion of the corpus for each topic on TheDonald, respectively.

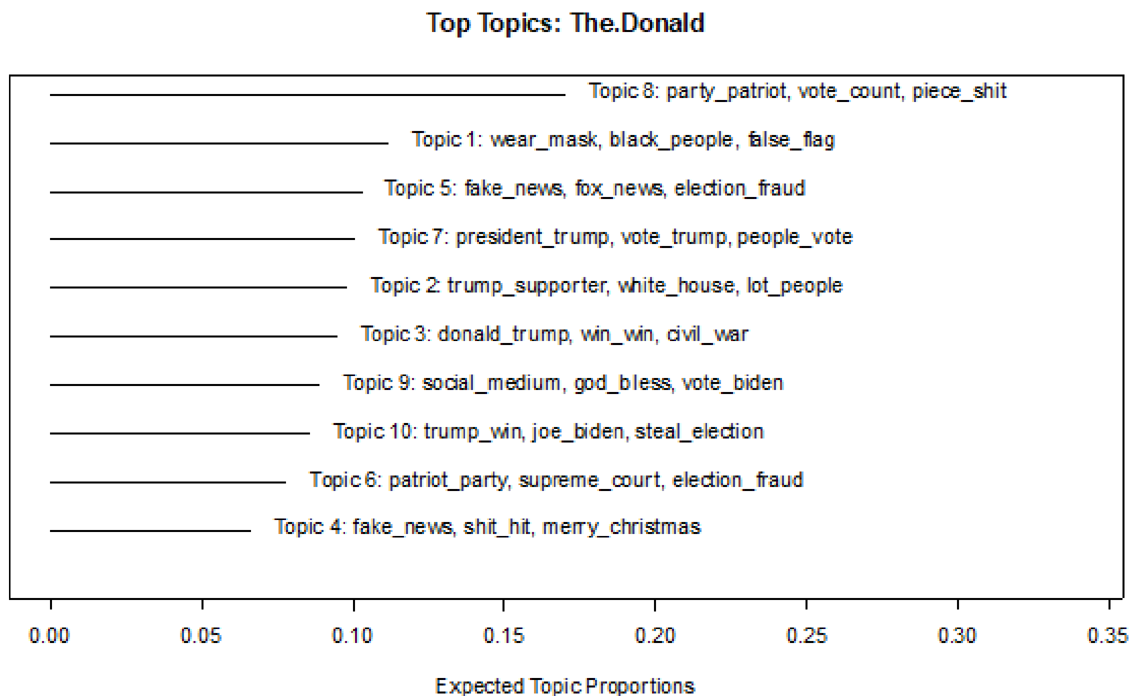
Table 2. TheDonald Topics, Themes, and Keywords

Topic	Label	Key Words
1	Pre-Election	wear_mask, black_people, false_flag, electoral_college, people_people, chris_wallace, vote_election
2	Trump Mobilization	trump_supporter, white_house, lot_people, vote_vote, white_people, election_night, change_mind
3	Civil War	civil_war, donald_trump, win_win, trump_trump, trump_vote, trump_president, white_supremacy
4	Anti-MSM	fake_news, shit_hit, merry_christmas, laugh_loud, fox_news, answer_question, bag_dick
5	Fake News	fake_news, fox_news, election_fraud, supreme_court, pay_attention, voter_fraud, presidential_election
6	Voter Fraud	patriot_party, supreme_court, election_fraud, voter_fraud, upvote_upvote, win_election, trump_fight
7	Election (Pro-Trump)	president_trump, vote_trump, people_vote, election_day, biden_win, holy_shit, american_people
8	Election Conspiracies	party_patriot, vote_count, piece_shit, fight_trump, alex_jones, lin_wood, voting_machine, american_people
9	Qanon	social_medium, god_bless, vote_biden, trust_plan, trump_lose, time_time, absentee_ballot
10	Election (General)	trump_win, joe_biden, steal_election, white_supremacist, electoral_vote, china_virus, vice_president

As expected, the topics found in the TheDonald corpus were more extreme than those in the Reddit corpus. Topic 8, labelled Election Conspiracies, had the highest average topic proportion

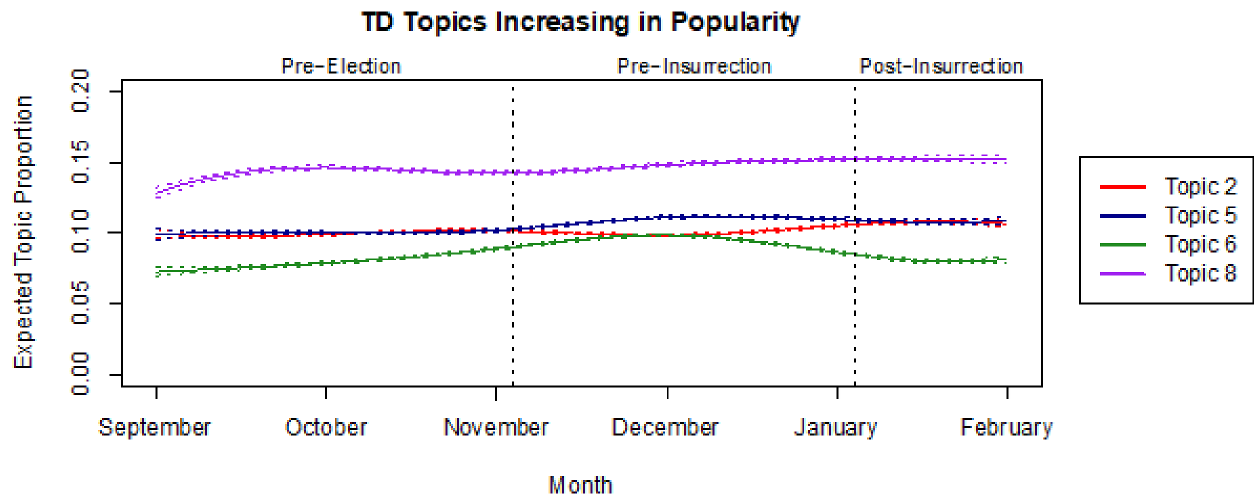
at around 17 percent . Although this finding was expected, it is concerning that content centred around spreading disinformation from Alex Jones and Lin Wood, two well-known conspiracy theorists who both propagated the "Big Lie." Topic 1, labelled Pre-election, had the second-highest average topic proportion at 12 percent . These posts consisted of comments ranging from Chris Wallace's handling of the Presidential Debates, tasteless jokes about questions related to the Black Lives Matter movement, and forecasting the impact of various state election results on the overall electoral college count.

Figure 6. Average Topic Proportions of TheDonald Data



Topic 5 (Fake News), Topic 7 (Election [Pro-Trump]), Topic 2 (Trump Mobilization), and Topic 3 (Civil War) all had average topic proportions hovering around 10 percent. Again, it is alarming to see comments calling for a civil war upon a Trump loss hold as much weight as those simply expressing support for President Trump. Equally as worrying is the prevalence of Topic 9, labelled QAnon; although its average topic proportion is not within the top five, comments belonging to this theme can still be found in around 10 percent of the corpus.

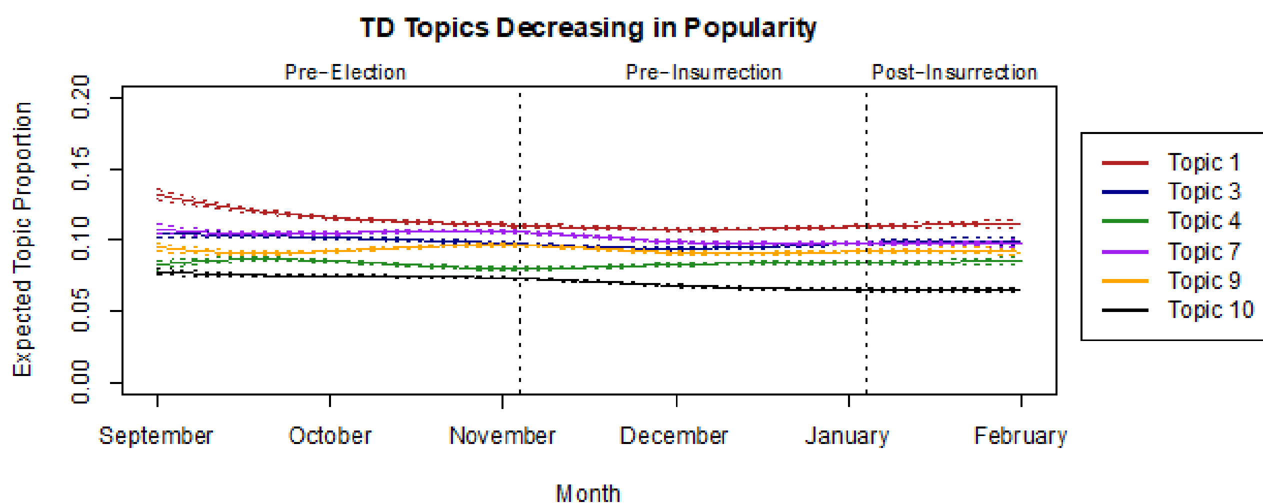
Figure 7. TheDonald Topics Increasing in Prevalence



Other than a small decrease in the immediate lead-up to the 2020 election, Election Conspiracies (Topic 8) sees a steady rise in average topic proportion across the temporal domain. This trend makes sense given Trump's and his supporters' refusal to accept the results of the election, which resulted in the violent attempt to overturn the election. Topic 5 (Fake News) peaks in the period between the 2020 election and the January 6 insurrection, which again is supported by the Trump campaign's refusal to concede the 2020 election. Notably, Voter Fraud (Topic 6) reaches its peak expected topic proportion values in the pre-insurrection period, which was fuelled by the accusations from the Trump campaign of widespread voter fraud.

Naturally, Topics 1, 7, and 10 (Pre-election, Election (Pro-Trump), and Election (General), respectively) all reached their peaks in the pre-election period, then gradually decreased over the remainder of the time frame. Interestingly, the topic that would make the most sense to reach its peak in the Pre- or Post-insurrection periods saw its highest expected topic proportion in the Pre-election period (Topic 3, Civil War).

Figure 8. TheDonald Topics Decreasing in Popularity



Discussion

This study presents novel empirical evidence on the key themes discussed across communities on two widely used social media platforms that endorsed violent anti-government rhetoric leading up to the January 6, 2021, insurrection. These findings suggest that there remains a great deal to be learned from examining how online communities discuss events, the degree to which they are responsive to news, rhetoric from elites, and the pervasive reach of disinformation. In this study, we applied an underutilised strategy to a novel data set of user comments across two web forums representing online communities that endorsed anti-government extremist attitudes and violence.

Key Themes and Topics

Overall, we found a mixture of convergence and divergence in the core themes observed across Reddit and TheDonald. Within the Reddit communities, we identified ten core themes, with the greatest focus on support for Donald Trump in the 2020 election. This tracked closely with salient issues online over the period of study and was also present among the top five themes on TheDonald. Moreover, we find that both communities had at least one core theme regarding Voter Fraud; however, rhetoric on TheDonald extended to conspiratorial allegations of systematic election fraud, whereas the Reddit communities expressed a tamer form of scepticism towards the election.

Unsurprisingly, themes identified on TheDonald trended towards more extreme and conspiratorial events and news coverage over the period. Notably—user comments and replies focused on conspiracy theories and the primary news sources cited included Project Veritas and Gateway Pundit—sources of disinformation.[43] Interestingly, the spread of average topic proportions was much tighter across TheDonald than Reddit, with only a 10 percent difference between the most prevalent and least prevalent topics. With topic labels like Election Conspiracies, Civil War, and QAnon, this suggests that a large amount of content found on TheDonald could es-

pouse extremist rhetoric containing anti-government sentiment and disinformation. Moreover, the similarities in terms found between benign topics, like Election (Pro-Trump), users rallying behind their leader (Trump Mobilization), and comments calling for anti-government violence (Civil War), are cause for concern. Together, this highlights the importance of studying a wide range of online communities, and in particular, communities that may appear to hold less-extreme attitudes. As prior work has shown, the mainstreaming of extremist ideas and the funnelling of users from more populated and closely monitored platforms to progressively more concerning content is a deliberate and strategic choice.[44]

In addition to meaningful differences observed across platforms, we also identified important thematic variation over time—largely tracking with salient events for each period. Themes related to the 2020 presidential election across both platforms reached their peaks in the pre-election period, while themes associated with mobilization for Trump, voter fraud, and election conspiracies increased in the period between the 2020 election and the January 6 insurrection. Topics related to social media censorship also followed trends in broader media discourse, reaching its peak in the post-insurrection period after thousands of users were suspended from Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit.[45]

We found that the distribution of the most extreme topic in TheDonald, Civil War, showed two identifiable peaks within these data; that is, it increased leading up to the 2020 election, decreased immediately following the election, and increased again. This suggests that calls for anti-government violence increased in the lead-up to both the 2020 presidential election and the January 6 insurrection. Despite seeing an increase in the prevalence of Civil War comments before January 6, the topic never reached its peak prevalence value achieved in mid-October. This is an interesting observation given the increasingly hostile political climate through the pre- and post-insurrection periods; thus, future work should explore this puzzling trend.

Limitations

Though this study provides a step forward in understanding trends and differences across online communities that traffic in anti-government rhetoric, we acknowledge important limitations to our findings. Firstly, due to the inherent user anonymity of the platforms studied, we recognise that there is some risk associated with 'big talk' on web forums. As a result, users both on Reddit and TheDonald may have felt emboldened to endorse more extreme views than they held. This has implications for the naïve assessment of 'risk' on these platforms since absent context it may be nigh impossible to determine whether a post reflects genuine violent intent, escalatory showboating, trolling, or sarcasm. All the same however, we assert assessing aggregate trends remains important, particularly as users form impressions of the ideological stance of the community writ large based on what they observe—regardless of the veracity of those opinions.

Likewise, this study was restricted to two publicly facing (non-password-protected) web forums. As prior research and reporting from non-government organiations has shown, evidence of attitudinal and behavioural radicalisation abounds on private platforms that require users (and indeed, observers) to access content with specific credentials.[46] Though that is the case,

these private sites tend to be smaller and represent more ideologically homogeneous and extreme communities. Accordingly, our findings reflect the broader experience of individuals that are first being introduced to anti-government extremist attitudes. Much of what we know about radicalisation indicates that such individuals do not go on to participate in extremist behaviour (violent or otherwise), and thus our findings yield important background information for others who investigate why some may 'turn away' from extremist movements.

Next, while our analyses captured themes, and demonstrates when shifts in those themes occurred, we did not capture granular or more ephemeral points of focus in the communities. As a result, we do not suggest individual trajectories of attitudinal radicalisation on the forums, but broader trends on the sites. As noted above, prior research has made important steps in examining individual posting behaviour,[47] and though outside the scope of this study, future research should explore these data for similar trends.

Finally, we recognise that the online environment leading up to the January 6 attack represents a distinct socio-political moment in the history of the United States. Since the attack, the online communities that facilitated and perpetrated the violence have shifted their behaviour, and in many cases, observed political and legal sanctions.[48] As such, this study represents sentiment from a uniquely incendiary period online in the United States, and not necessarily a generalisable pattern of facts to other anti-government extremist online movements in other countries or contexts.

Practical Implications, and Future Directions

Despite these limitations, this study yields practical knowledge into anti-government extremism on publicly accessible web forums. First, while Reddit has been critiqued for the light-handed moderation (and poor infrastructure of moderation) on the platform,[49] we observed instances of enforcement of community and site rules (via the removal of posts). By contrast, no moderator actions to enforce the limited community standards on TheDonald were observed across the entire period.[50] Taken in conjunction with the findings above, this hints at the role that rules of conduct and community guidelines may have in shaping user behaviour, and the possible specific or general deterrence benefits of the visible enforcement of these rules.[51]

Secondly, the shared lexicon and crossover of major topics (and linked sources) between the two platforms suggests that members of these communities may 'travel in the same circles' online. Accordingly, we suggest that research explore whether anti-disinformation and violence-prevention interventions on one platform may yield a diffusion of benefits in associated or networked communities. Critically however, any such interventions should bear in mind the existing body of research on digital and community-based violence prevention and P/CVE work.[52]

Beyond these general pieces of guidance, the identification of key themes on both Reddit and TheDonald provides a logical point of departure for subsequent research in this area. Firstly, researchers should continue to explore how individual sentiment shifted across the periods leading up to January 6 as well as drawing comparisons to other relevant acts of anti-government

extremism. Moreover, future work should examine how rhetoric online shifted in response to specific communication by political elites; that is, how do online communities respond to solicitations for protests, and does community response vary depending on the characteristics of the platform and users? Additionally, while this piece sought to describe shifts over time, more work should consider specific temporal cut points that produce statistically reliable shifts in topics or community rhetoric. Finally, given the disparity in the anti-government rhetoric and trends observed across these two platforms, future research should consider the impact of moderation on web forums, and how enforcement of community norms may shape the sanctioning or endorsement of violent views.

In closing, recent events have shown that there is significant power in the ability of online communities to shape a social movement and direct it to violent ends. Explicit calls to violence were observed in this study. however they represented a distinct minority of the topics observed—even among the more extreme of the two online communities studied. However, the spread of violent anti-government rhetoric online remains an evolving risk, and just as communities rally around leaders in the real world, the risk posed by a minority of violent voices online should not be discounted.

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Michael H. Becker is a doctoral student at American University in the Justice, Law and Criminology department. His research examines individual and group factors associated with support for, and participation in violent extremism, process and outcome measures in P/CVE programming, and novel strategies of data collection. His work has been featured in the Proceedings for the National Academy of Science, the European Journal of Criminology, Terrorism and Political Violence, and Studies in Conflict and Terrorism.

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Special Section: Anti-Government Extremism

From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism?

The "Querdenker" Protest-Movement and Its Interrelation and Dynamics with the "Reichsbürger" in Germany and Austria

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Like most other countries Germany and Austria attempted to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic by taking unprecedented measures restricting public and private life. Discontent with these measures arose, and a network of groups and individuals calling themselves "Querdenker" established themselves as a major player in the emerging protest movement in both countries. While they were rather heterogeneous, some parts of the "Querdenker"—and especially several of the more prominent activists—were not only prone to conspiratorial thinking but even open to sovereignist ideas. They publicly used topics from the "Reichsbürger" and met representatives of that milieu. The "Reichsbürger" are a particular brand of German anti-state extremism, also present in Austria, that believes in the continued existence of the German Reich, and often claims to be the only real "state authority". After many years of not being taken seriously, several recent incidents of violence have led to a debate about what level of threat the "Reichsbürger" anti-state extremism poses. This article describes and analyses the links and dynamics between the "Querdenker" movement and the Reichsbürger milieu. It looks at three of the most influential actors that connected the two groups and compares the developments in Austria and Germany, while also examining the role of traditional "protest parties".

Keywords: Querdenker, Reichsbürger, sovereignism, anti-government extremism, Germany, Austria

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Introduction

In the early morning of 7 December 2022, a counter-terrorism operation of unprecedented scale took place across the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and even reached into Austria: 3,000 police and special forces personnel stormed 150 properties and arrested 25 people. Altogether 55[1] individuals came under investigation. According to officials, the operation aimed to thwart a plot by the self-proclaimed "Patriotische Union" [Patriotic Union] to overthrow not only the current sitting German government but its entire political system. The conspirators were driven by a mixture of narratives of the so-called Reichsbürger[2], which are more or less the mainstream of the sovereignist milieu in Germany, and the QAnon conspiracy ideas.[3]

The foiled plans for a coup d'état had their origins in November 2021, at the height of the second "Corona Winter" which saw massive polarisation and protests in Germany and Austria. The plot highlights the development of anti-state sentiment, carried by a wave of discontent and rejection of norms that was unprecedented in both societies. Discontent was voiced and organised to a large extent by the Querdenker, a loose network of people and groups arguing with and "fighting" against government measures to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic in both nations. Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Querdenker movement organised massive protests across Germany, with tens of thousands of people in attendance. Querdenker drew the attention not only of the public in general, but also of right-wing extremists and people from the Reichsbürger milieu. Soon a certain overlap of ideas, talking points, and actors could be observed. Given the success the "Corona-protests" had in mobilising a broad spectrum of people—notably those that until then had been nonpolitical and from the "centre of society"—these interrelations and dynamics with anti-state extremists are viewed with great concern by politicians, security services, and media alike. For some politicians, it looked as if the Reichsbürger tried to infiltrate the Querdenker protests.[4]

This article describes and analyses the development of the links and dynamics between Querdenker and the Reichsbürger milieu. It explores the interrelation of the two groups and why the Reichsbürger in particular seem to be especially well-suited to connect with the anti-state sentiment that carried the Querdenker protests. Special attention is given to certain actors within the Querdenker movement, who also propagated Reichsbürger narratives and ideas. Due to common language and cultural developments in Germany and Austria, they were linked to each other. Therefore, both countries have been taken into consideration and compared. This revealed the difference made by the involvement of traditional protest parties in Austria.

To better understand how novel these sentiments and forms of extremism are to both countries, a short backdrop of the development of German and Austrian society in the last few years is necessary.[5] This is followed by an overview of the development of the Reichsbürger milieu since the end of World War II that introduces the readers to this special brand of German (and Austrian) sovereignism, and then a description of the rise of the Querdenker movement as a reaction to state measures to curtail the pandemic. Its most prominent activists, who also propagated (or at least "flirted" with) Reichsbürger ideas, are introduced in the next subsection, before the interaction and dynamics between the two groups are analysed. Here, a comparison

is provided between Austria and Germany regarding the canalisation of protests and its effect on anti-state sentiment. The article concludes with a summary of findings and potential for future research.

From a Consensus-Seeking Government to "Resisting" a Government "Without" Consent

After the Second World War (West) Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany—FRG) and Austria were transformed into rather stable western-style democracies. While both states had their brushes with political extremism[6] as well as terrorism,[7] the general agreement on their political systems was never in danger or even really questioned. Both societies were rather pacified, and their forms of government were built on variations and scales of concordance, or were (at least) consensus democracies. Both strove to include as many stakeholders as possible. These societal traits were reinforced by the then-recent past and the larger geopolitical situation. Both countries found themselves on the "front lines" of the Cold War, although in different roles. Austria, although officially neutral after the granting of a state treaty in 1955, became an important hub for intelligence activities and a place for diplomacy and trade between the western and Soviet blocks. The FRG was economically and militarily a core NATO ally. Unlike in Austria, the troops that arrived in (West) Germany as occupation forces never left, becoming allied defence forces during this period, and even stayed after the Cold War ended: a fact that becomes relevant in the German sovereignist milieu and its narratives.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, while the focus regarding extremists lay elsewhere,[8] ideas which questioned and attacked the foundations of Germany's and Austria's statehood, as well as the societal order as a whole, emerged—amplified by the rise of the Internet—from a state of obscurantism.[9] Some of the ideas evidently were imported (especially from the US); others were endemic and evolved around Germany's and Austria's international (legal) status as states after their absolute defeat in 1945. In particular, the independence and (full) sovereignty of the FRG were called into question, largely based on the fact that the Grundgesetz (Basic Law) was crafted while under occupation and due to the fact that Allied forces remained even after German reunification. Those sovereignists who believed that the old German state—the Reich, as framed by the Weimar Constitution—still existed legally, and "empowered" themselves to act on its behalf, became collectively known as Reichsbürger, which can be translated to "citizen of the empire".

While it must be noted that the Reichsbürger milieu is rather heterogenous, in nearly all cases certain ideas and traditions border on, overlap with, or are part of worldviews found on the (extreme) right. However, the philosophical and practical approaches of the sovereignists—and especially the Reichsbürger—were very different from other extremist groups seen previously in Austria and Germany. These were no longer classical "revolutionary" movements or parties that wanted to gain control of the levers of power, either by democratic means or by force. These were groups, or sometimes even only individuals, who denied the states' sovereignty by declaring themselves more or less independent of the state. In a way, the phenomenon can be summed up as an (irrational) form of self-empowerment, which rejects the established state

order and wants to replace it with its own order—one that is often only applicable to a small number of individuals or very small geographical areas.

For the larger public, the formation of these ideas and groups became more visible in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis after 2007, when people suffering economic hardship and substantial losses started to flock to them. The crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (called the Corona pandemic in Germany and Austria)[10] has led to a strong anti-state sentiment based largely on rejection of the measures taken by the state against the spread of the virus. This propelled the Reichsbürger from an obscure milieu of anti-state extremists to new heights, in public attention as well as in numbers.

The Reichsbürger: A Short Introduction to a Sovereignists' Milieu That Went from Obscurity to Deadly Notoriety

The idea of re-establishing (or more precisely, "continuing") the Reich as the legitimate basis of government was present immediately after the end of World War II. The Sozialistische Reichspartei Deutschlands [Socialist Reich Party—SRP], founded in October of 1949, claimed that the Reich continued to exist. For them, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was merely a puppet and Karl Dönitz was the last legitimate president of the German Reich, illegally hindered from fulfilling his duties.[11] Since the SRP saw itself as the heir of the NSDAP, given the proximity to the end of the Third Reich and its goal to overthrow the newly established state, this stance was not surprising. Consequently, the party was outlawed in 1952. Nevertheless, the basic idea did not die. In 1975 Manfred Roeder, a lawyer and activist of the extreme right, declared himself Reichsverweser [regent] and declared a "Reichstag zu Flensburg" ["Regime at Flensburg].[12] He based his claim to be the regent on an answer Karl Dönitz had given him in a letter as part of their mutual correspondence. Roeder was prosecuted for his activities, in particular at the so-called Reichstag. After going underground and founding a terror cell that committed attacks, he eventually was arrested and jailed.[13] Today he is seen as one of the two founding figures of the Reichsbürger movement. The other is Wolfgang Ebel, a former railway worker from East Germany. By then living in West Berlin, in 1985 Ebel declared that he had been commissioned by the Allied powers to lead an interim government. Like those before him, he claimed that the Reich had never ceased to exist, but was simply incapacitated due to the lack of officials acting on its behalf. Ebel's *Kommissarische Reichsregierung* [Provisional Government of the Reich—KRR] was a pseudo-state organisation which established a template for other *Reichsbürger and has* endured within certain elements of the milieu to the present day. In contrast to Roeder, Ebel explicitly distanced himself from neo-Nazis. These elements of the extreme right established their own *Reichsbürger* groups, starting in the mid-1990s under the leadership of (among others) Horst Mahler. Mahler, a cofounder of what would become the Red Army Faction, started out as a prominent Marxist-Leninist attorney and then drifted to the extreme right. Eventually he cofounded the *Deutsches Kolleg* training centre in 1994, which sought to foster a "Fourth Reich".[14]

The new millennium brought new variations of these established themes. Peter Fitzek, the self-proclaimed "King of Germany", founded a "Kingdom of Germany" at the city limits of Wittenberg in September 2012, where he was acclaimed as "highest sovereign" by 600 of his

"subjects". The area was cleared by authorities in 2017.[15] In another project, an association called NeuDeutschland ("NewGermany") aimed to reestablish Germany within the borders that existed on 31 December 1937, and to create a new constitution. Even after being released from prison for several offences connected to his "state-establishing" activities, Fitzek continued. To create his own political system, he wants to acquire two castles in Saxony as a base for a Reichsbürger settlement, an effort that will be partly financed by some of his 4,400 followers.[16]

In general, as noted above, the milieu of the "Reichsbürger" is decentralised and heterogeneous and for a long time its proponents—if they were not at the same time far-right activists and/or terrorists like Röder and Mahler—were seen as "ridiculous conspiracy theorists".[17] Followers of KRRs in the vein of Ebel and Fitzek were sometimes even jokingly dubbed "paper terrorists", since they tended to flood authorities with long texts which explained elaborate (pseudo-)legal theories. This changed on 19 October 2016, when the Reichsbürger Wolfgang Plan opened fire during a raid on his home in Bavaria. With one police officer killed and another severely wounded, the perspective of the authorities as well as the public on the Reichsbürger milieu changed fundamentally. The new perspective was that parts of the milieu posed a threat similar to that of other extremist movements.[18]

In Austria, a sovereignists' milieu in general existed before the pandemic. But because of the previously mentioned different path of Austria's history in the post-war and Cold War era, the shape of the scene was rather different. Since its independence from Germany had already been declared by Austrian politicians in late April 1945, the constitution of 1920 was reinstated, and a state treaty signed that formally ended occupation by handing back sovereignty to the Austrian government in 1955. Therefore, sovereignist narratives could not base their claim in the same way on a "continued occupation" and a "government not responsible to its people but the Allied Powers" argument. In Austria, narratives and ideas about the state being "merely a company" were for a long time much more prominent and visible among sovereignists. The "Staatenbund Österreich" [Austrian Commonwealth] might serve as an illustrative example. It was established in November 2015 and operated by using terminology from the "One People's Public Trust" (OPPT) in the US. Lead by Monika Unger, a farmer from Styria, the Staatenbund argued that the Republic of Austria is merely a company. The real Austria, she claimed, was the Staatenbund, which therefore is the only legitimate subject of international law. In Unger's narrative there is a conspiracy of the powerful elite against "little people" to keep them poor and downtrodden. Unger's speeches sometimes attracted hundreds of people.[19] The self-proclaimed President for Life was arrested with several others and sentenced for the founding of an association hostile to the state and for directing others to commit high treason.[20]

Since coming more into focus for the authorities and the public at large, anti-state endeavours have posed completely new challenges to the established legal order. A lot of the legal definition and classification used by security services, as well as the courts, did not apply to their activities. Therefore, new categories for this kind of anti-state extremism were created in both countries and the criminal codes amended: groups are now being classified as "staatsfeindlich" (hostile to the state) in Austria or "staatsverweigernd" (state-rejectionist) in Germany. The latter, in response to the developments during the pandemic, added a new category that addresses "delegitimization of the state relevant to domestic intelligence" ["Verfassungsschutzrelevante

Delegitimierung des Staates"]. This new category has been criticised by some as being too broad and ill defined.[21]

State Measures against the Pandemic: Galvanising Anti-State Sentiment among the Population

As a response to the largest global public health emergency in a century, the governments of Germany and Austria—like most others worldwide—took measures that would have been unthinkable even just weeks before. Life became extremely restricted, especially during the lockdowns. While this was met with acceptance by most citizens, especially during the first lockdown in March 2020, protests against these measures soon emerged.[22] Some protestors feared their income, liberty, and even their lives were not so much threatened by the virus, but by an overreaching state. Consequently, different forms of protest developed, ranging from small individual signs of disapproval to huge demonstrations that mobilised thousands in both countries.[23] One especially noteworthy form of protest arose early on, defying bans on demonstrations and public gatherings that were issued during the first weeks of the pandemic: so-called "walks", in which people gathered—largely organised over social media and other online communication channels—to perform a permitted activity (taking a walk) in a way that actually constituted a currently forbidden activity (gathering in public and protesting). As well as undercutting government orders in general, at times a portion of the participants sought confrontation with the police.[24]

When authorities reacted to those acts of defiance, and further attempted gatherings were prohibited, a new network of protest groups emerged. The Querdenker [literal translation: lateral or unconventional thinkers] established themselves first in Germany and then in Austria.[25] Their use of the term as self-identification was seen by some as a sort of appropriation. Previously, Querdenker had simply referred to someone who thinks originally and outside the box, and had positive connotations.[26] The newly proclaimed Querdenker quickly developed ties to the existing anti-Corona protest groups all over Germany.

A distinction is made by Grande et al.[27] between three waves of anti-measure protests. During the first lockdown in mid-March 2020, signs of protest included silent actions like setting up chairs in public spaces (to protest against the closure of restaurants) and online petitions, as well as street protests (which were initially banned but later allowed under restrictive conditions). Among these early street protestors were the first Querdenker groups. This first wave peaked in mid-May 2020. In the summer of the same year, the first mass demonstration of the Querdenker movement started a second phase of mobilisation, peaking in August. In late fall, another lockdown triggered the third wave. In all these waves, a wide range of actors were mobilised. Especially during the second wave, when (protest) gatherings were no longer banned in principle, Querdenker activities dominated the protest arena in Germany.

What gave the Querdenker an advantage in shaping public discourse was the fact that they managed to obtain significant public attention and media coverage early on. They did so by using aggressive and provocative rhetoric, often comparing government measures to curtail the

spread of the disease to actions taken by the regime of the Third Reich. This became something of a pattern during the protests, since it proved to be highly effective in gathering attention. It grossly violated societal taboos that are observed (especially by the political elite, journalists, and academics). One instance is particularly illustrative: when the debate about mandatory vaccination was raging, some protestors used symbols which looked like the Star of David patches that Jews were forced to wear on their clothing during the Third Reich. But instead of “Jude” [Jew], the patch read “Ungeimpft” [Unvaccinated]. The use of the symbolism alone caused an immense outcry, as well as criminal prosecution.[28] It is impossible to determine how much of these actions reminiscing the Third Reich were driven by pure tactic, banking on media and societal reaction, and how much they were based on a genuine feeling that there was a new totalitarian state in the making. But it is very likely that several of the protesters and activists who made this comparison and used that kind of imagery really believed that their analogy was correct and necessary to “inform” the wider public.

Other acts challenged the established democratic order on a symbolic level. During a major demonstration in Berlin organised by the founder of the Querdenker Michael Ballweg (see below), a group of Reichsbürger broke through police barriers and stormed the steps of the Reichstag. On the steps of the building that houses the German Parliament, they proceeded to wave the war flag of the old German state.[29] Parts of the group proceeded to the Russian Embassy to seek protection by Russian President Vladimir Putin.[30]

However, it must be noted that, contrary to the broadly held view, the Querdenker are not all oriented towards the right. Some parts of the movement see themselves as progressive.[31] Actors of the old “Friedensbewegung” [“peace movement”] as well as former left-wing movements can be found among prominent Querdenker. A group called “Freie Linke” [“Free Left”] appeared at numerous gatherings.[32] While those progressive individuals were part of the Querdenker, they were clearly in the minority. After the storming of the Reichstag, when it became evident that Reichsbürger and QAnon ideologists were gaining momentum among the Querdenker, the network lost nearly all support from left-leaning organisations.[33]

Interestingly enough, in Germany it was the Querdenker movement that also spawned “classical” political parties (although with a strong bend towards esoteric concepts). Their names suggested a stance against “the establishment” and “the system”: “Widerstand 2020” [“Resistance 2020”], its successors “Die Basis” [“The Base”] and “Wir 2020” [“Us 2020”]. In both Widerstand 2020 and Wir 2020, Bodo Schiffmann, one of the most noteworthy Querdenker activists (see below), was a leading figure at the beginning. Undoubtedly, there was a proximity to conspiracy thinking in these political organisations. The programs had very much centred around one issue, denying the dangers of the pandemic and the efficacy of vaccination.[34] They ran electoral campaigns, but unlike in Austria, these German protest parties were not successful. This was in part because of internal clashes and rivalries that existed from the start.[35] In the end, their attempt to form the political representation of the critics and sceptics in legislative bodies failed.

Due to the presence of extremist factions and views within the Querdenker network, the German Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesverfassungsschutz; BfV) started

to monitor regional parts of the movement—especially the founding group in Stuttgart—in December 2020 and nationwide in April 2021.

With their methods the Querdenker found success south of the border too, although not on the same level. In Austria, where protest likewise was widespread, they established themselves but never reached the same media dominance as in Germany. This was primarily because protests in Austria were supported by the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ), the third-largest party in Austria's parliament.[36] While the protestors in Germany found some support among parties that hold mandates, especially from Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD),[37] the FPÖ is much more established and involved in governing. Herbert Kickl, its current leader, placed himself at the head of anti-measure and anti-government protests. Additionally—as opposed to Germany—a small new party was founded, called "Menschen – Freiheit – Grundrechte" [Humans– Freedom – Basic rights, MFG], and managed to win seats in the regional state parliament of Upper Austria.

One demonstration in Vienna in December 2021 initiated by Kickl and the FPÖ gathered 44,000 protestors from all over the country. It involved not only Querdenker, whose leaders spoke next to Kickl and other FPÖ politicians on the stage, but was attended by members of the Identitarian Movement and other right-wing extremists as well.[38] Kickl, himself the former minister of the interior, but then in opposition, warned against the establishment of an "Apartheid system" and a "medical caste system" in Austria.[39] This highlights the fact that in both countries demonstrations and gatherings were in part directed against a presumed "Coronadiktatur" ("Corona dictatorship"). This trope implied that the (sometimes indeed far-reaching) state measures were an infringement on citizens' or human rights and presumably not temporary but "here to stay".

These generalised fears present in parts of the population were subsequently reinforced and channelled into new directions by those anti-measure activists and Querdenker who were prone to a variety of conspiracy ideas.[40] Members of the Querdenker and others cast doubt that the virus really existed and, if it did, questioned the level of danger it posed. Vaccination, especially if compulsory, was rejected and seen as the "real" danger. In a narrative found throughout the West, it was claimed that the vaccines—especially those based on mRNA technologies—were meant to eradicate a large part of humanity, or (simultaneously or alternatively) that microchips would be implanted through the inoculation.[41] This was connected to the idea that the "global elites" were using the pandemic to turn the world into one common dictatorship. In its most prominent version this revolved around interpretations of the "Great Reset", which the World Economic Forum and its head Klaus Schwab had advertised.

The unequivocal articulation of antisemitic conspiracy theories, primarily related to the US investor George Soros, could also be observed. Other by now well-known conspiracy theories about the role and "plans" of Bill Gates in relation to the pandemic were also often mentioned.[42] Many of those theories, or variations of them, were already part of the worldview of the Reichsbürger milieu even before the pandemic hit. Therefore, it is not surprising that certain activists of Querdenker[43] connected the anti-measure, anti-state sentiment that had arisen with the Reichsbürger narrative.

Propagating the Reich: The Role of Activists for the Dynamics between Parts of the Reichsbürger Milieu and the Querdenker Movement

The state measures against COVID-19 brought together a number of very different individuals. Those discussed here not only gathered large amounts of media attention, but likewise combined a prominent role in Querdenker with the propagation of, or at least "flirtation" with, explicitly Reichsbürger ideas. It is noteworthy that no figure with such profile and prominence arose in Austria. The reasons for this will be discussed below.

One of the best illustrative examples of the German phenomenon is Michael Ballweg. A businessman running an IT firm in Stuttgart and never politically active before the pandemic, he started to hold "Vigils for the Basic Law" in March 2020. Within days he founded "Querdenken 711– Stuttgart", the number referring to the local telephone code of the city. It is seen as the original Querdenker group. Ballweg's rallies became a focal point for thousands of protestors. At this point they attracted people from different backgrounds critical of or unsatisfied with how the pandemic was handled. But soon Ballweg, who from the beginning had close ties to right-wing esotericism,[44] cooperated with renowned figures from the conspiracy realm, inviting them as speakers. His events were then endorsed by proponents of the extreme right as well. These developments led to criticisms and some of the people originally attracted turning away. Over the course of summer 2020, Ballweg not only ventured further into the QAnon conspiracies[45] but also into sovereignist thought: he said he would look into a peace treaty for Germany, and declared a large rally on 29 August to be a "Constituent Assembly" that should develop a new constitution.[46] In November 2020, Ballweg and Peter Fitzek had a conspirative meeting with several of their supporters in order to "find new strategies".[47] It didn't end there: Ballweg opened a bank account for his "kingdom" which caused internal criticism.[48] The gathering was ended by authorities because it violated hygiene regulations, but from then on Ballweg and his group were under surveillance by domestic intelligence. At times, the former businessman seemed to try to distance himself from the extreme right, as well as Reichsbürger and sovereignists, but never did so conclusively.[49] Media research indicated that he tried to "cash-in" on the movement, using donations for the events, as well as profits from merchandise, to enrich himself.[50] Authorities came to the same conclusion and arrested Ballweg in the summer of 2022 under the suspicion of fraud and money laundering.[51]

Another of the influencers that combined Querdenken with the Reichsbürger narrative came from a field related more closely to the crisis: Bodo Schiffmann, a medical doctor running his own private practice, became influential with the start of the pandemic. His YouTube channel, which he had run before on more common medical themes, acquired more than 130,000 followers.[52] He organised a "Coronavirus info tour" that saw him travelling on a bus across Germany and speaking at demonstrations that were organised by the Querdenker.[53] Schiffmann used his professional credentials to give his arguments weight and an aura of authority. He used QAnon talking points and announced his support for Ballweg's approach to get in closer touch with "Reichsbürger" such as Fitzek. In some of his videos, he relativises the Holocaust by making comparisons between doctors who administer vaccinations with Josef Mengele, the notorious doctor of Auschwitz.[54] Generally, Schiffmann "opened the door" to create a network with

right-wing extremists.[55] Schiffmann has now moved to Tanzania but still warns against "plans of the elites" on the Internet. He clearly makes efforts to bolster his network even after leaving Europe. Schiffman says he is willing to return to take part in a trial related to the accusation that he forged medical exemptions for not wearing masks, as well as for demagoguery.[56]

Attila Hildmann also had a well-established career before he engaged with Querdenker demonstrations and became a figurehead of the protest movement: he was a well-known vegan chef who authored several cookbooks.[57] Hildmann consequently already had a large platform before he started to speak against the government's anti-Corona measures.[58] In the summer of 2020, Corona protests in Germany attended by Hildmann featured SS and Nazi symbols.[59] At the demonstration where the steps of the Reichstag were stormed, Hildmann demanded in speeches in front of the building that the barrier gates be removed and that demonstrators be allowed through to the building, which "is dedicated to the German people."[60] He was seen as a key driver of the protest movement and managed to canvas support on the messenger platform Telegram.[61] Private chat groups not only discussed apocalyptic scenarios, but in addition called for violence and the death of politicians and scientists.[62] Since several of his statements led to criminal investigations, Hildmann has escaped to Turkey, which currently does not seem willing to arrest and extradite him.[63]

Popular Discontent, the Querdenker, and the Road to Anti-State Extremism

Survey data show that Corona protests in Germany had a considerable, relatively stable 'mobilisation potential' which is socially heterogeneous and ideologically diffuse. While Grande et al.[64] find that more than 60 percent of sympathisers (not necessarily protestors) see themselves in the political centre, the political extremes (especially on the right) are strongly represented; 12.5 percent identify themselves on the extreme fringe, most of them (7.5 percent) on the extreme right. A large proportion does not feel represented by the established parties of the political centre and is generally suspicious of the state and its institutions. Since parts of this 'distrustful middle' are prone to conspiracy theories, Grande et al. see "considerable potential for further political radicalisation."[65]

Given this feeling of not being represented, which in Germany obviously could not be completely addressed by classical "protest parties" like the AfD[66], the Querdenker concept and activities found fertile ground. Because several of the original Querdenker also propagated conspiracy thinking and were at least prone to Reichsbürger ideas, an interrelation between the two milieus was established early on. In hindsight, this dynamic is hardly surprising given the fact that measures by the state were the reason for much of the anger and the discontent that fuelled the Corona protests in the first place. A narrative and worldview like that of the Reichsbürger, propagated with an established "practical" approach that fully negates the established state in the form of the FRG and therefore renders all of its action illegitimate *per se*, ultimately was the perfect fit for this situation. The Reichsbürger template, like all sovereignist narratives, is based on the idea of a (global) conspiracy that victimises the common people and hides the "truth" (and sometimes wealth, full human potential, etc.). Consequently, it could easily be connected

and brought in alignment with other conspiratorial beliefs regarding the pandemic: that it was planned, that it was a stepping stone for a world government, and that it would serve the purpose of depopulation.

The Reichsbürger narrative in the German context was the right seed for the fields of discontent. It is noteworthy that the QAnon line of argumentation and conspiratorial thinking is very compatible with the Reichsbürger narrative. As mentioned above, several of the more important actors as well as the plotters of the "Patriotische Union" integrated QAnon aspects into the Reichsbürger narrative and developed an eclectic meta narrative. Given the common elements, it could connect with ideas about the pandemic being planned, or at least that it was used to reach nefarious goals. This made a triangle possible that brought in alignment Querdenker discontent, Reichsbürger sovereignist ideas, and QAnon conspiratorial thinking, all consequently reinforcing each other. All three aspects were even open to other meta conspiracy theories that could bind them together further, especially antisemitic ones. Protestors from all walks of life who until then were not exposed to conspiratorial thinking were therefore confronted with several different avenues to similar ideas. This opened them up for radicalisation into these forms of anti-state extremism.

However, attention should be given to regional differences. There is the recurring theme of the east-west divide, with protests being more marked in parts of eastern Germany.[67] For example, a representative survey conducted in Thuringia in eastern Germany in autumn 2020 shows a strong and significant link between far-right political attitudes and COVID-19 scepticism.[68] This was not true for the west, where it was observed early on that the cradle of the Querdenker, which is Baden-Württenberg and Stuttgart, normally was associated with progressive and green ideas in recent years.[69] It therefore can be concluded that the protest movement was based on a network of esoteric, conspiracy-minded and sometimes (in their worldview) rather diffuse actors in western Germany,[70] whereas they were carried by experienced neo-Nazis and parts of the AfD sympathetic to the movement in eastern Germany.[71]

In Austria, the developments were similar in their structure, but different regarding the actors involved, which had an effect on which narratives and ideas were spread. The Reichsbürger narrative was not as prominent or even present among them as in Germany. While Querdenker were well established and made up a part of the media discourse in Austria, they did not gain the same media dominance as in their country of origin. Instead, a lot of the protest was carried by two "classical" political parties (FPÖ and MFG), who in turn also held a lot of the public's attention. In particular, the aforementioned FPÖ head, Herbert Kickl, established himself as a major opponent of the government's anti-Corona policies. Like the main proponents of Querdenker in Germany, he often provoked strong reaction by symbolic acts like appearing on stage at a demonstration without a mask (although mandatory), advocating the study as well as the use of Ivermectin on public television, and by his use of aggressive rhetoric,[72] such as referencing the motives of an overreaching authoritarian state and invoking the idea of a "Corona dictatorship". However, Kickl and the FPÖ—while they have a relationship with controversies surrounding such topics—largely stayed away from making comparisons to the Third Reich. The involvement of a major opposition party might explain why Reichsbürger and sovereignist ideas were not as important in Austria: along with the historically different situation regarding

the legal basis of the second Austrian Republic described above, Kickl and the FPÖ are part of the established political system. The MFG clearly wants to join it. As their representatives are members of parliament and hold public office, spreading sovereignist narratives of the Reichsbürger variety would be counterproductive. Firstly, it would do enormous harm in the political realm and lead to criminal prosecution. Secondly, the politicians involved would undermine their own credibility, because they basically would state that they willingly participate in an "illegitimate system" that exploits its people. This most likely "reined in" the Austrian Querdenker, because their prominent representatives, like Martin Rutter, spoke on the same stage and even directly before the appearance of Kickl. Had they ventured too deeply into the conspiracy realm, and especially sovereignist and Reichsbürger themes, this most likely would have ended their participation in the very successful demonstrations organised by the FPÖ.

This observation, however, does not mean that these themes were completely absent among protesters in Austria. But it can be observed clearly that other forms of conspiratorial thinking had more traction. However, a growth of the Reichsbürger milieu can be observed in Austria too,[73] a circumstance that implies that although not central, its rationale was still able to spread among the disaffected. Here more data are needed, since the phenomenon of sovereignists in Austria in general is not yet well documented and researched.

The comparison between Germany and Austria in the influence and development of the Querdenker in regards to Reichsbürger narratives shows that the involvement of politicians and classical protest parties curtailed this particular brand of anti-state extremism. While still polarising, sometimes provocative and sometimes venturing to the extreme, sovereignist ideas could not get the same exposure and traction in Austria as they did in Germany, since the protests were channelled by groups and individuals working within the established system. This is not true for other conspiracy theories. Their spread, however, could be observed in many Western countries. Other aspects and circumstances of the protests in Germany and Austria were similar: like in Germany, it was noticed early on that in Austria well-known, sometimes notorious members of the extreme right were participating in the protests—and, therefore, it can be concluded that the protests tapped the same potential.[74]

Conspiracy thinking in both countries was spread by influencers like Hildmann and Schiffmann on their personal social media channels. This could be done across the border, although here more research is needed into the interaction between Austrian and German influencers and followers in the digital realm. Social media provided a tool for mobilisation and activism, and their provocations received intense coverage by mainstream media in both countries. When the larger sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram cracked down on conspiracists, other means—the online messenger service Telegram in particular—were utilised. And while not all Telegram groups were filled with xenophobic right-wing extremist content, a tendency towards the far right was clearly visible within the movement.[75] It can be argued that while banned on other social media platforms, Telegram actors, especially the German ones discussed here, could still reach the masses and thereby influence them.[76] As Tyson Barker observed: "Germany's disinformation landscape is evolving—and metastasising—rapidly. In recent months, Querdenken has developed connective tissue with the Reichsbürger, Hildmann, and the growing German following of the QAnon cult of conspiracy."[77] By now, all three of the main influenc-

ers mentioned above are under prosecution for different offences, often related to hate speech and demagoguery, but also for crimes that imply a financial interest. While Ballweg was arrested, Hildmann and Schiffmann left the country.[78] They try to keep their influence by utilising the Internet, but with the lifting of more and more restrictions and the arrival of new themes like the Russian war against Ukraine, it has clearly waned. This might explain why several of these actors moved on and are now involved in other topics like climate change and the Russian war on Ukraine. Obviously, their anti-state sentiment persists, but to continue their engagement with their audience (and to enlarge it) they need new talking points.

In analysing the social movement of the Querdenker and their interrelation with the Reichsbürger, it is easy to see that there is a complex mix of radicalism, conspiracy theories, and extremism, especially of the anti-state variety.[79] An interesting aspect is the potential for what researchers have described as "stochastic violence, even terrorism."[80] While it should be mentioned that no terror attack has occurred that had its origins in the interrelation and dynamics between Querdenker and Reichsbürger, troubling events include the discovery of the aforementioned plans for a coup d'état, and some violent incidents that even led to death. With the pandemic "largely over", terrorist attacks seem less likely. But it remains to be seen whether the dynamics and networks that developed during the acute health crisis will bear any violent fruit in the (near) future.

Conclusion

While Corona-related activism and protest in Germany and Austria had many facets and actors, the activities of the Querdenker have seen the greatest successes in mobilisation[81] and had a major impact on the protest scene, particularly in Germany. The Querdenker cut across many classes and niches of society. Indeed, neither the far right nor the far left could really take ownership of it, but the far right made considerable inroads into the German as well as the Austrian movement. In Germany, of all groups monitored by domestic intelligence, officials conclude that the anti-system far right has succeeded most in tapping COVID-19 deniers.[82] This is made more achievable by the heterogeneity of the Querdenken movement[83] as well as its character as a loose network of many single actors, with top influencers playing a crucial role.

While the impact of the COVID-19 measures was the only concern for many involved in the protests, the developments suggest that some participants have become more radical and more ready to engage in acts of violence or sabotage. They joined the ranks of anti-state extremism and most likely will remain there. This is in line with research that implies that belief in conspiracy theories may lead to forms of nonnormative political engagement or even criminal behaviour.[84] Certain influencers that shaped the Querdenker acted as a catalyst for this development and built bridges to the Reichsbürger milieu, which in turn was especially well-suited to absorb the anger that built up during the pandemic. Evidently, there is a link between the pandemic-related conspiracy thinking of Querdenker and a general affinity towards conspiracy theories among Reichsbürger, with their respective antisemitism and rejection of the established liberal and democratic order.

The boost that Reichsbürger received, with over 23,000 Reichsbürger and sovereignists in 2022[85] (up from 19,000 in 2019[86]), has to be considered as part of the development of radical right-wing politics. It can be placed in the context of a larger authoritarian-nationalist rebellion and increasingly polarised politico-cultural cleavages in Germany, Austria, and Europe. Many conspiracist patterns have become interchangeable and are transcending established borders, as the allusions by different key figures that are involved with the Reichsbürger and the QAnon movement demonstrate. The interrelations between QAnon and the Reichsbürger conspiracy theories in particular should be the focus of future research, since they obviously have been "fruitful" and therefore dangerous dynamics. This also applies to antisemitism and its tradition within these milieus as a meta-narrative, since it is a factor that connects not only different groups and actors in the present, but likewise with the larger antisemitic tradition of the past.

Beyond domestic security concerns, all of this has additional implications for both countries' international standing. This could be seen when, in a recent speech, Vladmir Putin referenced political statements that Germany was not fully sovereign, and claimed that US troops there were still occupation forces—fully utilising the most basic Reichsbürger narrative.[87] This is only fitting, since parts of the protesting milieu have in the meantime turned to other issues, among them a clearly visible support for Russia.

In recent years, several assassinations by right-wing terrorists have been linked to misinformation and conspiracy theories[88]—in Germany, for example, the lone-actor attacks in Munich, Halle, and Hanau,[89] and the plot by the "Patriotische Union" revealed in December 2022. The development of an "antidemocratic campaigning machine"[90] remains to be seen. But it became clear during the last three years that discontent channelled by protest movements like the Querdenker can these days lead directly to citizens turning away from the democratic state and into the arms of anti-state extremists like the Reichsbürger.

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Endnotes

1 The number still is growing, as of the end of January. Without Author, "Reichsbürger"-Razzia. Behörden ermitteln inzwischen gegen 55 Verdächtige," *Der Standard* (January 30, 2023), https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000143061978/reichsbuerger-razzia-behoerden-ermitteln-inzwischen-gegen-55-verdaechtige. Accessed on February 1, 2023.

2 Normally terms like Querdenker and Reichsbürger are used in quotation marks. However, since both are needed in this text so frequently, we refrained from doing so for the sake of readability.

3 Daniel Koehler, *Germany Targets One of Its Largest Far-Right Domestic Extremist Groups, 9th December, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (Den Hague 2022) https://icct.nl/publication/germany-targets-far-right-domestic-extremist-group/. Accessed on February 6, 2023; see also Lars Rensmann, *Authoritarian Rebels. The Reichbürger Movement, the Far-Right, and the Growing Assault on German Democracy* (2023), https://www.aicgs.org/2023/01/authoritarian-rebels/. Accessed on February 6, 2023.

4 Frederik Schindler, "Reichsbürger infiltrieren Querdenker-Szene," *Welt.de* (September 9, 2021), https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article233697240/Reichsbuerger-infiltrieren-Querdenker-Szene-mit-rechtsextremen-Ideen.html. Accessed February 20, 2023.

5 See for example: Stefan Goertz, *Querdenker. Ein Überblick*, (Wiesbaden: Springer essentials, 2022). Goertz primarily delivers a description of the movement based on security and intelligence reports.

6 On German extremism, see: Uwe Backes and Cas Mudde, "Germany: Extremism without Successful Parties" *Parliamentary Affairs* 53, no. 3 (2000): 457–468, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/53.3.457. On Austrian and German right-wing extremism see: Michael Minkenberg, "The Radical Right and Anti-Immigrant Politics in Liberal Democracies since World War II: Evolution of a Political and Research Field," *Polity* 53, no. 3 (2021): 394–417, https://doi.org/10.1086/714167. On German right-wing extremism see: Samuel Salzborn, "Renaissance of the New Right in Germany? A Discussion of New Right Elements in German Right-Wing Extremism Today," *German Politics and Society* 34, no. 2 (2016): 36–63. On European (including German) right-wing extremism in the post-WWII era see: Bernt Hagtvet "Right-Wing Extremism in Europe," *Journal of Peace Research* 31, no. 3: 241–246, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343394031003001. On post-war European (including German and Austrian) extremism see: Klaus von Beyme, "Right-Wing Extremism in Post-War Europe," *West European Politics* 11, no. 2 (1988): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402388808424678.

7 On left-wing extremism and terrorism in Germany see: Daniel Koehler, "Disengaging from Left-Wing Terrorism and Extremism: Field Experiences from Germany and Research Gaps," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1917639. On left-wing terrorism in Germany see: Norman Siewert, "11.2 Linksterrorismus: Selbsternannte Avantgarde der Revolution," in *Terrorismusforschung*, eds. Liane Rothenberger et al. (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2022). On right-wing extremism in Germany see: Sebastian Gräfe, *Rechtsterrorismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2017). On Austrian terrorism see: Heinz Vetschera, "Terrorism in Austria: Experiences and Responses," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4, no. 4 (1992): 210–233, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559208427182.

8 At first, after several incidents, on right-wing extremism and terrorism, and after 9/11 on those driven by extremist jihadi interpretations of Islam.

9 Jan Rathje "For Reich and Volksgemeinschaft—Against the World Conspiracy: Antisemitism and Sovereignism in the Federal Republic of Germany Since 1945," *Antisemitism Studies* 5, no. 1 (2021): 100–138, https://doi.org/10.2979/ANTISTUD.5.1.04.

10 It has been noted that the English or international term for the pandemic is COVID-19. However, since a lot of the vocabulary in Austria and Germany, especially in the realm of protests, used Corona, the authors decided to stay with this term for this article.

11 Otto Büsch, "Geschichte und Gestalt der SRP," in *Rechtsradikalismus im Nachkriegsdeutschland. Band 9, Ed.* Otto Stammer (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien 1957); "Ideologische Grundlagen der SRP": 24–52. Martin A. Lee, *The Beast Reawakens* (New York: Warner Books 1998), 50.

12 Richard Stöss, *Die extreme Rechte in der Bundesrepublik: Entwicklung – Ursachen – Gegenmaßnahmen* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1989), 163; Thomas Grumke and Bernd Wagner, *Handbuch Rechtsradikalismus: Personen – Organisationen – Netzwerke. Vom Neonazismus bis in die Mitte der Gesellschaft* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich 2002), 302.

13 Jan Rathje, "Driven by Conspiracies: The Justification of Violence among 'Reichsbürger' and Other Conspiracy-Ideological Sovereignists in Contemporary Germany" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 6 (2022): 49–61, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27185091. Roeder is known for violent attacks on objects in the 1970s. Back then, his violent attacks focused on bombing pornographic cinemas and kiosks selling erotic magazines. Roeder called for the release of Rudolf Heß and denied the Holocaust for the first time in 1973.

14 Martin Jander, "Horst Mahler," in *Die RAF und der linke Terrorismus, Vol. 1*, ed. Wolfgang Kraushaar (Hamburg:

Hamburger Edition 2006), 372–397.

15 Jan Rathje, “WIR SIND WIEDER DA: Die Reichsbürger: Überzeugungen, Gefahren und Handlungsstrategien” *Initiativen für Zivilgesellschaft und demokratische Kultur*, ed. Amadeu-Antonio-Stiftung 13.

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24 “Spaziergänge” are still relevant in other contexts in eastern Germany. See: Thomas Datt et al. “Extremismus: Droht Ostdeutschland ein ‘heißer Herbst’?” *Tagesschau.de* (August 23, 2022), https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/herbst-proteste-103.html. Accessed on January 10, 2023. These walks also loomed large in other parts of Germany during the pandemic. See: Without Author, “Corona-Maßnahmen: Proteste weiten sich auf das Münchner Umland aus” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (January 11, 2022), https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/muenchen-corona-proteste-demonstration-landkreis-1.5505372. Accessed on January 10, 2023.

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26 The German standard dictionary Duden defined it as “a person who thinks independently and originally, and whose ideas and views are often not understood or accepted.” See: DUDEN, “Querdenker, der,” https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Querdenker. Accessed January 10, 2023; Similarly, the official Austrian dictionary: Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur, 39th edition (2001), “index word Querdenker” 467, left column. Technically, the part about ideas and views not being understood and accepted gives weight to the idea of self-deception. However, and not surprisingly, this sentiment was not shared by many outside the movement itself. See: Peter Strasser, “Die neuen Querdenker – ein Fall von Begriffsraub,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 1 (2021), https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/die-neuen-querdenker-ein-fall-von-begriffsraub-ld.1602163?reduced=true. Accessed on January 10, 2023.

27 Edgar Grande et al., *Alles Covidioten? Politische Potenziale des Corona-Protests in Deutschland* (Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin 2021), 3–6.

28 Ministerium des Innern Nordrhein-Westfalen, *Sonderbericht zu Verschwörungsmythen und “Corona-Leugnern”*

(Düsseldorf 2021), 179.

29 Ministerium des Innern Nordrhein-Westfalen, *Sonderbericht zu Verschwörungsmythen und "Corona-Leugnern,"* 117. Bundesministerium des Inneren, für Bauen und Heimat, *Verfassungschutzbericht 2020* (2021) 60–61; Uwe Backes, "Organisationen 2021," in *Jahrbuch Extremismus & Demokratie, 34. Jahrgang*, eds. Uwe Backes et al. (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2022) 127–149, here 141–142; also William Callisonand Quinn Slobodian "Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol," *Boston Review* 12. https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/quinn-slobodian-toxic-politics-coronakspeticism/. Accessed on January 11, 2023.

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31 Oliver Nachtwey et al., *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste. Grundauswertung* (Basel: Universität Basel 2020).

32 Florian Hartleb, "Rechts- und Linksextremismus und die COVID-19-Pandemie," in *Europäische Werte, Sicherheit und Integration*, eds. Stefan Karner and Wilhelm Sandrisser (Graz: Leykam-Verlag 2023), 197–219.

33 Edgar Grande et al., "Politischer Protest und Radikalisierung," in *MOTRA-Monitor, Bundeskriminalamt – Forschungsstelle Terrorismus/Extremismus*, eds Kemmesies, Uwe, et al., 104–132, here: 115.

34 Nora Feline Pösl, "Von Verschwörungsideologien, Vernetzungsstrategien und Vernichtungsphantasien," in *Verschwörungsdenken Zwischen Populärkultur und politischer Mobilisierung, Verschwörungsdenken*, eds. Florian Hessel, Pradeep Chakkarath and Mischa Luy (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag), 215–238.

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41 Oliver Nachtwey, Robert Schäfer and Nadine Frei *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste. Grundauswertung* (Basel: Universität Basel 2020).

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44 See Matthias Pöhlmann, *Rechte Esoterik. Wenn sich alternatives Denken und Extremismus gefährlich vermischen* (Freiburg et al.: Herder), 57–59.

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(Baden-Baden: Nomos 2022), 131–152, here 144. For the whole episode see also: Sebastian Leber "'Geeinte deutsche Völker und Stämme'– Einblicke in die Reichsbürgerszene," in *Querdenken (Endnote 25),* ed. Wolfgang Benz, here 105–107.

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65 Oliver Nachtwey et al., *Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste. Grundauswertung.* (Basel: Universität Basel 2020), 21–24, 54; Sebastian Koos, *Die "Querdenker". Wer nimmt an Corona-Protesten teil und warum? Forschungsbericht* (Konstanz: Universität Konstanz 2021), 7–8.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

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Anti-Government Extremism in Australia: Understanding the Australian Anti-Lockdown Freedom Movement as a Complex Anti-Government Social Movement

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This article aims to explore the emergence and consolidation of various actors and sympathisers into the Australian 'anti-lockdown' freedom movement, a diverse, hybrid anti-government movement that emerged during the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative longitudinal analysis of data from the online posts of a prominent branch of the anti-lockdown freedom movement, we identify the movement's core narratives, motivations, and forms of action, revealing how this social movement developed into a complex form of anti-government extremist movement that combines and conflates anti-institutional, anti-elite sentiments, and anti-government attitudes and beliefs through conspiratorial narratives. Drawing upon interrelated strands of social movement theory and the broader body of research on conspiracy theories and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on radicalisation to extremism, we offer a conceptual framework to understand the movement's emergence, consolidation, and development. This study furthers our understanding of how conspiracies and disinformation can be utilised and fed into anti-government extremism during times of crisis and emergency.

Keywords: anti-government, conspiracy, extremism, crises, social movement, hybrid movements

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Introduction

The stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Australian state and federal government pandemic responses to it, particularly the lockdown measures enacted during declared states of emergency, served to acerbate anti-government sentiments among segments of the Australian population. This provided opportunities for existing anti-government extremist actors and ideologically driven extremist movements, particularly far-right, sovereign citizen, and conspiracy fuelled extremists, to capitalise on these sentiments and conditions.[1] It also led to the emergence of a new, often difficult-to-define movement—the anti-lockdown 'freedom' movement. Despite its self-characterisation as a peaceful association intent on preserving civil liberties, the anti-lockdown freedom movement has engaged in violent rhetoric and forms of action and can be labelled as an anti-government extremist movement that is, as defined by Jackson, "*primarily* or *consistently* focus[ed] on government as a source or cause of perceived crises."[2]

Drawing upon the work of an ongoing research project, *Crisis Points: Extremism under a State of Emergency*,[3] this article aims to explore the emergence and consolidation of various actors and sympathisers into the Australian 'anti-lockdown' freedom movement, a diverse, hybrid online/offline anti-government movement that emerged during the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a qualitative longitudinal analysis of data from the online posts of a prominent branch of the anti-lockdown freedom movement called the Melbourne Freedom Rally, we identify the movement's core narratives, motivations, and forms of action, revealing how this social movement developed into a complex form of anti-government extremist movement that crosses the boundaries between various forms of anti-government extremism (ideological, issues driven, and conspiratorial), and combines and conflates anti-institutional, anti-elite sentiments, and anti-government attitudes and beliefs through conspiratorial narratives. Drawing upon interrelated strands of social movement theory and the broader body of research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on radicalisation to extremism, we offer a conceptual framework to understand the movement's emergence, consolidation, and development.

While the overt activities of the Australian anti-lockdown freedom movement have reduced in scope and tempo since pandemic restrictions have lifted, the anti-lockdown freedom movement serves as an important case study to illustrate how a diverse anti-government social movement can come together, particularly in terms of the movement's ability to unite a disparate and diverse cross sector of actors and how it provided opportunities for political exploitation and recruitment by extremist ideological players. This study also furthers our understanding of how conspiracies and disinformation can be utilised and feed into anti-government extremism. This case also serves as an example of a hybrid form of anti-government extremist movements and illustrates the online-offline dimensions to social movements that we are likely to see in the future. By offering an alternative typology of violent forms of action that can be carried out by anti-government social movements we also hope this study of the anti-lockdown freedom movement can expand our understanding and categorisations of political violence.

Background to the Study

Fortress Australia

The first recorded case of COVID-19 in Australia was recorded on the 25th of January 2020 when a traveller from Wuhan Province arrived in the city of Melbourne.[4] It did not take long for community transmission to occur, with the first case recorded in early March 2020.[5] Consistent with the country's precedent of strong biosecurity approaches, the response of the Australian government was swift and stringent. The Commonwealth government, at the time under the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, applied a COVID-19 Biosecurity Emergency Determination under the Commonwealth Biosecurity Act on March 18, 2020. This gave the national Health Minister expansive powers to "issue any direction to any person" and "determine any requirement" to control this biosecurity threat, with criminal charges, fines, and jail time applicable against anyone contravening these directives.[6] Under the Biosecurity determination, which was in effect for 25 months,[7] the federal government shut international borders and issued an overseas travel ban for citizens and permanent residents. Australian state governments, particularly the most populous states of Victoria and New South Wales, undertook a public health approach to manage the pandemic and enacted similarly stringent measures, declaring states of emergency that enabled state governments to bypass normal constitutional checks on government authority to enact these measures.

Australia's pandemic response amounted to some of the strictest public health measures in the democratic world. The state of Victoria made frequent use of so-called 'lockdowns.' While the state of New South Wales also enacted strict and contested public health measures, from March 2020 until October 2021, the Victorian government declared six lockdowns. This meant that Victorians lived under multiple forms of restriction for a cumulative 260 days over a nearly two-year period, leading Melbourne to be named "the world's most locked down city."[8] Lockdown measures in Victoria included the use of stay-at-home measures, mask mandates, curfews, 5km travel limits, school shutdowns, prolonged quarantine requirements for the sick, restrictions on gathering, including to attend funerals, religious services, and in private homes, even bans on the use of children's playgrounds.

State border closures were also part of the pandemic response which restricted travel between Australian states and territories. The announcements of snap lockdowns, resulted in residents stranded across state lines, unable to return to their own homes, when they could not make arrangements to cross state borders before the deadline.[9] Lockdowns also saw public housing residents in Victoria unable to even leave their apartments to obtain food or supplies for a period of time, a measure that the Victorian Ombudsman found had violated their human rights.[10] When vaccines became widely available, the Victorian government issued vaccine mandates in all but name only, which restricted the activities and freedoms of those who were not vaccinated, creating tiered levels of rights and liberties during the later stages of the state of emergency conditions.

While these public health measures reduced the spread of the virus and helped reduce the risk of illness and death, they also had negative consequences and effects. The lockdowns added

to the prolonged exposure to stress during the pandemic. The lack of social contact and support resulted in multiple psychological and social ill effects.[11] The lockdowns also revealed the expansive nature of state power and cultivated feelings of exclusion among segments of the population who felt that some of the public health measures overly impinged on their freedoms without providing a clear public health benefit. Perhaps for the first time, many people were confronted with, and resented, the ability of governments to impose on the basic liberties previously taken for granted in a democratic society such as Australia.[12] Additionally, the impacts of the pandemic and the governments' pandemic response measures were felt unevenly across socioeconomic demographics. While there were no significant differences in infection rates across class, race, or gender, there is evidence that pandemic and pandemic restrictions had differentiated effects across social groups and that it exacerbated sociocultural, health, educational, economic, and digital disadvantages.[13]

Nevertheless, according to opinion polls, lockdown measures were broadly supported by the general public.[14] The Victorian government's robust public health response was even identified as a major factor in the re-election of the State Labour government led by Premier Daniel Andrews in November 2022.[15] But as the lockdowns wore on, public sentiment began to shift, with a majority of Victorians turning away from support of their usage[16]. Even during times when these measures were largely supported by the general public, there was concurrent, vocal opposition among a diverse cross section of society.

COVID-19, Anti-Government Extremism, and the Emergence of the Melbourne Freedom Rally Movement

COVID-19 Pandemic and Violent Extremism

Existing research literature, as well as government and professional reporting, has found that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an increase in radicalisation to violent extremism and the exploitation of the pandemic by extremist actors of all ideological stripes, but particularly the far right.[17] Violent extremists have used the pandemic to bolster their existing frameworks and beliefs and used the crisis to make direct calls for action.[18] The pandemic also provided fertile ground for ideologically based extremist movements to recruit others with existing or developing anti-government sentiments to their cause.[19]

Government pandemic response measures that restricted rights and liberties provided further justification for anti-government extremist beliefs. In Australia, the reliance on lockdowns energised anti-government extremists as it fuelled their conspiratorial narratives about an authoritarian takeover. The public-health-driven model that was adopted by state and Commonwealth governments was reframed as "health dictatorship" or "health fascism" by the anti-lockdown movement.

The COVID-19 pandemic also led to an accompanying 'infodemic'[20] of mis- and disinformation and pandemic-related conspiracy theories. A rise in conspiracy theories is common during times of crisis. Complex situations, like a pandemic, where the origins and implications of the

crisis are contested, have been found to increase the propensity for belief in conspiracy theories. These theories flatten ambiguity and complexity, often positing that these complex crises are caused or controlled by a cabal of the powerful who harbour malintent. Conspiracies and disinformation around the pandemic not only undermined public health efforts, but they also fuelled societal divisions, a rise in hate speech, and anti-government sentiment and action.[21] Conspiratorial beliefs have also contributed to radicalisation to violence and involvement in extremist movements.[22]

The contribution of conspiratorial belief to anti-government extremism is well researched. Foundational scholar of conspiracy theories Michael Barkun articulated how extremist and conspiratorial movements can emerge out of the junction of catastrophic events and mass communication.[23] Scholars, such as Fenster, Hofstadter, and Lipset and Rabb, have examined how conspiracy theories are commentaries on power and encourage vanguardism,[24] how they can contribute to and reflect feelings of alienation and cynicism with the democratic process,[25] and how they have been central to anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies[26]. They can also motivate violent and unlawful anti-democratic behaviour[27] and serve as a basis for anti-government extremism. Belief in conspiracy theories can also develop in group/out-group delineations, which according to Berger, are essential components of extremism.[28] More broadly, conspiratorial beliefs contribute to the 'transformational delegitimation,'[29] of democratic governance, the state, and other institutions.

Freedom Rally Movement

The emergence of the Freedom Rally Movement is part of this broader context. The Melbourne Freedom Rally (the subject of this study and data collection) was the first expression of the Australian anti-lockdown, 'freedom' movement, a new social movement arising from the pandemic conditions in Australia that eventually grew to include chapters across many Australian cities. The anti-lockdown freedom rally movement first began as an online social movement, which Loader identifies as a social movement that develops via interactive computer-mediated communication channels where these channels are used for networking, communicating, and mobilisation to protesting. It is in these online spaces where collective identity is formed, and communication is at the 'interstices of networked social action.'[30] However, as will be explored in more detail, it was not limited to an online movement but encompassed other forms of 'offline' actions and expressions.

The anti-lockdown freedom movement incorporated a wide array of actors, including anti-vaxxers, religious communities, wellness influencers, QAnon and other conspiracists, sovereign citizens, and known Australian far-right actors and influencers. They all converged alongside so-called 'average citizens' who were opposed to vaccine mandates imposed by Australian governments and the harshness of the lockdown measures and other policies that they perceived as unfair or unwise.[31] This divergent cluster of actors nevertheless formed into a cohesive movement that shared conspiratorial beliefs and grievances against government and institutions.

The first and most prominent branch of the anti-lockdown freedom rally movement was the Melbourne Freedom Rally. The Melbourne Freedom Rally first emerged as a social media ac-

count on various mainstream social media platforms, namely Facebook, where followers of the account could communicate, network, share grievances, and organise protest action. It was not the only online social media account involved in these efforts and it had antecedents in other Facebook accounts, such as the '99% Unite' Facebook page, but it would emerge as the prominent manifestation of the anti-lockdown movement. Like other similar online accounts, the Melbourne Freedom Rally was soon deplatformed from Facebook as part of the company's crackdown against content that hindered the COVID-19 health response.[32] But it quickly transferred to the alternative online messaging platform Telegram. From then on, Telegram became the movement's primary platform. The platform's affordances and features contributed to the movement's sustainability, growth, and mobilisation efforts at time when pandemic restrictions in Australia made mass mobilisation difficult.

Telegram was launched in 2013 as encrypted messaging service by two Russian nationals, Pavel and Nikolai Durov, who also started Vkontakte (VK), known as the Russian Facebook. Even though it was initially created as a free, no-ad, encrypted messaging platform, it has added features that have allowed it to become an alternative social media platform.[33] Public and private messaging groups, called channels, can host up to 200,000 users, essentially functioning as social media accounts. Telegram also added 'broadcast' channels where the channel administrators can broadcast messages, audio, video and text files, images, and customisable stickers to an unlimited number of accounts. These messages and media can also be shared between channels.

Telegram has several features that have made it the platform of choice for extremist movements and other dangerous actors.[34] It has good functionality and an expanding user base. The risk of deplatforming is low. The platform does not moderate or take down private or group chats and it rarely moderates or removes public channels. It rarely enforces its terms of service that state that users are not allowed to promote violence on publicly viewable Telegram channels. Its encrypted messaging functionality aids clandestine activity and planning while its public channels are ideal for sharing propaganda and messaging. Telegram also added a file storage feature which has allowed users and movements to securely create and house their material.[35]

One feature that Telegram does not have is an algorithmic recommender system, which helps steer users to other accounts based on their preferences and profiles. However, Telegram users have worked around the loss of an automated recommendation tool and formed a type of 'do-it-yourself' recommendation system where users, like those within the anti-lockdown freedom rally movement, manually post recommendation lists of like-minded Telegram accounts to join.

Even though this do-it-yourself system is not as efficient or powerful as algorithmic recommendation, what these curated, personalised recommendations lose in efficiency, they gain in credibility and have also led to greater opportunities for social movement development. Because the recommendation is made via human-to-human interaction rather than algorithm to human, they serve to strengthen interpersonal bonds and community cohesion—key aspects that contribute to the strength and longevity of any social movement.[36]
The posts by the online administrator of the Melbourne Freedom Rally Channel, recommending other channels to follow also exposed the channel's followers to conspiratorial and far-right

ideological content. The recommended accounts by the Melbourne Freedom Rally administrator, who became a de facto leader of the movement, have included sovereign citizen accounts, far-right figures, and conspiracy influencers, revealing a broader ideological motivation and agenda of the individuals leading the anti-lockdown movement activities and online presence.[37]

Investigations by *The Guardian* and the Australian White Rose Society identified the channel's administrator as Harrison McClean, a 25-year-old former competitive cheerleader, Bitcoin enthusiast, and COVID denier. McClean was not only active in administering the online channel but in organising offline protest action and rallies.[38] He also connected with other like-minded groups and actors associated with the anti-lockdown freedom movement and coordinated activities and messaging. He was especially associated with far-right figures and known Australian extremist actors, which will be explored in more detail below.

Hybridity

The anti-lockdown freedom movement was not limited to an online social movement. Rather, the anti-lockdown freedom movement operated simultaneously across online and offline spheres making it a truly hybrid movement. Online postings and expressions of the Melbourne Freedom Rally were accompanied by 'offline' or 'real world' action. The online administrators organised and participated in real-world protests; so too did the posters *within* the channel engage in protest action, some of it violent, in response to the Victorian government's public health measures, particularly lockdowns and vaccine requirements.

Protest action and rallies, which were illegal during the state of emergency due to the ban on public mass gatherings, often punctuated key public health policy or legislative action by government. This included when lockdowns were extended, vaccine requirements were enacted, and further limitations on working conditions were placed. Notably large violent protests occurred in September 2021 when new limitations were placed on the construction sector that targeted labour unions, police, and government.[39] There were also large anti-government demonstrations outside Victorian Parliament. In an echo of the January 6th riots, protesters dragged out a noose in front of the State Parliament House[40] and threatened to hang 'treasonous' politicians when pandemic-specific legislation was being considered.

Participants in the anti-lockdown freedom movement also engaged in anti-government extremist violence. Protesters involved in the anti-lockdown movement have made multiple assassination threats on the state premiers' and other politicians' offices and residences. Police have also laid charges against individuals involved in the broader anti-lockdown movement for incitement, violent plotting, including plans to kidnap the premier, bringing weapons to protests, and attacks on infrastructure, among other expressions of violence. These violent actions were not necessarily directed by movement leaders but were reflective of the loosely organised, sometimes spontaneous violence committed by individuals who are connected to a broader network and movement.

The anti-lockdown movement also had significant overlap with Australian far-right extremists' influencers and movements. Far-right ideologues and influencers as well as alt-right media

figures amplified and participated in the anti-lockdown freedom movement's protest action. McClean, for example, engaged with a number of other extreme right-wing groups including the Victorian chapter of the Proud Boys.[41] These connections have been confirmed by our data collection which showed posts from Australian Proud Boys Telegram channels being reposted on the Melbourne Freedom Rally channels and vice versa. The leader of the Victorian Proud Boys branch, Jarrad 'Jaz' Searby, also engaged and posted online on the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel. McClean confirmed in an interview that "There is some overlap on a lot of principles [within the groups] but not all of them ... we have had the Proud Boys come to our events, they were invited, they didn't infiltrate us."[42] McClean however has attempted to strategically shield these affiliations and present himself as a "libertarian activist, and vocal proponent of individual and economic freedom, through the application of technological and political decentralisation."[43]

Applying the Lens of Social Movement Theory

In seeking to understand the anti-lockdown freedom movement in Australia in the period 2021–2022, we faced an apparent paradox. On the one hand, the movement was constituted by a diverse array of actors. During protests, anti-vaxxers marched alongside vaccinated protesters angry at the lockdowns, while known far-right extremists were present amidst an often highly multicultural mass of people. Evangelical Christians marched alongside conservative Muslims. On the other hand, the protesters were largely united in their opposition to COVID-19 lockdowns, vaccine and mask mandates, and criticism of the government, demonstrating at least a base level of cohesion that make it possible to refer to it as a cohesive anti-government 'social movement.' Social Movements as defined by della Porta and Diani as 'informal networks, based upon shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest'[44] are an accurate descriptor of the anti-lockdown freedom movement. Consequently, we have selected key aspects of social movement theory as a frame to guide our research and to inform the coding of the data collected to understand and analyse this movement.

There has, historically, been a lack of theoretical and conceptual tools to inform the analysis of extremism, yet social movement theory can offer a useful framework. As Beck notes, social movement theory, 'due to its integrative and interdisciplinary nature is uniquely positioned to contribute a necessary conceptual framework for the study of political violence and terrorism.'[45] We contend that this includes anti-government extremism and concur with Futrell, et al. that extremist movements are not a fundamentally different unit of analysis when it comes to the application of social movement theory to understanding their formation. Extremist movements, like all social movements, incorporate the same factors, "personal and collective grievances, political and religious ideologies, networks and interpersonal ties, and enabling environments and support structures" as any other type of movement.[46]

Social movement theory may be understood as attempting to explain the 'origins, growth, decline and outcomes of social movements[47], including the social, cultural, and political manifestations and consequences of such movements including violence[48] It is, as Gunning, notes,

'neither homogenous, nor a theory in the strictest sense of the word', rather, '[i]t contains a broad set of analytical frameworks for exploring social movement dynamics.[49] For this study, we draw upon the concepts of relative deprivation, the concept of social isolation and its impact on emotion stemming from the concept of 'mass society,' and political opportunism. We also draw upon the concept of technological affordances, which have enabled social movements to coalesce, spread their narratives and organise online, while, in many instances, protesting simultaneously in the streets.

The concept of relative deprivation as a contributor to the formation of social movements extends back well over half a century; however, there has been a more recent interest in its relevance to explaining more recent manifestations of violent extremism and terror in the context of increasing inequalities.[50] Emotional responses and actions are triggered when an individual's expectations or anticipated trajectory is not attained in comparison with that of another social group.[51] This may include a sense of deprivation in relation to economic resources, power, and social status, resulting in feelings of resentment, humiliation, and anger. However, as Kunst and Obaidi note, a sense of relative deprivation can also trigger collective action for those not directly impacted by inequality but who perceive themselves or the wider group with which they identify to be victims.[52]

Individual subjective levels of deprivation can also engender grievance and can play a role in the development of social movements[53] as well as opening up political opportunities for protest and anti-government action.[54] Theories on the development of 'new social movements,' particularly movements made up of actors of diverse motivations and ideologies with no clear class or structural basis, posit that social movements are developed through confirmations of collective and individual identity[55] with that expression of identity often rooted in shared grievance.

Similarly, to the concept of relative deprivation and grievance, the notion of 'mass society', grounded in the classic works of Durkheim, Arendt, and Mannheim amongst others dates back to the early origins of social movement theory. The concept emphasises the significance of social upheaval in shaping the attraction to social movements and was initially grounded in the assertion that the 'new urban masses' were comprised of uprooted and isolated individuals and were hence 'vulnerable to new forms of demagoguery and manipulation by the media.'[56]

As cities became prosperous and middle classes flourished, many assumed that the preconditions for relative deprivation theory had faded away. However, amidst rapidly increasing social and economic inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdowns had the contrary impact of legally requiring citizens to stay in one place for prolonged periods, resulting in an immense psychological and social upheaval and uprooting of daily life.[57] It is in this context of this disruption that people would increase their online activity, 'seeking alternative cognitive and social structures'[58] and gaining significantly increased exposure to conspiracy theories. Much as the emergence of print media as a mass industry was influential in the context of the 'new urban masses;' it is the loss of control and loss of certainty that contributed to the increased consumption of social media where conspiracy theories proliferated.[59]

Political opportunity theory ties into this approach. Political opportunity or (political process)

theory asserts 'activists' prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilising supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependant.'[60] Variables including the form and substance of the grievance(s), the mode of their transmission, and government or institutional actions and responses combine to play an important role in shaping the development of the social movement and their actions to shape society. The technological affordances of social media, offering anonymity, secure communications ensuring protection for authorities, and the opportunity to engage directly in order to share grievances and plan, in real time, with other participants during protests as well as the use of memes, humour, and anonymous meeting rooms have all, for the first time, played a role in the development of a mass, albeit amorphous, social movement.

These concepts, to be elaborated upon in the analysis of data, provide an important frame for understanding the emergence of a dynamic social movement whose participants appear to vary in orientation, yet share many, largely unrecognised similarities—particularly around the narratives, motivations, and forms of action expressing anti-government sentiments and beliefs.

Methodology

To better understand how the Australian anti-lockdown freedom movement evolved as a cohesive social movement despite its diversity, and to provide insights into the development and dynamics of this movement, we collected online data from the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel. We chose the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel because it was the first expression of the Australian anti-lockdown movement, and because it was the genesis of the wider Australian anti-lockdown movement. It was also the Telegram channel from which the leadership and main organisers of protest action most often posted, and its Telegram posts and discussions were most often reposted to other Australian Freedom Rally pages.

At its height, which occurred during the time of our data collection, the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel consisted of more than 16,000 members and several hundred thousand posts, more than 44,000 photos, and 24,000 videos. With the assistance of our research assistant, we collected and analysed posts from sample periods from the inception of the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel, September, 2020, until November, 2021. This period covered a 13-month period that coincided with the movement's development and growth and that encompassed significant periods of anti-government actions and expressions.[61]

By joining the channel, we were then able to download the content directly from Telegram for the sample periods we wished to analyse. The data were then stored on NVIVO for analysis. We collected data from online posts during the following sample periods: the week the Telegram channel was created, September 4–11, 2020 (271 posts); February 4–11, 2021 (218 posts); July 4–11, 2021 (528 posts); September 20–21, 2021 (1671 posts); and November 15–18, 2021 (960 posts). Our overall data sample consisted of 3648 original posts.

This implicit or passive data collection on the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel was possible because as a public Telegram channel, used as a tool for broadcasting **public** messages to large audiences, it was accessible by username search within the Telegram application. After

joining this public channel (no permissions or requirements were needed to join), we were able to collect posting data. We did not attempt to access or incorporate private messaging data that may have emerged from the channel.

Passive data collection as a collection method has the advantages of obtaining data that are observable and objective and do not rely on self-reporting or the interpretations of the subject of study. Nevertheless there are limitations to both passive data collection and on relying on samples, instead of the entirety, of the Telegram channel's online postings.

This data set was not fully comprehensive, as we collected data from select time segments and did not capture or analyse all data in the channel. There were periods, particularly in November 2021, when the channel's administrators shut off the public channel and we were unable to incorporate any further posting data from this period into our analysis. This was due to an increasing number of individuals using the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel to make violent threats against Victorian members of parliament and government. We can only speculate that this was done to avoid further law enforcement scrutiny of the movement and for the reputational concerns and management of the movement, which had consistently taken pains to claim it was nonviolent.

There are also limitations to qualitative data analysis. The coding and analysis of the data set are subject to interpretation by the collectors and analysts. Different data samples taken from different time periods may reveal different prevalence of sentiments or core themes, or indeed different themes. However, given the consistency in core themes across the time points captured in the data set, we are confident that the sample data collected and analysed is indicative of the sentiment and core themes prevalent across the entirety of the Telegram channel's posting data and therefore of the movement itself.

With limitations acknowledged, we then coded the collected data in order to conduct a thematic qualitative data analysis. Our coding was informed by our application of social movement theory and any reoccurring themes observed in the data.

Coding Framework and Analysis

In analysing the online posting data from the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel, we sought to examine the following. Firstly, we sought to obtain evidence that would either confirm or negate our proposition that the anti-lockdown movement was an anti-government extremist movement; or was it, as self-advertised, concerned with peacefully upholding human rights and liberties?

Secondly, given the diverse nature of the lockdown movement, we sought to understand how it coalesced into a cohesive social movement. We sought answers by examining the narratives shared and actions expressed as well as examining the stated driving motivations for involvement in the anti-lockdown movement in the online posts collected from the channel.

When examining the posting data, we coded them along the following three categories, "narra-

tives," "motivations," and "forms of action"—key categories to understand social movement development. Posts were often cross coded as many contained elements that included analysable data on one or more of the three coding categories.

Table 1 explains the various subcodes that were applied across the broad coding categories and a description explaining what those subcodes delineate.

Table 1: *Codes and Subcodes*

Narratives	
	Posts expressing the following or utilising the following narratives' frames:
Anti-government	Government as tyrannical, fascist, authoritarian, communist, illegitimate; government is the enemy of the people; government is the source of crisis[62]
Anti-institution	Institutions including—mainstream media, Big Tech, Big Pharma, medical establishment—are corrupt, ineffectual, and not serving the interests of the public
Anti-elite	Global elites are corrupt; there is a 'global cabal'; New World Order conspiracy theory narratives, anti-Semitic narratives or conspiracies
Conspiracy	QAnon, Pandemic, and other COVID related, anti-vaxx; 5-G conspiracies
Human rights/civil liberties concerns	Criticising public health/anti-lockdown response/government pandemic response is anti-democratic and/or violates human rights/civil liberties; accusations of police brutality/targeting/unfair police action; suppression of free speech

Forms of Action	
	Posting footage of or calling for participation in or stating intention to do forms of action that include:
Protest Light	Circulating and signing petitions, online operational security, contesting fines, legal action against state; not complying with COVID restrictions; supporting anti-lockdown politicians; resisting vaccine mandate; Red pilling—'awakening' others and yourself to 'the truth'
Protest Heavy	Participating in illegal protest (in context of pandemic restrictions); violent protest action; protest targeting specific individuals/government officials/politicians; engaging in confrontation with police; vandalism; destruction of property
Violent Extremism	Calls for assassination or violence against specific individuals/government officials/politicians, terrorism, other ideologically motivated violence, sovereign citizen action, and/or 'paper terrorism'[63]
Building Solidarity	Encouraging and motivating the movement; creating atmosphere of mutual support and unity

Motivating Factors	
	Expressions of motivating factors such as:
Deprivation/Grievance	Deprivation and/or grievance due to: economic struggle due to pandemic conditions, lack of freedom of movement, perceived/real human rights violation, perceived/real police brutality/overreach/unfair police action, belief that being unfairly targeted, by authority, being deplatformed from mainstream social media; inaccurately portrayed by media, double standard vs. other forms of protest (i.e. BLM) concern for children's future/children's future is compromised
Anger, Anxiety, Alienation	Emotions of anger, anxiety, alienation arises from pandemic conditions and/or government response

Conspiracy Theory	Articulated in the post that conspiracy is the motivating factor behind their action. Differs from the conspiracy-n in that conspiracy-n is outlining the narrative or stating the conspiracy
Ideology	Ideological belief or position
Representation	Desire for 'purer' representation, creating a movement to speak for 'real people'; grassroots action
Seeking Specific Policy Change	Seeking to change specific public health rule, specific mandates without broader anti-government sentiment expressed

Findings

Anti-Government Narratives

The sample Telegram posting data of the Melbourne Freedom Rally movement confirmed that it was overwhelming anti-government. Many of its participants' online postings expressed extreme anti-government sentiment that challenged the legitimacy of government and framed the government as tyrannical. This is demonstrated by posts that asserted, "[h]ow the treasonous political parties have deliberately destroyed our nation and our future." This post was accompanied by a link to videos explaining the specific steps of 'treasonous politicians" or memes with slogans that "politicians are the virus." This belies Melbourne Freedom Rally propaganda that they were simply a movement advocating for human rights, civil liberties, and the easing of stringent public health measures. While there were posts that included narratives about upholding civil liberties and human rights, they were often cross coded with anti-government narratives. For example, posts articulating concerns about quarantine monitoring by military personnel, perceived police brutality during protests, or "intrinsic value of human rights" also end with the hashtag or discussion referencing the Nuremberg trials, implying that government officials should be tried, imprisoned, or put to death. "How to start a normal life," stated one poster: "arrest the corrupt politicians for this corona scam and restart the Nuremberg trials." There were often posts, like this one, that pushed back against the identification of their movement as extremist or associated with neo fascists by hurling back that label against the government. Referring to the premier, "Why Daniel Andrews is the very definition of a Nazi," one poster wrote, going on to list all the public health measures enacted as evidence of his fascist tendencies.

While the analysis of the narratives shared on the Freedom Rally justifies the categorising of the anti-lockdown movement as an anti-government movement, which type is not as clear cut. The fact that this movement constituted and coalesced in opposition to the Australian government's lockdowns, it is most obviously a candidate to be labelled as an "issue driven" anti-government extremism as defined by Jackson.[64]

But there is a limitation in identifying the Freedom Rally movement solely as an issue-driven extremist movement. Again, as Jackson notes, an issue-driven anti-government extremist movement will abate once that issue or policy area is resolved. However, the lockdown measures have ceased in Australia and the Freedom Rally movement remains and has continued its anti-government actions both online and offline, albeit with less intensity.

Additionally, as even Jackson concedes, the distinction between issue-driven anti-government extremism and ideological anti-government extremism, as well as other types of anti-government extremism is often blurred. The qualitative analysis of the narratives present in the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel does indeed reveal that the movement blurs the boundaries between various forms of anti-government extremism and exhibits qualities of various other types of anti-government extremism, such as—anti-government extremism that rejects the legitimacy of democratic governance as a matter of principle; anti-government extremist manifestations against politicians and government representatives; and anti-government extremism motivated and expressed through the spread of conspiracy theories.[65]

Conspiratorial Narratives

Conspiratorial narratives were rife among the posts of the Melbourne Freedom Rally Telegram channel. In this way the Melbourne Freedom Rally echoes other global forms of anti-government mobilisations around government responses to the pandemic in that conspiracy theories have played a central role.[66] Analysis of the posts also reveals that conspiracy theories connected to COVID-19, like the Plandemic conspiracy theory or Agenda 21 conspiracy theory, also intersected with other broader conspiratorial narratives and movements such New World Order and other anti-elite and anti-Semitic conspiracies.

The anti-lockdown freedom movement can be considered a complex form of anti-government extremism because it both blurred the boundaries between typologies, as discussed above, and because it combines and conflates anti-government, anti-establishment, and anti-institutional narratives and sentiment. And what connects these three "anti-expressions," as we will call them, are conspiratorial beliefs and narratives. The sharing and belief in these conspiratorial narratives contribute to the complex identity of this anti-government movement.

Conspiracy theories often concoct connections between various powerful institutions and figures *outside* government and those holding political power *within* government. In our qualitative analysis we found that the 'anti-government' narratives reflected this, with anti-government narratives often conflated with anti-institutional and anti-elite narratives.

For example, anti-government sentiment and narratives were most expressed as government being co-collaborators with, corrupted by, being unable to control, or are indeed led by, powerful global elites. At times, these narratives were accompanied by QAnon-related conspiracies, such as this one: "You're going to have to fight your way out of it or wait from Trump and Q to save you." More often than not, the anti-elite narratives were anti-Semitic. Government and institutional elites were referred to as "Goy slaves" in service of their "Hebrew masters."

There were also numerous conspiratorial references and narratives around mainstream institutions such as the mainstream media (MSM), Big Tech, and medical establishments. They believe that these institutions have failed the public because they are corrupt and controlled by elites with their own vested interests that work against 'the people.' One post referencing the state premier calls him the "pharma fascist premier" while others complaining of being deplat-

formed on mainstream social media for anti-vaxx postings point to this as evidence of collusion between Big Tech and Big Pharma in the service of government.

Yet another sample post judges, “The media is a military level propaganda machine they should be wearing uniforms. They look at everyday Australians as the enemy.” Numerous videos were shared explaining how COVID-19 was a biological weapon and that Big Pharma had a motive to make money out of the spread of COVID-19. Still others involved discussions around how vaccines were not only money-making enterprises for Big Pharma but that vaccines were somehow an instrument of government control, that they were a type of microchip.

While it’s clear that conspiracy theories were important to the social movement’s development, how much of this is an organic convergence of like-minded individuals with a conspiratorial mindset versus a deliberate introduction of conspiracy theory narratives and discourse for political opportunity is unclear. On one hand, conspiratorial narratives were readily expressed and shared by many, if not most, of the posters and commenters of the Telegram channel, indicating that participants on the channel already had a predisposition toward conspiratorial thinking. On the other hand, the administrator of the Telegram channel had the declared objective of purposefully creating a social and political movement to introduce far-right conspiratorial narratives to a broader ‘normie’ audience that was drawn to the movement through their disagreements and grievances with the Australian governments’ public health response to the pandemic.[67]

Journalistic investigations into McClean uncovered separate online communications where he wrote, “We have a LOT of very NORMIE people coming in from banners and [Facebook] groups that are not ready for the JQ [Jewish Question] yet, … are new to this side of politics and discourse…”[68] Referring to Victorian State Premier Daniel Andrews who was the public face of the pandemic response, “We start at ‘Dan Bad’ and go right through to “No Coercive Vaccines” and get into the Pedo suppression orders and NWO agenda and One world government as a concept to be opposed… I wish it were different [but] we need to take it one step at a time.”[69]

Motivations

These ‘anti’ expressions tied together through conspiratorial narratives not only identify the anti-lockdown movement as a complex anti-government extremist movement, the identification of the prevalence of conspiratorial narratives among the data samples also allow us to understand how the anti-lockdown movement emerged as a social movement grounded in genuinely held perceptions of relative deprivation, societal upheaval, as well as being driven by the political opportunism of actors such as McClean and other anti-lockdown freedom rally movement influencers.

Research reviews into motivation for believing in conspiracy theories find that on an individual level, belief in conspiracy theories helps one to make sense of the world in uncertain times, provide a sense of control, and to confer a sense of specialness to conspiracy believers, as holders of unique knowledge.[70] But once held, conspiracy belief can then, in turn, become a motivating factor for social movement development, particularly the in-group development of social iden-

tity[71] and the identification of targets of social movement grievances. Shared belief in conspiracy theories also helps create an alternative worldview that participants can collectively identify. They also create solidarity with like-minded believers, helping to create bonds between them and a strong in-group identity.[72]

The conspiracy theories expressed and discussed in the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel served not only as a framing device[73] but as a motivating factor in mobilisation,[74] as belief in conspiracy theories has an important role in coalition building[75] and mounting challenges to authority.[76] The shared anti-expressions and conspiratorial beliefs about the illegitimate and corrupt nature of government and institutions also helped to bind the diverse actors of the movement together.

Conspiracy belief also interacts with and helps to assuage anger, alienation, and anxiety that had developed from living under the stress of the pandemic, but specifically the lockdowns. Even by conservative estimates, the mental health impacts of the lockdowns, on top of the collective and individual stress of the pandemic, are substantial and wide reaching, with anxiety and post-traumatic stress presenting as the most common psychological effects.[77] For Victoria, christened the 'most locked down city,' the psychological effects and impacts were significant.[78] It is therefore not surprising that anger, alienation, and anxiety would feature as a prominent motivating factor for individual participation in the anti-lockdown movement.

Furthermore, the technical affordances of social media have played a key role. The use of social media and online communications has allowed negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and alienation to spread contagiously,[79] thus developing intergroup emotions which serve as collective motivation for action.[80] The shared feeling of these emotions, deriving from a shared experience under lockdowns, has united an otherwise-diverse array of actors into this relatively cohesive anti-government social movement.

Emotions such as anger, anxiety, and alienation also serve to sustain group identity and drive mobilisation when they are coupled with perceptions of deprivation and grievance against government or society. Social movement theory posits that shared perceptions of collective relative deprivation, sustained by negative emotions, can predict collective protest intentions and actions.[81]

The COVID-19 pandemic, according to Grant and Smith, has revealed and amplified shared grievances.[82] For the participants in the anti-lockdown freedom movement, there is indeed a shared identification of deprivation and grievance. In the analysis of the online posting data, they feature prominently as motivating factors. One example of shared deprivation that showed up frequently in the channel was around limitations placed on employment. Vaccination requirements and work limitations placed on the construction sector in particular resulted in mass mobilisation of protest action by the anti-lockdown movement.

One illustrative post was of a recorded video of a person complaining angrily about how their freedoms are being taken away, particularly their right to work, as a result of Dan Andrews's "no jab, no play" and "no jab, no job mandates" for the construction industry. Their depriva-

tions and grievances were identified by participants of the movement as stemming from the Victorian government and its elected officials and the corrupt elites of whose interests they serve—thus making the government illegitimate and thus deserving of being overthrown by anti-democratic means.

Other posts, like one by a user who writes, "The war is against the middle class. They want to wipe out the middle class of western democracy so that the only poor who ever complain are left for the elite's labour." The user then went on to connect this expression of deprivation to conspiratorial narrative, referring to Agenda 21, a United Nations plan for sustainable development which conspiracists have claimed is really a plot by the UN to wipe out 90% of the world's population.

In addition, the anti-lockdown movement was also driven by a perceived grievance against the Victorian Labour government for the "blatant selective enforcement of … restrictions on the basis of political alignment,"[83] frequently pointing to the double standard of allowing Black Lives Matter protests to proceed under lockdown in contrast to the heavy-handed police response against anti-lockdown protesters, that many in the anti-lockdown movement blame for the protest violence.

While the identification of motivation based on ideological belief and desire for representation was present among the sample data, it was not as prevalent as other motivating factors such as conspiracy belief and individual motivations such as relative deprivation and grievance and feelings of anger, anxiety, and alienation. However, while ideological belief was not as prevalent in the sample data, as discussed, ideological actors—particularly various far-right extremists and far-right politicians—were seeking to exploit these motivations.

Forms of Action

The COVID-19 pandemic complicated the picture of what were considered acceptable forms of political dissent and what should be considered anti-government or even violent extremist action. What constituted anti-government action during a declared state of emergency was what would have been considered lawful political dissent and expression in a non-emergency, democratic context. Protest, under a state of emergency and lockdown conditions, was now a form of provocation[84] and labelled as 'extremist,' an inherently subjective, comparative, and politicised label. Given this context, we found it difficult to utilise existing frameworks that differentiated between social movement protest action and violent extremism[85] to categorise the forms of actions taken by the anti-lockdown freedom movement. We also resisted attempts to classify all protest action as violent extremism as we consider it important to preserve the distinction between violent extremism and terrorism and social protest, as freedom to protest and freedoms of association and expression remain core identifying features of democratic societies.

However, it must be acknowledged that the actions of the anti-lockdown movement *are* ambiguous and fall within the grey zone. Advocacy, protest, dissent, and industrial action lie outside legislative frameworks for what constitutes a terrorist act and are generally not considered violent extremism. However, this is provided that such conduct does not explicitly intend to cause

a serious risk to public safety, which in a state of emergency and during pandemic restrictions, these protests did do according to government.

We did not attempt to answer this complexity in our analysis. Instead, we sought to develop our own three categories of forms of action to work around this ambiguity: 1) protest light, 2) protest heavy, and 3) violent extremism—categories which are further described in the coding table. Data collected reveal overwhelmingly that the forms of action taken by the movement would fall under the category of 'protest heavy'—which includes the participation in illegal protest (in the context of pandemic restrictions), violent protest action, protests targeting specific individuals/government officials/politicians, engaging in deliberate confrontation with police, vandalism, and destruction of property—again, belying claims by the movement that they are nonviolent.

Analysis of the online posting data shows much of the rhetoric of the movement has been violent and anti-democratic; the offline/real-world actions of the anti-lockdown movement have followed this violent rhetoric. Much of this user-generated content posted to the channel in the form of videos and images showed instances of participation in violence, particularly confrontations with police who were deployed to shut down the protests. But in highlighting their violent confrontations with police, the user content was often accompanied by commentary about the corrupt, violent, and authoritarian nature of the authorities and law enforcement. To illustrate this point, one poster writes, "The cops are PAID MURDERERS. They have the right to do whatever they want without punishment." An image that was reposted widely was of a manipulated Victoria Police logo that included a swastika and the phrase, "Uphold the Reich."

Less prevalent but still present in the movement was violent extremist action, which we define as encompassing calls for assassination or violence against specific individuals/government officials/politicians, terrorism, other ideologically motivated violence, sovereign citizen action, and/or 'paper terrorism'. Posts stating, "this is war," "they [referring to politicians] should be shot" were also present. Posts could be particularly evocative. A poster referring to one politician writes, "People like this should be shot. Firing squad the bastard. I hope he dies slowly. Painfully. The c***."

Hybrid-Action

For some online social movements, their actions are limited to or predominantly are online, what's more commonly referred to as 'slacktivism.' But the offline protest action and online posting activities of the anti-lockdown freedom movement often coincided. For example, there was a high volume of online posts to the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel during significant offline protest action organised by the anti-lockdown movement.

Online posts included live footage of offline action during protests and commentary on real-world protests and other forms of civil disobedience in real time. Again, this was especially the case in September 2021, where the majority of posts in that sample period were of recorded footage of the large, violent protests across Victoria spurred by the announcement of public-health measures that further restricted the construction sector. These protests occurred

when the Victorian Government imposed an industry-wide shutdown and mandatory vaccine mandate for the construction industry. During these protests the head office of a well-known construction union, the CFMEU, was mobbed and attacked, and protesters descended and desecrated the Victorian war memorial, the Shrine of Remembrance.

Online posting continued when a certain offline protest action, or other anti-government action and expression ended, with online postings acting as a continuation and further expression of these actions. This indicates that online postings did not displace offline or 'real-world' action but the two complemented and augmented each other, making this a truly hybrid movement. This is consistent with previous research evidence that found, contrary to the perception that online activism hinders offline protests, online and offline activism of social movements are positively related and intertwined as online actions can help mobilise offline action.[86]

But likewise, we also found that the offline action of the freedom movement, such as real-world gatherings and protests, were intertwined with online activity and served a dual purpose. The offline actions were a form of protest in and of themselves. They were also opportunities to connect individuals who first became involved in the movement via computer-mediated communications to meet and network face-to-face. But they were also opportunities to further create online content. The Telegram channel was filled with user-generated content of offline action of channel followers—creating a symbiotic feedback loop of offline/online activity.

Embedded in a Global Social Movement

Online connectivity also embedded the Victorian anti-government lockdown movement within the global anti-lockdown movement—both in terms of narrative and coordinated protest action. Much of the vocabulary, symbology, and tactics employed appear to be drawn directly from the American far-right and conspiracy movements, embedding the Melbourne Freedom Rally as part of a transnational phenomenon, but one which operates in an Australia-specific political and social context and responds to specific grievances engendered by Australia's COVID response.

Aided by the digital environment, influencers and leaders of the Freedom Movement have also engaged directly with international extremist influencers and actors. For example, Monica Smit a leader of a separate, but associated, organisation with the Melbourne Freedom Rally and who is part of the broader anti-lockdown movement, appeared on US extremist conspiracist Alex Jones' program.[87] Australia featured prominently in US anti-government discourse and cited as an example "Covid Tyranny" or of pandemic conditions allowing otherwise democratic nations to slide into authoritarian conditions in the name of public health.[88]

A number of Australian-based protests promoted by the Melbourne Freedom Rally, specifically those in July 2021, were also branded as being a part of the World Wide Freedom Rally. These protests were organised online via a variety of social media platforms and promoted under the hashtag #WewillALLbethere.[89] Investigations later revealed that these protests were organised by German conspiracy theory influencers and anti-lockdown activists and helped drive anti-lockdown protests in Australia[90] as well as 129 other coordinated protests worldwide.[91]

The administrator of the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel confirmed, 'We've been working with an international coalition of people from over 100 cities around the world to put this event on.'[92] The online promotion of the protests by the German actors helped spark the creation of other local Australian channels of the Freedom Rally Movement. Prior to the appearance of the World Wide Freedom Rally, the Melbourne Freedom Rally was the only prior online/offline manifestation of the Freedom Rally movement.[93]

The anti-lockdown freedom movement in Australia, although it arose from the context of the particularly strict and prolonged public health measures, was also connected to the wider phenomenon of pandemic protests against public health measures happening globally and organised by movements similarly embedded in conspiratorial narratives and beliefs. In addition to the World Wide Freedom Rally, the Canadian 'Freedom Convoy' protests, which also included a diverse cross sector of society, were reflections of similar dynamics and also engaged in anti-government extremist rhetoric and action.

There were similar anti-government pandemic-related protest actions that cross-pollinated with far-right actors, ideologies, and conspiracies occurring around the world. In the United States and Europe, COVID-19 restrictions generated vehement opposition. In 2020, for example, the FBI disrupted the plotted kidnapping of Michigan's governor by extremists motivated by her enacting statewide coronavirus restrictions and there were similar mass protests, violent plotting and attacks, and storming of legislative assemblies. The Telegram posting data also revealed that there were many posts about these other global movements. Melbourne Freedom Rally channel participants amplified global opposition, connected their efforts to other global movements, and found encouragement and derived motivation from similar international expressions of opposition to public health measures.

Conclusions and Questions for the Future

The pandemic crisis and ensuing state of emergency declarations brought about the convergence of disparate actors of varied ideological and philosophical underpinnings. The Australian anti-lockdown movement accommodated many different types of actors with various affiliations, beliefs, and motivations, eventually coalescing into a social movement centred around extreme anti-government and anti-establishment and anti-institutional sentiment, (which we distinguish and define as distinct from but related to anti-government sentiment). In applying the concepts found in social movement theory we have been able to better understand how a cohesive movement formed, grounded in shared relative deprivation, conspiratorial worldviews, emerging from disruption, and opportunistically guided and shaped by conspiracy-minded, far-right, anti-government actors.

An important question moving forward is this: how will the anti-lockdown movement evolve as a social movement beyond its emergence under a state of emergency? Will it outlast pandemic restrictions and their aftermath? How will the threat of protest violence and violent extremist threats and action associated with this movement evolve?

According to the latest public assessments by the Director General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the threat of violent extremism by individuals involved in the anti-lockdown movements and those with associated anti-government conspiratorial beliefs has abated. In his responses during parliamentary testimony during Senate estimates, the Director General Mike Burgess stated, "The volatility has reduced somewhat, in particular around the COVID [measures], so there's less angst these days. We're not subject to mandates… Some of that feeling does live on, but the number of cases we've been looking at, they've reduced significantly."[94]

However, merely months prior to the director general's statements about the reduction in the threat, there was an unprecedented attack against Queensland police officers who conducted a welfare check on three related individuals, Gareth, Nathaniel, and Stacey Train, at their rural Queensland property. Two police officers were ambushed and killed by the Trains and a neighbour was also killed in the shootout. The Trains were subsequently shot dead by police following the siege.

The Trains were motivated by extreme anti-government conspiratorial and millennialist beliefs.[95] While Gareth Train had a yearslong history of conspiratorial beliefs and a record of posting conspiratorial anti-vaxx, anti-government, particularly anti-law enforcement, content on various forums, it is also clear that, as an ISD report examining his online posts concluded, "the pandemic and the associated government restrictions and vaccination campaigns played a significant role in radicalising him further into conspiratorial beliefs, and perhaps in spurring extreme action."[96]

Gareth Train posted online, echoing similar posts in our data collection, that the pandemic restrictions were a form of "military intervention" by the government and that politics was only a diversion. Train was also reported to have posted comments online in solidarity with the anti-lockdown protesters but he also questioned their tactics of 'peaceful demonstrations' and insisted that they will inevitably have to address the 'corporate soldiers, aka police,' with violence.[97] The example of the Wieambilla attack reveals that while there may be less intensity in context of protests or other forms of mass action, anti-government and pandemic-related conspiracy beliefs remain important as motivating factors for violent extremism even as pandemic restrictions have eased.

There also remains a committed core of individuals involved in the freedom movement who remain committed to their views and broader activism.[98] Their activism can have sustained, though complex impacts on democratic governance. The extremist anti-government sentiment of the Freedom Rally movement has grown alongside persistent trust deficits within Australian democracy[99] and mainstream anti-establishment sentiments and perceptions that Australian political and economic systems are 'broken' or government is not responsive to the needs of average citizens. According to the Ipsos' "Broken System Index" there is widespread sentiment that the political status quo ignores the priorities of the average voter and that the current political system is geared towards the benefit of elites within Australia.[100] While these majority sentiments around the effectiveness and integrity of democratic governments are different to

anti-government extremism, they are not entirely distinct. These persistently high and continuing public sentiments about the deficiencies of democratic government and political leaders and other elites, can interact, bolster, and sustain anti-government extremism, contributing to broader reductions in the legitimacy of democratic government.

Currently, little is understood about the different political opportunities that anti-lockdown activists have sought to exploit in the aftermath of the pandemic. While some may have withdrawn back into everyday life, others may continue to engage in further activism. Some have sought to enter electoral politics, as some leaders and key organisers of the anti-lockdown movement have done in Australia, so far with little success.[101] Some, like McClean, may be hindered by bail conditions that prohibit their involvement in any political activities. Still others become further entrenched in their conspiratorial worldviews and disillusionment with government and move towards more explicit violent extremist activity. But as one participant in the Melbourne Freedom Rally channel posted, "Dan Andrews state of emergency ends in a few days. What happens next? We continue to fight for the people. We continue to learn and educate. And we definitely, definitely unite."

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Bibliography

Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) Part 7

Judith Tinnes*

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This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on the Islamic State (IS/ISIS/ISIL/Daesh) and its predecessor organisations. To keep up with rapidly changing events on the ground and in the jihadist online ecosystem, the most recent publications have been prioritised during the selection process. 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, Islamic State, IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, al-Qaeda in Iraq, MSC, ISI

NB: All websites were last visited on 19.02.2023. This subject bibliography is conceptualised as a multi-part series. To avoid duplication, this compilation only includes literature not contained in the previous parts. However, meta-resources, such as bibliographies, were also included in the sequels. For an inventory of previous bibliographies, see: https://archive.org/details/terrorism-research-bibliographies.

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Bookshelf

10 Books on Terrorism & Counter-Terrorism-Related Subjects

Reviewed by Joshua Sinai*

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So many books are published on terrorism- and counter-terrorism-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 ten recently published books.

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Terrorism – General

Seden Akcinaroglu and Efe Tokdemir, Battle for Allegiance: Governments, Terrorist Groups, and Constituencies in Conflict (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 218 pp., US $ 75.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-4721-3199-0.

This is a conceptually innovative account of how domestic terrorist groups, like their foreign group counterparts, go about attracting support from their constituencies through their violent and nonviolent strategies to legitimise their violent activities on the one hand, while their targeted governments also seek to gain the support of their populations, as well as the support of the terrorists' constituencies, through a mix of such measures in the counter-terrorist campaigns against the terrorist threats challenging them. As the authors note, one way for terrorists and their targeted governments to increase support for their respective sides is by formulating narratives that will legitimise their activities while delegitimising their adversaries. While one might disagree with the authors that the competition over narratives is superior to the strength of their military capability, since defeating the terrorists militarily is one end-state for governments' counter-terrorism campaigns, it is still valid to argue that winning the allegiance of the citizens in a country where the terrorist insurgency is taking place remains an important factor in legitimising the contending sides. To examine these issues empirically, the authors employ a multimethod approach based on interviews and focus groups from Turkey and large N original data from around the world. Among the authors' conclusions is the recommendation that "The key to winning wars is through people. Improving the lives of aggrieved populations and minority groups represented by terror groups can render violence unnecessary" (p. 172). Seden Akcinaroglu is Associate Professor of Political Science at Binghamton University. Efe Tokdemir is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Bilkent University.

Table of Contents: Introduction: An Untold Story of Terrorism, PART 1: Nonviolent Strategies of Terrorist Groups; The Choice of Terrorist group Strategies: Why Form the Ties that Bind or Bite?; The Impact of Violent vs. Nonviolent Strategies on the Achievements of Terrorist Groups; Precedents and Consequences of Audience Relations; Eirical Analysis of Audience Relations; PART II: Nonviolent Strategies of Governments in Countererrorism; Forcing the Government's Hand: Terrorism, Constituency Reforms, and Improvements in Minority Rights; Empirical Analysis of Government Concessions to Constituency as a Counter-terrorism Strategy; Constituency Reforms: The End of "Terrorists," or More of Them?; Conclusions: Room for Optimism?; Appendix.

C.A.J. Coady, The Meaning of Terrorism (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 240 pp., US $ 40.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-1996-0396-1.

This is an interesting and well written account of the literature on defining terrorism and terrorist acts including their moral and political significance. One of the shortcomings of this account is the author's proposal for a "tactical definition" which focuses solely on violent attacks against "non-combatants or innocents" (p. 108), while in the real-world terrorists especially prise attacking armed combatants, such as the military and law enforcement, which positions them as "equal combatants." Also examined are the moral significance of terrorism in relation to the philosophy of war, which also places an onus on the responding governments to adhere

to moral codes, as well. The role of religion, especially its extremist interpretations, in causing terrorism is also examined. C. A. J. Coady is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, University of Melbourne.

Table of Contents: Introduction; Shaping a Concept of Terrorist Acts: A Clarifying Proposal; Further Objections: The Tactical Definition Too Wide? Too Narrow?; Terrorism and its Claims to Distinctive Significance; Combatants, Non-Combatants, and the Question of Innocence; Justifying Terrorism: Four Attempts; Justifying Terrorism: Three More Attempts; Counter-Terrorism and its Ethical Hazards; Religion, War, and Terrorism.

Lara A. Frumkin, John F. Morrison, and Andrew Silke (Eds.), A Research Agenda for Terrorism Studies (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 298 pp., US $ 135.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-7899-0909-8.

Part of the Elgar Research Agenda Series, the contributors to this edited volume apply multidisciplinary approaches to examine what they consider to be current and future directions for research on terrorism and counter-terrorism studies. Following the editors' introductory overview, the handbook's chapters discuss topics such as defining terrorism, motivations, radicalisation and recruitment into terrorism, the impact of terrorism attacks on its victims, the relationship between terrorism studies and the academic discipline of International Relations, applying ethnographic approaches to studying terrorism at the local level, gender issues in terrorism studies, utilising online sources to study terrorism, and advances in automating terrorism incident databases. The subject of counter-terrorism is covered with chapters examining what law enforcement agencies consider as best practices for countering terrorism, applying risk management methodologies to examine issues in counter-terrorism, including ethical consequences, and future directions for terrorism and counter-terrorism studies.

Much of the discussion is sound, but the volume's incorporation of several academics who belong to the Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS) sub-discipline is problematic due to their over-use of highly partisan academic jargon. In one example, in the fourth chapter on "Critical Terrorism Studies," the authors write that their sub-discipline is "characterised by an identifiable set of ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical normative commitments which distinguish it from the broader terrorism field…." (p. 64), that it is based on embracing "methodological and disciplinary pluralism and a refusal to privilege social scientific methods and approaches to terrorism research based on rationalism, empiricism and positivism" (p. 65), that it critiques 'Western-based' "'coloniality of knowledge, which the terrorism industry has tactfully avoided over time'" (p. 67), and that the term 'religious terrorism' consists of "racial ideology and colonial practice" (p. 73).

Other chapters are enlightening. These include Chapter 10's "Using Online Data in Terrorism Research," which discusses three methodologies to examine terrorists' online activities in the form of machine learning, case studies, and netnography, and Chapter 11's "Terrorism Databases: Problems and Solutions," which examines key databases, such as the ongoing GTD and older ones, such as WITS and ITERATE.

The volume's final chapter, "Interdisciplinarity, Globality and Downsizing: Aspirations for the Future of Terrorism Studies," was written by Harmonie Toros, a CTS practitioner, who shares John Mueller's and Mark G. Stewart's belief that the threat of terrorism is 'misoverestimated' (p. 264), that the study of terrorism as epistemic violence "'privileges the Western mode of knowledge production as the only viable way of producing knowledge that is universal, neutral and scientific'" (p. 267), and that there is a need for "a recalibration – a downsizing – of terrorism from its current place as 'exceptional' threat and form of political violence, to one of the threats and one of the forms of political violence" (p. 270). While this reviewer agrees that terrorism constitutes one of several violent threats facing countries, by misunderstanding the nature of the threat of terrorism, this is not the type of critique that will help to advance the state of terrorism studies.

In conclusion, several of the volume's chapters are insightful, but it would have been helpful if the volume's editors had addressed the CTS' critiques in a meaningful debate to enlighten the reader that not everyone agrees with the CTS' approach. Otherwise, the reader is left confused about what the editors and the volume's contributors consider to be strengths, weaknesses, gaps and future directions in the state of the discipline. Lara A. Frumkin is Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology and Counselling, Open University, UK; John F. Morrison is with the School of Law and Criminology, Maynooth University, Ireland; and Andrew Silke is Professor of Terrorism, Risk and Resilience, Cranfield Forensic Institute, Cranfield University, UK

Table of Contents: Contemplating a research agenda for terrorism studies; PART I: MAJOR PERSPECTIVES IN TERRORISM STUDIES RESEARCH; Terrorists; Victims and victimhood: the case of terrorism and political violence; Critical terrorism studies; PART II: ASSESSING THEORY, SOME METHODS AND APPROACHES; Applying theory to research; The interdisciplinarity challenge for terrorism studies; Ethnographic approaches in terrorism studies and research; Guides, interviews, ethics: conducting fieldwork with Islamist extremists in Indonesia; Using social media to research terrorism and extremism; Using online data in terrorism research; Terrorism databases: problems and solutions; PART III: CONTROVERSIES AND DEBATES; Debating the health of terrorism studies: methodological issues, research biases and cautious optimism; Gender issues in terrorism studies; Collaborative approaches to countering terrorism; Terrorism research practices in the private sector: context and considerations; Ethics and terrorism research: the rights, safety and vulnerability of participant and researcher; PART IV: THE FUTURE OF TERRORISM STUDIES; Interdisciplinarity, globality and downsising: aspirations for the future of terrorism studies.

Terrorism and Organised Crime

Letizia Paoli, Cyrille Fijnaut, and Jan Wouters (Eds.), The Nexus Between Organised Crime and Terrorism: Types and Responses (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), 544 pp., US $ 225.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-7889-7929-0.

The contributors to this massive and detailed edited volume examine the nexus between organised crime and terrorism in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. As the editors note, the

trigger for the book were the attacks in November 2015 in Paris and in March 2016 in Brussels where prior to the attacks the terrorists had engaged in "criminal activities, thus giving new urgency to the debate on the crime-terror nexus" (p. 6). Three types of nexus are examined: interaction, transformation/imitation and similarities (p. 9). In addition to reviewing the literature on these subjects, the book's parts examine how terrorists engage in criminal activities to raise funds and weapons, European and non-European case studies, and international and European policies and legal instruments to counter the nexus between terrorists and organised criminal groups. Letizia Paoli is Full Professor of Criminology and Chair of the Department of Criminal Law and Criminology, Faculty of Law and Criminology, KU Leuven, Belgium; Cyrille Fijnaut is Emeritus Professor of Criminology and Criminal Law, Erasmus University Rotterdam and Tilburg University, the Netherlands and KU Leuven, Belgium; and Jan Wouters is Full Professor of International Law and International Organisations, Jean Monnet Chair ad personam EU and Global Governance and Director, Institute for International Law and Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium.

Table of Contents: Introduction to the nexus between organised crime and terrorism; PART I: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUALIZATION; Taking stock of the literature on the nexus between organised crime and terrorism; Conceptualizing the nexus between organised crime and terrorism; PART II: TRANSFER OF RESOURCES; Criminal pasts, terrorist futures? Jihadist recruits in Western Europe; Terrorists' acquisition of firearms and explosives: criminal, legal and grey sources; The organised crime–terrorism nexus and its funding; PART III: EUROPEAN CASE STUDIES; The nexus between organised crime and terrorism, and the attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016; Assessing the involvement in organised crime of jihadists from the Netherlands; Legal and law enforcement implications arising from the organised crime–terrorism nexus in Northern Ireland; To what extent was Basque terrorist group ETA involved in a nexus with organised crime? An economic analysis; Sweden: violent extremism and organised crime; PART IV: NON-EUROPEAN CASE STUDIES; The crime–terror nexus in Syria and Iraq; he nexus of organised crime and terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan; Largely fleeting and hardly convergent: Libya's crime–terror nexus; The terrorism–organised crime nexus in the Boko insurgency in Nigeria; Is there any nexus between terrorism and organised crime in Mexico?; Terrorism and organised crime in Colombia; PART V: INTERNATIONAL POLICIES; Responding to the crime–terror nexus: the international level; The nexus between organised crime and terrorism: policy responses from the European Union and the Council of Europe; One, none, multiple nexuses between organised crime and terrorism and the challenges of their control.

Counter-terrorism – Countering Violent Extremism

Kamaldeep Bhui and Dinesh Bhugra, Terrorism (Eds.), Violent Radicalization, and Mental Health (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 288 pp., US $ 72.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-1988-4570-6.

The contributors to this edited volume apply multidisciplinary approaches to examine significant aspects of the mental and behavioral relationship between individuals who have been radicalised into violent extremism and their mental health and interventions by public

health professionals to deradicalize and disengage them from terrorist activities. The volume's chapters examine these issues conceptually (i.e., reviewing the literature) and empirically (i.e., assessing case studies of countering violent extremism programs, such as in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands). The editors conclude that "super-complex and systems-based approaches to intervention" are required" that are accompanied by "innovative sector-specific solutions" to resolve the societal problems that give rise to violent extremism (p. 284). Kamaldeep Bhui is Professor of Psychiatry, Academic Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford, Oxford. Dinesh Bhugra is Emeritus Professor of Mental Health and Cultural Diversity, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience (IoPPN), King's College London.

Table of Contents: Section 1: Introducton and Background; Violent Radicalisation and Terrorism: A societal challenge for all citizens; SECTION 2. Political, Social, and Health Perspectives on Causation and Complexity in Terrorism Research; In defence of Islam: how Islamic State justifies violence; The undeniable reality of the war on terror , radicalisation and sanity; The reception of broadcast terrorism: Recruitment and selection; What attracts people to the English Defence League and who is most vulnerable to recruitment; The Sharing Economy and Livestreaming of Terror: Co-Production of Terrorism on Social Media; Terrorism: Group dynamic and interdisciplinary aspects; The psychological impact of involvement in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the Troubles : Preliminary evidence of moral injury; Terrorism and Radicalisation: social factors: a narrative review; Violent Radicalisation & Mental Health's Equifinality and Multifinality; SECTION 3. Prevention, Evaluation, and Intervention: new paradigms of research for policy and practice; The relationship between countering violent extremism, police, cultural competence and public health; Clinical Intervention to Address Violent Radicalization: the Quebec Model; Deradicalization and Rehabilitation: A Case Study of Quilliam Foundation s Decade Long Approach in the UK, US and Global; Counter-Radicalisation, Public Health and Racism: A Case Analysis of Prevent; A discourse for the prevention of radicalization in the Netherlands: Curbing the Radical inflow; Tackling radicalisation and terrorism in Dutch mental health institutions: outcomes of a Dutch population survey; Leadership, Conflict, Cooperation; Extremism, Violence, and Mind: apprehending the super-complex.

Counter-terrorism – Conflict Resolution

Dieter Reinisch, Learning Behind Bars: How IRA Prisoners Shaped the Peace Process in Ireland (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 240 pp., US $ 70.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-4875-4582-6.

This is an important account of the role of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners who were imprisoned on both sides of the Irish border who were instrumental in starting the critical debate that ultimately contributed to resolving the Northern Ireland conflict through the 1994 Provisional (IRA) ceasefire and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The account is based on the author's compilation of oral history interviews with numerous former IRA prisoners in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland between 1971 and 2000, when the high-security Long Kesh Detention Centre/HM Prison Maze was closed. In the conclusion, the author insightfully recommends that "political prisoners can be leaders of conflict transformation processes" (p. 161). The author is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Political Science and Sociology at

the National University of Ireland, Galway.

Table of Contents: Preface; Introduction; The Irish Prison Arena: Republican Prisoners and the Northern Ireland Conflict; "Portlaoise is an example for this": Portlaoise Prison Protests, 1973–7; "No prisoner has the right to advance the education of another": Education in Portlaoise Prison; The Harvey/McCaughey/Smith Cumann: Sinn Féin in Portlaoise Prison, 1978–86; "He was just rhyming off pages of it": Internment and the Brownie Papers, 1971–7; Marxist Esperanto and Socialism in Cell 26: Reading, Thinking, and Writing in the H-Blocks, 1983–9; "It's only when you look back …": The Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Peace Process in the 1990s; Conclusion: An Irish Century of Camps; Interview Partners.

Counter-terrorism – International Law

Dan E. Stigall, Counterterrorism and Investigative Detention (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 272 pp., US $ 140.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-8008-8717-6.

This is an interesting and authoritative account of the roles of investigative detention regimes of terrorist suspects in the legal systems of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. As the author explains, investigative detention "specifically refers to the pre-charge detention of a suspect for the purpose of obtaining evidence for use at a subsequent criminal investigation" (p. 3). Also examined is the extent of the application of international legal instruments vis-à-vis the national security imperatives that drive counter-terrorism agencies to employ investigative detention measures to uncover evidence for prosecutorial purposes and uncover potential future attack plots. In the conclusion, the author presents a valuable table that compares investigative detention practices in the US, the UK, and France (pp. 229-230) and finds that "Each country, with some qualifications, has adopted functionally equivalent solutions to address a common problem" (p. 245). The author is Deputy Chief of Staff and Counselor for International Affairs, National Security Division, U.S. Department of Justice, and Distinguished Professorial Lecturer in National Security Law, The George Washington University Law School, Washington, DC.

Table of Contents: Foreword by Colonel Christopher P. Costa; Preface; Introduction to Counter-terrorism and Investigative Detention; Investigative detention and international law; The United States; The United Kingdom; France; Conclusion to Counter-terrorism and Investigative Detention.

Cyber Terrorism

James Bacigalupo; Kevin Borgeson and Robin Maria Valeri (Eds.), Cyberhate: The Far Right in the Digital Age (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 186 pp., US $ 95.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-7936-0697-6.

The contributors to this important volume apply multidisciplinary approaches to examine how tech savvy right-wing extremists operate in cyberspace in the United States. This consists of ex-

amining how their ideologies affect their propaganda in the form of manifestos and other materials, processes of radicalization and recruitment into their radical subcultures and movements (including the Atomwaffen Division, Incel and others), their funding sources (such as Bitcoin), and how it expresses as 'offline' violence. Also discussed are laws governing the expressions of cyberhate and bitcoin funding. In the conclusion, James Bacigalupo observes that responding to such cyberhate is difficult for governments because of the "coded vocabulary" often used by these extremists to avoid censorship (p. 159) as well as restrictions on governments' surveillance of social media platforms, especially in the United States, although it is possible for tech companies to support government agencies by tracking the postings of extremist individuals on their websites (p. 161). James Bacigalupo is a doctoral student in the criminology and justice studies program at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. Kevin Borgeson is associate professor of criminal justice at Salem State University and former Research Fellow for the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Robin Maria Valeri is professor of psychology and Director of the Center for Nonviolence at St. Bonaventure University.

Table of Contents: Welcome to Cyberspace; Looks Can Be Deceiving: The Challenges of Recognizing Hate in Cyberspace; Is Hate Against the Law? Legal Responses to Cyberhate; Bitcoin: The Currency of White Supremacists; Accelerating Hate: Atomwaffen Division, Contemporary Digital Fascism, and Insurrectionary Accelerationism; When Cyberhate Turns to Violence: White Nationalism to the Manosphere; The Alt-Right: Breaking into the Mainstream; Responding to Cyberhate.

Nuclear Terrorism

Jonathan Herbach, International Arms Control Law and the Prevention of Nuclear Terrorism (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 256 pp., US $ 137.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1- 8003-7451-5.

With the prospect of a possible tactical nuclear attack by Russia if it loses in the Ukraine war a real possibility, the subject of nuclear terrorism is once again at the top of governments' national security concerns, especially if Russia were to utilise a terrorist group proxy to carry out such an attack. This important book provides a comprehensive examination of how nuclear terrorism can be prevented through various measures, including an international arms control regime (ACR). The author explains how an ACR is structured, its key characteristics, its strengths, weaknesses, and gaps, and future directions for strengthening it. The book was published prior to Russia's military intervention in Ukraine in February 2022 and Iran's support of the Russian invasion, which served to break down the United States-led negotiations to contain Iran's nuclear weapons program, so the author's discussion of strengthening international legal conventions on the development of nuclear weapons is moot, but his overall discussion of these issues provides a highly useful overview of the legal instruments required to establish a robust nuclear terrorist regime. The author is Faculty of Law, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Table of Contents: Arms control law approach to countering nuclear terrorism; Developing the

law of nuclear security: from Atoms for Peace to the Nuclear Security Summits; The main legally binding instruments applicable to nuclear security; Nuclear security at the crossroads of arms control and criminal justice; Normative soft law instruments in the nuclear security law framework; The role of international organisations in nuclear security; The way forward: strengthening the international legal framework for nuclear security.

Islamic State

Charlie Winter, The Terrorist Image: Decoding the Islamic State's Photo-Propaganda (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022/London, England, UK: Hurst Publishers), 320 pp., US $ 50.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-1976-5966-3.

This is a highly interesting and conceptually innovative account of how the Islamic State employed photography and video to shape its narrative, image, and branding to portray itself as the Islamic Caliphate. The author's account is based on an examination of more than 20,000 propaganda photographs he collected from the Islamic State's covert networks online between 2015 and 2017. Examining these photographs of the Islamic State's Salafi-Jihadist symbols and myths enabled the author to identify the value systems that shaped the Caliphate's ideological appeal and mobilisation successes. In the conclusion, the author observes, echoing Mark Juergensmeyer's finding, that the Islamic State utilised the notion of cosmic war in its photo-propaganda, "with the purportedly primeval animus between 'sacred order' and 'the disorder of the profane'" (p. 186). He adds, however, that "never before has any actor, whether state or insurgent, set out to visualise this animus as thoroughly and with as exacting precision as the Islamic State. In that sense it was unique" (pp. 186-187). The account includes numerous photos that illustrate the text. The author is a senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London.

Table of Contents: Introduction; The Islamic State's Approach to Propaganda; Disentangling the Islamic State Brand; The Semiotics of Propaganda; Part One: Jihad; The Soldier; The Army; The Enemy; Part Two: Khilafah; The State; The Nation; The Victim; Conclusion.

TRI Award for Best PhD Thesis on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Submitted in 2021 or 2022

Deadline for Submissions: 15 May, 2023

The Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) seeks to enhance the quality of research in the field of Terrorism Studies. For this purpose, TRI established an award for the Best Doctoral Dissertation on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism. Previous recipients of the annual (now: bi-annual) TRI Thesis Award were Tricia Bacon, Anneli Botha, Erin E. Miller, Emily Corner, Steven Zech, Nicole A. Tishler, Kenneth P. Reidy, Michael Shkolnik and Thomas Renard.

For the next award round, TRI invites authors of PhD theses defended in the calendar years 2021 and 2022 to submit their doctoral dissertation in the field of terrorism- and counterterrorism studies. Submissions can also be made by their academic supervisors.

Theses should be sent in electronic form as a Word or PDF document to the chairman of the jury at *apschmid@terrorismanalysts.com*, together with a cover letter (1-3 pp.), highlighting the merits of the submitted doctoral thesis. Submissions must be in English (or translated into English). The deadline for new entries is 15 May, 2023.

The TRI Award jury—consisting of Prof. James Forest, Prof. em. Clark McCauley, Prof. Rashmi Singh, Prof. em. Alex P. Schmid, and a 5th scholar whom we hope to confirm shortly— will evaluate and compare the submissions, based on criteria such as originality (in terms of introducing new data, theory and/or methodology), novelty and uniqueness of findings as well as degree of in-depth research. Among the incoming submissions of PhD theses, the TRI Award jury identifies three finalists and from these the winner.

The chairman of the jury will inform the three finalists identified by the jury's evaluation process not later than 15 October, 2023. The winner among them will be announced in the December 2023 issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* and can expect an award of US $1,000, plus a certificate of achievement, acknowledging the granting of the TRI Thesis Award. The other two finalists will also receive a certificate of achievement signed by the chairman of the jury. For all three finalists, TRI will assist the authors in finding a publisher for their dissertation. The winner of the TRI Thesis Award will be invited to submit an article, summarising the winning thesis' main findings, for publication in *Perspectives on Terrorism*. The other two finalists' thesis abstracts will also be reproduced in the December 2023 issue of our journal.

The TRI Thesis Award 2023 will be issued with the support of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), the new parent organisation of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

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