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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

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# PT

PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

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# About

## Perspectives on Terrorism

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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# Editorial



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# Words of Welcome

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume XVIII, Issue 3 (September 2024) 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); and the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University. All past and recent issues can be found online at https://pt.icct.nl/.

*Perspectives on Terrorism* (PT) is indexed by JSTOR, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar, where it ranks No. 3 among journals in the field of Terrorism Studies. *Jouroscope*™, the directory of scientific journals, has listed PT as one of the top ten journals in the category "free open access journals in social sciences", with a Q1 ranking. Now in its 18th year of publication, PT has close to 8,000 registered subscribers and many more occasional readers and website visitors in academia, government and civil society worldwide. Subscription is free and registration to receive an e-mail of each quarterly issue of the journal can be done at the link provided above. The Research Articles published in the journal's four annual issues are fully peer-reviewed by external referees, while Research Notes and other content are subject to internal editorial quality control.

In the first article of this issue, Lorne Dawson examines a range of empirical studies and finds significant indications that terrorist movements are more lethal when religious ideology is combined with two other factors: the use of suicide terrorism, and being transnational. Then Stanley De Coster, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, Amarnath Amarasingam and Tahir Abbas provide an empirical analysis that unveils systematic biases in how major US and UK print media outlets portray terrorist attacks carried out by Muslim versus non-Muslim perpetrators. In the next article, Cécile Rousseau, Janique Johnson-Lafleur, Cindy Ngov, Christian Savard and Samuel Veissière describe the prevalence of hybrid ideologies in a sample of clinical psychology clients referred for attraction toward or involvement in violent extremism. Then Caroline da Silva, Nicolas Amadio, Rachel Sarg, Bruno Domingo and Massil Benbouriche examine multiple levels of analysis on the risk and protective factors associated with violent extremism, and propose a socio-ecological model of violent extremism. In our fifth article of this issue, Ivan Katchanovski and Max Abrahms analyse the nature and extent of involvement by neo-Nazi and other far-right Ukrainian organisations in the Donbas war (2014-2022) and the Odesa massacre (2014). Then María Isabel García García explores why several women disengaged from the Islamic State, noting the important impact of disenchantment, the acquisition of new goals, and the feeling of being accepted by and/or integrated into new social networks. And in our final research article of this issue, Irene van Oorschot, Giorgio Touburg, Alexander Strelkov and Gabriele Jacobs inductively identify four 'issue frames' about online radicalisation that are most prominently shared by law enforcement, religious and community leaders, policy-makers, activists, and scientific experts.

Our Research Notes section contains an introduction of a new database on court decisions about criminal acts of terrorism in Indonesia, authored by Iwa Maulana, Daniella T. Putri, Indriana M. Kresna, and Destya G. Ramadhani. In our Resources section, Judith Tinnes provides an extensive bibliography on the conflict in Syria, her fifth (and final) contribution on that topic. This is followed by a comprehensive book review of Julia Ebner's body of published books from our Associate Editor for Book Reviews Joshua Sinai. This issue of the journal has been produced by the Editorial Team at ICCT with considerable assistance from Nina Prillwitz, for which we are very grateful.

Prof James Forest, Editor-in-Chief

PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Is Religious Terrorism More Dangerous? What Have We Learned and How Does It Matter?

Lorne L. Dawson*

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**Abstract:** If religiously inspired terrorism is more lethal than other types of terrorism, then its explanation requires taking into consideration distinctive factors, one of which might be the role of religious ideology. The role of religious ideology in terrorism, however, is much disputed. This article contributes to the debate about the motivational role of religious beliefs and commitments by examining empirical studies of the greater lethality of religious terrorism. A critical synopsis of the findings, which are diverse and scattered throughout the research literature, demonstrates the complexities of the issue and the significance of the cumulative results. Despite some conflicting findings, there is strong evidence of the greater lethality, indicating that religious ideology, in conjunction with two other identified factors (i.e. the use of suicide terrorism and being transnational), accounts for the heightened danger posed by religious terrorism. This conclusion highlights the need to integrate a more fulsome understanding of the religious aspects of religious terrorism into an explanation of what is happening and why than many researchers recognise.

**Keywords:** Religious terrorism, lethality of terrorism, religious extremism, religion and violence

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# Introduction

It is widely assumed that religious terrorism is more dangerous than other forms. Is that assumption warranted? The wave of religious terrorism that emerged in the late twentieth century was often thought to be a new type of terrorism - one that is more lethal than the earlier anarchist, anti-colonial, and new left waves of terrorism.[1] This assumption, however, is rarely based on a sound knowledge of relevant empirical findings, and certainly not in any cumulative sense. This article offers a critical overview of these findings, to see if this assumption is valid, and if so, how this is the case. Testing this seemingly straightforward empirical claim has proved more complex than anticipated, and the results have implications for wider debates about the significance of different ideologies, religious or otherwise, and ideology in general, relative to other factors, in determining the nature of terrorism as a phenomenon.

Scholarly discussions of the seemingly new and preeminent threat posed by religious terrorism began before 9/11,[2] but the shocking events of 9/11 elevated interest in the issue dramatically. Was 9/11 the harbinger of a new tendency in terrorism? Did the religious motivations for this attack account for its ferocity? The questions are distinct yet linked. It was the observed tendency for religious terrorists to engage in more attacks, more indiscriminate attacks, and more lethal ones, that prompted speculation about the heightened threat posed by religious terrorism as a distinctive new type of terrorism.[3] Investigation of this observation led some scholars to explore how the religious aspects of new religious terrorism might account for its greater lethality.[4] Others, more limitedly and empirically, simply sought to test whether religious forms of terrorism are in fact more dangerous.[5] While this study is informed by the former studies, its focus is limited to the latter ones. These studies were undertaken to heighten awareness of a new type of threat. My interest is more specific: to clarify the issue as an unexamined aspect of a larger and ongoing debate about the role of religious motivations in explaining religious terrorism – as discussed below.

Research into whether religious terrorism is more dangerous has been undertaken in diverse ways for more than two decades. While some of the research is well-known, the scattered findings have yet to be critically reviewed.[6] Most of the relevant studies only take into consideration a few other studies and/or examine data from a limited period. Cumulatively, however, what have we learned? Comparing the results of the many different approaches taken to this issue is problematic, yet in the end, the evidence in hand points to a clearer resolution than is commonly appreciated, with implications for explaining the extent to which the religiousness of the terrorism is relevant to explaining any heightened brutality detected, and whether the linkage is direct, indirect, or both.

In explaining the rise, spread and appeal of religious terrorism, many researchers have surprisingly insisted that the religiousness of religious terrorism is not a significant factor. Rather, they argue, the violence in question stems from political,[7] socio-economic, and/or social psychological motivations,[8] and the religious rhetoric of religious terrorists, individually and organisationally, is merely a post hoc justification for their actions. Other terrorism scholars have opposed this strong interpretive tendency. While recognising the multi-factorial nature of the motivations for violent extremism, they argue that failing to recognise the evidentiary value of the religious motivational claims made by religious terrorists, whether individuals or groups, is methodologically unsound and distorts our understanding of the nature of this threat.[9] If the terrorism perpetrated by religious terrorists is demonstrably more lethal than other types of terrorism, then this finding lends credence to the claim that the religious motivations of these terrorists, as individuals or groups, should be treated as a significant factor in the explanation of this phenomenon;[10] and this is the case regardless of how we theorise why extreme religiosity leads to extreme violence.[11]

To be clear, as I have specified elsewhere,[12] the argument is not that the motivations of either individuals or groups involved in religious terrorism are necessarily religious. On the contrary, that must be determined on a case-by-case basis, as must the extent to which religious beliefs and commitments influence specific actions. Further, as stated above, it is recognised that the process of radicalisation involves the complex interaction of multiple variables, and in some instances, people may even engage in religious terrorism for non-religious reasons, or at least initially they might do so.[13] But if individuals and/or groups claim their actions have a religious motivation, and the behaviour of the groups espousing such a motivation are measurably and appreciably different, especially in terms of being more dangerous, then discounting the explanatory significance of the religious ideology is counterproductive, unless specific and strong evidence is provided for minimising its significance. But in most instances, so far, that has not been the case (as reinforced by some of the studies examined below), and as I and others have argued,[14] the reasons commonly given for minimising or even dismissing the relevance of religious motivations for religious terrorism are insufficient in significant ways. Whatever the merits of this argument, however, in this context, I am arguing a simpler supplemental point: if religious forms of terrorism are demonstrably more dangerous, then we should be seeking to pay more systematic theoretical and empirical attention to the role of religious ideologies and motivations, at micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis, to understand what is happening more fully and accurately. Quite surprisingly, however, none of the studies engaged in the debate over the relevance of religious ideologies and motivations have given much consideration to the empirical debate over the relative lethality of religious terrorism in their arguments; an omission this analysis seeks to correct.

There are four parts to the analysis I present. First, I set the initial historical context of the debate by discussing the "new terrorism" debate in terrorism studies. This was a largely theoretical debate that drew attention to the proposition that religious terrorism is more lethal. Second, I deepen the context of the lethality debate by examining some of the descriptive statistics used to support the claim of greater lethality, and highlight certain basic limitations raised by critical commentators. Third, I present an analysis of the most informative studies of the greater lethality in terms of the different factors that researchers have additionally identified as important in understanding this issue, developing analyses that go beyond the mere contrast of data for religious and secular groups. Consideration of these factors adds significant nuance to the debate and points to a few sub-issues in need of further research. Fourth, in the Concluding Remarks, I provide: (i) a more systematic assessment of where things stand; (ii) its implications for treating religious ideology as a significant explanatory variable; and (iii) briefly relate the findings to some theorising about why religious terrorism is more dangerous.

Before proceeding, however, three qualifying comments are in order. First, given the dominance of the threat posed by Islamist terrorism in the post-9/11 era, most of the studies addressed in this review are focused on data about jihadist groups. But, as some of the studies explicitly assert,[15] the increased lethality correlated with a religious rationale for the violence is not limited to any one religious tradition; a view that receives limited but important support from the inclusion of data about Christian forms of terrorism in a recent study.[16] That means, on the one hand, that neither I nor any of the studies examined think the findings are contingent on the Islamist worldview per se. This is the view of most scholars seeking to discern the reasons for religious terrorism as well. That is why they identify aspects of extreme religiosity in general, as found in multiple religious traditions (Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Sikh), as well as new religious movements like Aum Shinrikyo,[17] to explain what is happening and why religious terrorism is so dangerous.[18] On the other hand, it also means that we need similar studies incorporating more comparable data for the terrorist groups associated with other religious traditions to reach more definitive conclusions about "religious terrorism" per se.

We have excellent scholarship on religious forms of violent extremism in some of these traditions,[19] but the work is largely textual and historical and/or focused on case studies and limited qualitative research. This research, moreover, is usually about religion and violence in general (e.g. inter and intra-religious persecution and sectarian strife) and not terrorism per se. To develop comparable data on the relative lethality of other forms of religious terrorism, new datasets need to be created and analysed. In the contemporary context, nevertheless, historical circumstances have made jihadism the paradigmatic instance of religious terrorism, and logically in this context, and given the limited data available, it remains plausible to draw some inferences about the lethality of religious terrorism, relative to the other non-religious forms of terrorism, based on data about jihadist groups.

Second, in undertaking a review of the empirical findings about the lethality of religious terrorism it must be acknowledged that the studies examined employ an array of similar, different, and complex quantitative methodologies, which cannot be fully documented and assessed in this limited context. Diverse data sources were used, controls were considered, and statistical techniques were employed. Where pertinent, the differences are noted. In this limited context, however, there is little opportunity to engage in a full assessment of the relative reliability of the approaches taken. The studies were all published in reputable journals, so presumably, they were scrutinised by appropriate experts, and the problems raised in this situation are typical of efforts to examine contentious issues with different and incomplete datasets. The use of different methodologies always poses problems for the comparative analysis of results, the focus of this initial review, however, is delineating the similarities and differences in the results obtained to establish what we do know and what we still need to know. Ultimately, the findings may point to the need for initiating an even more sophisticated and standardised methodological approach; doing so, though, goes beyond the purview of this first comprehensive review.

Third, this analysis is not based on any formal systematic method of literature review, such as the approach promoted by the Campbell Collaboration.[20] The studies examined were collected during years of research on aspects of religious terrorism and supplemented through standard bibliographic search techniques. The themes used to organise the analysis were inductively derived from a careful reading and comparison of the studies. Seeking to be thorough, I think the analysis addresses the most pertinent studies available, but some others may have escaped my attention. This situation qualifies the findings, hypothetically, but I doubt that a more formal review process would lead to appreciably different results.

## Setting the Context: The New Religious Terrorism Debate

Quantitative studies of the lethality of religious terrorism are historically anchored in an older and wider debate about the emergence of a "new terrorism" in the 1990s and 2000s.[21] In most respects, this debate is no longer directly pertinent to these studies, but some discussion of the new terrorism discussion sets the context for what follows; hence a brief overview is warranted. The transition towards a new form of terrorism was associated with an amorphous set of identifying features,[22] but most discussions focus on a few key shifts in ideology, organisation, and tactics, that are thought to have led to a heightened brutality. The "old terrorism" was largely secular and focused on localised political struggles. The new terrorists are acting on religious ideologies and they have religious goals, which are often radically millennialist or apocalyptic in nature. They are seeking the total transformation of the world, and not just strategic political changes. Past terrorist groups were largely national organisations with a centralised and hierarchical, or vertical, structure (i.e. paramilitary). The new terrorists operate through transnational networks of actors, based on a shared ideological inspiration and personal relationships. The structure of these movements is much looser and more horizontal. The new

terrorists also are much more indiscriminate in who they attack, using suicide missions against soft targets. They are not so much interested in winning over the wider public to their cause, like previous terrorists, as maximising the carnage they inflict to gain even more attention or satisfy symbolically significant religious goals. The grandiose objectives and fanaticism of the new terrorists make them harder to reason with, hindering the capacity to strike the kinds of political compromises that have ended many other campaigns of terror.[23] Consequently, the "new terrorism" is harder to detect and defeat, and it is far more lethal.

There is some scepticism about this "new terrorism" scenario, but most researchers recognise that something changed, qualitatively, with the rise of al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups, especially the Islamic State. There appears to have been an increase in the number, frequency, and lethality of terrorist attacks. In many respects, however, critics have argued that there is as much continuity as change between the old and the new terrorism.[24] The "newer" forms of terrorism have antecedents in the history of terrorism (e.g. Zealot-Sicariis, Anarchists); new and older forms of terrorism have been religious or secular or involved a mixture of these motivations; and many of the organisational changes noted are more evolutionary than revolutionary.[25] Much of the critique, though, misses the mark. As Ersun Kurtulus points out, "the key question is not whether one or another trait of new terrorism occurred before or one or another feature of traditional terrorism still occurs today, but the frequency and scope of that occurrence in each historic period."[26] It may be impossible to resolve the debate over the new terrorism, Kurtulus demonstrates, since "neither the critics nor the proponents define [the] features clearly, precisely and, in a few cases, correctly."[27] Nevertheless, he surmises there is strong evidence that there is something new about contemporary terrorism. "It is religious, networked, and indiscriminate," and strong support for this view comes from the statements and tactics of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other jihadist groups. "They not only explicitly declare their purpose to kill civilians and to adopt horizontal networks, but they also go to lengths to justify this novel tactical and organizational approach."[28]

Did these changes lead to a more dangerous form of terrorism? Has the greater lethality of the new religious terrorism been empirically substantiated, and can we establish whether religious beliefs or religious ideologies play a significant role in accounting for this heightened lethality? These are not questions addressed by Kurtulus in his otherwise thorough and telling examination of the arguments advanced for and against the idea of a "new terrorism," yet they logically follow from it.

## Deepening the Context: Descriptive Statistics

Basic descriptive statistics seem to suggest strongly that contemporary forms of religious terrorism are very lethal, and for many this evidence has seemed to be sufficient. Some doubts have been raised, however, as discussed in the next section of this analysis.

In their pre-9/11 study on the changing lethality of transnational terrorism over time, Walter Enders and Todd Sandler found "a significant increase in severity" in the casualties inflicted by transnational terrorists in the post-Cold War period.[29] While the number of terrorist incidents decreased dramatically, the attacks became much more lethal, as measured in terms of incidents with injuries and/or deaths, the proportion of incidents with casualties, and incidents with deaths. They also detected, in line with the observations of Hoffman[30] and others, that there was a noticeable "ratcheting up in the severity of attacks" with the onset of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and then again with the rise of al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups in the 1990s.[31] Consequently, they hypothesise that there was a structural change in casualty statistics, and it was linked with a "shift toward greater religious-based terrorism."[32]

Citing data from the RAND Terrorism Knowledge Base, James Piazza[33] noted that religiously motivated groups had the highest number of victims per attack in the period 1968 to 2005. Compared with "leftist," "rightist," "national-separatist," and "other" groups, "religious" terrorist groups committed the second largest number of attacks, and they had an average casualty rate per attack (wounded or killed) that was higher than "all three of the other types combined."[34] In a later analysis, relying on the data from the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism database, from 1 January 1998 to 6 August 2007, Romano et al. similarly found that while more terrorist attacks were perpetrated by nationalist groups, "religious and most commonly Islamist terrorist groups produce more fatalities … than all secular nationalist groups combined."[35]

Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan report that thirteen of the twenty deadliest terror groups since 2001 were Islamist.[36] Correlating several of the features of terrorist organisations with levels of lethality, Victor Asal and Karl Rethemeyer found that religious ideology, the size of the group, and the extent of its alliances with other terrorists "all drove up lethality."[37] Other hypothesised factors (e.g. the age of the group, whether it was operating in a democracy, and role of state sponsorship) had no effect. The data they were working with, however, were incomplete and limited to the period 1998-2005.

Overall, then, it appears that attacks by religious terrorists result in more casualties than secular groups, most of the most dangerous groups are religious, and there is some reason to believe that it is the religious ideology that accounts for at least some of this greater lethality.

## Deepening the Context: Critical Concerns

Some off-setting data has emerged as well, however, and critics have called attention to several problems that may affect the confidence we can have in these general findings. Some of these concerns have been dealt with, though this is not widely recognised, while others need to receive further attention.

Michael Stohl, for example, notes that data from the US Department of State on international terrorist events shows "no dramatic increase in lethality in the overall series and that 9/11 … is clearly an absolutely horrendous exception to the data series."[38] The relative statistical impact of the 9/11 attacks on results is something that needs to be measured, especially as the data Stohl cites end in 2003. Some later studies take this concern into consideration, but most admittedly do not. Burstein, for example, argues that the results of his analysis of the attacks of religious terrorists between 1970 and 2012 do not change significantly for the post-2000 period, or when he controlled for the impact of the 9/11 attacks.[39] Likewise for Levy.[40] Measuring average lethality rates for terrorist organisations (i.e. the average number of kills per attack per organisation), and not just the raw numbers of kills/casualties or attacks per group, he first excluded "the exceptionally lethal 9/11 attacks from [his] group lethality calculations," then later checked the robustness of his findings by running an additional statistical regression including the 9/11 data. The results, he reports, were similar.[41]

Stohl also argues, citing evidence on the lethality of attacks from the National Terrorism Center Report Series, that "while there is more lethality in the more recent data set [i.e. in the 2009 report], it is most likely that the lethality is due to a focus on the violence of war [, taking into account the terrorist events in Iraq and Afghanistan,] than it is to a change in terrorist tactics."[42] Similarly, Meagan Smith and Sean Zeigler, found, using data from the Global Terrorism Database, that the "… strongest predictor of terrorism within the borders of any given state is the presence of armed conflict, especially for domestic attacks,"[43] and that "terrorism incidents outside of warzones in the post-9/11 era have decreased in absolute terms," especially for "transnational terror incidents."[44] This condition must be considered in analyses of the post-9/11 context, but while the number of attacks, or perhaps even the frequency, may have diminished, the studies

discussed below repeatedly establish that the lethality (number of fatalities) certainly did not. In various ways, many of these additional studies take the significance of the location of attacks into account as well, and they find that this variable has limited relevance in explaining variations in the levels of lethality, relative to other variables.[45]

In addressing the question of the greater lethality of religious terrorism, then, we need to specifically recognise the outsized impact of the 9/11 casualties and those associated with the attacks that followed in the wars fought in Afghanistan and Iraq in response to the 9/11 attacks. These developments have skewed the data somewhat, though the best evidence suggests nowhere near as much as anticipated, either statistically or theoretically (see the more complex analyses discussed in the next section).

Levy raises an additional concern: for a surprisingly high percentage of terrorist incidents, the affiliation of the perpetrators is simply unknown. This fact can impact the accuracy of the results.[46] As with the skewing effect of 9/11, though, some attention has been given to this limitation. Carson and Suppenbach ran analyses of the lethality of jihadism, "with and with out" the unaffiliated incidents, and concluded that the analyses "yielded similar findings."[47]

In the end, as Romano et al. stress, the "[q]ualitative literature on the 'new terrorism' needs the support of quantitative data to ensure that common perceptions are grounded in fact."[48] What, then, does a critical review of the findings from an array of more sophisticated, and hence pertinent, empirical studies reveal about the lethality of religious terrorism?

## Deepening the Analysis: Is Religious Terrorism More Lethal?

The findings of other studies have, in diverse ways, supported the base finding that religious terrorism is indeed more lethal. But they have added important nuance to the argument by identifying different specific factors that they think explain this greater lethality. Therefore, they reveal that the situation is more complicated than it seems, but because the studies are scattered and tend to reference only a few of the others, we lack a sufficiently systematic grasp of the situation and the state of our knowledge. To bring more order to the diverse findings, I first sort them by the six alternative key factors that the authors think should be taken into consideration to understand the greater lethality of religious terrorism. The analysis allows us to grasp a better sense of the overall record of research, what really matters, and the implications.

### *We Need to Consider the Different Types of Religious Terrorist Groups*

Piazza argues that a closer analysis of the data indicates that not all jihadist groups are more deadly.[49] Using global data and a case study of terrorist attacks in Iraq between 1998 and 2005, he demonstrates that it is only Islamist groups affiliated with the al-Qaeda network that are more lethal. In doing so, of course, he partially addresses the concerns raised about the skewing effect of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the data about religious terrorism. Differentiating between "universal/abstract" groups like al-Qaeda and "strategic" groups like Hamas, Piazza finds that the former is more likely to commit high-casualty terrorist attacks than other terrorist groups.[50] In fact, al-Qaeda affiliated groups "perpetrate significantly more lethal attacks and are responsible for a disproportionate number of attacks and total casualties per group."[51] In Iraq, for example, "while accounting for only one-third of all attacks by Islamist groups, al-Qaeda groups were responsible for 95.9% of all casualties due to Islamist terrorism, and attacks by al-Qaeda affiliates resulted in four times the number of casualties per attack than non-al-Qaeda groups."[52] "The primary difference," Piazza stipulates, "between universal abstract groups and

strategic groups is the former are distinguished by highly ambitious, abstract, complex, and nebulous goals that are driven primarily by ideology." This orientation results, he argues, in "critical organizational and goal structure differences that determine the tactical behavior" of the groups, like "whether or not they use suicide attacks, whether or not they attack soft targets, and whether or not they are inhibited about attacking members of their same nationality or religious community." These are the behaviours, he reasons, that determine the lethality of their attacks.[53]

Graig Klein builds on and modifies this conclusion.[54] Shifting the key explanatory variables, some control variables, and the unit of analysis in some of the models run with Piazza's data, he argues it is the transnational character of the attacks that is most consequential in explaining the higher lethality, rather than the Islamist ideology per se. Transnational Islamist attacks have the largest casualty counts by far, but all transnational attacks have significantly higher casualty counts. So, he seeks to demonstrate, what matters most is not the more universal goal structure of certain Islamist groups, like al-Qaeda, but the orientation of transnational groups "to attacking outside [their] recruitment audience."[55] Organisations focused on domestic terrorism must exercise more restraint, since higher levels of collateral deaths and injuries generate a backlash effect curtailing future recruitment from this environment. This hypothesis, while plausible, has yet to be tested with other data, with the partial exception of Levy.[56] Levy factors the number of transnational attacks into his analysis and notes a correlation with some statistical significance with higher levels of lethality. But both his findings and Klein's still indicate a strong link between the jihadist ideology and greater lethality, and one which may be more explanatorily significant (as discussed further in the conclusion). The linkage, however, may be more indirect, or multi-faceted, than commonly envisaged.

## *We Need to Consider the Use of Suicide Terrorism*

Others suggest that the key factor in accounting for the greater lethality of religious terrorism is the use of suicide attacks, more than the religiousness of the group per se. As might be expected, the data reveals that this variable is strongly correlated with higher lethality. Using data from the International Policy Institute's "Terror Attack Data Base," from 1 January 1980 to 1 January 2002, for instance, Mathew Capell and Emile Sahliyeh conclude:

> *Our research offers evidence that there is more to the story of this "New Terrorism's" lethality than the type of groups involved. While it supports Bruce Hoffman's hypotheses that religious groups do have a significant effect on the number of terrorist-related fatalities, including indiscriminate attacks leading to higher numbers of civilian casualties, it offers, on the other hand, considerable support for our hypothesis that the use of suicide terrorism as a tactic is highly significant in explaining the increase in ... lethality.*[57]

Suicide terrorism may be a key factor in explaining the higher lethality of jihadists. As Levy notes, years after Capell and Sahliyeh's analysis, "almost 70 percent of the sampled groups that use suicide terrorism are jihadist,"[58] and the "groups that use suicide terrorism kill and wound over 100 percent more than do groups that do not use it."[59] When this information is coupled with the fact that "jihadist groups perform almost 80 percent fewer attacks than non-jihadist groups," then it appears that it is the greater efficiency of the attacks by jihadists, and not the volume, that accounts for their higher lethality.[60] Nonetheless, as we will see, Levy still places a stronger onus on the role of religious ideology in accounting for the increased lethality, a view supported by the analysis undertaken by Peter Henne.[61]

Like Piazza and others, Henne finds that the data suggests terrorist attacks motivated by a religious ideology are significantly more lethal, compared to those driven by nationalism, socio-political repression, or economic deprivation. But he focuses more narrowly on one form

of terrorist violence, suicide attacks between 1980 and 2006. The preference for this tactic may constitute a key mediating variable in accounting for the heightened lethality of religious terrorism, but it does not displace religious motivations in explaining the greater lethality.

Analysing data on suicide attacks between 1980 and 2006, compiled by Phillip Kapusta for a project conducted at the US Army's School of Advanced Military Studies, and controlling for several pertinent variables, he demonstrates that it is the religious groups, amongst those using suicide attacks, that are the most lethal. Therefore, he concludes:

> *These findings show strong support for the theorized effect of religious ideology on terrorist violence. Groups with religious ideologies cause more deaths through suicide bombings than nationalist and leftist groups. This relationship holds in conditions of varying political freedom, economic development, ethnic fractionalization, and military occupation. Studies of suicide terrorism that ignore – or attempt to downplay – the importance of religion in groups' actions will therefore be incomplete, and possibly misleading.*[62]

Seeking to better specify the way religion is relevant, he further found that the mere presence of Muslims in a terrorist group has no effect on the level of suicide attacks. Specific religious traditions, then, are not the cause of increased violence. It is the presence of religious motivations, from any tradition, that intensifies the violence. Echoing Piazza in some respects, he argues that everything depends on how religion contributes to the framing of the violence. Political violence framed by a religious ideology "can lead to combatants perceiving their struggle as a sacred one and becoming disassociated from local factors."[63] Contradicting Piazza, however, Henne thinks his data shows that the specific organisational structure or goals of the groups are irrelevant. Whether the group is "ethnoreligious" or "fundamentalist," partially analogue to Piazza's "strategic" and "universal/abstract" groups, has little influence on the severity of the violence. His analysis indicates that it is the presence of a religious ideology that "influences the behavior of terrorist groups even when the differing nature of the groups [is] accounted for."[64]

## *We Need to Consider the Degrees of Religiosity*

Alon Burstein builds, in effect, on these insights by arguing that "the more religious components are found in a terror group's ideology, the more violent and deadly its actions tend to be."[65] Replacing the simple dichotomy of secular and religious groups found in the new terrorism debate with a continuum of degrees of secularity and religiosity, he tests if secular and religious groups use different tactics, if religious groups engage in more attacks, and if their attacks are more deadly. He did so with data on 3,000 terrorist organisations, for the period 1970–2012, drawn from multiple sources: the Global Terrorism Database, the Terrorist Organisation Profiles database, the Big Allied and Dangerous database, the Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium database, the US State Department "Patterns of Global Terrorism" reports, and various founding texts and statements by the terrorist groups. In each way, he concludes, the increased presence of religion in the ideology leads to more violence and fatalities. His analysis further reveals that "the results are not isolated to a specific region or religion," and they do not change significantly for activities only measured after the year 2000, or when the impact of the 9/11 attacks is controlled for.[66]

A similar conclusion is reached by Brittnee Carter, Ranya Ahmed, Cagil Albayrak and Maya van Nuys.[67] Using a dataset of 198 terrorist groups categorised as religious and controlling for a wide variety of organisational characteristics of the groups and of the environment in which they operate, they undertook a comparative analysis of religious and secular groups, but also Islamist and Christian terrorist groups. Overall, they too found that the religious groups were more lethal. Both terrorist groups motivated by Christian fundamentalism and Islamist groups

are "more likely to attack civilian targets than any other target." Christian groups are "most likely to use assassination as a primary tactic," while Islamist ones are "more likely to use armed assault than any other tactic" – but also bombings and hijackings.[68]

As for the rate of casualties from their attacks, both Islamist and Christian groups have markedly higher rates, but it is the Christian groups that are the most lethal. Directly comparing the two groups with a statistical model reveals that "Islamist terrorist attacks can expect an increased rate of casualties of 1.70 times the rate of non-Islamist groups, while the rate ratio of casualties of Christian fundamentalist groups is over 3.3 times that of non-Christian terrorist groups."[69] Consequently, they argue, researchers and counter-terrorism practitioners must carefully consider how ideology, and especially specific religious ideologies, "can set the diagnostic, motivational, and prognostic frames that drive a group's decisions making, leading them toward specific behaviour to achieve specific ends."[70] Ideology is only one of multiple relevant contextual and motivating factors, but it is critical, and as their study indicates, differences in ideology, or at least religious ideologies, matter.

Ido Levy arrives at a similar conclusion. After providing one of the most comprehensive analyses of the issue, he argues that groups espousing a jihadist ideology are more lethal, and further that jihadist groups espousing a more intense ideology are more lethal than those with less intense ideologies.[71] His overall objective is to establish that "greater ideological intensity increases terrorist organization lethality."[72] Whatever the merits of this argument,[73] here the focus is the more direct and limited initial question of whether jihadism is more lethal. Using data from the GTD from 1970 to 2017, he demonstrates that "jihadist groups are approximately 41 percent – 77 percent more lethal than non-jihadist groups."[74] The statistical model he uses to derive this finding takes into consideration numerous organisational and country controls. Many of the organisational control variables are ones that other studies have linked to increased terrorist lethality: the age of the group, the extent of its network ties, if there is state sponsorship, the number of transnational attacks, and whether suicide bombings are used.[75] The underlying premise of the first three variables is that more established and stronger organisations, with networks of support, will have "more opportunities to accumulate skill and increase lethality."[76] To this, he adds Klein's argument that "groups that conduct transnational attacks have more liberty to act and kill since they are less concerned with impressing a local audience."[77] While calculating the use and number of suicide attacks accounts for the common suspicion that it is this tactic that primarily explains the higher rates of lethality, whether the groups are religious (e.g. Islamic State) or secular (e.g. the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka).

In the various statistical models run, some evidence emerged that the extent of network ties and state sponsorship were statistically significant, to a degree in determining levels of lethality (in line with Asal and Rethemeyer[78]). But the level of significance in the first instance is low, and the number of sponsors is limited for most groups, so Levy concludes: "… while sponsors may serve as force multipliers for terrorist lethality, ideology is a more substantial determinant of lethality."[79] The use of suicide terrorism is consequential as well. But the question now pivots somewhat to: What accounts for the higher use of suicide attacks by jihadist groups? Curiously, though, Levy does not actually pose this question. He is content to note a jihadist "affinity" for this modus operandi, but he does not explore its nature.[80] Is there a significant ideological, or even more specifically a religious, reason for the marked preference of jihadist groups for this mode of attack and the consequent higher casualty rate?

## *We Need to Consider the Call to Action Issued by the Islamic State*

Using data from the Global Terrorism Database for the period 1994-2014, Jennifer Carson and Matthew Suppenbach[81] also found a strong nexus of religious ideology and lethality, with regard at least to the jihadists. The "Global Jihadist Movement," they conclude, "has a distinct ability to

kill and maim civilians." "[T]he odds of an incident causing death is over 3 times more probable when tied to the [Global Jihadist Movement]"[82] and "al Qa'ida alone has averaged 63.2 deaths per incident, which is a 761% higher average than the next group."[83] This and other findings lead them to conclude that jihadism had become a dominant and distinct "manifestation of terrorism," even though it was not necessarily the most "frequent" one nor displayed "a distinctive targeting strategy."[84] The strong preference for suicide attacks, they too note, also contributed to the heightened lethality.

They go a step further, however, by also suggesting we consider the influence of an additional specific mechanism driving the lethality; a factor which happened too late to be considered by most of the other studies.[85] In September 2014, the external operations emir of the Islamic State (IS), Muhammad al-Adnani, called on the supporters of IS in the West to carry out attacks in their countries. Speaking two months after the establishment of the new Caliphate, he issued the following call: "If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian … kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone's advice and do not seek anyone's verdict."[86] The message was repeated on at least three subsequent occasions, providing more specific instructions on how to kill Westerners.[87] The data shows that this call was remarkably successful in encouraging unaffiliated IS sympathisers to plot and launch attacks; attacks that peaked in Europe, North America, and Australia in the following years.[88] Factoring this development into the findings further demonstrates the power of the connection between religious terrorism, and ideology in general, and increased violence and lethality.

Carson and Suppenbach's own data, however, only extends to 2014. It does not capture the full extent of the surge in IS planned and inspired attacks, as reflected by the shootings, suicide bombings, and vehicular attacks that occurred, for example, in Paris (Nov. 2015), San Bernardino (Dec. 2015), Brussels (Mar. 2016), Orlando (June 2016), Nice (July 2016), Berlin (Dec. 2016), Stockholm (April 2017), London (Mar. 2017, June 2017, and Nov. 2019), Manchester (May 2017), and Barcelona (August 2017).

## *We Need to Consider the Influence of State Sponsorship on the Lethality of Religious Terrorism*

Building on possibilities and gaps in the existing research, Brittnee Carter examines data from the Global Terrorism Database and the Big, Allied, and Dangerous 2.0 dataset on "more than 2,500 attacks from nearly 140 … terrorist, militant, and insurgent groups"[89] to investigate what conditions foster the increased targeting of civilians, giving rise in turn to higher levels of lethality. She differentiates and compares data on groups she categorises as "Religiously Motivated (Only)," State Sponsored (Only)," "Religiously Motivated & Sate Sponsored," and "Other." Her hypothesis is that "the potential missing link in the theoretical and empirical studies of religiously motivated terrorism and target selection is the impact of group resources and support in the form of state sponsorship."[90]

Her analysis reveals three things. First, as anticipated by many, "religiously motivated terrorism is positively associated with civilian attacks with an increased odds (sic) of 4.30."[91] Second, contrary to what some expect, her analysis does not provide "enough information" to support a positive correlation between state sponsorship and the increased likelihood of targeting civilians.[92] Third, her results demonstrate there is a positive and significant "interaction effect" between religious motivation and state sponsorship: "violent religiously motivated groups that are state-sponsored are more likely than secular non-sponsored groups, religious non-sponsored groups, or secular sponsored groups to carry out civilian attacks,"[93] and "do so at much higher rates."[94] [95]

Why might this be the case? Carter offers several possible reasons, such as state sponsorship makes it easier for such groups to stay focused and pursue their activities by providing financing, weapons, and sanctuary, and allowing them to engage in indiscriminate attacks without concern about the loss of popular support.[96] This is plausible, but her discussion is largely speculative, as is her analysis of why states may particularly wish to sponsor religiously motivated groups. Overall, though, everything rests on the finding that religiously motivated groups are more inclined to target civilians in the first place. It is the religious ideology that condones and incentivises the indiscriminate targeting of civilians – of unbelievers, broadly defined - that is the primary factor for 69.3 percent of her sample (combining the "Religiously Motivated" at 43 percent with the "Religiously Motivated and State Sponsored" at 26.3 percent). State sponsorship, she notes, "may only exacerbate" this pre-existing reason for greater lethality.[97]

### *We Need to Consider What We Mean by the Increased 'Brutality' of the Religious Terrorists*

Finally, one study stands out as being at odds with the others. Aiming for greater specificity about what is happening and why, Sebastian Jäckle and Marcel Baumann[98] chose to operationalise the "brutalisation" thesis (as they call it) of the new terrorism argument in nine different ways: (1) as more terrorist attacks; (2) as more fatalities due to terrorist attacks; (3) as more fatalities per terrorist attack; (4) as more suicide attacks; (5) as more attacks against soft targets; (6) as more fatalities due to terrorist attacks against soft targets; (7) as the average number of fatalities due to terrorist attacks against soft targets; (8) as more suicide attacks against soft targets; (9) and as more beheadings. Examining data from the Global Terrorism Database, from 1970 to 2011, they arrived at a more qualified conclusion:

> *First, we find no strong and definitive trend within most of our indicators that would justify speaking of a general trend towards brutalization. Yet there are some hints that there is indeed some brutalization going on. We have to differentiate between a certain general brutalization that has started in the early 1990s (particularly with regard to the average number of fatalities), albeit interrupted by periods of relative "terrorist tranquillity," and a brutalization in terms of qualitative changes in the form of killings, which is very much related to the logic of maximizing public and media attention. This second form of brutalization started in the late 1990s and has been particularly strong since the mid-2000s.*[99]

While acknowledging some increase in the levels of lethality, then, in contrast with most of the other studies, they suggest it is far less substantial. They only analyse data from one source, however, and up to 2011. Consequently, they are not considering data from one of the most brutal periods of jihadist terrorism, namely the post-2014 attacks perpetrated or inspired by the Islamic State. They also argue, though, that there is a measurable increase in the preference for more brutal styles of attacks, providing a different kind of qualified support for the new terrorism thesis, a trend heightened by the onset of the Islamic State. As the focus of their study is the new terrorism debate, no attempt is made to explain away the conflicting evidence on the levels of lethality detected by Piazza, Henne, and others. In fact, these studies are not even cited by them, and further consideration would now have to be given to the conflicting findings, derived from study of the Global Terrorism Database as well, provided by Carson et al. and Levy.[100, 101]

## Concluding Remarks

Debatable differences in the approaches taken by these studies lead to somewhat different results, but overall, the data provides strong support for the claims made about the unique

dangers posed by religious terrorism. In fact, the research demonstrates that the attacks perpetrated by religious terrorists, at least Christian and Islamist ones, are, on average, many times more deadly than those by other groups, though studies differ by how much. To arrive at a more definitive conclusion, we would need to additionally pay more critical attention to the comparative analysis of the various quantitative methods used in these studies and acquire more comparable data for religious terrorists from other faiths.

The findings are impacted as well by other limitations with the datasets used that are highlighted by Romano et al. and "bedevil virtually all statistical analyses of terrorism," and not just this issue.[102] First, citing Martha Crenshaw,[103] Ramano et al. note classification issues in many of the databases on which the analyses rely.[104] It is not always clear which groups have been designated as "religious" or why, or how we should deal with data on various types of "hybrid" groups, like Hezbollah and Hamas. They are defined as being both religious and national-separatist.[105] Second, Romano et al. point out that most of the "well-received" statistical studies of terrorism simply "do not provide a breakdown of which kinds of groups account for how much terrorism.[106] Third, most datasets rely on "Western press accounts as their primary data source" and "this means that while almost 100% of deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan are counted, very few of those in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo get counted, since international media tend not to pay as much attention to states like the DRC."[107] Levy notes this limitation as well, extending the scope to include data on the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa, since the media coverage there is probably far less comprehensive than in the Western or developed world.[108] Similarly, Carson and Suppenbach note that the emergence of newer communication technologies could also have skewed the data because of increased coverage of more recent incidents.[109] Fourth and finally, as Ramono et al. state, if the datasets "stretched back to the African liberation and civil wars of the 1960s-80s, the trends would probably look dramatically different (with the more relative weighting of secular nationalist and Leftist terrorist groups)." Likewise, if all the datasets included the period in which the Islamic State (ISIS) exacted a "grisly death toll," the results would skew more heavily towards Islamist religious groups.[110] So much depends on the geographic and temporal coverage of the datasets used in different analyses.[111]

The impact of each of these limitations is hard to gauge, and the issues raised exceed the bounds of this initial assessment of the studies on lethality. Nevertheless, the existing findings lend credence to the claim that religious terrorism is distinctive, and hence its explanation necessitates calling on ideas not typically used to explain other types of terrorism. Certainly, the crucial role of differences in ideology comes to the fore. It remains a somewhat more open question, however, whether this, in turn, means that religious ideology per se is the key additional factor. As we have seen, various confounding factors were initially identified that may have a skewing effect on the findings of studies of the greater lethality of religious terrorism (i.e. the impact of the 9/11 data, the unknown affiliation of the perpetrators of many attacks, and whether the attacks happened in war zones). Later studies, taking these factors into consideration in various ways, found the effects were minimal. Two other factors, though, appear to have a more direct and telling effect: the use of suicide terrorism and engaging in transnational terrorism. A third factor, state sponsorship, may also play an aggravating role, though less significantly. However, none seem adequate, on their own or in combination, to explain the heightened lethality of religious terrorism except in combination with the effects of being motivated by a religious ideology.

Much of the heightened lethality detected probably stems from the brutal effectiveness of suicide attacks, though even this supposition is also subject to some empirical dispute.[112] The heightened effectiveness of this attack modality may explain the preference for its use under certain circumstances, such as when other options have been effectively suppressed, or groups lack the resources to do otherwise (e.g. in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or that between Sri

Lankan Tamils and their government). Are these circumstances sufficient, however, to explain this tactical preference? This question raises another old and complex debate about the relative significance of ideology, that is too complex to resolve here.[113] Given the irrefutably strong preference of jihadists for this tactic, however, there is good reason to think that ideology plays a causal role in the resultant greater danger. Moreover, as Henne demonstrates, when religious groups revert to suicide terrorism, they are more lethal than secular groups, and as Burnstein argues, there is a strong correlation between the degree of religiosity of the motivating ideology and the relative lethality of the attacks perpetrated.[114]

The other factor associated with the greater lethality is the tactical consequences of engaging in transnational as opposed to more limited domestic forms of terrorism.[115] Once again, though, it is the jihadists that have been most strikingly transnational (i.e. al-Qaeda and ISIS). Why might this be the case? The transnational focus would seem to be inextricably linked with ideological considerations. Both Piazza and Levy argue that the evidence suggests that the influence of a religious motivating ideology remains the predominant background factor, rather than the independent effect of the strategic choice to be transnational.[116] This conclusion is reinforced by the finding that Christian groups are even more lethal than the jihadists, since few Christian terrorists could be classified as transnational.[117] The outsized impact of the call to arms issued by the Islamic State in 2014 is indicative of the crucial role of ideology as well.

While state sponsorship seems to heighten the potential lethality of religious terrorists, Carter is clear that it is the prior, ideologically determined, willingness to launch indiscriminate attacks on civilians that is more consequential, and her discussion demonstrates that it is difficult at this time to really know how, why, and to what extent state sponsorship makes a difference.[118]

The use of suicide attacks or having a transnational focus, then, are the two most significant factors to further consider in thinking about what makes religious terrorists more dangerous, but it is the jihadists that have demonstrated a more pronounced preference for these modalities. Why might this be the case? Implicit in the literature is the suggestion that it is the universalising and transcendentalising features of their religious worldview that offer a plausible common denominator for the explanation of both developments, and hence the greater lethality of religious terrorism. The limited evidence in hand, however, indicates that there is nothing inevitable about the connection between the greater use of suicide terrorism, being transnational, and religious terrorism per se.

The discussion of these two factors largely just returns us to the original debate about the relevance of religious ideologies, but with a bit more specificity. To resolve matters we would need to prove whether the choice of this attack modality and/or this orientation stemmed from the influence of religious or non-religious factors. Did they result from strategic or ideological considerations, or both, and to what degree? Some may question, however, how relevant this way of thinking, with its dependence on a strong distinction between strategic and ideological modes of thought, is to the analysis of religious terrorism. Do religious extremists, who are usually radical fundamentalists, engage in one without the other?

Alternatively, as Kurtulus stresses, we need to keep in mind that what is new and most worrisome is not just the sheer lethality of the new terrorism but "the deliberately indiscriminate nature of the terrorist attacks – regardless of the capabilities to do so." The key factor is the "intention and strategy … of terrorist organisations to cause such large number of casualties," and the efforts jihadists have taken to explicitly legitimise the indiscriminate targeting of civilians on a moral and religious basis.[119] Carter's analysis pivots on this same point – the willingness to target civilians indiscriminately.[120] In other words, the issue is the ideological motivation and justification for the violence and not just the tactics or means used, or the national versus transnational orientation of the groups. The question then becomes whether there is an affinity

between a certain type of religious worldview and being so ready to inflict large numbers of civilian casualties. While clearly, there is a strong link to intolerant sectarian extremism in general,[121] many scholars have pointed more specifically to an additional factor: the adoption of an apocalyptic and/or millennialist understanding of a group's mission.[122] Is this something shared by Christian and Islamist forms of religious terrorists, and what about other types?

The various analyses linking the new terrorism to religious motivations call upon aspects of the apocalyptic worldview and mindset to account for the heightened violence, ranging from the radicalising impact of dividing the world into categories of absolute good and evil, through the consequent easy dehumanisation of one's enemies, to the antinomian tendencies of thinking one is engaged in a cosmic war during the end of days. Explication of these and other possible linkages exceeds the purpose of this study, but to reiterate, establishing the greater lethality of religious terrorism undergirds the explanatory value of such theorising, and the importance of empirically augmenting these arguments with research into the operative nature and effects of the religious motivations espoused by religious terrorists. Those theorising about this situation have considered textual and qualitative findings from a range of different religious traditions, Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and new religious movements, but as demonstrated, except for some limited consideration of data on the greater lethality of Christian groups, we lack comparable data on the terrorist groups identified with the other religious traditions.[123]

Focusing for now on the group for which we have the most evidence, jihadists have used at least three interrelated lines of argument to legitimise targeting civilians. First, there is a doctrine of proportionate response. Attacks by jihadists in the West are an appropriate response to the many Muslim civilians killed by infidels in the wars waged by Western governments against supposed terrorism in Muslim lands. Second, civilians in the West are legitimate targets because of the support they offer to the democratic governments waging these wars in Muslim lands, and the support these governments provide to apostate oppressive regimes in many Muslim countries. Third, these oppressive regimes and their followers, and the many Muslims opposed to waging jihad, are fair game because they have forfeited the protections normally accorded fellow Muslims. They are no longer "true Muslims."[124] In each instance the key variable is an extremist interpretation and enactment of religious identity. Not just any identity, but a religiously conceived one. Not just an ethno-nationalist identity anchored in the negotiable realities of this world, but a world-transcending identity, in terms of space and time, that is conceptually wedded to an ancient prioritisation of the pursuit of radical purity of purpose and being, both for the defenders of God and the world He created.[125] There is nothing uniquely Islamic about the focus on such idealised religious identity goals, and the concomitant call to self and world transformation.[126] But for a host of reasons (e.g. the ongoing consequences of colonialism and globalisation) violent Islamists are the most prominent contemporary manifestation of this religio-historic tendency.[127, 128]

What have been the consequences of the introduction of religious motives into modern terrorism? The answer to this question is pertinent to discerning the broader relationship between religion and violence, but it has its own chilling significance as well. Given the various limitations of the datasets available, the need to subject the methodologies of the studies reviewed to greater scrutiny, and to secure more data about the lethality of other forms of religious terrorism, a fully comprehensive answer is not possible at this time. We can say with confidence, however, that significantly more people die at the hands of Christian and Islamist religious terrorists than any other terrorists, and this fact alone establishes an imperative to integrate a more fulsome and sophisticated understanding of the ways people order their lives (and deaths) through their religious beliefs and commitments into the study of "religious terrorism." To this end, we need to start by paying more serious attention to the evidentiary value of the religious motivational claims made by religious terrorists, individuals and groups, no matter how fanciful or alien these professions may appear to us.

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15 Henne, Ancient Fire, 2012; Alon Burstein, "Armies of God, Armies of Men: A Global Comparison of Secular and Religious Terror Organizations," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, No. 1 (2018): 1-21.

16 Britnee Carter, Ranya Ahmed, Cagil Albayrak, and Maya van Nuys, "Disaggregating Religiously Motivated Terrorism: Ideology as a Frame for Strategic Behaviour in Islamist and Christian Fundamentalist Terrorism," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism* 18, No.1 (2023): 72-94.

17 For example, R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred,* (Lanham, MD: Oman and Littlefield, 2000); Juergensmeyer, Mind of God, 2003; Gregg, Three Theories, 2016; Pratt, Religion and Extremism, 2018.

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19 For example, Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, *Jewish Terrorism in Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Heather S. Gregg, *The Path to Salvation: Religious Violence from the Crusades to Jihad* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2014); Philippe Buc*, Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror: Christianity, Violence, and the West* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press,2015); Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Violence and the Sikhs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

20 See https://www.campbellcollaboration.org/what-is-a-systematic-review.html

21 For example, Lacqueur, New Terrorism, 1999; Benjamin and Simon, Sacred Terror, 2002; Peter R. Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

22 Martha Crenshaw, Crenshaw, "'Old' vs. 'New' Terrorism," in *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (New York: Routledge, 2011), 51-66; Ersun N. Kurtulus, "The 'New Terrorism' and its Critics," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, No. 6 (2011): 476-500; Orla Lynch, and Christopher Ryder, "Deadliness, Organisational Change and Suicide Attacks: Understanding the Assumptions Inherent in the Use of the Term 'New Terrorism'," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, No. 2 (2012): 257-75.

23 Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

24 For example, Tucker, What is New, 2001; Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "How New is the New Terrorism?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27 (2004): 439-54; Neumann, Old and New, 2009; Field, "The 'New Terrorism': Revolution or Evolution," *Political Science Review* 7, No. 2 (2009): 195-207; Crenshaw, Old vs New, 2011.

25 See Kurtulus, The New Terrorism, 2011.

26 Ibid., 482.

27 Ibid., 485.

28 Ibid., 493.

29 Enders and Sandler, Transnational Terrorism, 2000.

30 Hoffman, Holy Terror, 1995.

31 Enders and Sandler, Transnational Terrorism, 2000, 308.

32 Ibid., 330.

33 Piazza, Islamist Terrorism, 2009.

34 Ibid., 63.

35 Romano et al., Correlates of Terror, 2019, 15.

36 Gary LaFree, Laura Dugan, "Global Terrorism and the Deadliest Groups since 2001," in *Peace and Conflict 2016*, eds. David Backer, Ravinder Bhavnani, and Paul Huth (New York: Routledge, 2016), 67-78.

37 Asal and Rurthemeyer, The Nature of the Beast, 2008.

38 Michael Stohl, "Don't Confuse Me with the Facts: Knowledge Claims and Terrorism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, No. 1 (2012): 38.

39 Burnstein, Armies of God, 2018, 14.

40 Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023.

41 Ibid., 817.

42 Stohl, Don't Confuse Me, 2012, 38-39.

43 Meagan Smith and Sean Zeigler, "Terrorism Before and After 9/11 – A More Dangerous World?" *Research and Politics* (October-December, 2017): 5.

44 Ibid., 6.

45 For example, Piazza, Islamist Terrorism, 2009; Henne, Ancient Fire, 2012; Burstein, Armies of God, 2018; Carter et al., Disaggregating Religiously Motivated Terrorism, 2023; Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023.

46 Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023, 816.

47 Jennifer Varriale Carson and Matthew Suppenbach, "The Global Jihadist Movement: The Most Lethal Ideology*?" Homicide Studies* 22, No. 1 (2018): 23.

48 Romano et al., Correlates of Terror, 2019, 14. Curiously, however, in their own analysis they do not examine the most consequential quantitative studies available on the lethality of religious terrorism (i.e. those discussed below). Why is unclear, but the omission further points to the need to undertake a critical review of the literature.

49 Piazza, Islamist Terrorism, 2009.

50 Ibid., 72.

51 Ibid., 66.

52 Ibid., 74.

53 Ibid., 65.

54 Graig R. Klein, "Ideology Isn't Everything: Transnational Terrorism, Recruitment Incentives, and Attack Casualties," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28 (2016): 868-887.

55 Ibid., 877.

56 Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023.

57 Mathew Capell and Emile Sahliyeh, "Suicide Terrorism: Is Religion the Critical Factor?" *Security Journal* 20: 276.

58 Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023, 819.

59 Ibid, 819.

60 Ibid., 819.

61 Henne, Ancient Fire, 2012.

62 Ibid., 52.

63 Ibid., 39.

64 Ibid., 53.

65 Burnstein, Armies of God, 2018, 14.

66 Ibid., 14.

67 Carter et al., Disaggregating Religiously Motivated Terrorism, 2023.

68 Ibid., 81-82.

69 Ibid., 83.

70 Ibid., 89.

71 Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023, 816.

72 Ibid., 811.

73 Levy argues that greater ideological intensity encourages greater terrorist lethality for three reasons: (1) the espousal of more abstract and less attainable goals reduces the likelihood of negotiations and heightens the willingness to be more brutal in local contexts; (2) more intense ideologies promote stronger group cohesion, which facilitates the retention of members while perpetrating horrible acts; and (3) more abstract ideologies facilitate the networking that assists with exchanges of information, weapons, and operational support (Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023, 811-812). He then uses jihadism in general as an indicator of ideological intensity (Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023, 817) and seeks to measure the relative intensity of jihadist groups by aligning the data on the lethality of attacks with a typology of jihadist groups, identifying "Local" groups as the least intense and "Apocalyptic" as the most (with "Revolutionary" and "Caliphal" types between). The adequacy of his overall approach and reasoning, for example whether it escapes a certain circularity and sufficiently differentiates being more "ideologically intense" from merely being "transnational," is debatable. These and other problems, however, do not impact his calculations of the increased lethality of jihadism overall, relative to other types of terrorism, using a more comprehensive dataset than attempted before.

74 Ibid., 819.

75 For example, Capell and Sahliyeh, Suicide Terrorism, 2007; Asal and Rethemeyer, The Nature of the Beast, 2008; Henne, Ancient Fire, 2012; Klein, Ideology Isn't Everything, 2016.

76 Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023, 818.

77 Ibid., 818.

78 Asal and Rethemeyer, The Nature of the Beast, 2008.

79 Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023, 819.

80 Ibid., 822.

81 Carson and Suppenbach, "Global Jihadist Movement" 2018.

82 Ibid., 18.

83 Ibid., 22.

84 Ibid., 19 and 22.

85 Ibid., 22.

86 Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, No. 4 (2015), 4.

87 Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen, and Emilie Oftedal, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, No. 6 (2016), 5.

88 Ibid.; Shandon Harris-Hogan, Lorne L. Dawson, and Amarnath Amarasingam, "A Comparative Analysis of the Nature and Evolution of the Domestic Jihadist Threat to Australia and Canada (2000–2020)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, No. 5 (2020): 77-102.

89 Britnee Carter, "When Civilians are Targets: The Fatal Effects of State Sponsored Religiously Motivated Terrorism," *Democracy and Security* 18, No. 1 (2022): 35-36.

90 Ibid, 31.

91 Ibid, 38.

92 Ibid, 39-40; This is in line with the earlier findings of Asal and Rethemeyer, Nature of the Beats, 2008.

93Ibid., 40.

94 Ibid, 43.

95 To a lesser extent there also is a positive and significant correlation with "the age of the group, the regime type of the state [targeted], and the presence of ethnic conflict" for both religiously motivated groups and state-sponsored groups (2022: 38).

96 Ibid., 33.

97 Ibid., 33.

98 Sebastian Jäckle and Marcel Baumann, "New Terrorism = Higher Brutality? An Empirical Test of the "Brutalization Thesis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, No. 5 (2017): 875-901.

99 Ibid., 898.

100 Carter et al., Disaggregating Religiously Motivated Terrorism, 2023; Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023.

101 A more fulsome and direct comparison of their methodologies and findings with those of Piazza, Henne, Carson & Suppenbach, and Levy to resolve this anomalous situation would be ideal but exceeds the limits of this review.

102 Romano et al., Correlates of Terror, 2019.

103 Crenshaw, Old vs New, 2011, 61.

104 Romano et al., Correlates of Terror, 2019, 5.

105 Kurtulus (2011: 488), however, questions whether this is a problem. He questions the way some researchers argue that groups like Hamas and Hezbullah are more political than religious. He notes the intrinsically territorial and communal nature of Sunni and Shi'a Islam, both normatively and historically, and the renewed emphasis placed on solidarity with the umma amongst contemporary Islamists, and then suggests the researchers calling into question the religiousness of such "hybrid" groups are relying on a distinction between religion and politics that is foreign to Islam. In considering these "hybrid" groups, he insists, much depends on the stated objectives of the groups. While in some instances Islam is being used to mobilize people for nation building, a relatively secular objective, in other instances, where the aim is establishing a theocratic order, the objective is decidedly anti-secular. The mere mixing of politics, territoriality, and religion, tells us little, and overall, it is common and orthodox for the latter (i.e. religion) to encompass the former.

106 Romano et al., Correlates of Terror, 2019, 7. The studies they cite are: A. Abadi, "Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism." Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research (2004); J.J. Andreas Freytag, D.M. Kruger, & F. Schneider, "The Origins of Terrorism: Cross Country Estimates on Socio-Economic Determinants of Terrorism." Economic of Security Working Paper Series (2010); A. Basuchoudhary & W.F. Shughart, "On Ethnic Conflict and the Origins of Terrorism," *Defence and Peace Economics* 21, No. 1 (2010): 65-87; G. S. Bird, B. Blomberg & G. D. Hess, "International Terrorism: Causes, Consequences, and Cures," *The World Economy* 31, No. 2 (2008): 255-274; B. Burgoon, "On Welfare and Terror: Social Welfare Policies and Political-Economic Roots of Terrorism," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, No. 2 (2006): 176-203; N. F. Campos & M. Gassebner, "International Terrorism, Political Instability, and the Escalation Effect." Institute for the Study of Labor, 2009, http://ftp.iza.org/dp4061.pdf; A. Dreher & M. Gassebner, "Does Political Proximity to the U. S. Cause Terror?" *Economics Letters* 99, No. 1 (2008): 27-29; T. Krieger & D. Meierrieks, "Terrorism in the Worlds of Welfare Capitalism," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 No. 6 (2010): 902-939; A. B. Kruger, *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); A. B. Kruger, "Kto Kogo?: A Cross-Country Study of the Origins and Targets of Terrorism," in *Terrorism, Economic Development, and Political Openness*, eds. P. Keefer & N. Layaza (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 148-173; J. A. Piazza, "Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?" *International Studies Quarterly* 52, No. 3 (2008): 469-488.

107 Ibid., 7.

108 Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023, 816.

109 Carson and Suppenbach, "Global Jihadist Movement" 2018, 23.

110 Romano et al., Correlates of Terror, 2019, 7.

111 There is an additional serious problem that also cannot be addressed adequately in this limited context: most analyses of religious terrorism, including those examining its lethality, never bother to define it, so implicitly we may be comparing somewhat different phenomena. In his famous essay in "Modern Terror: The Four Waves," (in *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, eds. A. Cronin and J. Ludes (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 46-74) David Rapoport differentiates the wave of religious terrorism from the three earlier waves of modern and secular terrorism, for example, by their use of sacred texts and historic examples to legitimate violence. Even more sweepingly, Mark

Juergensmeyer proposes that acts of terrorism "for which religion … provide[s] the motivation, the justification, the organization, and the world view" are religious terrorism (Juergensmeyer, *Mind of God,* 2003, 7). Alternatively, Heather Gregg argues that what makes religiously motivated terrorism unique is not just "the presence of scripture, religious symbols or adherents," but the goals they are fighting for, and she specifies three: "fomenting the apocalypse, creating a religious government, and religiously cleansing a state or area" (Gregg, Path to Salvation, 2014, 39). Few of these approaches, however, also specify what they mean by religion. This is quite typical of research on religion and terrorism, and it crucially limits the functionality of many discussions of religious terrorism. For my overall conceptions of religion see Lorne L. Dawson and Joel Thiessen, *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Perspective* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2014); but my most precise definition of religion is delineated in Lorne L. Dawson, "On References to the Transcendent in the Scientific Study of Religion: A Qualified Idealist Proposal," *Religion* 17, No. 4 (1987): 227-250.

112 For example, Burcu Pinar Alakoc, "When Suicide Kills: An Empirical Analysis of the Lethality of Suicide Terrorism," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 11, No. 8 (2017): 1-15; Marco Nilsson, "Hard and Soft Targets: The Lethality of Suicide Terrorism," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21 (2018): 101-117; Joseph Mroszczyk, "To Die or to Kill? An Analysis of Suicide Attack Lethality," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, No. 2 (2019): 346-366.

113 For example, Pape, Dying to Win, 2005; Martha Crenshaw, "Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review Essay," *Security Studies* 16, No. 1 (2007): 133-162; Assaf Mogahadam, *Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Leonard Weinberg and Ami Pehahzur, "Suicide Terrorism," *Religion Compass* 4, No. 4 (2010): 234-244.

114 Henne, Ancient Fire, 2012; Burstein, Armies of God, 2018.

115 Klein, Ideology Isn't Everything, 2016.

116 Piazza, Islamist Terrorism, 2009; Levy, Lethal Beliefs, 2023.

117 Carter et al., Disaggregating Religiously Motivated Terrorism, 2023.

118 Carter, When Civilians are Targets, 2022.

119 Kurtulus, The New Terrorism, 2011, 486.

120 Carter, When Civilians are Targets, 2022.

121 For example, Appleby, Ambivalence of the Sacred, 2000; Pratt, Religion and Extremism, 2018.

122 For example, Robert J. Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyō, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999); James W. Jones, *Blood That Cries Out from the Earth: The Psychology of Religious Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Juergensmeyer, Mind of God, 2003; Gregg, Three Theories, 2016; Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of The Islamic State* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015); Frances L. Flannery, *Understanding Apocalyptic Terrorism: Countering the Radical Mindset* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

123 Here again, though, the discussion must be taken up with more nuance, since most of the theorizing in question is about the nature and origins of religious violence in general and not terrorism *per se*, though many of the studies fold discussions of religious terrorism into their analyses (e.g., Juergensmeyer, Mind of God, 2003; Jones, Blood that Cries Out, 2008; C Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008); Armstrong, Fields of Blood, 2014). But sectarian violence, for example, cannot always be equated with terrorism.

124 Moghadam, Al Qaeda, 2008; Mohammed M. Hafez, "The Alchemy of Martyrdom: Jihadi Salafism and Debates over Suicide Bombings in the Muslim World," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38, No. 3 (2010): 364-378; Kurtulus, The New Terrorism, 2011, 486; Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst, 2016), 71-107; Dawson, Bringing Religiosity – Part II, 2021, 8-10.

125 Pieter Nanninga, "'Cleansing the Earth of the Stench of Shirk': The Islamic State's Violence as Acts of Purification," *Journal of Religion and Violence* 7, No. 2 (2019): 128-157.

126 Juergensmeyer, Mind of God, 2003; Buc, Holy War, 2015; Pratt, Religion and Extremism, 2018.

127 For example, Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," The Atlantic (Sept. 1990), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/. Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); McCants, Isis Apocalypse, 2015.

128 Nevertheless, it is important to note, as others stress (e.g. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Armstrong, Fields of Blood, 2014), that far more people have died from the mass violence generated by political and nationalist movements. In the

twentieth century alone, tens of millions died during the First and Second World Wars, the Holocaust, the purges of Stalin, the Cultural Revolution in China, and the slaughter unleashed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. While religion has a palpable record of slaughter throughout history, through wars, crusades, and pogroms, it is far from the most dangerous source of overall violence.

PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Uncovering the Bias and Prejudice in Reporting on Islamist and Non-Islamist Terrorist Attacks in British and US Newspapers

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**Abstract:** This article presents an empirical analysis that unveils systematic biases in how major US and UK print media outlets portray terrorist attacks carried out by Muslim versus non-Muslim perpetrators. Employing computational text analysis of a corpus spanning over 10,233 newspaper articles published in *The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, The Guardian, The Daily Mail*, and *The Telegraph* from 2003–2018, the study reveals two key disparities. First, Muslim attacks tend to elicit more negatively valenced emotional language, which may cultivate fear and stigmatisation in Muslim communities. Second, such attacks garner greater sustained media attention over time compared to those committed by non-Muslims, which exhibit a sharper decline in coverage beyond the immediate aftermath. These differences in framing and agenda-setting illuminate how media representations can contribute to socially constructing particular forms of ideological violence as more existentially threatening. By empirically documenting biases in terrorism coverage, the article raises critical concerns about journalistic objectivity and the media's role in perpetuating prejudicial narratives that enable policies targeting Muslims while minimising other security threats. The findings underscore the urgency of promoting more responsible reporting practices and inclusive public discourse surrounding extremism and its underlying drivers.

**Keywords:** Media representation, terrorism, Islamophobia, framing, agenda setting, content analysis

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# Introduction

In 2020, the Global Terrorism Index reported a 250 percent increase in far-right attacks in North America, Oceania, and Western Europe since 2014, with deaths increasing by 709 percent during the same period. Meanwhile, terror-related incidents carried out by Muslim extremists have decreased in the West.[1] Despite these trends, mainstream media outlets have tended to cover Muslim-perpetrated terrorist attacks more negatively than those committed by non-Muslims.[2] According to a recent study, attacks carried out by Muslims were 4.5 times more likely to receive media coverage than attacks committed by non-Muslims, demonstrating a striking difference in media attention depending on the identity of the perpetrator.[3] While this and other studies have provided evidence of differences in the rate of media coverage depending on the identity of the perpetrator[4], systematic, large-scale analysis of this phenomenon remains scarce. Additionally, there is limited analysis of the variations in language that the mainstream media uses to report on these various types of attacks.

To empirically assess whether disparity in the coverage of terrorist attacks is widespread among Western media outlets, this article analyses a corpus of 12,319 newspaper articles published in six prominent US and UK newspapers covering 32 high-casualty attacks committed between 2003 and 2018 by Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators.[5] Based on the results of computerised text analysis methods, this article suggests that, in addition to the difference in reporting frequency previously highlighted by other scholars, the reporting of terrorist attacks committed by Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators differs in two other regards. First, terrorist attacks by non-Muslims tend to receive more intensive coverage in the first days after the attack, while Muslim-perpetrated attacks captivate media attention for a longer time post-attack. Second, when describing an attack by a non-Muslim, newspaper articles frequently use language with fewer negative connotations than when describing an attack by a Muslim perpetrator.

The significance of this research lies in its ability to elucidate the nature of differential representation found in media coverage of far-right and Islamist[6] attacks. With the pervasiveness of Islamophobia in the post-9/11 period, there is a tendency to describe Muslim events and lives in Islamophobic terms, including in the media.[7] The objective of the current study is to determine the disparity in representations of Muslim-perpetrated versus non-Muslim-perpetrated terror attacks in articles published over a fifteen-year period in mainstream US and UK newspapers. Alongside the rate of reporting, this research also provides important insight into differences in the language used in such reporting.

First, the article provides background on the framing of terrorism in media discourse and the role of perpetrator identity in shaping media narratives. It reviews relevant literature from critical terrorism studies, media studies, and related fields on media representations of Muslims and Islam. Second, the methodology section outlines the approach to data collection and analysis, including the selection of terrorist attacks from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the sampling of newspaper articles from major US and UK outlets, and the use of computational methods to analyse the linguistic characteristics and temporal patterns of media coverage. Third, the results section presents quantitative findings on differences in the emotional tone and volume of coverage between Muslim-perpetrated and non-Muslim-perpetrated attacks over time. Finally, the discussion examines the theoretical and social implications of the results, situating the findings within broader debates around media bias, agenda-setting, and the construction of risk perceptions. We argue that systematic disparities in media framing related to perpetrator identity can reinforce negative stereotypes, distort threat assessments, and further marginalise minority communities.

## Terrorism and the Media

The framing of terrorism and its perpetrators has also been a key concern in critical terrorism studies, religious studies, and postcolonial literature.[8] These fields offer valuable insights into the politics and power dynamics that shape dominant narratives around terrorism. Scholars in religious studies have examined how media representations can contribute to the 'othering' of Islam and Muslims. Ewards Said's seminal work highlights how reductive Orientalist tropes depicting Muslims as uncivilised and threatening have long pervaded Western media and political discourse.[9] In the British press, reportage on Islam often reproduces a narrow set of stereotypes fixated on violence and cultural differences.[10] Such patterns construe Muslims as a 'suspect community' and can fuel Islamophobia. Postcolonial theorists situate these representational practices within broader histories of empire and the unequal global power structures that endure today. The figure of the Muslim terrorist has become a key foil against which Western nations assert their supposed moral superiority.[11] This framing serves to justify military interventions abroad and the erosion of civil liberties at home, particularly for Muslims and those racialised as Muslims. Critical terrorism studies, in turn, challenge the field's traditionally state-centric orientation to interrogate terrorism as a discursive category and tool of the powerful.[12] 'Terrorism' is not a neutral descriptor, but a label selectively applied to delegitimise certain acts of violence while sanctioning others.[13] Critics have critiqued the disproportionate application of the 'terrorist' label to Muslims, even when other groups commit more attacks, as reflecting an Islamophobic bias.[14]

Despite a large amount of research on the media's coverage of terrorist attacks and Muslim identity, there are still notable gaps in the literature, particularly surrounding linguistic differences in media reports and quantitative analysis of the coverage. Unsurprisingly, there is a significant body of literature looking at the media's role and influence on public opinion and policymaking[15], while there is a more specific sub-section of research that studies the nexus between the media and terrorism and violence.[16] The literature on media coverage of terrorism and Muslims highlights several key themes relevant to the present study. First, the media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and policy responses to terrorist incidents.[17] By selectively allocating attention to certain attacks, the media can signal to audiences that these events are worthy of concern and in need of solutions.[18] The concept of "focusing events"[19] is useful for understanding how dramatic, violent incidents like terrorist attacks can concentrate public attention in ways that create openings for policy change.

However, not all terrorist attacks receive equal coverage. Several factors have been shown to influence both the amount and nature of media attention, including perpetrator nationality[20], the number and identity of casualties[21], and crucially, the perpetrator's perceived religious affiliation.[22] A robust body of scholarship documents pervasive negative biases in Western media representations of Muslims and Islam, particularly in the context of terrorism and violence.[23] These stereotypical portrayals have been linked to increased public support for policies that disproportionately target and harm Muslims.[24] The tone and emotionality of coverage appears to be a key mechanism driving these effects. The more threatening news coverage of terrorism elicits greater anxiety and hawkish policy attitudes among viewers.[25] Major American newspapers applied the "terrorism" label inconsistently when perpetrators were not linked to Islam, suggesting that the term itself carries an implicit Muslim association.[26] There is a qualitative difference in how media depict Muslims within the US (as largely peaceful) versus abroad (as dangerous), indicating that the geographic context of attacks may also shape representations.[27] The expectation that the identity of the perpetrator will influence the tone and duration of media coverage is rooted in the broader dynamics of media framing and agenda-setting.[28]As discussed earlier, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions

and policy responses by selectively emphasising certain aspects of an issue or event.[29] In the context of terrorism, the media's framing choices can powerfully influence how the public understands and evaluates the nature of the threat, the groups involved, and the appropriate societal responses.[30]

Research has consistently shown that media framing of Muslims and Islam in Western contexts has been predominantly negative and stereotypical, often focusing on themes of violence, extremism, and cultural otherness.[31] This pervasive pattern of representation can create an implicit association between Islam and terrorism in the public imagination, leading to heightened threat perceptions and support for punitive policies.[32] From this perspective, the framing of a terrorist attack by a Muslim perpetrator as part of a broader narrative of Islamic extremism and civilisational conflict amplifies perceptions of fear and risk. In contrast, terrorist attacks committed by non-Muslim perpetrators, especially non-white perpetrators, are framed as isolated incidents or as the result of individual pathology, rather than as a systemic threat.[33] This differential framing can lead to a lower sense of collective danger and a quicker dissipation of public attention. The perpetrator's identity thus serves as a key heuristic cue that journalists and editors use, whether consciously or unconsciously, to guide their framing choices and determine the newsworthiness and salience of a particular attack.

These framing dynamics, in turn, shape the media's agenda-setting function by influencing the relative prominence and duration of coverage given to various attacks. In line with agenda-setting theory, the amount and prominence of coverage devoted to an issue or event is a strong indicator of its perceived importance and can significantly influence public attitudes and policy priorities.[34] By providing more extensive and prolonged coverage of attacks carried out by Muslim perpetrators, the media may heighten the salience of Islamic extremism as a political issue and maintain public attention on the perceived threat of Muslim violence. Conversely, by devoting less sustained coverage to attacks by non-Muslim perpetrators, the media may dampen the sense of urgency around other forms of extremist violence and limit public pressure for a robust policy response. Crucially, these framing and agenda-setting processes are not necessarily the result of deliberate bias on the part of individual journalists or news organisations. Rather, they reflect how cultural stereotypes, institutional routines, and market imperatives shape media content.[35] Nevertheless, by systematically privileging certain narratives and voices over others, media coverage can contribute to the reproduction of dominant ideologies and power structures, with significant implications for public attitudes and policy outcomes. Through this theoretical lens, examining the tone and duration of media coverage of terrorist attacks can provide valuable insights into how the perpetrator's identity shapes the social construction of risk and the perceived urgency of different forms of extremist violence. It can also throw light on the role of the media in reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives about Islam, terrorism, and national security. By empirically assessing these relationships, the present study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of media representation and public opinion in the context of terrorism.

In terms of coverage duration, terrorist attacks, while rare, tend to attract disproportionate media attention relative to other violent crimes.[36] The 9/11 attacks in particular as a "made-for-television" event that commanded an exceptional degree of live, repeated coverage.[37] The concept of an "issue attention cycle"[38] has been applied to media coverage more broadly, suggesting a pattern whereby the salience of events spikes and then gradually declines. However, the rate of this decline differs across incidents in ways that may depend on perpetrator identity. Building on these insights, the present study aims to assess whether systematic differences exist in the tone and duration of US and UK media coverage of terrorist attacks based on the Muslim versus non-Muslim identity of perpetrators. By applying computational and quantitative techniques

to a large corpus of newspaper articles, we contribute evidence on specific linguistic and temporal disparities in coverage that may shed light on the mechanisms through which biased representations of terrorism are constructed and sustained in Western media discourse. Our focus on differential language use and the trajectory of coverage over time offers a novel perspective that complements existing work and provides a foundation for future comparative scholarship.

The focus on the emotional tone and duration of media coverage in this study is motivated by the recognition that these variables serve as important indicators of the media's underlying orientations and can have significant impacts on public perceptions and attitudes. The emotional tone of media coverage, as reflected in the use of language evoking fear, anger, or other affective responses, provides insight into the implicit frames and narratives that journalists and editors employ in their reporting. As discussed earlier, media framing plays a powerful role in shaping public understandings of terrorism and can influence the perceived severity of the threat and the groups or communities that are stigmatised as a result.[39] By systematically examining variations in the emotional tenor of coverage across attacks with Muslim versus non-Muslim perpetrators, this study aims to uncover patterns of bias and stereotyping that may contribute to the reproduction of Islamophobic sentiment and the construction of Muslims as a suspect community.[40] Moreover, the emotional tone of coverage has been shown to have direct effects on audience reactions and policy preferences. Experimental research has demonstrated that exposure to news stories that evoke fear and anger can lead to increased support for punitive and restrictive policies, such as military intervention, surveillance, and immigration restrictions.[41] By documenting disparities in the affective framing of terrorist attacks based on perpetrator identity, this study can shed light on the potential role of the media in shaping public attitudes and creating a climate conducive to the erosion of civil liberties and the targeting of particular communities.

The duration of media coverage, as measured by the number of articles published over time and the rate of decline in coverage, serves as an indicator of the perceived newsworthiness and salience of different terrorist attacks. As agenda-setting theory posits, the amount and persistence of media attention devoted to an issue is a key determinant of its prominence on the public agenda. When the media provides sustained coverage of an attack over an extended period, it signals to audiences that the event is of high significance and warrants continued concern and engagement. Conversely, when coverage of an attack quickly dissipates, it suggests that the incident is of lesser importance and does not require prolonged public attention or policy action. By comparing the duration of coverage for attacks with Muslim versus non-Muslim perpetrators, this study aims to illuminate disparities in the perceived public significance of different forms of terrorism. If attacks by Muslim perpetrators consistently receive longer and more persistent coverage compared to similar attacks by non-Muslim perpetrators, it may indicate a media bias that privileges certain narratives of threat and contributes to the disproportionate focus of public attention on the spectre of Islamic extremism. Such disparities in coverage duration can have important consequences for policy priorities, resource allocation, and the overall shape of public discourse on terrorism and security. Examining the intersection of emotional tone and coverage duration further allows for a more nuanced understanding of how these dimensions of media coverage may interact to shape public perceptions over time. For example, if attacks by Muslim perpetrators are both framed in more emotionally charged terms and receive more sustained coverage compared to attacks by non-Muslim perpetrators, it suggests a compounding effect that may amplify public fears and policy responses in ways that disproportionately target Muslim communities.

By focusing on these critical aspects of media coverage and their potential impacts on public attitudes and discourse, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of the media in constructing social and political responses to terrorism. Uncovering systemic disparities in coverage based on perpetrator identity can inform efforts to challenge biased reporting practices, promote more responsible journalism, and foster a more informed and inclusive public dialogue about the nature and scope of terrorist threats. At the same time, by illuminating the ways in which media coverage may contribute to the stigmatisation of particular communities and the erosion of civil liberties, this research can help to galvanise support for policies and initiatives that prioritise social justice, equality, and the protection of human rights in the face of terrorist violence.

## Content and Discourse Analysis

There are five approaches identified as the most common for studying media content. The first is the hermeneutic approach, which provides an interpretation of the media frames within a certain cultural ecosystem.[42] Second, the linguistic approach focuses on the placement and structure of words and sentences based on four characteristics: syntax, script, theme, and rhetoric.[43] Third, in the manual holistic approach, frames are identified within a sample of articles and defined within a codebook, after which the entire body of the text is also coded. However, this approach encounters a problem of external validity, as the frames are identified and created by researchers and are thus subject to confirmation bias. The fourth approach is known as the deductive approach, which essentially involves pre-defining the frames and coding units of analysis within a frame.[44] The final approach is the computer-assisted approach, which is used in this study.

The computer-assisted approach has been used to distil topics from textual datasets so large that comprehension cannot be feasibly attempted by reading them.[45] For example, this approach has been applied to a corpus of statistics literature composed of 2,500 news articles and 1,400 technical abstracts containing a total of more than 45,000 unique words.[46] Others have employed the computer-assisted approach to extract latent topics and frames from large textual datasets derived from other media, including internet forum posts,[47] educational materials,[48] as well as aviation incident reports.[49]

While the computer-assisted approach offers the distinct advantage of facilitating the analysis of extremely large textual datasets, scholars seeking to analyse how terrorist incidents are reported in the media have traditionally eschewed computer-assisted approaches in favour of more traditional means of discourse analysis. For example, reporting of the neoconservative American political magazine *The Weekly Standard* showed that the religious identity of Muslim perpetrators was often conflated with their violent acts.[50] As such, this 'Muslim' identity is seen as a static concept directly associated with an entire religion. Furthermore, a 2011 survey of media coverage of terrorist attacks on US soil since 9/11 found that even if there was only spurious proof of the perpetrator having a link with Islam, it nonetheless became the central point in the coverage.[51] The survey also showed that domestic non-Islamic terrorism (or "homegrown" terrorism) was considered much less important than Muslim terrorism, which was more often linked to a greater international threat. This domestic terrorism was also normalised, with more focus on the possible mental illness of the perpetrators.[52]

A study of the representation of Muslims in US media found that Muslims were often represented as more aggressive than adherents of other religions.[53] Additionally, their identity was constructed in such a way as to draw a division between those of Muslim faith and the wider American public, suggesting that Muslim Americans have dual loyalties. Similarly, a quantitative critical discourse analysis of British newspapers also showed that Muslim and

Irish communities were often presented as having dual loyalties.[54] Finally, it is important to note that these representations of Muslim communities also differ depending on whether the communities are located inside or outside the country,[55] as found in a study of media coverage following 9/11. In the aftermath of an attack, domestic Muslim communities are framed as peaceful, whereas Muslims abroad are linked to notions of violent jihad.[56]

Building on these works and working with larger datasets, scholars have recently begun to leverage computer-assisted approaches to study disparities in the way terrorist attacks are reported. For example, when focused on the differences in framing between UK and US news coverage and found that in the US, the coverage is largely event-oriented, whereas in the UK, the coverage seems to be more context-orientated.[57] Perhaps unsurprisingly, American newspapers generally advocated a military response to terrorism, which largely eschewed diplomatic options, whereas British newspapers tended to favour both diplomatic and military solutions. The causes underlying the disparities in media coverage of terrorist attacks remain unclear, however.[58] By employing both computer-assisted techniques and more traditional approaches, scholars have highlighted the importance of examining disparities not only in the frequency of coverage of terrorist attacks but also in the representation and framing of the event and the creation of perpetrator identity based on overt religious affiliation (or lack thereof). This is particularly important since the performativity of language has a certain degree of influence over an audience. As the media is seen as a meaning-maker for their audience, media discourse has a direct effect on the interpretation of events and their variables.[59] The choice of vocabulary and creation of perpetrator identity by the media are part of this entire process of meaning-making.

The literature surveyed thus far highlights the media's role in shaping public perceptions and discourses around terrorism. The specific mechanisms through which the identity of perpetrators may influence the emotional tenor and intensity of attack coverage, however, remain underexplored. The interplay between fear, terrorism, and media consumption offers a useful theoretical lens.[60] Drawing on a series of survey experiments, threatening media coverage of terrorism can significantly increase feelings of fear, anxiety, and risk perception among viewers.[61] Importantly, it is found that the emotional tone of terrorism coverage is a stronger predictor of threat perceptions than the factual information conveyed. This suggests that variations in the affective dimensions of coverage based on perpetrator identity could have differential impacts on audience response. The concept of "coverage duration" from communication studies further illuminates how media attention to different types of attacks may vary. Incidents of terrorism tend to attract significantly more coverage compared to other violent crimes, indicating the media's tendency to allocate disproportionate space to these events.[62] The idea of the "issue attention cycle" describes how coverage of major events evolves, with an initial spike in reporting followed by a gradual decline.[63] Crucially, they note that the pace of this decline can differ based on the perceived salience and resonance of the incident.

Together, this scholarship provides a theoretical basis for expecting that the identity of the perpetrator will shape both the emotional intensity and temporal scope of terrorism coverage. Given the prevalence of Islamophobic sentiment and the frequent conflation of Islam with terrorism[64], attacks by Muslim perpetrators may receive more threatening framing and total coverage than equivalent incidents by non-Muslim actors. Specifically, we hypothesise that:

$H_1$: Media coverage of terrorist attacks by Muslim perpetrators will feature more negatively valanced emotional language compared to coverage of non-Muslim perpetrators.

$H_{2a}$: Attacks carried out by Muslim perpetrators will receive more overall media attention than attacks by non-Muslim perpetrators.

$H_{2b}$: Coverage of Muslim-perpetrated attacks will exhibit a slower rate of decline, remaining salient in the media for a longer duration relative to non-Muslim attacks.

# Methodology

To analyse the existence of differences in the media's portrayal of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslims versus non-Muslims, this study involves three distinct steps. First, using the renowned Global Terrorism Database, we identified 32 major terrorist incidents, of which nineteen were carried out by Muslim perpetrators and the remaining thirteen by non-Muslims. Secondly, we selected newspaper articles from six major English-language newspapers focusing on each of these 32 attacks. Thirdly, the text of these articles was extracted and pre-processed for analysis.

Several key criteria guided the selection of terrorist attacks and media outlets for this study. First, we focused on attacks that occurred in Western Europe, Canada, and the United States between 2003 and 2018 to capture a period of heightened concern about terrorism post-9/11 while maintaining a degree of cultural and political similarity across the countries included. We initially identified attacks using the GTD, a comprehensive and widely used source that applies a consistent definition of terrorism across contexts.[65] To filter for incidents likely to attract significant media coverage, we selected attacks resulting in at least four fatalities, excluding perpetrators. This threshold aligns with prior studies of media coverage of terrorism[66] and provides an objective criterion for inclusion.

In terms of media sources, we focused on high-circulation newspapers based in the United States (*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*) and the United Kingdom (*The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Guardian*) to capture influential outlets across the political spectrum in two Western countries with significant global media reach. These outlets are also well-represented in major news databases like Factiva, enabling comprehensive coverage of our selected attacks. By including both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, we account for potential differences in reporting styles and audiences. However, we acknowledge several limitations of these selection criteria. First, we cannot discuss potential differences in incident coverage in other regions due to distinct geopolitical and cultural factors, as we only include attacks in Western countries. Second, setting a relatively high casualty threshold means our findings may not generalise to less lethal attacks. Third, our focus on traditional print media does not capture the growing role of online and social media in shaping narratives around terrorism.

To mitigate the impact of these limitations, we employed several strategies in our analysis. First, in our models, we included the number of casualties as a covariate to account for the potential confounding effect of attack severity on media coverage. Second, we conducted sensitivity analyses using alternative casualty thresholds to assess the robustness of our findings. Finally, while our data does not directly address digital media, we situate our findings within the broader context of a changing media landscape and highlight this as a key area for future research. Despite these limitations, we believe our approach offers valuable insights into patterns of media coverage of terrorism in the Western context. We aim to provide a rigorous empirical foundation for understanding how the identity of perpetrators shapes the framing and narrating of these incidents for public consumption, by systematically analysing a large corpus of articles from influential news sources over a significant time period.

## Methods

The data for this study comprises media coverage of terrorist attacks that had more than four fatalities (excluding the perpetrators in cases of suicide) and were carried out in Western Europe, Canada, or the United States between 2003 and 2018. All the attacks and their details are pulled from the Global Terrorism Database.[67] The minimum fatality criterion was introduced because the vast majority (95.3 percent) of incidents in the GTD involved no fatalities and therefore received minimal media coverage. Based on these conditions, 32 events were selected from the GTD dataset. Single events that the GTD split into multiple attacks, such as the 2004 Madrid bombings, were also merged into one event with a single perpetrator identity.

*Table 1. Summary of Event Dataset (Casualties represents the sum of wounded and killed)*

| Event | Date | Country | Killed* | Wounded* | Ideological categories |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Madrid attacks | 2004-3-11 | Spain | 191 | 1,800 | Al-Qaeda |
| London bombings | 2005-7-7 | UK | 56 | 784 | Al-Qaeda |
| Jokela School shooting | 2007-11-7 | Finland | 9 | 13 | Neo-Fascist extremists |
| Fort Hood shootings | 2009-11-5 | US | 13 | 32 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Norway attacks | 2011-7-22 | Norway | 77 | 75 | Right-wing extremists |
| Wisconsin Sikh Temple shooting | 2012-8-5 | US | 7 | 4 | White supremacists/nationalists |
| Charlie Hebdo attacks | 2015-1-7 | France | 17 | 15 | Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula |
| Charleston Church shooting | 2015-6-17 | US | 9 | 0 | White supremacists/nationalists |
| Chattanooga Shootings | 2015-7-16 | US | 6 | 2 | Muslim extremists |
| Umpqua Community College shooting | 2015-10-1 | US | 10 | 7 | Incel extremists |
| Paris Attacks | 2015-11-13 | France | 132 | 293 | Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant |
| San Bernardino attack | 2015-12-2 | US | 16 | 17 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Brussels bombings | 2016-3-22 | Belgium | 35 | 270 | Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant |
| Orlando Shootings | 2016-6-12 | US | 50 | 53 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Dallas Police shooting | 2016-7-7 | US | 6 | 9 | Anti-White extremists |
| Nice truck attack | 2016-7-14 | France | 87 | 433 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Munich shooting | 2016-7-22 | Germany | 10 | 27 | Anti-Immigrant extremists |
| Berlin Truck attack | 2016-12-19 | Germany | 12 | 48 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Fort Lauderdale airport shooting | 2017-1-6 | US | 5 | 6 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Quebec City Mosque shooting | 2017-1-29 | Canada | 6 | 19 | Right-wing extremists |
| Westminster attack | 2017-3-22 | UK | 6 | 50 | Muslim extremists |
| Stockholm Truck attack | 2017-4-7 | Sweden | 5 | 14 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Manchester Arena Bombing | 2017-5-22 | UK | 23 | 119 | Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant |
| London Bridge attack | 2017-6-3 | UK | 11 | 48 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Barcelona attacks | 2017-8-17 | Spain | 20 | 107 | Muslim extremists |
| Las Vegas shooting | 2017-10-1 | US | 59 | 851 | Anti-Government extremists |
| New York City truck attack | 2017-10-31 | US | 8 | 13 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |
| Stoneman Douglas HS shooting | 2018-2-14 | US | 17 | 17 | White supremacists/nationalists |
| Toronto ramming attack | 2018-4-23 | Canada | 10 | 15 | Incel extremists |
| Sante Fe High School shooting | 2018-5-18 | US | 10 | 14 | Neo-Nazi extremists |
| Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting | 2018-10-27 | US | 11 | 7 | Anti-Semitic extremists |
| Strasbourg attack | 2018-12-11 | France | 5 | 11 | Jihadi-inspired extremists |

Overall, attacks carried out by Muslim perpetrators had 4,813 total casualties (i.e. dead or wounded), while those carried out by non-Muslims had a total of 1,299 casualties. Specifically, Muslim perpetrators caused the deaths of 698 people and wounded 4,115 within Western Europe, the United States, and Canada, whereas non-Muslim terrorists caused the deaths of 241 people and wounded another 1,058.

## Newspaper Selection

We selected the six newspapers in this study based on their prominence, circulation, and influence in the US and UK media markets. For the United States, we selected *The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today*. People widely regard *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* as two of the most influential newspapers in the country, boasting a combined daily print and digital circulation of over 1.5 million and 1 million, respectively.[68] *USA Today* is the most widely circulated newspaper in the US, with a daily print and digital circulation of over 2.2 million.[69] Other media outlets, policymakers, and the public frequently cite all three newspapers due to their strong international focus.

For the UK, we selected *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Telegraph*. *The Guardian* is a leading left-leaning newspaper with a daily print and digital circulation of over 110,000.[70] *The Daily Mail* is the UK's second-largest daily newspaper, with a circulation of over 980,000[71], and is known for its conservative editorial stance. *The Telegraph* is another prominent right-leaning newspaper, with a daily circulation of over 310,000.[72] These three newspapers represent a diverse range of political perspectives and have significant influence on public discourse in the UK. Given our focus on US and UK media coverage, we limited our analysis to terrorist attacks occurring within these two countries. We made this decision to ensure that the selected news outlets would likely devote significant attention to the incidents, given that media coverage of domestic events typically exceeds that of international events.[73] By focusing on attacks in the United States and the United Kingdom, we aim to capture the most salient and impactful incidents in terms of media attention and public interest.

To gather data representing the media coverage of these 32 events, we turned to the Factiva Global News database, from which we extracted relevant articles from the six selected newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* from the US, and *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Daily Mail* from the UK.[74] These newspapers were selected due to their wide readership, high posting frequency (as per Factiva), and their focus on a variety of social and economic news. In addition, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and *The Telegraph* are of the same type, namely daily broadsheet newspapers that have similar linguistic traits. To diversify the collected data, *USA Today* and *The Daily Mail* were added as middle-market or tabloid newspapers.[75] The timeframe for the collection of articles is from the day of the event up until four weeks post-event. This time period is chosen so as to achieve the potential for maximum correlation between the public and media agendas, making it an important period.[76]

## Attack Selection

To identify relevant terrorist attacks for this study, we relied on the GTD, a comprehensive and widely used source that applies a consistent definition of terrorism across contexts. We focused on attacks occurring in the United States and the United Kingdom between 2003 and 2018, a period that captures the heightened concern about terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 while also providing a sufficiently long timeframe to observe potential changes in media coverage over time.

To minimise concerns about cherry-picking incidents, we applied an objective threshold for inclusion based on the number of fatalities. Specifically, we included all attacks that resulted in at least four deaths, excluding the perpetrators. Previous research suggests that attacks with higher casualty counts tend to receive more extensive media coverage,[77] which led us to choose this threshold. By setting a clear and consistent criterion for inclusion, we aim to mitigate potential biases in case selection and ensure that our analysis focuses on the most high-profile and impactful incidents.

However, we acknowledge that this approach has some limitations. First, if we focus solely on fatalities, we may exclude attacks that caused significant injuries or property damage but did not meet the four-death threshold. Second, our reliance on the GTD restricts our sample to incidents that align with the database's definition of terrorism, potentially excluding all instances of political violence. Despite these limitations, we believe that our approach provides a transparent and objective basis for case selection that helps to mitigate concerns about cherry-picking and ensures a focus on the most salient attacks in terms of media coverage and public interest.

## *Sample Characteristics*

The final sample included 32 terrorist attacks meeting our inclusion criteria, with nineteen perpetrated by individuals classified as Muslim and thirteen perpetrated by non-Muslim individuals. To provide a more detailed picture of the attacks in our sample, we calculated descriptive statistics for key variables of interest.

In terms of fatalities, attacks perpetrated by Muslim individuals resulted in a total of 698 deaths ($M = 36.74$, $SD = 58.81$, $Mdn = 14$), while assaults perpetrated by non-Muslim individuals resulted in a total of 241 deaths ($M = 18.54$, $SD = 20.40$, $Mdn = 10$). The higher mean and median fatalities for Muslim-perpetrated attacks suggest that these incidents tended to be more lethal on average, although there was also greater variability in the number of deaths (as indicated by the larger standard deviation). Muslim-perpetrated attacks resulted in a total of 4,115 injuries ($M = 216.58$, $SD = 518.39$, $Mdn = 48$), compared to 1,058 injuries for non-Muslim-perpetrated attacks ($M = 81.38$, $SD = 231.15$, $Mdn = 14$). Again, the higher mean and median values for Muslim-perpetrated attacks suggest that these incidents tended to result in more injuries, with greater variability across attacks. It is important to note that these descriptive statistics are based on a relatively small sample of high-profile attacks and may not be representative of all terrorist incidents during this period. Moreover, the larger standard deviations for Muslim-perpetrated attacks indicate greater variability in the scale of these incidents, which could potentially skew the overall figures. Nonetheless, these statistics provide valuable context for understanding the nature of the attacks included in our analysis and highlight the importance of accounting for potential differences in attack severity when examining media coverage.

## *Accounting for Attack Severity*

Given the descriptive statistics presented above, our sample has significant differences in the average number of fatalities and injuries between Muslim-perpetrated and non-Muslim-perpetrated attacks. To account for this imbalance and its potential impact on media coverage, we included measures of attack severity as covariates in our analyses.

Specifically, for each attack, we recorded the total number of fatalities (excluding perpetrators) and the total number of injuries. All models examining differences in media coverage between Muslim-perpetrated and non-Muslim-perpetrated attacks included these two variables as

covariates. By statistically controlling for the severity of each incident, we can more accurately assess the independent effect of perpetrator ideology on media coverage, above and beyond any differences in the scale of the attacks themselves.

In our main analyses, we used the raw counts of fatalities and injuries as covariates. However, to ensure the robustness of our findings, we also conducted sensitivity analyses using log-transformed counts and categorical measures of attack severity (e.g. attacks with 0–10 fatalities, 11–50 fatalities, etc.). These alternative specifications yielded substantively similar results to our main findings, suggesting that the observed differences in media coverage are not solely a function of differences in attack severity.

It is important to note that including fatalities and injuries as covariates helps to mitigate the impact of imbalanced attack severity on our findings, but it does not completely eliminate this issue. These measures may not fully capture other aspects of attack severity, such as the symbolic significance of the target and the level of property damage. Nonetheless, by explicitly accounting for the two most salient measures of attack severity in our analyses, we aim to provide a more rigorous and unbiased assessment of the relationship between perpetrator ideology and media coverage.

## *Data Sources and Limitations*

The GTD is widely recognised as one of the most comprehensive and reliable databases of terrorist incidents worldwide, covering events from 1970 to the present.[78] However, it is important to acknowledge and discuss the potential limitations and biases inherent in this data source. First, the GTD is based on publicly available information, primarily drawn from media reports and other open-source materials. This reliance on media reporting means that the database may be subject to the same biases and limitations as the media itself, such as underreporting certain types of incidents or overemphasising more sensational attacks.[79] Moreover, media coverage of terrorism can vary across countries and time periods, which may affect the consistency and completeness of the data. Second, the GTD's definition of terrorism, while widely accepted, is not without controversy. The database defines terrorism as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation".[80] The definition may not encompass all forms of political violence, or its application may vary across different contexts. Additionally, the classification of an incident as terrorism can be subject to political and ideological biases, both in the media reporting and in the coding process itself. Third, while the GTD makes efforts to verify and triangulate information from multiple sources, the accuracy and completeness of the data may vary depending on the availability and reliability of the information for each incident. Attacks in countries with limited media freedom or in conflict zones may restrict access to information, making this particularly true.

Another limitation of the current study is its focus on a specific set of Western countries (the United States and the United Kingdom) and a limited number of media outlets within those countries. While this focus allowed for a detailed analysis of high-profile attacks and influential newspapers, it does limit the generalisability of the findings to other geographical and media contexts. Future research could expand the scope to include a more diverse range of countries and media sources, including non-Western and non-English language outlets, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of global media coverage patterns. Additionally, incorporating a wider variety of media types, such as television, radio, and digital-only platforms, could offer valuable insights into potential differences across media formats. Despite these limitations, we believe that the GTD remains the best available source for systematically identifying and comparing terrorist attacks across countries and time periods. By focusing on high-profile

attacks with significant casualties, we aim to mitigate some of the potential biases in media reporting and data collection. We recognise the limitations of our findings and urge future research to further scrutinise and enhance the data sources and methodologies employed in the study of terrorism and its media coverage.

## Data Processing

Factiva contains both print and online media sources, both of which are considered in this study. A search query was built around each of the 32 terrorist events we examined. The challenge in creating these search queries was that they needed to be as inclusive as possible while excluding less relevant material. For example, the query for the Madrid attack was first composed so that only articles including the terms "attack" and "Madrid" were included. However, this also returned articles about the members of the Real Madrid football club who play in attack positions. Consequently, more precise terms were used. Each search query was designed to find the name of the perpetrator and the city within a timeframe from the event to four weeks afterwards. These search queries yielded 12,319 articles, containing a total of 11,783,758 words. After further analysis of the entire dataset, 2,096 articles were removed. These were either duplicates, video/picture descriptions, or irrelevant articles. The final dataset included 7,349 articles about attacks perpetrated by Muslims and 2,874 about attacks perpetrated by non-Muslims, for a total of 10,223 articles.

The data were coded for whether the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks were Muslim or non-Muslim. As there were no events involving multiple perpetrators of different faiths, the coding is binary without exception. It is important to note that this variable is not a dichotomy between a religious identity (Muslim) and a political identity (right-wing). Rather, it is a comparison between perpetrators who are Muslim and those who are affiliated with any other religion or political identity. Hence, it contrasts the presence versus absence of Muslim faith regarding the perpetrator(s). Events are coded as being carried out by a Muslim if the perpetrator was recognised as being Muslim by the GTD, while any other non-Muslim affiliation that is indicated by the GTD is coded as non-Muslim in the dataset.

## Measuring Reporting Bias

In this analysis of whether language use differs depending on the identity of the perpetrator, the dependent variable is the word choice in the articles selected. For other topics such as global warming or taxation, word choice has been shown to have some degree of influence on public perception of an issue.[81] Thus, if the media uses different terminology to describe the perpetrator of an attack or chooses to focus more on specific traits such as religion, this can also be expected to affect public perception of the issue.

The aspect of word choice we focus on in this study is the tone or sentiment of the words. For example, the sentiment of the words used in an article may be more or less negative depending on the identity of the perpetrator. This variable is calculated using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count programme (LIWC). The LIWC assesses the tone of a text using a calculation that analyses the positive and negative sentiment expressed in a body of text, drawing on previous research on linguistic markers of psychological change.[82] For this study, we used the LIWC to measure the tone (sentiment) of each article on a 100-point scale. Between 1 and 39 is considered a negative article, between 40 and 59 a neutral article, and between 60 and 100 a positive article.

The null hypothesis for this analysis is that there is no statistical relationship between the sentiment of the article and the identity of the perpetrator. However, if there is a difference

in sentiment depending on the identity of the perpetrator, we can accept the first hypothesis (presented as H1 above). See Table 2 below.

*Table 2: Comparing Media Tone Towards Muslim vs Non-Muslim Perpetrators*

| Comparison | $\hat{\psi}$ | Standard Error | 95% CI | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The Daily Mail: Muslim vs. Non-Muslim | 0.668 | 1.368 | -8.515 to 4.860 | 0.67 |
| The Telegraph: Muslim vs. Non-Muslim | -1.997 | 0.784 | -5.464 to 0.428 | 0.008 |
| USA Today – Muslim vs. Non-Muslim | -6.199 | 1.178 | -10.678 to -2.194 | $p < .001$ |
| The New York Times: Muslim vs. Non-Muslim | -5.661 | 0.734 | -8.481 to -3.038 | $p < .001$ |
| The Washington Post: Muslim vs. Non-Muslim | -4.088 | 0.865 | -7.080 to -0.730 | $p < .001$ |
| The Guardian: Muslim vs. Non-Muslim | -2.604 | 0.908 | -5.807 to 0.4878 | 0.002 |

Note: The $\hat{\psi}$ column is the difference between the trimmed means of the compared groups. Significance is implied when the confidence interval does not cross zero. It should be noted that the p value can be influenced by sample size, considerable sample sizes can lead to a decrease in p values. As detailed in Knaub: "Taken to the extreme, with infinite, sample sizes, the attained significance level will be zero even when there is only a very small, but finite difference between the null hypothesis and the true state of nature." Given the sample size for this analysis, 5,000 bootstrap samples, the confidence interval is better suited as a measurement of significance. Under these conditions, there is a significant difference in the tone of the article depending on whether the perpetrator is Muslim or not, within three newspapers: *USA Today, the New York Times* and *the Washington Post.*

## *Measuring the Intensity of Coverage*

The timeframe that the media allots to coverage of a given issue is an indicator of agenda-setting, or media issue salience, which in turn influences public opinion and policy making. Additionally, the interest of the media in a particular issue can be assessed by investigating the attention given to it, measurable as the frequency with which the topic appears in the news cycle. As Factiva also extracts the publishing date for each article, the frequency of posting can also be assessed and compared with the identity of the perpetrator, giving further insight into the agenda-setting efforts (if any) of the media.

The second dependent variable in the analysis therefore concerns the frequency of articles published about the terrorist attacks and the 'rate of decay'. The rate of decay can be understood as the amount of time it takes for reporting on an event to cease or noticeably diminish. Specifically, the rate of decay refers to the speed at which newspapers stop covering a specific issue, thus making it disappear from the public agenda. In this case, a steep rate of decay indicates intense coverage immediately post-event and less long-term coverage, which may result in a lesser effect on public perception. A gradual rate of decay, on the other hand, indicates that the issue remains for a longer time in the news and, consequently, on the public agenda.

Through this analysis, we aim to evaluate the second hypothesis ($H_2$ above), namely that the intensity of coverage of a terrorist attack differs depending on whether the perpetrator is Muslim or non-Muslim. The null hypothesis for this part of the study is that terrorist attacks are covered for the same time period and with the same intensity, regardless of the perpetrator.

### *Correcting for Death Counts and Casualties*

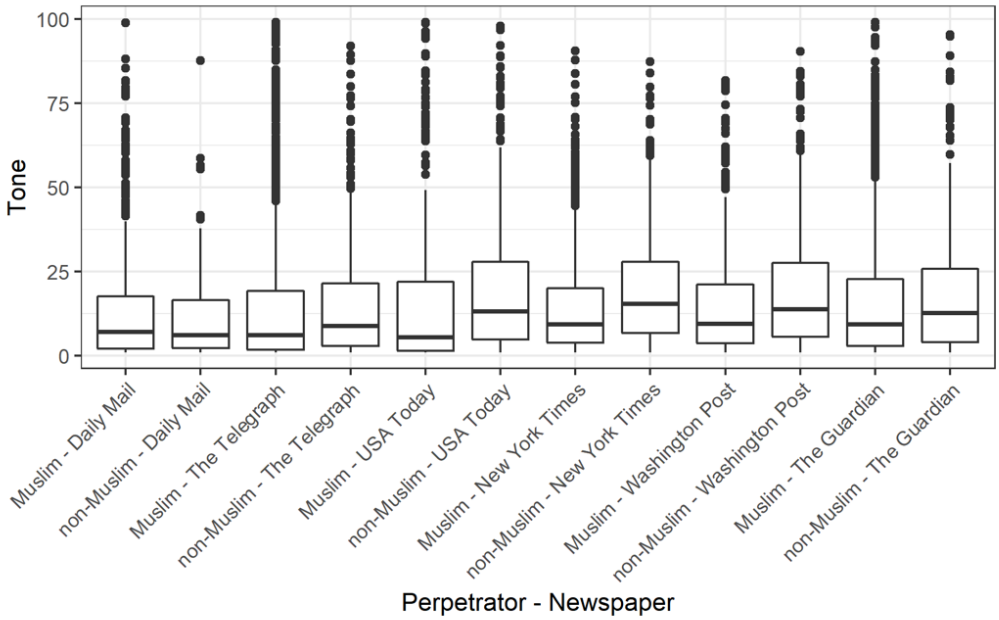
Previous studies have shown that public and media reactions are also dependent on the scale or methods of the terrorist attacks. These aspects should, therefore, be taken into consideration as potential confounding variables. In the case of high-casualty events such as 9/11 and the Madrid bombings, trust in the media increased immediately post-event, stressing their role in defining the narrative.[83] In the case of 9/11, an empirical study in its immediate aftermath revealed that beliefs and attitudes about matters of national interest were altered when individuals were stimulated to feel fear or anger.[84] Worryingly, the study showed that when anger was stimulated, individuals showed a preference for more punitive government policy; combined with media narratives on attacks, this can have a dramatic effect on the perception of risk.[85] In addition, a study on the coverage of terrorism in *The New York Times* from 1980 to 2001 showed that the newspaper would be more likely to cover high-casualty attacks rather than low or no-casualty attacks.[86] Muslim-specific suicide attacks also garner significantly more attention among print and television outlets.[87] This could have a considerable effect on the analysis of Muslim versus non-Muslim attacks. Just as the number of casualties also affects the media coverage, there is also an important link between whether the attack is carried out by a lone wolf or a group. Overall, the number of casualties, attack type, and perpetrator type are expected to affect the media posting frequency, but not necessarily the language used. When possible, these variables are accounted for in the analysis, although it is difficult to completely eliminate such variables as potential confounds.

## Analysis

### *Sentiment Analysis*

To determine if the perpetrator and newspaper have any effect on the sentiment conveyed by the word choice (i.e. the tone value), an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with post-hoc tests was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference between the mean tone value of different groups of articles. The combination of the six newspapers with the binary variable of perpetrator identity resulted in twelve groups for the ANOVA; in other words, there were two groups for each newspaper, one for articles about non-Muslim perpetrators and another for articles about Muslim perpetrators. The groups are labelled in the following format: perpetrator: newspaper. The grouped dataset is visualised in Figure 1 below.

*Figure 1: Tone Analysis*




The boxplots in Figure 1 visualise the distribution of tone values for articles covering attacks by Muslim perpetrators versus non-Muslim perpetrators across the six analysed newspapers. The horizontal line in each boxplot indicates the median tone value. The boxes show the interquartile range, while the whiskers indicate variability outside this range. What is evident from the graph is that for three newspapers – *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* – the media tone is distinctly more negative (lower values) when covering attacks perpetrated by Muslims compared to non-Muslims. This is shown by the lower median value and overall distribution of tone scores for the "Muslim" groups compared to the "non-Muslim" groups within each newspaper. For example, in *The New York Times*, the median tone value is approximately 52 for articles about attacks by Muslim perpetrators, compared to over 57 for non-Muslim attacks. The interquartile range is also lower for the Muslim group. This pattern demonstrating a more negative tone for Muslim attack coverage holds for *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* as well. In contrast, for the other three newspapers shown—*The Guardian, The Daily Mail,* and *The Telegraph*—there is less clear visual evidence of differences in tone between articles on Muslim versus non-Muslim attacks.

Since the analysis here is focused on the effects of more than two levels of just one factor (perpetrator-newspaper) on the experimental result (tone), a robust one-way ANOVA is the most suitable option. For this dataset, Welch's F Ratio, which is used when assumptions of homogeneity of variance are not met, is $F$ (11, 1995) =1145, p<0.001,[16] which indicates that the mean tone differs significantly across the 12 groups.[88] Robust ANOVA methods estimate statistics that are reliable even when the normal assumptions of the data are not met. These methods are mainly based on bootstraps and trimmed means.[89] There are other methods to compensate for the violation of assumptions; however, robust methods generally control the Type I error rate, which is the main concern of this analysis. Therefore, a robust ANOVA with 20 percent trimmed means was performed with 5,000 bootstrap samples. A robust ANOVA suggests that the tone of the article does differ significantly across the twelve groups ($F_t$ = 18.26, p< 0.001).

After conducting an ANOVA, further analysis is required to determine exactly how the different groups contrast with one another. This is commonly known as a post-hoc test, which consists of pairwise comparisons designed to compare all different combinations across the chosen groups. However, since the assumptions of homogeneity of variance have not been met, the post-hoc tests must also be robust, using the same parameters as for ANOVA. Under these conditions, there is a significant difference in the tone of the article depending on whether the perpetrator is Muslim or not, within three newspapers: *USA Today*, *The Washington Post,* and *The New York Times*. The exact results of this can be found in Table 2. To summarise, there are clear differences in the way Muslim perpetrators are treated by the media in comparison to their non-Muslim counterparts. On the one hand, both commit extreme acts of violence against civilians with varying degrees of casualties, but they are not covered in the same way. The difference in trimmed means for tone ($\hat{\psi}$) shows that Muslim perpetrators are consistently covered more negatively. In the case of *The Daily Mail*, the difference between Muslim versus non-Muslim articles was extremely large, deviating from the range seen in the other newspapers.

To determine if the perpetrator and newspaper have any effect on the sentiment conveyed by the word choice (i.e. the tone value), an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with post-hoc tests was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference between the mean tone value of different groups of articles. The combination of the six newspapers with the binary variable of perpetrator identity resulted in twelve groups for the ANOVA; in other words, there were two groups for each newspaper, one for articles about non-Muslim perpetrators and another for articles about Muslim perpetrators. The groups are labelled in the following format: perpetrator: newspaper. The grouped dataset is visualised in Table 3 below.

*Table 3: Regression Table of Articles Released Per Day Per Newspaper*

*Dependent variable: Percentage of articles released per day - Regression*

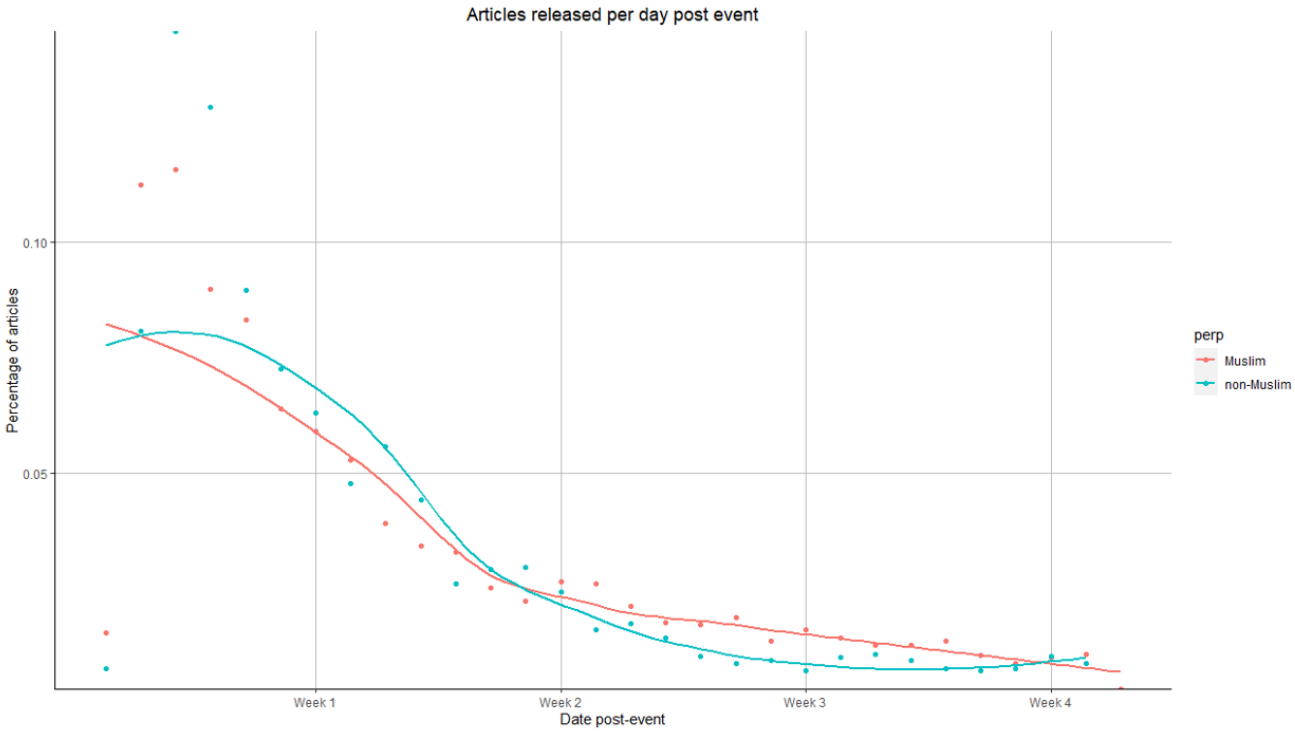
| | Percentage | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Daily Mail Muslim perpetrator | Daily Mail non-Muslim perpetrator | New York Times Muslim perpetrator | New York Times non-Muslim perpetrator | The Guardian Muslim perpetrator | The Guardian non-Muslim perpetrator | The Telegraph Muslim perpetrator | The Telegraph non-Muslim perpetrator | USA Today Muslim perpetrator | USA Today non-Muslim perpetrator | Washington Post Muslim perpetrator | Washington Post non-Muslim perpetrator |
| Slope of regression model | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-3.22*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-6.42*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-2.68*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-3.45*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-3.11*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-3.73*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-3.38*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-4.75*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-4.00*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-4.00*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-3.54*10^{-8}$) | $-0.000^{***}$ ($-3.38*10^{-8}$) |
| Constant | $0.074^{***}$ | $0.115^{***}$ | $0.067^{***}$ | $0.076^{***}$ | $0.072^{***}$ | $0.079^{***}$ | $0.076^{***}$ | $0.091^{***}$ | $0.083^{***}$ | $0.083^{***}$ | $0.080^{***}$ | $0.083^{***}$ |
| | (0.010) | (0.018) | (0.006) | (0.010) | (0.007) | (0.010) | (0.008) | (0.014) | (0.010) | (0.010) | (0.005) | (0.007) |
| Observations | 30 | 19 | 30 | 29 | 30 | 29 | 30 | 28 | 29 | 29 | 29 | 28 |
| $R^2$ | 0.452 | 0.511 | 0.573 | 0.490 | 0.629 | 0.504 | 0.566 | 0.460 | 0.552 | 0.517 | 0.774 | 0.679 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.433 | 0.482 | 0.557 | 0.471 | 0.616 | 0.486 | 0.551 | 0.439 | 0.535 | 0.500 | 0.766 | 0.666 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.027 (df = 28) | 0.042 (df = 17) | 0.018 (df = 28) | 0.026 (df = 27) | 0.019 (df = 28) | 0.028 (df = 27) | 0.023 (df = 28) | 0.038 (df = 26) | 0.027 (df = 27) | 0.029 (df = 27) | 0.014 (df = 27) | 0.019 (df = 26) |
| F Statistic | $23.137^{***}$ (df = 1; 28) | $17.736^{***}$ (df = 1; 17) | $37.502^{***}$ (df = 1; 28) | $25.967^{***}$ (df = 1; 27) | $47.445^{***}$ (df = 1; 28) | $27.434^{***}$ (df = 1; 27) | $36.531^{***}$ (df = 1; 28) | $22.139^{***}$ (df = 1; 26) | $33.247^{***}$ (df = 1; 27) | $28.953^{***}$ (df = 1; 27) | $92.719^{***}$ (df = 1; 27) | $54.948^{***}$ (df = 1; 26) |

*Note:* $^{*}p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

## *Frequency Analysis*

This section concerns the number of articles released over a four-week period post-event and how that differs depending on the perpetrator and the newspaper. The first part examines the relationship between the number of articles and perpetrator type, regardless of the newspaper; the second part examines the number of articles published as a function of both newspaper and perpetrator type. The results in this section inform us about the salience of the issue for the media, as discussed in the literature on agenda-setting. There are several indicators from which we can ascertain media salience. Here, we plot the number of articles released about the attacks over time, including a line of best fit to highlight the trends in the data. The slope of this line can indicate the rate at which the topics 'die down'. For example, a gradual slope indicates that the topic survives beyond the initial 'shock' of the attack and persists over a longer period, indicating higher media salience. Moreover, this slope can be compared between the two types of perpetrators (Muslim or non-Muslim). It is important to note here that casualties, which are unequally distributed, are likely to have an impact on the number of articles released but cannot easily be controlled due to the structure of the dataset. Thus, the rate of decay is measured as the percentage of the total number of articles released about a specific event per week post-event. This mitigates the difference in casualties and the absolute number of articles and allows for easier comparison between non-Muslim- and Muslim-perpetrated attacks, as shown in Figure 2 below.

*Figure 2: Coverage of Attacks*




This plot suggests that there is a higher initial 'shock' and a steeper downward slope when the perpetrator is non-Muslim. In contrast, reporting about Muslim perpetrators shows a lower initial percentage but a less steep downward slope, indicating higher media salience over time. However, it is important to note that the difference could also be affected by factors other than perpetrator identity, such as the number of casualties, which is potentially a confounding variable. Given this, and due to the relatively low numerical differences between the regression lines, the results cannot be considered conclusive for all newspapers collectively.

However, when we look at individual newspapers, some notable trends become apparent. In particular, it is clear that some newspapers have a much sharper decrease in the rate at which they cover non-Muslim attacks. In particular, for *The Daily Mail*, *The New York Times, The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, the decrease is much sharper when the perpetrator is non-Muslim, indicating that after the initial 'shock' of the terrorist attack the newspaper no longer covers the event. This points to lesser media salience when the perpetrator is non-Muslim versus Muslim and could be the result of bias by those specific media outlets. However, this is not the case for *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*. The former covers both types of attacks to the same degree over time; meanwhile, the coverage of the Washington Post diminished more rapidly when Muslims perpetrated the attack. It is important to note, however, that as with the previous analysis, this decrease does not account for the confounding potential of the casualties per attack, which has a potential impact on the slopes calculated in Table 3 in the appendix. Thus, it is impossible to draw these inferences conclusively.

In summary, these findings offer preliminary evidence that a terrorist attack is accorded less media salience when the perpetrator is non-Muslim. The patterns of reporting frequency of *The Daily Mail*, *New York Times, The Guardian,* and *The Telegraph* indicate a high initial reaction to non-Muslim attacks but a low after-event reaction or recall of the event. This is the opposite for Muslim attacks, where there is a comparatively lower initial reaction but a longer recall and thus media issue salience.

## Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the way the print media cover terrorist incidents varies depending on the perpetrator of the attack. This supports the first hypothesis, indicating a statistically significant difference in the coverage of attacks by Muslims compared to those by non-Muslims. The results show that there is increased usage of negative words if the perpetrator is Muslim, a different pattern of article publication, and a difference in word usage. When the perpetrator is Muslim, the greater use of words linked to negative emotions can be indicative of a different perspective on the media. The different usage suggests a heightened level of fear when the perpetrator is a Muslim. Upon closer inspection of the articles, it becomes clear that while non-Muslim perpetrators are often associated with gun violence, mental illness, and mass murder or shooting, Muslim perpetrators are directly associated with terrorism, potentially influencing public perception. Finally, the difference in frequency of coverage suggests that when the perpetrator is non-Muslim, the highest rate of coverage occurs during the first week following the event, with little recall of the attack later. When the perpetrator is Muslim, however, there is a higher rate of coverage later in the four-week post-event period, resulting in higher media salience.

In general, the public tends to forget events that receive brief coverage compared to those that receive longer post-event coverage.[90] This study has found that the difference in reporting manifested itself in media salience, as Muslim-perpetrated attacks received more negative and lengthy coverage. On the other hand, the media covered non-Muslim-perpetrated attacks more intensely in the first week, but much less afterwards. However, a non-Muslim attack exposes the public to the story more briefly than Muslim-specific attacks. As a result, a Muslim-related attack is more likely to generate discussion for a longer period of time. We must interpret this in the context of agenda-setting, given that a prolonged media presence impacts public awareness of the issue. This finding has far-reaching implications, as significant linguistic differences between Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators are associated with anxiety and negative emotions towards Muslims.

These findings offer strong confirmation of the core tenets of agenda-setting theory concerning the media's power to shape issue salience and public attitudes.[91] Conceptually, the research highlights the need for greater consciousness around coverage biases that may cultivate inaccurate perceptions and fears surrounding social groups. However, some limitations include the inability to definitively account for potential confounds, such as the number of casualties, and conclusively ascertain the real-world impacts of observed differences. Further research incorporating additional data and methods would strengthen causal claims. Overall, the article contributes to the body of knowledge by demonstrating how identity influences how the media tells stories, supporting theories about how the media affects people, bringing up policy issues related to representation, and suggesting ways to investigate these things in more depth.

Further research is necessary to address limitations and strengthen the validity of the inferences made, even though this study makes an important contribution in demonstrating differences in media coverage of terrorist attacks correlated with perpetrator identity. More research that considers the unequal effect of deaths on the rate of decay would show if identity affected the length of coverage. Also, it is important to use both quantitative linguistic analysis and targeted qualitative coding to prove that negative language is more likely to come from negative media portrayals of Muslims than from other complex contextual factors that affect language use. Some possible approaches are: collecting articles that use very negative language to see if the negativity specifically targets Muslims; conducting granular sentiment analysis of language used to describe perpetrators, communities affected, and policy issues to find out where tone differences are happening; and using collocation analysis to see if there are links between words like "extremist" and direct mentions of "Muslim." Employing mixed methods and isolating confounding variables would place conclusions about biased coverage of Muslim perpetrators on firmer empirical ground. The phenomena this research aims to uncover warrant such methodological rigour, given their profound social implications.

## Conclusion

The results of this large-N analysis and its limitations clearly indicate the need for further systematic research on this topic. Larger media studies could greatly benefit the media, the public, and academia by shedding light on how the media shapes public opinion. Furthermore, while this study concentrated on the media's output, it is crucial to also examine the impact of this coverage on public opinion. Future research should specifically investigate the impact on public opinion when language usage varies based on the ethnicity or religion of the offender.

This study's findings provide strong empirical support for key tenets of agenda-setting theory. Agenda setting posits that media coverage plays a vital role in determining the salience and priority of issues and events on the public agenda. This study found unambiguous evidence that print media coverage of terrorist attacks differs systematically based on whether the perpetrator is Muslim or non-Muslim. Specifically, attacks by Muslims receive more frequent and sustained coverage over time than non-Muslim attacks. Agenda setting plays a crucial role in determining the salience of issues through media attention. The findings suggest that the perpetrator's identity shapes media judgements of newsworthiness and what issues consume public attention. The tone analysis also shows media language differs in covering Muslim versus non-Muslim attacks. This relates to the idea that the media not only tells us what to think about, but also how to think about issues. Together, this demonstrates the media's power to set the public agenda regarding terrorism and attitudes towards social groups. The differences based on perpetrator identity suggest that coverage may cultivate negative perceptions of Muslim communities. It also risks minimising threats from other forms of extremist violence. These

results show that the media covers terrorist attacks differently depending on who did them. This is in line with the main ideas of agenda-setting theory. This highlights the need for greater awareness of how media judging newsworthiness based on specific attributes, such as identity, shapes public discourse and policy.

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# Endnotes

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5 For this study, we selected the time period of 2003--2018 to capture media representations in the post-9/11 era, when the seminal attacks of 9/11 heavily influenced terrorism discourse. Using 2003 as a starting point allows for an examination of this pivotal period when discourse and policies around terrorism, particularly those involving Muslim perpetrators, underwent significant shifts. By concluding the analysis in 2018, we can ensure that the data accurately reflects recent media coverage, which is crucial for comprehending contemporary portrayals, while keeping the sample size manageable and avoiding potential confounding effects from the subsequent global covid-19 pandemic.

6 Due to their association with political violence and extremism, "Islamist" and "Islamism" are loaded. This unfairly casts a wide range of Islamic thought and practice in a negative light. Critics say the terms confuse political movements with religious ideology, obscuring the many political interpretations and applications of Islamic principles. Due to their imprecision, the terms cover a wide range of actors and movements with varying degrees of political commitment or interpretations of Islam. Despite these drawbacks, using these terms with nuance and explanation may be analytically useful. Differentiating between Islamist political parties that want to peacefully participate in democratic processes and those that want to overthrow governments can illuminate political Islam. Understanding the evolution of Islamist movements over time or across geographical contexts requires a nuanced use of the term, acknowledging its limitations while recognising its potential to illuminate specific political phenomena.

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89 Bootstrapping is a statistical process that includes repeatedly sampling observations from the original dataset and replacing them with new ones to create different data sets. The bootstrap's power comes from the fact that it can be easily applied to a wide range of statistical learning methods, including ones for which obtaining a measure of variability is difficult and statistical software does not automatically produce it. Additionally, a trimmed mean is a mean calculation that reduces the influence of outliers. For instance, a 10 percent trimmed mean will remove 10 percent of the highest and lowest data points before a mean is calculated

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Hybrid Ideologies in Clinical Settings: Implications for Intervention of the Changing Landscape in Violent Extremism

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**Abstract:** Practitioners are observing rapid transformations in the landscape of violent ideologies. To understand the role and importance of changing ideologies for preventive interventions, this article describes the prevalence of hybrid ideologies in a clinical sample of clients referred for attraction toward or involvement in violent extremism and documents clinicians' perspectives. Results demonstrate that hybrid ideologies are common and suggest that both homogenisation and fragmentation processes associated with globalisation and digitalisation may explain the observed shift in ideological presentation. These changes may have significant implications for intervention and call for a redefinition of ideological categories and silo approaches in the field.

**Keywords:** Hybrid ideologies, violent extremism, practitioner perspectives, clinical model, intervention

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# Introduction

The last decades have seen the rise of growing resistance to rapid social change, along with an overall increase in social polarisation and the resurgence of worrisome discourses legitimising violence — a process accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Since its origin, the field of violent extremism (VE) studies has been defined by the idea that specific ideologies may be drivers toward extremism and terrorist violence, construed as a justified means to achieve a group's objectives. Recently, different voices coming from the field noted that the traditional categories describing the ideological trends associated with extreme violence (extreme-right, extreme-left, religious extremism, nationalism, and so on) may need to be revised in light of the increase in overlap among ideologies[2] — a phenomenon referred to as hybrid ideologies, the "salad-bar" phenomenon, or Composite Violent Extremism in the emerging literature on the subject.[3] Analysing data from a clinical sample of clients referred for attraction toward or involvement in VE, this article examines the prevalence of hybrid ideologies and documents practitioners' perspectives to seek to understand the extent to which this fluidity of ideologies is significant in terms of presentation, outcome, and relation to services.

## *Ideologies in the Field of Violent Extremism*

Social scientists define ideology as a shared system of ideas, beliefs and values that shape and guide how individuals interpret and navigate the world around them, including how they relate to others.[4] Ideologies also entail a normative dimension that structures people's perceptions of how the world ought to be. Because of the well-documented human tendency to naturalise ideas (i.e. to treat culturally situated goals, norms and values as 'facts' of nature),[5] ideologies are typically invoked to justify particular social arrangements or political goals (e.g. patterns of inequality, egalitarian institutions). While all collective elaborations and manifestations of meaning, values, and identities are partly grounded in ideological processes, they are most often not recognised as such – indeed, the term 'ideology' is typically leveraged derogatorily to critique ideas associated with an outgroup.[6]

Traditionally, in the VE field, the concept of ideology is associated with group-based beliefs, often but not always opposed to the State, its institutions and/or mainstream civil society and cultural institutions, which justify the use of extreme violence to acquire political power and influence.

### *Emerging Evidence Suggesting a Hybridisation of Ideologies in Violent Extremism*

Recently, in the VE field, the concept of hybrid ideologies has increasingly been acknowledged by scholars, especially with regard to far-right or religious extremist ideologies.[7] This emerging literature proposes different ways to categorise and characterise this phenomenon. Some authors propose to focus on common causal mechanisms. Kehlet Ebbrecht and Lindekilde interrogate the distinction between lone actor terrorists and school shooters.[8] They claim that attacks committed under different types of VE have common motivations, and propose to replace the different violent lone actor types with a single category: lone actor grievance-fuelled violence. Focusing rather on the accelerating role of the internet, Brace et al. argue that the emergence of what they characterise as "mixed, unclear and unstable ideologies" is a result of technical affordances, and more specifically of outlinking: the cumulative effect of all the exolinks posted in the diverse ideological ecosystem pulling individuals toward other political ideas and communities.[9] Taking a more phenomenological stance, Gartenstein-Ross et al. coin the umbrella term Composite Violent Extremism, and, through analysis of retrospective data, propose a typology distinguishing ambiguous, mixed, fused and convergent VE.[10] This

includes, for example, convergences across ideologies (Neo-Nazi and masculinist, religious and masculinist), which seem to overcome what may appear as fundamental divides[11] and are described as fringe fluidity by Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman.[12]

Although the term hybrid ideologies circulates in the VE field, it has not been, to our knowledge, explicitly defined. In this article, we consider that an individual endorses a specific ideology when their adherence to elements of this collective ideology has a structuring effect on their beliefs about and understanding of the world. We define hybrid ideology as simultaneously endorsing more than one set of collective beliefs, which together have a structuring effect on one's worldview.

As it stands, borrowing symbols, images, narratives, and concepts from different ideologies in an erratic or playful way, as a way to enact an attraction for horror or dystopia, or as a means to provoke, would be considered as non-ideological under our current taxonomy. Our proposed definition of hybrid ideologies thus contrasts the use of different ideologies to create a coherent or partially coherent account of perceived reality, from the rather indiscriminate use of ideological signifiers to represent or contain uncertainty and confusion and glorify violence within a nihilistic perspective.[13]

## *Rethinking Theoretically the Role of Ideologies and Violent Extremism in a Globalised World*

Political scientists have documented the relationship between the emergence of mass media, the polarisation of identities, and the rise of global conflict.[14] The extent to which globalisation has contributed to a homogenisation or fragmentation of cultural representations and identities has been an ongoing subject of debate.[15] These dynamics are not unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For historians, the rise of print media in the late Middle Ages, which enabled the fast reproduction and spread of ideas, simultaneously led to a broad diversification of social representations, and to massively homogenised desires and processes of ethnic nationalism that culminated in violent conflicts.[16] In the wake of the rapid changes ushered by the recent digital revolution[17], the latest remodelling of individual and collective landscapes of identities is just beginning to be examined.

In this domain, repeated surveys in Quebec's educational institutions have shown that there is an association between collective identity and sympathy for VE. If overall, claiming a plurality of identities is protective, some political (e.g. far-left, far-right) and gender identities (e.g. gender-non-conformity) have a strong polarising effect.[18] At the youth culture level, the present shift from more organised protest ideologies toward a dystopic youth culture may reflect a disappointment toward political models that have shown their limits and failed, and the adoption of worldviews that do not aim at the common good but may glorify violence as a form protest of the system's perceived failures.[19] In that perspective, actively participating to apocalypses or the extermination of a part of humanity can be seen as an attempt to regain agency when other means of political or social actions are seen as unavailable.[20] The literature shows, however, that ideologies or worldviews, although associated with violence, are not linearly related to behaviours.[21] It is, as such, essential to interrogate the fine line between a youth culture that glorifies violence as a way to oppose political correctness, provoke and challenge older generations, and endorsement of beliefs that justify actual harmful behaviours. The rapidly changing, seemingly hybrid content and structure of current beliefs that get flagged as ideological makes the task of distinguishing the dangerous from the banal or protective especially arduous.

Whether the current landscape of radicalisation and anti-establishment sentiments may be exhibiting homogenising processes or fragmentation into diversifying and solitary spaces is a pressing empirical question. Indeed, both propositions predict different risk profiles. While a return to large-scale armed conflict and civil wars may be expected from globalisation and associated homogenisation, a concurrent increase in individualisation, which can be characterised as fragmentation, would suggest a possible rise in lone-actor incidents. Recent global trends suggest there is evidence for both claims.

Beyond evolving theoretical frames, the notable differences in approaches to hybrid ideologies in the emerging literature may also be related to wide differences in methods which yield contrasted portraits of this complex phenomenon. Following the classical approach in the domain, some studies rely on single[22] vs multiple[23] retrospective case studies of completed attacks. Others opt for an analysis of large data banks documenting online extremist spaces to study the fluidity of ideological references.[24] It is timely to better circumscribe the pertinence of the issue for the re-orientation of the intervention field (beyond silos), and build across these different sources of data to better understand systemically the eventual transformation in the structural, societal and individual drivers of VE.

## *Hybrid Ideologies and Violent Extremism: Insights from the Clinical Field*

Through trajectory studies, scholars have shown the similarities between lone actors adhering to an ideology and "non-ideological" mass murderers and school shooters.[25] At the research level, both the VE and the different violence fields have largely been structured around detecting the presence or absence of an ideology and treat both options as distinct entities. This distinction is, however, increasingly challenged by practitioners' voices who suggest that this cut-off may have to be rethought, given the present shifts in this field. In recent years, clinicians working in the VE field have increasingly underlined the relative fragility and fuzziness of youth ideologies, but their observations have only been the object of descriptive reporting in some publications documenting their perspectives.[26] A closer systematic look at the changing landscape of ideologies in a clinical sample may thus help us better identify where homogenisation and diversification occur, and the type of risk and protective factors associated with both.

### *Research Questions*

1. What is the prevalence of hybrid ideologies in a clinical sample of individuals attracted or involved in violent extremism in Montreal? What are the patterns of associations among ideologies? What is, if any, the influence of age/generation on ideology patterns?

2. According to clinicians, what are common presentations of hybrid ideologies? Is it possible, based on these clinical presentations, to delineate a typology of hybrid presentations useful for intervention purposes? What dynamic elements may be meaningful for interventions?

3. According to clinicians, what are the perceived consequences of hybrid presentations on clinical interventions in terms of partnership, risk assessment and outcome of interventions?

# Methods

### *Mixed Methods Design*

This article uses a mixed-method concurrent triangulation design[27] to combine available quantitative data on the individuals referred to a group of mental health professionals in Montreal with expertise in the prevention of VE (the Polarisation team), with qualitative data collected through a focus group with practitioners and clinical ethnography. Approval was obtained from the Research and Ethics Board of the Integrated University Health and Social Services (CIUSSS) West-Central Montreal for the study and signed consent from the focus group participants.

## *Quantitative*

### *Sample*

This study includes clients of the Polarisation team who received services between 1 January 2016 and 31 December 2021, and who were referred for being at risk of violent extremism (N=86).

### *Procedures*

Data from medical charts were extracted and transferred to the data capture software REDCap by two research assistants, who were trained by a member of the clinical team. A research team member with experience in medical chart review extracted the data of five clients; these data were considered as the gold standard. To assess inter-rater reliability, two research assistants independently extracted data from the same five medical charts and results were compared against the gold standard. Disagreements were discussed and resolved with the experienced member of the research team, and the process was repeated until the two research assistants reached an eighty percent agreement on the extraction process.

### *Measures*

*Age:* Age was recorded as a continuous variable and refers to the age of clients at the time of referral. Clients were categorised into three age groups: under 18 years old, 18 to 35 years old, and over 35 years old.

*Types of ideologies:* Categories of VE ideologies were chosen based on existing literature of types of radical ideologies[28] and the experience of the clinical team. The types of VE recorded and used in this study are far-right, far-left, religious, gender, nationalism, and conspiratorial ideologies. Non-ideological violence was categorised separately (this category includes school shooters, and attraction toward mass killing supported by violent nihilism and the glorification of dystopic violence). Individuals could align with one or more ideologies and the number of types of ideological extremism was calculated as a continuous variable.

### *Data Analysis*

We used univariate statistics to present a descriptive epidemiology of individuals engaged in violent extremism services. Frequencies and proportions are reported for types and number of ideologies across age groups.

## *Qualitative*

A focus group was held in March 2023 with six clinicians from the Montreal Polarisation team (three men and three women). The focus group lasted 87 minutes, was facilitated by two of the coauthors, and was conducted in French, a language spoken by all participants. The interview guide included questions on the clinicians' perceptions and experiences with multiple ideologies in the individuals they follow in their professional practice, particularly the categorisation of multiple ideologies and related clinical implications. Observational and reflective notes were also collected throughout the duration of the research.

The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A thematic content analysis[29] was then performed with the assistance of a qualitative data analysis computer software (NVivo). By going back and forth between the focus group transcript, field notes, and a priori and emerging codes, a saturation of categories was reached. Key themes and sub-themes were identified and discussed among coauthors. For publication purposes, focus group extracts were translated from French to English and research results were cautiously examined and anonymised to preserve participants' confidentiality.

# Results

## *Quantitative*

Overall, the most common types of radicalisation among clients of the Polarisation team were non-ideological violence (32.6%) and far-right extremism (31.4%), followed by gender-related extremism (25.6%) and religious extremism (20.9%) (Table 1). Additionally, the incidence of each type of VE varied across age groups. Of note, clients under the age of 18 were more likely to present non-ideological violence or far-right ideologies, while gender and religious VE were more common among clients aged 18 to 35 (Table 1). Overall, 22.1% of the clients were considered as adhering to more than one ideology, with 11.6% adhering to two and 10.5% to three ideologies (Table 1). The most common association was between far-right and gender VE, followed by far-right and conspiratorial VE (Table 2, see below). Interestingly, the ideological patterns and the prevalence of hybrid ideologies varied with age: a slightly higher proportion of clients under the age of 18 adhered to only one type of VE (83.3%) compared to those aged 18 to 35 and those 36 years old and older (71.9% and 77.8% respectively) (Table 1).

*Table 1: Frequency of types of Violent Extremism and Multiple Ideologies across Age Groups*

| | <18 (N=36) | | 18-35 (N=32) | | > 36 (N=18) | | Overall (N=86) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| **Type of VE** | | | | | | | | |
| Far-right | 14 | 38.9 | 8 | 25.0 | 5 | 27.8 | 27 | 31.4 |
| Far-left | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 6.3 | 1 | 5.6 | 3 | 3.5 |
| Religious | 4 | 11.1 | 11 | 34.4 | 3 | 16.7 | 18 | 20.9 |
| Gender | 4 | 11.1 | 14 | 43.8 | 4 | 22.2 | 22 | 25.6 |
| Nationalism | 1 | 2.8 | 3 | 9.4 | 1 | 5.6 | 5 | 5.8 |
| Conspirational | 2 | 5.6 | 4 | 12.5 | 5 | 27.8 | 11 | 12.8 |
| Non-ideological | 18 | 50.0 | 4 | 12.5 | 6 | 33.3 | 28 | 32.6 |
| **Number of types of VE** | | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 30 | 83.3 | 23 | 71.9 | 14 | 77.8 | 67 | 77.9 |
| 2 | 5 | 13.9 | 4 | 12.5 | 1 | 5.6 | 10 | 11.6 |
| 3 | 1 | 2.7 | 5 | 15.6 | 3 | 16.7 | 9 | 10.5 |

*Table 2: Frequency of Associations between Ideological Types of Violent Extremism*

| | Far-right | Far-left | Religious | Gender | Nationalism | Conspirational |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Far-right** | 12* | 0 | 4 | 9 | 2 | 7 |
| **Far-left** | | 2* | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| **Religious** | | | 10* | 5 | 1 | 1 |
| **Gender** | | | | 10* | 1 | 3 |
| **Nationalism** | | | | | 2* | 1 |
| **Conspirational** | | | | | | 3* |

**= Single Ideologies*

## Qualitative

### *A Complex Landscape*

Clinicians coincide in recognising that, beyond self-assigned or externally attributed ideological labels, none of their clients fit perfectly in the ideological categories delineated in our clinic's referral forms (extreme right, extreme left, religious, gender-related, conspiratorial, nationalist, non-ideological). One clinician described what he perceived as a "hybrid homogenisation" of ideologies:

> *I think the ideological landscapes have rapidly changed. They [patients] appear to have become more polarised and radicalised on the one hand, and more homogenized on the other at the level of their beliefs. A majority of our extreme right patients, for example, also exhibit extreme left beliefs typical of the new "third position" landscape. (…) Online and in the stories reported by patients, one increasingly finds alliances between communities dedicated to millenarianism and survivalism, some varieties of New Age beliefs, but also neo-fascism, Christian fundamentalism, and Islamic fundamentalism. Sadly, antisemitism seems to be an increasingly common narrative linchpin to justify hybrid alliances around distrust of a number of polarising issues like vaccines, banks, feminism, LGBT issues, multiculturalism, globalization, etcetera.*

Clinicians who took part in the focus group also underlined that the concept of ideology in their field is influenced by its use in the VE field:

> *The threshold of what may be ideologically acceptable is always more or less defined by a dominant culture, by the media, the government (…). One tends to identify as pathological and criminal concepts that are not part of that dominant culture.*

Clinicians described their clients as situated on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are individuals with low literacy levels who rely mostly on videos, podcasts, memes, and other condensed content on the Internet as sources of information. Those tend to present moderate to poor mastery of conceptual elements and may refer to a bricolage of simplified information that has some echo with their personal grievances. At the other end are educated individuals who may obsessively collect and search written internet content as sources of information that confirm their beliefs in a very systematic way, relying on a mixture of historical, scientific, philosophical, journalistic, and biased or fabricated information to support their views. Within this continuum, some individuals with a flourishing imaginary world and/or delusional

tendencies add personally crafted elements and highly idiosyncratic reconfigurations of historical and philosophical elements to define or confirm their special mission in this global landscape.

The diverse ideological positions and profiles described by clinicians offered a sharp contrast to mainstream perspectives of vulnerable individuals falling prey to group indoctrination into ready-made ideological packages. Some clinicians, however, described trajectories of indoctrination as more common to some better-organised (i.e. more internally coherent) ideologies - in particular neo-Nazi, Incel, and Jihadi, - that become deeply woven into individual ways of giving meaning to their lives. Although not mutually exclusive, some configurations characterising the presentation of hybrid ideologies emerged during the group discussion.

## *Toward a Typology of Hybrid Ideologies?*

When questioned on a possible categorisation of the phenomenon of hybrid ideologies in their clientele, the clinicians emphasised the presence of differences in patterns of relation among ideologies. They distinguished cumulative from alternate ideological patterns, as well as from the "salad-bar" metaphor often used by VE practitioners to characterise non-ideological violence.

*1) Cumulative Ideologies*

Clinicians reported some common convergences in ideological associations. In some cases, these convergences appear to replicate the overlap in traditional doctrines between patriarchal/misogynistic positions, white supremacy/nationalism predicaments, and extreme right/"third position" political stances. More recently, emerging ideological systems composed of anti-system and conspiracy theories advocating for the use of violence and preparing for societal collapse are also frequently concurrent with hybrid ideological package.

> *In the new extreme-right, the common elements are a loss of trust in the collective, a desire to protect oneself and one's group against perceived threats to create a homogenous group, and in a lot of individuals, a resurgence of religion. Some are worried by central banks, the control of the media. Among neo-Nazis, some are more preoccupied with material dimensions like perceived economic exploitation and technological control, others direct their grievances toward perceived cultural domination (e.g. multiculturalism and feminism as a plot against traditional families), while a third fringe is more concerned with perceived spiritual harm (e.g. a Satanic plot) and prepare for the second coming of Christ.*

The question of gender most consistently appeared as a converging entry point into both political and religious extremism. The perceived disintegration of traditional social roles, gendered models, and ways of being recognised and valued as a man in particular was mentioned by clinicians as an entry point into such diverse ideologies as Christian or Islamic fundamentalism, neo-fascism, survivalism, and Incel culture.

Finally, clinicians emphasised that some apparent paradoxes in the blending of ideologies may in fact simply reflect the more global evolution in discourses, with extreme right positions increasingly borrowing from the approaches of socialist and Marxist social movements, in spite of a proclaimed ferocious opposition to communism.

*2) Switch in Ideologies*

The focus group results show that hybrid ideologies may sometimes present as a trajectory of successive quests and disillusions. In this group, ideologies may coexist within a certain

time frame, but the search for other or additional ideologies often indicates that the person is unhappy with the support provided by the in-group or feels cheated or used in one way or another.

> *I have a client that went from extreme left to extreme right. He theorized it by saying, "I went there for this reason and then I got new information that took me to this other place," So it's a rational conversion.*

Phenomena described as "revelations" and "conversions" are common in this group of clients. A client who had been consuming psychedelics reported a spiritual experience during which the religious dimension of his political quest and evidence for a Jewish plot were revealed to him. Before that, he adhered to environmental apolitical groups, then to anti-immigration projects around the Great Replacement hypothesis, before subsequently understanding how the Christian community was a better avenue for him, all the while maintaining his beliefs in the Great Replacement threat. As another example, a racialised client adhering to extreme left ideology had a revelation after finalising a gender transition, that he was a Nazi, and had finally discovered his true self and mission.

> *There was also this dimension of a conversion linked to new information, which gives a new understanding of the world. And it is religious terms that are used, as in a revelation. "I was lied to about such and such a thing, making me believe that the world was in such and such a way, and then such information made me realize that...". And oftentimes, the denial of the Holocaust is used as the initial element of revelation after which complete loss of trust in public and historical discourse occurs.*

On this point, clinicians also explained that the timing of switches is often significant, coinciding with obvious adverse life events (e.g. a divorce) or with openings (e.g. a new relationship), which, even if hoped for, may challenge usual protective avoidance strategies.

> *It also depends on what is going on in the person's life. If there is a failure in love, then it might be the Incel that will come out. If it's a professional failure or a conflict in the public space or on the internet, then maybe it's more likely to be the far right.*

*3) Non-Ideological Violence: Nihilism and Dystopia*

Clinicians described how borrowing disparate concepts and images from a wide range of ideologies was increasingly common in their young clientele.

> *I have the impression that the notion of hybrid ideologies comes from an expectation that people will be coherent in their theoretical, ideological choice. But it's not like that. There are a few people who are going to be very theoretical and then coherence will be a central factor. But most of them are going to be influenced by the last video that they saw on YouTube and it just goes around like that.*

Two main organising patterns of this phenomenon were identified. In one pattern, many clients' consumption of images evoking horror, like ISIS decapitation videos, Ku Klux Klan and Nazi activists' videos and school-shooting footages would help appear to confirm a dystopic view of the world. Clinicians perceived that these representations of extreme violence helped the youth to master and, to a certain extent, exorcise an apocalyptical perception of the world. They felt this could also help the youth regain a certain sense of agency: if I have no power and

no voice to stop terrible things from happening, I may at least regain some power by predicting and enjoying them, if not participating in making them happen.

> *There's the evolution of Internet discourse from red to black pilling. Metaphorically, "taking the red pill" is the idea that one can become awakened to the "true nature" of a deceiving and oppressive society. Taking the Black pill marks an individual's complete loss of hope in the world, and their desire to participate in its destruction. We see a lot more attraction to mass-shooting, lone wolf, models in our clientele.*

In these cases, ideological constructs are often almost absent, and group affiliation is largely absent outside anonymous forums for consumers and glorifiers of crude violence. Practitioners also identified a second pattern in this non-ideological category characterised by apparent provocation. These youths would share horrific images or glorify mass murderers and school shooters in order to provoke fear. Rather than imposing the ideology through terror, the element borrowed from an ideology becomes a means to provoke terror in others, usually for self-protection. This scenario was most commonly observed in youth who had been bullied repeatedly and would try to stop their aggressor by acquiring a symbolic aggressor status.

Discussing the evolution of their clients' ideologies over time, clinicians reported that many had come to gather a wider array of seemingly disparate material online with increasingly negative, pessimistic, and often paranoid themes that confirmed their sense of isolation, hopelessness, and impending doom. They mentioned several clients who had acquired increasingly delusional preoccupations with manipulative control and personalised harm targeted toward them by a malevolent global elite. Over time, the online platforms dedicated to these themes seemed to have gathered more individuals from diverse conspiracy backgrounds.

### *Dynamics Within Hybrid Ideologies: Continuity or Rupture with Community/ Familial Culture*

When reflecting on the clinical implication of hybrid ideologies, the clinicians noted that beyond hybridisation types, a significant clinical factor was the degree to which these ideologies were situated in continuity or in contradiction with the client's familial, community and societal sets of beliefs. Traditional representations of villains often identify multiple figures of evil. In the West, these may fuel antisemitism, islamophobia, racism, homophobia, and anti-communism. Among some minority communities, the collectively identified villains may be distinct (the non-believers, for example). A clinician mentioned the new constructions of Otherness which are mostly circulating in online environments, such as the Incel, the Woke, and so on. Endorsing the specific worldviews and battles of one's family and community can appear to be and often is a sign of loyalty. However, a clinician insisted on the complexity of these processes of identification. In spite of the appearance of continuity, the search for purity and the discontent toward the perceived failure of previous generations may lead an individual to look for ways to do better than their parents and lead them to become even more radical and extremist than them, ultimately reaching a line of rupture.

> *I have no case of perfect [ideological] continuity [in my clients]. I have either cases of strong opposition [with family and community], like neo-Nazi ideology for someone from a liberal family, or others who become more neo-Nazi than their holocaust-denying parents. Or more fundamentalist Christian than their parents who were already evangelical Christians.*

Clinicians thus noted that violent radicalisation for their clients could follow an extreme pattern of identification with the familiar; that is, adopting an extreme version of ingroup ideology motivated by a desire to be accepted by parents perceived to be unloving, or groups from which they had felt rejected but aspired to belong to.

In other cases, clinicians reported that some client trajectories followed an extreme individuation process, as they chose their ideological affiliations in an attempt to express their overall rejection of their family, community and society. The ideological choices could then represent and explain the feelings of isolation and rejection ("I am rejected because of my faith, because of my political beliefs", and so on). It may also (and often concurrently) represent a form of provocative protest, praising and valuing what is rejected by the past in-group. In a few cases, the creation of a grandiose self-mythology situated within vastly reconstructed ideologies could mark a way to distance oneself from a family or group perceived to be harmful, by radically distancing oneself from all humans and non-human entities, assuming a quasi-divine position.

### *Adapting Clinical Practice to this Changing Landscape: Observations and Challenges*

Directly addressing the impact of hybrid ideologies on their practices was not easy for clinicians. The discussion was tempered by the mutual recognition that ideological change was not a key target of our intervention, the aims of which were geared toward decreasing psychological distress, increasing social integration and life skills, and building or strengthening a sense of purpose and a life project disengaged from a violent predicament. Clinicians recognised that thinking about the clinical implications of hybrid ideologies was a relatively new topic, largely absent from training curriculums and practice guidelines. In spite of this, they identified a few avenues to begin circumscribing the potential consequences of the change in ideological landscapes.

First, hybrid ideological presentations could be indicators of personal, familial, and social dynamics. As such, inquiring and documenting hybrid ideologies should be part of a regular assessment in the field of VE. The understanding of the role played by the chosen ideologies and of possible shifts may inform the clinical formulation (as part of the cultural formulation interview, for example) and orient the treatment plan.

> *It [hybrid ideologies] can be an indicator of mental state as well, a rapid change in beliefs can at times be worrying. It can indicate that there are internal triggers. [...] When a client says, "I don't believe in God anymore", then you think "OK... there's something going on".*

Clinicians agreed that the clinical formulation of different ideological configurations should be inspired by an eco-systemic perspective that situates the individual in relation or in rupture with their environment.

> *I have the impression that it is not so much the ideological content that will alarm us as the changes in the content, and the intensity. Whether it's very intense in something very structured or very intense in something not very structured, it's the fact that it's very intense that's going to be alarming, because we're going to see that as our indicator of their [the client's] suffering.*

Second, hybrid ideologies are sometimes seen as atypical presentations by different actors in the field and this may lead to services disengagement. Clinicians emphasised the problems of silo work that presently divides different violence fields (intimate partner violence, gangs, VE/violent radicalisation, school/active shooters). They insisted on the fact that atypical

presentations often fall between specific intervention mandates and may end up without appropriate services. They identified the importance of addressing this gap within a multi-actor perspective to jointly review the partners' mandates in terms of complementarity and potential gaps. This brings to the forefront the challenge of defining the different intersectoral mandates.

Finally, clinicians noted that the imposition of previously favoured categories in the VE field may sometimes lead to ineffective responses. In particular, they reported that the confusion introduced by hybrid ideologies and by non-ideological presentations may have an impact that they have observed on risk assessment, such as minimising risk when practitioners equate "This is not radicalisation" with "This is not risky". Another impact of this confusion may entail an exaggerated perception of risk when disparate ideological images are successfully mobilised to provoke fear. In all cases, clinicians pleaded for a thorough assessment which would include a dynamic formulation of the use of ideologies by the individuals.

# Discussion

The results of this mixed-method study indicate that hybrid ideologies are frequently encountered in a clinical sample of individuals referred due to attraction or involvement in VE. According to the file review, 22.1% of clients are considered as adhering to more than one ideology, and 32.6% are classified as adhering to non-ideological violence. The latter refers to the fact that these subjects do not appear to adhere to a single, coherent ideology with a structuring effect on their vision of themselves or of the world, but yet includes borrowing from a diversity of symbols, narratives and images in their glorification of violence. In slight contradiction with these numbers, practitioners consider that ideological hybridisation is more the rule than the exception at the levels of individual concerns, trajectories, and points of entry. They described a transformation of the ideological landscape, which can be characterised as a wide continuum including specific forms of ideological reconfiguration and the indiscriminate consumption of ideological signifiers (images, symbols, concepts, narratives) converging to represent an increasingly homogenised and dystopic view of life. The gap between the file review and the clinicians' account suggests that the information recorded in the clientele's files is much less complex than the clinicians' understanding of their clients' ideological landscape. This underlines the methodological challenges of studying this issue, and the limitations associated with an external categorical attribution of ideology. Despite the numerous recent papers mentioning the phenomenon of hybrid ideology in the VE field in online mappings and retrospective case studies of offenders to our knowledge, this is the first estimate of the prevalence of hybrid ideologies in a group of individuals at risk of VE seen in an intervention setting.[30]

## *Hybrid Points of Entry, A Rapidly Homogenising Ideological Landscape*

Clinical and ethnographic data collected by our team suggest that in our sample, ideological hybridity, which includes convergence, confusion, instability and fluidity, is observed at the level of *points of entry* into a rapidly homogenising landscape of shared grievances and growing distrust with institutions in the West. Our findings echo recent discussions by public safety experts regarding a rising phenomenon termed anti-government and anti-authority violent extremism (AGAAVE).[31] In this vein, a number of recent studies and reports have documented a significant increase in ideologically motivated threats to government officials in both the United States and Canada. This increase has been linked to various forms of violent extremism, including anti-government and anti-authority movements.[32] Similarly, in Canada, the Canadian

Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) has reported a rise in ideologically motivated threats to public officials during the COVID-19 pandemic associated with the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.[33] The narratives driving these threats often include anti-authority sentiments and other grievances, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and related public health measures.[34] In our clinical sample, discontent with only one among a range of official positions on a limited set of issues (vaccine and mask mandates, immigration, feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, traditional gender roles), paired with adverse life events, appears to have been sufficient for some individuals to come to adopt most of the claims of the new Neo-Nazi cultural package, for example. Individual's need to make sense of seemingly distinct personal grievances and personal and familial affiliations may influence the dynamic patterns of hybridisation. The need to belong to a large group of people who share the same grievance should not be underestimated in the attraction to the cumulative model, just as the urge to oppose one's group may push individuals to opt for ideologies which portray one group as subhuman.

Within this landscape of ideological hybridisations, some associations among ideologies are more common than others. The issue of gender emerges as a red thread which, as in the literature, establishes bridges between very different political and religious ideologies.[35] The results converge with views expressed by the same group of clinicians in an analysis of gendered VE, in which they emphasised that the actual upsurge in gendered VE reflected the increase in everyday forms of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia that were activated by personal experiences.[36] The authors underscored the fact that misogyny has been described as 'the extremist gateway' that connects the ideologies of otherwise disparate extremist groups.[37]

## *A Generational Effect*

Although very preliminary, the association between hybrid ideologies and age groups supports the idea that generational factors deserve close attention. The predominance of non-ideological violence in the younger group, associated, according to clinicians, with a dystopic worldview, may reflect both the disillusion with social and personal changes and the increased consumption of crude violence associated with a glorification of mass killers and school shooters. For this group, which adheres mostly to nihilist violence, the clinicians suggested that the salad-bar metaphor may accurately represent the relatively indiscriminate use of symbols and images belonging to different ideologies to provoke horror and elicit fear in others. It may also be a way of representing a feeling of confusion among younger generations, related to the rapid changes and to the high level of uncertainty in twenty-first-century societies.[38]

The clinicians emphasised the need to refine our understanding of hybrid ideologies, distinguishing different types of clinically meaningful forms of hybridisation (cumulative, shift, or pseudo-ideological) and underscoring dynamic elements such as continuity and rupture, and the association with life circumstances. Of course, these results are very preliminary and per se cannot indicate which categories, if any, are most useful to describe the present shift in VE presentations. What are the pros and cons of the different models proposed? Kehlet Ebbrecht and Lindekilde argue that we should minimise ideology and focus on grievances, but this may lead to underestimate the role of the present social transformations in the discourses legitimising violence.[39] Gartenstein-Ross et al. propose an interesting conceptual model of composite violent extremism, which partially overlaps with the categories identified by the clinicians, but does not represent the associated dynamics.[40] More research is needed to appraise which model may fit different sets of data and help translate our understanding into guidelines for prevention and intervention. Nonetheless, the clinicians' perceptions confirm the pertinence to study the different forms that ideological hybridisation may adopt and distinguish those through future empirical studies, examining their potential implications in terms of

risk assessment and outcome. Furthermore, at a more sociological and anthropological level, these results call for a joint examination of the simultaneous processes of homogenisation and differentiation associated with globalisation, which may provide a theoretical framework to understand the present phenomenon.

## *Implications for Practice, Policies and Research*

This small study has a number of potential implications. First, in terms of practices, results invite practitioners to go beyond traditionally established categories to assess ideology in individuals at risk of VE. This includes, for example, paying attention to multiple affiliation patterns while considering the evolution in adherence to ideologies in light of a personal trajectory. It may also entail examining the relations between life events and the social environment and the eventual ideological shifts. Before we can produce guidelines based on evidence, we urgently need to learn more about this phenomenon. Recognising and leveraging practitioners' knowledge is an essential step to pave the way toward more studies. Indeed, future epidemiological research would benefit from integrating qualitative findings from this study in order to refine the categories used to code individuals' ideologies, moving beyond broad and traditional ideological typologies, if the aim is to better account for and understand the current hybridisation processes and their theoretical and clinical implications. In terms of intervention, the multiplicity of ideologies (and identities) may require clinicians to weave meanings integrating individual, familial, transgenerational and collective predicaments. Complex tools like the DSM-5's Cultural Formulation Interview may be helpful to train clinicians to address these issues.[41] Their use in VE circumstances remains to be established. In terms of policies, results from this study suggest that the traditional ideological categories used to organise the VE field may lead to working in silos, and sometimes to miss engagement opportunities with clients who do not fit the classical extremist profiles but are however at high risk of acting out. The present trends indicate that it may be timely to rethink the overlap between VE, non-ideological school shooters and mass killers, and interpersonal gendered violence. This could mean common gateways to access intervention services, but also joining perspectives in online and offline prevention programs.

This study also has a number of limitations. Based on a relatively small sample size, it relies, for the quantitative part, on limited information on ideologies in the clientele's clinical files. The information in the files was not initially recorded to study hybrid ideologies. The difference between a structuring ideology versus a more erratic borrowing of symbols or images is not clear cut and constitute a continuum, which is difficult to identify through a file review. However, this methodological limitation revealed by our qualitative results is also an opportunity for future research. In addition, the clients' perspective on this issue is not directly represented in clinical files and clinicians' accounts and would provide additional insights on the matter. Nonetheless, this is, to our knowledge, the first empirical study on hybrid ideologies in VE, and it raises important questions for a field which has to adapt constantly to rapid social transformations.

# Conclusion

One of the greatest challenges in the VE field is that the rhythm of social transformations often exceeds our capacity to learn from and adapt to those changes. This small study raises a few hypotheses about the phenomenon of hybrid ideologies in individuals attracted or involved in VE. Showing that hybrid ideologies are common among at risk individuals, it suggests that both homogenisation and fragmentation processes associated with globalisation may explain this shift in ideological presentation. These exploratory results also indicate that these changes may have direct implications for intervention and prevention, which need to be examined in research and practice.

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Violent Extremism: A Multilevel and Interdisciplinary Evidence-Based Approach

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**Abstract:** This integrative review aims to inform research, policy and practice at the tertiary level of prevention targeting radicalised individuals, whether they have acted on their radicalisation or not. It stresses the need to respond to the terrorist threat with a multilevel and interdisciplinary evidence-based approach in order to account for the complexity of the issue. To do so, drawing from the socio-ecological model of violence, we categorise across four levels of analysis (i.e. individual, relationship, community, and societal) the risk and protective factors associated with violent extremism and reported in the existent systematic reviews and meta-analyses on this issue. As a result, we observe an overemphasis on the study of individual factors, with a few relationship factors, and no community or societal factors reported. To address this limitation, we emphasise the need for future studies to focus on risk and protective factors across the four levels of analysis. We also suggest future systematic reviews and meta-analyses to focus on qualitative data. Finally, based on the individual and relationship factors identified in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses, but also on the community and societal factors identified in narrative reviews, we propose a socio-ecological model of violent extremism.

**Keywords:** Preventing violent extremism, behavioural radicalisation, risk and protective factors, socio-ecological model of violence, evidence-based practice.

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# Introduction

The numerous terrorist attacks enacted worldwide since 9/11 warrant the need for better prevention strategies to be implemented. These strategies can be seen as part of a continuum in which prevention is carried out with the general population with no apparent risk (primary prevention), with individuals identified as being at risk of radicalisation (secondary prevention), and with radicalised individuals, whether they have acted on their radicalisation or not (tertiary prevention).[1] Hence, these strategies are designed to prevent the onset and continuity of the cognitive (i.e. attitudes and behavioural intentions) and behavioural outcomes of radicalisation. That is a subscription to a radical ideology through the justification or support for the use of violent radical behaviours (i.e. cognitive radicalisation), and the acting out on behalf of this ideology (i.e. behavioural radicalisation).[2] Cognitive and behavioural radicalisation should be seen as extremities to a continuum, starting with growing sympathy for a radical ideology, and evolving to the point of taking violent action in the name of that ideology.

The present integrative review will focus on the endpoint of this continuum (i.e. behavioural radicalisation) by discussing the risk and protective factors associated with violent extremism, that is, "involvement in violent radical behaviours, including illegal and violent sub-terroristic behaviours motivated by a radical ideology, and behaviours that can be classified as terrorism."[3] Of note, "sub-terroristic radical violence includes acts of violence against persons and property that is usually nonlethal and fall short of the legal definitions of terrorism."[4] However, in between these two extremities of cognitive and behavioural radicalisation, other forms of nonviolent behaviour can be found, such as interacting with radical communities online and offline, and downloading and promoting propaganda. Although considered as behavioural expressions of radicalisation, because of the absence of physical violence, these behaviours are not considered as pertaining to the category of behavioural radicalisation and, therefore, are not considered in the present review. Moreover, as observed by Schuurman and Carthy[5], the risk and protective factors associated with violent extremism may differ from those associated with other radicalisation-related behavioural outcomes. For instance, the authors have shown that alignment with a group whose main strategy is violence and access to weapons are strongly associated with violent extremism rather than with other radicalisation-related behavioural outcomes, whereas alignment with an extremist (but nonviolent) group and parenting during radicalisation are associated with participation in nonviolent activism. Therefore, the risk and protective factors reported in the present integrative review are informative to prevention strategies targeting violent extremism and cannot be extended to the prevention of other radicalisation-related behavioural outcomes.

In the last decade, a growing body of quantitative and qualitative research has focused on identifying risk and, to a lesser extent, protective factors associated with cognitive and behavioural radicalisation. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses synthesising the available quantitative evidence have also flourished.[6] Risk and protective factors are the factors observed to be, respectively, positively or negatively associated with the outcome of interest (i.e. cognitive and/or behavioural radicalisation).[7] Both risk and protective factors can be considered either dynamic or static, meaning that they can be, respectively, modified or not through outside intervention.[8] Moreover, concerning protective factors, it is necessary to distinguish between promotive factors and buffering protective factors.[9] Promotive factors are understood to exert a direct inverse effect on the individual's probability of acting out, regardless of the risk factors to which the individual is exposed, whereas buffering protective factors are understood to attenuate the negative impact of risk factors, thus exerting a moderating effect only when risk factors (or a given risk factor) are (is) present.[10] It is noteworthy that no single risk (or protective) factor can lead to (or prevent) behavioural radicalisation. Instead, it is the combination of different risk factors and the presence or absence of protective factors that might be associated with

acting out or refraining from acting out.[11] Indeed, by comparing radicals who engaged in radical and violent behaviours to those who did not, Schuurman and Carthy showed that acting out is the product of a combination of the presence of risk and the absence of protective factors.[12]

Drawing from the socio-ecological model of violence, the present integrative review aims to put forward a comprehensive analysis of risk and protective factors associated with violent extremism by bringing together all factors identified in the aforementioned systematic reviews and meta-analyses, and organising them across different levels of analysis.[13] By doing so, we aim to inform research, policy and practice at the tertiary level of prevention and propose a multilevel and interdisciplinary evidence-based approach to this challenging issue.

## The Socio-Ecological Model

The socio-ecological model has been proposed by Dahlberg and Krug to understand any form of violence perpetration (or victimisation).[14] It explains violence as a multifactorial and multilevel phenomenon. In this perspective, no single factor can explain alone why an individual becomes a perpetrator (or a victim) of violence. Instead, it is the interplay between various factors that should be considered. Accordingly, the scholars stress that the various factors involved in violence perpetration (or victimisation) can be observed across four levels: 1) individual, 2) relationship, 3) community, and 4) societal. The individual level refers to individual characteristics across psychological, biological, and personal history factors that are likely to increase (or decrease) the individual's likelihood of violence victimisation (or perpetration). The relationship level refers to proximal social relationships (e.g. peers and family members) that might lead the individual toward (or away from) violence victimisation (or perpetration). The community level refers to environmental factors in which such relationships are embedded in (e.g. schools and neighbourhoods) and targets the contextual characteristics that might be positively or negatively associated with violence victimisation (or perpetration). Hence, both relationship and community factors can be considered as social factors. Finally, the societal level refers to macro-level factors (e.g. social norms and policies) that can positively or negatively influence violence victimisation (or perpetration).

Dahlberg and Krug also stress the importance of this multifactorial and multilevel model in informing multifaced interventions.[15] For them, all levels should be tackled at once across various interventions. On the individual level, the interventions will focus on attenuating individual characteristics which are understood as risk factors, whereas strengthening those are understood as protective factors. On the relationship level, the interventions will focus on proximal relationships aiming to address those representing a risk for the individual and strengthen (or develop) those protecting them from violence victimisation (or perpetration). On the community level, the interventions will focus on addressing the social problems that are present in the social environments in which the individual is embedded. Finally, on the societal level, the interventions will focus on promoting societal change by tackling cultural, social and economic factors associated with violence victimisation (or perpetration).

Although intended for the prevention of violence in general, this model has been applied by other scholars to the understanding of specific forms of violence (see Hales[16] for university-based sexual violence perpetration, and Wallace et al.[17] for cyber-dating victimisation). In Hales' analysis of university-based violence perpetration, gender-based cognitions, such as sexist thoughts, are highlighted as individual-level risk factors.[18] Perceived approval of sexual aggression by students' peers is considered a relationship-level risk factor, whereas studying in universities promoting a hypermasculine student lifestyle (e.g. fraternity membership) is considered a community-level risk factor. Finally, one of the societal risk factors put forward

by the author is the normative sexual objectification of women. Hence, drawing from the socio-ecological model, the present integrative review proposes an analysis of violent extremism across individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.

## Other Attempts

Of note, this is not the first attempt to organise and discuss risk and protective factors per level of analysis. For instance, LaFree and Schwarzenbach discuss micro- (individual) and macro-level (societal) risk factors pertaining to cognitive and behavioural radicalisation, within the field of criminology.[19] In such a dichotomic structuration, social (relationship and community) risk factors were not considered as such and were then presented as pertaining either to the micro (individual) level (e.g. radical peers) or macro (societal) level (e.g. group structure and dynamics). Doosje et al., however, considered the individual, social, and societal levels of analysis in their discussion on factors influencing radicalisation leading to violence as well as de-radicalisation.[20] Nonetheless, in both papers, it is not clear how the risk and protective factors were selected. Also, in both cases, the structuring of factors through levels of analysis is not based on a theoretical framework. As a consequence, different understandings of individual, social and societal factors are applied, making it difficult to draw conclusions across papers. Finally, neither paper goes beyond the structuration of risk and protective factors per level of analysis. That is, they do not explain why this structuration is important and do not provide much guidance for research and practice.

Moreover, the need to adopt an integrative and multilevel approach in the fight against extremism was also put forward by Bouhana.[21] In her moral ecology of extremism, this scholar states the importance of considering the drivers of extremism across four levels of analysis. One level includes individual factors, two more levels comprise environmental factors, and a fourth level refers to societal factors. In her work, she highlights the need for prevention strategies to focus not only on individuals at risk, but also on the social environments and societal factors that can create or reinforce this risk. Her study was not included in the present integrative review for three main reasons. First, this work was not peer-reviewed and does not constitute a systematic review. Second, the scholar mobilises a broader definition of extremism, considering every harmful action deviating from the moral conduct established by the law in a given country, whereas in the present review, we are interested in one specific outcome: violent extremism, defined as a violent action on behalf of a radical ideology. Third, as a consequence of this broader definition, it is not possible to identify, among the risk factors put forward by the author, which ones are associated with this specific outcome variable.

A more fine-grained and systematic approach to this issue was recently proposed by Ohls et al. in their systematic review of risk and protective factors pertaining to cognitive and behavioural radicalisation.[22] The authors proposed their categorisation across eight domains: 1) static factors, 2) past and current social environments, 3) psychological features, 4) personality features and social factors, 5) ideology, 6) religiosity, 7) criminal past, and 8) behavioural and emotional patterns. For each domain, the authors present (when available) risk and protective factors, which allows a more comprehensive understanding of their dynamics. Importantly, the authors also examine qualitative data, which is lacking in the previously mentioned systematic reviews. However, the authors focus only on Islamic radicals and violent extremists. Therefore, although they propose a multifactorial and multilevel understanding of cognitive and behavioural radicalisation, their conclusions are limited to one specific ideology, preventing generalisation to other ideologies. Moreover, in their systematic review, it is not possible to distinguish factors associated with radical attitudes and intentions (i.e. cognitive radicalisation) from those associated with radical and violent behaviours (i.e. behavioural radicalisation). Similarly, in Feddes et al.'s systematic review[23] of risk and protective factors associated with cognitive and

behavioural radicalisation, it is not clear, when they mention factors associated with violent extremism, if these factors are indeed associated with actual behaviour or with behavioural intentions. The authors nevertheless put forward demographic, structural, personality, group, trigger, capacity, opportunity, and resilience factors observed in quantitative and qualitative studies, which represents an important step in the understanding of radicalisation processes.

These attempts can be seen as a starting point for the discussion on the need to implement a multilevel and interdisciplinary evidence-based approach to violent extremism by encompassing risk and protective factors across individual, relationship, community, and societal levels of analysis. We follow in their footsteps by proposing a more systematic analysis of the issue, as well as by focusing only on the endpoint of the radicalisation process (i.e. violent extremism).

# Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Violent Extremism

## *Selection Criteria*

The papers included in the present integrative review are peer-reviewed systematic reviews or meta-analyses reporting quantitative data on the association between risk and/or protective factors associated with behavioural radicalisation (i.e. violent extremism) among adults. Moreover, considering the methodological issues in studies investigating the role played by mental disorders and their inconsistent findings, systematic reviews and meta-analyses focusing specifically on mental disorders as risk factors were not included.[24]

The choice to focus only on systematic reviews and meta-analyses of quantitative data stems from their methodological rigour, compared to narrative reviews. Indeed, as stated by Pae, the findings provided by systematic reviews and meta-analyses are based on "comprehensive and systematic literature searches in all available resources, [...] avoiding subjective selection bias", whereas findings provided by narrative reviews are more descriptive than comprehensive, and prone to subjective selection bias.[25]

Some systematic reviews and meta-analyses that did not meet the aforementioned criteria were, however, not included. Desmarais et al.'s systematic review[26] was not included because the authors also considered theoretical papers, which is not in line with our approach focusing on empirical and quantitative evidence. Likewise, the systematic reviews conducted by Vergani et al.[27], Ohls et al.[28], and Feddes et al.[29] were not included because it is not possible to distinguish factors associated with cognitive radicalisation from those associated with behavioural radicalisation (i.e. violent extremism). Moreover, Emmelkamp et al.'s meta-analysis[30] was not considered, because it focuses on radicalisation among juveniles.

In the end, the following systematic reviews and meta-analyses were included: Lösel et al.[31], Wolfowicz et al.[32], and Zych and Nasaescu.[33] The risk and protective factors reported in these as, respectively, positively and negatively associated with violent extremism, are presented and discussed below.

## *Risk Factors*

Table 1 displays the sixteen risk factors identified in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses as relevant for violent extremism. These are structured per level of analysis according to the socio-ecological model.[34] The majority of the identified risk factors pertain to the individual level (n=11), with only a few factors reported at the relationship level (n=5) and none at the community and societal levels. It is important to note that the risk factors are named

and defined in the following table as they were labelled in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Some of these factors are marked by negative connotations, expressing subjective judgement values. For instance, the risk factor "deviant peers" might be interpreted differently depending on the perspective one adopts. However, such a fine-grained distinction goes beyond the scope of the present review. For this reason, we decided to employ the terms and definitions found in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

*Table 1. Risk Factors Associated with Violent Extremism and their Characteristics*

| Factor | Definition | Type | Level of analysis | Reference |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Authoritarianism/ fundamentalism | Submission to higher authority/ aggression to out-groups | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Criminal history | Criminal record for unspecified offences | Static | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Thrill seeking | Taking risks just for fun of it, without thinking of consequences | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Radical Attitudes | Support for or justification of radical violence in the name of a cause | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Job loss | Recent loss of employment | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2021 |
| Unemployed | Lack of gainful employment | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Prior incarcerations | Prior incarcerations for unspecified offences | Static | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2021 |
| Low self-control | Impulsivity, quick to anger | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Perceived injustice | Feeling that one or one's ingroup is treated unjustly | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2021 |
| Welfare recipient | Beneficiating from social benefits | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Gender | Being a male | Static | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2021 |
| Parental abuse | Physically abused by parents | Static | Relationship | Wolfowicz et al., 2021 |
| Experienced violence | Perpetrated/victim of violence involving strangers, bullies, or parents | Static | Relationship | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Deviant peers | Peers support/involved in deviance, including radicalism | Dynamic | Relationship | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Online contact with radicals | Online contact with radicals | Dynamic | Relationship | Wolfowicz et al. 2021 |
| Radical family | Family members with cognitive or behavioral radicalisation | Dynamic | Relationship | Wolfowicz et al. 2021; Zych & Nasaescu, 2022 |
| Critical family event | Various critical family events (e.g. divorce, serious illness or death). | Static | Relationship | Zych & Nasaescu, 2022 |

### *Individual*

At the individual level, being a male and having a criminal record were found to be static risk factors associated with violent extremism. Dynamic risk factors were also identified. These are related to employment (recent loss of employment, lack of gainful employment, and being a welfare recipient), personality traits (authoritarianism/fundamentalism, low self-control, thrill-seeking), perceived injustice (directed at the individual and/or their group), low social integration, and radical attitudes.

### *Relationship*

At the relationship level, we observe static and dynamic risk factors related to family issues: critical family events and parental abuse for static risk factors; and radical family members for dynamic risk factors. The influence of radical peers (deviant peers and online contact with radicals) also appears as a dynamic risk factor.

## *Protective Factors*

Similarly, Table 2 (see below) displays the eighteen protective factors identified in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses as relevant for violent extremism. These are structured per level of analysis according to the socio-ecological model.[35] The majority of the identified protective factors pertain to the individual level (n=12), with only a few factors reported at the relationship level (n=6), and none at the community and societal levels. As for the risk factors, the reported protective factors are named and defined in the following table as they were in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Some of these factors are marked by positive connotations, expressing subjective judgment values. For instance, the protective factor "prosocial peers" might be interpreted differently depending on the perspective one adopts. However, as previously explained, such a fine-grained distinction goes beyond the scope of the present review.

### *Individual*

At the individual level, there is evidence that ageing, as well as positive experiences at school (school bonding, school performance), protect against violent extremism. These are static protective factors. Other dynamic protective factors were also observed. These are related to education (high level of education), employment, social class (high socioeconomic status), religion (intensive religious practice), institutions' perceptions (police and law legitimacy, law abidance), personality traits (self-control), and cognitions (value complexity).

### *Relationship*

Similar to relationship risk factors, relationship protective factors highlight the influence of social networks. However, as they are protective, these dynamic factors refer to a prosocial influence, in the sense that family commitment, parental involvement, having nonviolent peers and prosocial significant others, and establishing contact with foreigners is negatively associated with violent extremism. Also, personal discrimination was observed to be negatively associated with violent extremism. Although counter-intuitive, as other negative experiences (e.g. perceived injustice) appear as a risk factor, Lösel et al. argue that the observed negative association between personal discrimination and violent extremism might stem from the ideology under scrutiny (i.e. far-right extremism).[36] They argue that, in this context, other variables, such as higher self-esteem and authoritarian attitudes, function as risk factors, which may counteract feelings of discrimination. It is important to note, however, that this association was observed only in one single paper, requiring further investigation.[37]

*Table 2. Protective Factors Associated with Violent Extremism and their Characteristics*

| Factor | Definition | Type | Level of analysis | Reference |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | Being older | Static | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Education | Highest level of education attained | Dynamic | Individual | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Employment | Having a job | Dynamic | Individual | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Intensive religious practice | Not specified | Dynamic | Individual | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Law abidance | There is a duty to follow and abide by the law | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021; Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Law legitimacy | Respect for the government/law/authorities | Dynamic | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| Perceived personal discrimination | Not specified | Static | Individual | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Police legitimacy | Respect for the police | Dynamic | Individual | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| School bonding | Enjoying going to school and/or studying/attachment to school | Static | Individual | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021 |
| School performance | Good grades | Static | Individual | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Self-control | Low impulsivity | Dynamic | Individual | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Socioeconomic status | Level of personal/household income | Dynamic | Individual | Zych & Nasaescu, 2022 |
| Value complexity | Acknowledgement that values may be in conflict | Dynamic | Individual | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Contact to foreigners | Not specified | Dynamic | Relationship | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Non-violent peers | Not specified | Dynamic | Relationship | Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Family commitment | Importance of family, feeling that parents are important, family cohesion, leisure time with parents, parental involvement, parental care, and democratic parenting | Dynamic | Relationship | Zych & Nasaescu, 2022 |
| Parental involvement | Parents show interest, praise, and are aware of whereabouts | Dynamic | Relationship | Wolfowicz et al., 2020, 2021; Lösel et al., 2018 |
| Significant other not involved in violence | Not specified | Dynamic | Relationship | Lösel et al., 2018 |

## Dynamic Individual Factors in the Spotlight

In the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses, much more dynamic, as opposed to static, risk and protective factors were identified. This supports the importance of evidence-based prevention programs likely to modify those factors by an intervention. Indeed, although static factors can be informative in the risk evaluation, they are not relevant for the interventions,

because they cannot be modified by them. Therefore, in terms of prevention, the identification of dynamic factors is of great importance. These will inform interventions aiming to reduce the influence of risk factors and strengthen the influence of protective factors.

In terms of level of analysis, the majority of the identified risk and protective factors are concentrated at the individual level, with very few factors observed at the relationship level, and none at the community and societal levels. Although risk factors like being a recipient of welfare benefits and having a low socioeconomic status point to issues related to social class and social inequalities, and could, therefore, be considered at the societal level, they were measured here at the individual level. Their equivalent at the societal level could be, for instance, the Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality in a country. Hence, the Gini coefficient, when low, could be considered as a risk factor, and, when high, as a protective factor. This does not mean that all individuals living in a country with a low Gini coefficient are at risk of violent extremism, or that all individuals living in a country with a high Gini coefficient are not at risk. As we will discuss later, no (risk or protective) factor should be considered in isolation. It is its interaction with other factors that really matters.

The observed overemphasis on the individual level indicates that the remaining levels are overlooked or understudied at the moment or, at least, neglected by the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses. For instance, in Wolfowicz et al.'s systematic reviews and meta-analyses[38] the authors state that their focus is exclusively on micro-level (individual) factors, excluding from their analyses community-level factors, such as community-level deprivation and population density, and societal-level factors, such as gross domestic product (GDP) and Gini coefficient.[39] As a consequence, societal risk factors such as those identified by LaFree and Schwarzenbach[40] are absent in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses. That is ethnic heterogeneity, ethnic tension, exclusion of ethnic groups from political power, minority socioeconomic discrimination, (long-term) income inequality, failed or weak states, repressive counter-terrorism measures, population size, immigration, and civil and interstate conflicts.

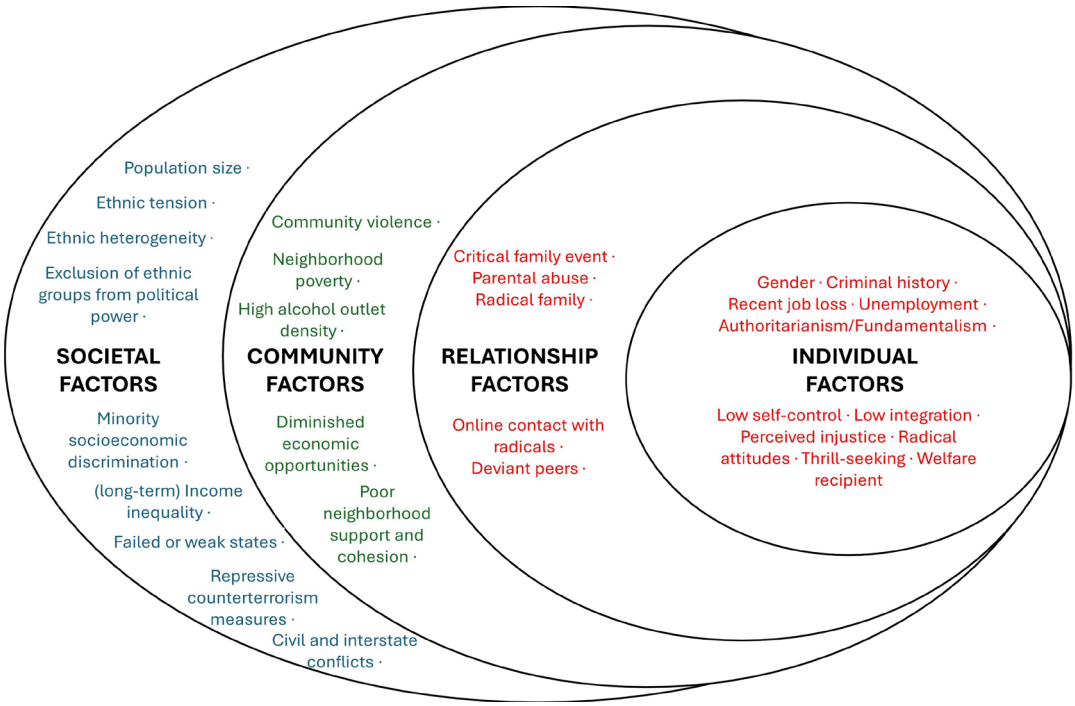
Another related explanation for the observed scarcity of relationship factors, and the absence of community and societal factors, is disciplinary bias. Indeed, the issue of violent extremism has been most often studied separately by different disciplines, resulting in a monodisciplinary approach. Consequently, the understanding of violent extremism is reduced to a few individual, social, or societal factors, depending on which discipline lens is favoured. Taken separately, the findings from each discipline can only provide a partial picture of this complex and challenging issue of violent extremism. For instance, whereas research in psychology focuses mainly on individual factors, social (relationship and community) and societal level factors might be of greater interest to scholars from other fields within social sciences (e.g. sociology, political science) in which qualitative, rather than quantitative, research is more common practice. Therefore, by focusing on systematic syntheses of quantitative data, our review might have neglected qualitative data providing support for the existence of other (relationship, community, and societal) risk and protective factors. For instance, in their interview study with ISIS and al-Qaeda members incarcerated in Kuwait, Scull et al. concluded that being a Bidoon, which can be considered a societal factor, might increase the individual's vulnerability toward joining a terrorist organisation.[41] It remains unclear, however, whether this factor can also be associated with violent extremism. Of note, Bidoon is a term used to refer to "[…] stateless Arab minority in Kuwait who were not included as citizens at the time of the country's independence […]. [They] face difficulties in obtaining civil documents, finding employment, and accessing healthcare, education, and other social services provided to Kuwaiti citizens."[42]

## Socio-Ecological Model of Risk and Protective Factors Pertaining to Violent Extremism

As recognised by Dahlberg and Krug[43], violence is a multifactorial and multilevel phenomenon. In order to account for its complexity, it is necessary to be able to explain it by combining of different factors stemming from internal mechanisms, social relations, social environments, policies, ideologies and social norms pervading a given society. Given that the majority of the identified risk and protective factors pertaining to violent extremism are situated at the individual level, the current state of knowledge allows us to understand which individual characteristics might lead to (or prevent) violent extremism, but makes it difficult to understand how social and societal factors can facilitate or, on the contrary, counter violent extremism. As a result, we only get a partial picture of the phenomenon and can only provide partial answers.

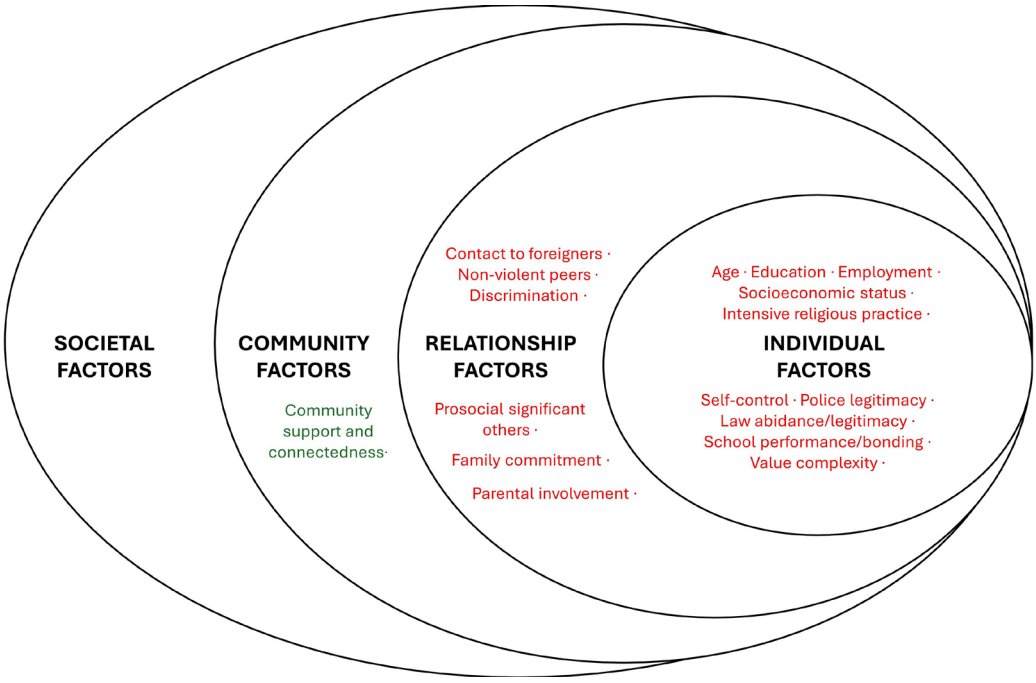
To cope with this limit, and to guide future research, policy and practice, we propose hereafter a socio-ecological model of risk and protective factors pertaining to violent extremism (cf. Figures 1 and 2).[44] This model is based on the individual and relationship factors identified in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses[45] but also on societal factors identified in LaFree and Schwarzenbach's narrative review.[46] Moreover, as community factors are absent in these, we completed the model by drawing some potential community-level risk and protective factors from Armstead et al.'s narrative review of risk and protective factors associated with violence in general.[47] Despite its methodological limits (i.e. the absence of a systematic approach), the authors also apply the socio-ecological model in their categorisation of risk and protective factors, which makes it easy for their inclusion in our proposed socio-ecological model of risk and protective factors pertaining to violent extremism.[48] As discussed by Dahlberg and Krug, various forms of violence can share a number of risk factors.[49] For this reason, some individuals can be at risk of perpetrating more than one type of violence. Likewise, as noted by Estano et al., violent extremism shares some commonalities with ordinary crime in terms of classic criminogenic factors.[50] In line with this argument, Raets showed that the dimensions concerning disengagement and social reintegration of violent extremists are the same as for the ordinary criminal population, although group involvement, ideology, and socio-legal responses appear more prevalent for violent extremists.[51] Hence, this extrapolation from factors associated with violence, in general, to violent extremism, in particular, follows the rationale according to which, while violent extremism is a particular form of violence, it remains a form of violence after all. The community protective and risk factors identified in Armstead et al.'s narrative review as pertaining to violence in general, can give us some indications of potential community protective and risk factors associated with violent extremism, which obviously needs to be tested empirically.[52] At this stage, we cannot state that these factors are associated with violent extremism, but in view of what has been discussed above, we have reasons to believe that this might be the case. Finally, to the best of our knowledge, societal-level protective factors associated with violent extremism or violence in general, are not reported in any existing review, which makes it impossible for us to complete the proposed model on this particular level.

*Figure 1. Socio-ecological model of risk factors pertaining to violent extremism*




Note: Adapted from Dahlberg & Krug.[53] Factors identified in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses[54] are highlighted in red, those identified in LaFree and Schwarzenbach's narrative review[55] are identified in blue, and those identified in Armstead et al.[56] are highlighted in green.

*Figure 2. Socio-ecological model of protective factors pertaining to violent extremism*




Note: Adapted from Dahlberg & Krug.[57] Factors identified in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses[58] are highlighted in red, those identified in LaFree and Schwarzenbach's narrative review[59] are identified in blue, and those identified in Armstead et al.[60] are highlighted in green.

## Risk and Protective Factors as a System

In many studies, risk and protective factors are treated separately. However, although presented in distinct socio-ecological models for clear visualisation, risk and protective factors should be understood as a system in the sense that they are complementary to each other. Hence, risk and protective factors should be simultaneously considered. Moreover, because of the observed overemphasis on individual factors, these studies always end up concluding on the heterogeneity of profiles of violent extremists (i.e. the absence of a common risk profile). More precisely, the predominance of individual factors and the scarcity or lack of data on the other levels (i.e. relationship, community, and societal) make it difficult to identify common patterns beyond individual differences. The importance of simultaneously identifying risk and protective factors across levels of analysis relies on the assumption that no single factor can explain, by itself, violent behaviour.[61] Instead, it is the combination of various risk factors that might lead to violent extremism. Similarly, it is the combination of various protective factors, in the presence or absence of risk factors[62], that can prevent violent extremism.

Although Ohls et al. go one step further by exploring risk and protective factors across dimensions, which could inform risk assessment and interventions, their findings are limited because of their descriptive nature and because they conflated cognitive and behavioural outcomes of radicalisation.[63] Similarly, although Bouhana's moral ecology of extremism also explores risk factors across different levels of analysis, her findings are also limited because they are not peer-reviewed, as well as by their descriptive nature and by the broader definition of extremism employed.[64]

Finally, Clemmow et al. put forward an analysis of how risk and protective factors co-occur and relate to each other and to violent extremism.[65] Through a latent class analysis, the authors observed different risk and protective profiles tapping into different components of radicalisation, namely propensity, situational, and exposure. They also showed that some of these profiles interact either to increase or to buffer the risk of radicalisation. However, as the study was conducted among a general sample and the outcome measure was behavioural intentions, its findings are informative for prevention strategies focusing on the cognitive component of radicalisation, but not necessarily for those focusing on its behavioural component. Indeed, as shown by Ajzen, behavioural intentions do not necessarily lead to actual behaviour: perceived control over one's own behaviour, positive attitudes toward the behaviour under consideration and subjective norms are necessary to link intentions to actions.[66] Also, in their analysis, community and societal factors are not considered. They nevertheless provide evidence for the interactional and cumulative effects of individual and relationship-level risk and protective factors in leading to (or preventing) violent extremism intentions.

## Onset Offending vs. Reoffending

As the present integrative review focuses on risk and protective factors associated with violent extremism, it is informative to the prevention of onset offending, but not necessarily to recidivism. Indeed, it is known that factors related to onset offending are not always the same or as relevant in explaining re-offending.[67]

However, the scientific literature on the issue of re-offending among violent extremists is scarce. Hasisi et al.'s study of risk and protective factors associated with recidivism among terrorism-related convicts is one rare example of such an effort.[68] In their study, based on secondary data from terrorism-related convicts in Israel (n=1,585), the sentence length appears to prevent recidivism. Specifically, they observed that a longer sentence decreases the likelihood of recidivism, among first-time offenders and recidivist offenders. In this result, it is difficult

to disentangle the influence of sentence length from the influence of ageing on recidivism. Indeed, the authors also find that ageing functions as a protective factor against recidivism. Hence, the negative association between the sentence length and recidivism is probably due to the violent extremists' older age at the moment of release. Other risk and protective factors identified by Hasisi et al. are: prior incarceration and affiliation with a terrorist organisation, for risk factors; and marital status, for protective factors.[69] Also relying on secondary data from terrorism-related convicts in Israel (n=26,667), Carmel et al. identified the following risk factors pertaining to recidivism: prior incarceration, younger age at release, sentence length (below seven years), offence type (being convicted for violent and disorderly offences), affiliation with a terrorist organisation and being single.[70] Likewise, also relying on secondary data pertaining to 85 violent extremists scattered all over the world, Altier et al. identified ageing and higher socioeconomic status as protective factors against recidivism, whereas radical attitudes and connections appeared as risk factors.[71] However, in their sample, when controlling for beliefs and social connections - unlike observed by Hasisi et al.[72] and Carmel et al.[73] - marital status does not appear to protect against recidivism. Finally, relying on secondary data from Guantanamo Bay detainees (n=731), Fahey showed that, among the various risk factors considered, only time since release predicted recidivism, which demonstrates the importance of a longer follow-up study.[74]

The aforementioned results should be considered with caution, as they all rely on secondary data, encompassing official documents as well as news reporting. Another reason is their lack of consensus on what is considered recidivism. It is important to note that the recidivism rates identified in these different studies are strongly dependent on various recidivism characterisations. For instance, some studies use reincarceration related to violent extremism as a measure of recidivism[75], whereas others prefer the broader conception of reengagement in violent extremism, independently of incarceration.[76] These findings suggest, nevertheless, that some risk (e.g. radical attitudes and connections) and protective (e.g. older age and higher socioeconomic status) factors can be observed both in relation to the onset of offending and reoffending of violent extremism.

## *Evidence-Based Practice*

Among the various risk and protective factors put forward in the proposed model, many are neglected by prevention interventions, as noted by Hassan et al.[77] In a recently published book chapter, the authors highlight that intervention programs targeting employment were effective in tackling violent extremism. This is in line with the proposed socio-ecological model of violent extremism in which lack of employment appears as a risk factor, whereas employment functions as a protective factor. Other successful interventions, however, targeted civic education/engagement and citizenship, but were not observed in the present integrative review as protective factors. The results of interventions targeting other factors, which were not observed in the present integrative review, are inconclusive. This is the case for interventions targeting the development of knowledge on radicalisation and religion, empathy, self-esteem, self-image, confidence, and identity. These findings highlight that some factors need further inquiry (e.g. civic education/engagement and citizenship), as well as that some interventions are not evidence-based. One possible explanation, highlighted by the researchers, is the novelty of studies examining risk and protective factors and the even more recent publication of systematic reviews regrouping and synthesising these studies. Indeed, as the researchers argue, the majority of the intervention programmes examined were designed and implemented at a time when these risk and protective factors were unknown. These findings highlight the importance of researchers, policymakers and practitioners working together in order to effectively counter violent extremism, and the proposed socio-ecological model aims to facilitate this process.

## Future Perspectives

To deal with the observed overemphasis on individual factors pertaining to violent extremism, we proposed a socio-ecological model encompassing individual, relationship, community and societal risk and protective factors pertaining to violent extremism.[78] Future systematic syntheses aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of violent extremism should apply such a model and, therefore, also focus on social (relationship and community) and societal factors reported in qualitative and quantitative studies. Although this is a less common practice, systematic reviews and even meta-analyses of qualitative data are achievable goals that ought also to be applied to the field of violent extremism.[79] Also, more research targeting social relations and environments (i.e. at the relationship and community levels, respectively), as well as social norms and broader policies (i.e. at the societal level), should allow for a more comprehensive understanding of risk and protective factors associated with violent extremism across all levels of analysis proposed by Dahlberg and Krug.[80] Finally, more research focusing on the risk and protective factors associated with other (nonviolent) radicalisation-related behavioural outcomes (e.g. downloading and promoting propaganda) should allow a more comprehensive understanding of which factors are exclusive to this form of behaviour and which factors are common across violent and nonviolent radicalisation-related behavioural outcomes. This research could also investigate if nonviolent radicalisation-related behaviours can serve as a risk or protective factor for violent extremism.

The risk and protective factors reported in the proposed socio-ecological model should also be tested empirically in order to attest to the model's relevance across different radical ideologies. Such an effort of empirical validation of the socio-ecological model was conducted by Wallace et al. in the context of cyber dating violence (DV) victimisation.[81] The results of their online survey conducted among 456 adolescent girls suggest that the following factors are associated with increased risk of cyber-DV victimisation: clinical dissociation and emotion dysregulation, for the individual level; offline (verbal-emotional and sexual) dating violence, for the relationship level; and living in neighbourhoods with lower levels of social disadvantage, for the community level. However, when all variables are included in the same model, the individual ones are no longer associated with victimisation. Moreover, whereas the relationship-level variables accounted for 28.2 percent of variation in the model, the community-level variables only accounted for 1.36 percent of variation. This suggests that relationship-level factors have a greater influence on the risk of cyber-DV victimisation. It remains to be established whether this is the case when we consider factors associated with violence perpetration rather than victimisation, across the various forms of violence and, in particular, regarding violent extremism. Finally, although the authors claim to provide an empirical test of the socio-ecological model, societal-level factors are left out of their analysis for non-explained reasons. This might be due to the difficulties in actually measuring factors at this level. However, such difficulties do not imply impossibility as shown elsewhere.[82] Hence, although Wallace et al.'s research is an important step in the empirical validation of the socio-ecological model of violence, future studies should put more effort into measuring the societal level and, therefore, providing an empirical validation of the model across its four levels.[83]

In the model's validation, it is also important to consider the influence of the co-occurrence of risk and protective factors and if (and how) these interact. One way of doing this is to adapt the research protocol proposed by Clemmow et al.[84] By mobilising a sample of terrorism-related convicts, one could conduct a latent class analysis in order to better grasp how the putative risk and protective factors featured in the proposed socio-ecological model interact in order to lead to (or to prevent) violent extremism. Such research will also help to identify which protective factors exert promotive or buffering effects.[85] It is also possible that some of the factors identified may function for some individuals as risk factors, while for others, they will

function as protective factors. This would probably be due to the interaction with other risk and protective factors. However, no overlap was observed between the risk and protective factors identified in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses, suggesting the need for further studies.

Given the focus of the present integrative review (i.e. risk and protective factors pertaining to violent extremism), its content is informative to the prevention of behavioural radicalisation, but not necessarily to the prevention of cognitive radicalisation (i.e. radical attitudes and behavioural intentions). Future research syntheses could also apply the socio-ecological model of violence to the understanding of these cognitive outcomes of radicalisation across individual, relationship, community, and societal risk and protective factors.[86] Likewise, as previously stated, by focusing on risk and protective factors associated with violent extremism, the present integrative review is informative for the prevention of onset offending, but not necessarily for the prevention of recidivism among terrorism-related convicts. Given the paucity of empirical studies on the latter, more research efforts are needed to distinguish between exclusive and mutual risk and protective factors pertaining to these two different outcome behaviours (i.e. onset offending and recidivism), as well as a more systematic inquiry, ideally with primary data, on the risk and protective factors associated with recidivism across different levels of analysis. Such research can inform social reintegration strategies aiming to facilitate the transition between the prison release and the return to society of terrorism-related convicts. This is of great importance, given the increasing number of prison releases expected for the next years.[87]

# Conclusion

The socio-ecological model of violent extremism proposed in the present integrative review aims to provide a comprehensive (multifactorial, multilevel, and interdisciplinary) and evidence-based analysis of this complex and challenging issue. At first, this review's aim was to classify, across four levels of analysis (i.e. individual, relationship, community, and societal), the risk and protective factors reported in the examined systematic reviews and meta-analyses as pertaining to violent extremism. The ultimate goal of such a classification is to provide a socio-ecological model of violent extremism based on the most robust empirical evidence. However, as a consequence of the observed overemphasis on individual factors and the lack of community and societal factors, this goal was not fully achieved. In order to address these difficulties, we completed the community and societal levels of the model with factors identified in narrative reviews.

Hence, at its current state, the proposed socio-ecological model is intended to inform research. It might help to encompass the observed overemphasis on individual factors and the epistemological gap between the different disciplines in social sciences by highlighting the need to understand violent extremism as a multifactorial phenomenon which needs to be examined across different levels, and, therefore, opening avenues for an interdisciplinary take on the issue. Future research efforts might be oriented in this direction, as well as on the empirical validation of the model.

Then, after its empirical validation and, if necessary, reformulation, this model is intended to inform practice by providing an integrative model of prevention. Precisely, it has the ambition to inform interventions that will focus on the interaction of individual, relationship, community/environmental, and societal risk and protective factors. By doing so, it remains an individual-level approach, in the sense that it aims to inform interventions concerned with the risk of individual progression toward violent extremism. However, although focusing on the individual, this model highlights that these interventions should also consider the individual's social relations and environments, as well as the societal context in which the individual is embedded.

Hence, the interventions can focus on eliminating (or at least attenuating) risk factors, while providing and reinforcing protective factors. This can mostly be done at the first two levels (i.e. individual and relationship). For instance, based on the proposed socio-ecological model, an intervention should aim to decrease the individual's perception of injustice and increase their self-control at the individual level, and help individuals to move away from sources of radical influence and toward sources of prosocial influence at the relationship level. Although it can be difficult to target community and societal factors with an intervention, these levels can, nevertheless, inform the risk evaluation, allowing for the identification of individuals with a greater risk of acting out. For instance, individuals with low self-control and in contact with deviant peers, who are also exposed to community violence and to ethnic heterogeneity, might be at higher risk than their counterparts who, although presenting the same individual and relationship risk factors, are not exposed to the aforementioned community and societal risk factors.

Finally, while interventions guided by this model remain focused on individuals, public policies informed by this model can support these interventions, but also target changes at community and societal levels. However, such policies should go beyond short-term solutions, such as welfare policies, by providing the means for individuals to overcome, instead of cope with, poverty. This can be achieved, for instance, through educational programs.[88] Another example of a societal risk factor that might be countered by public policies is ethnic tension. Public campaigns targeting this risk factor could, for instance, try to bring people together by putting forward diversity as something that can enrich rather than divide the nation.[89]

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Far-Right Political Violence in Ukraine: Assessment of the Donbas War and the Odesa Massacre

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**Abstract:** This study analyses the nature and extent of involvement by neo-Nazi and other far-right Ukrainian organisations in the Donbas war (2014-2022) and the Odesa massacre (2014). This issue is highly politicised with contrasting narratives. The Russian and Donbas separatist governments, as well as their media, have contended that Ukraine has been a Nazi or neo-Nazi regime since a fascist coup took place in 2014, while Ukrainian and Western governments and media have maintained that such elements in the Ukrainian far-right were marginal, trivial, even non-existent. The article interrogates the historical record with primary sources in the three most relevant languages—Ukrainian, Russian, and English. The investigation reveals crucial far-right involvement in both the early stages of the war in Donbas and the Odesa massacre. Although the percentage of far-right supporters and fighters in Ukraine was relatively small, they exercised disproportionate influence in the country due to their greater reliance on violence and armed formations. The Russian government, however, exaggerated the role of the neo-Nazis in Ukraine to publicly justify the illegal invasion in February 2022.

**Keywords:** Political violence, far-right, neo-Nazi, Ukraine, Russia

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# Introduction

This study analyses the nature and extent of involvement by neo-Nazi and other far-right Ukrainian organisations during both the Donbas war from its start in April 2014 until the Russian invasion in February 2022 and the Odesa massacre on 2 May 2014. Other than the Maidan massacre in February 2014, these were the most significant and contested cases of political violence in Ukraine from its independence in 1991 to the commencement of the Russia-Ukraine war on 24 February 2022.[1] The role of far-right Ukrainian groups during these major episodes of political violence is controversial because they are beset by duelling, self-serving narratives. Russian President Vladimir Putin has claimed that the principal goal of the invasion is to "denazify" Ukraine.[2] But well before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there have been several overt and covert Russian military interventions here, including the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and direct support for pro-Russian insurgencies in the Donbas region, particularly in August 2014 and February 2015. Following the overthrow of the pro-Russian Ukrainian government in February 2014, the United States and other Western governments have consistently opposed Russia's interventions and backed the current central government of Ukraine. In addition to political support, financial and military assistance has been provided, including training during the Obama presidency.[3] To justify this support, the US and other Western governments disputed any real power or even the existence of neo-Nazi armed formations in Ukraine or claimed that they abandoned their far-right elements. Understanding the contested issue of far-right involvement in the Donbas war (2014-2022) and the Odesa massacre (2014) is valuable not only for elucidating intrinsically important historical episodes of political violence but also due to the contemporary relevance given the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

This article proceeds in five sections. The first section highlights the contribution of our study by describing the weakness of the extant academic literature and our methodological approach to filling in important lacunae in the research landscape. The second section details the duelling of contemporary narratives over the political violence by the far-right in the war in Donbas and in the Odesa massacre. The third and fourth sections develop qualitative case studies with process tracing to illuminate the role of the far-right in the Donbas war and the Odesa massacre. The fifth section presents the conclusion.

# Developing the Extant Literature

Research on the far-right in Ukraine since the Euromaidan has been spotty. Studies on neo-Nazi and other far-right organisations in Ukraine following the Euromaidan have been limited in quantity, quality, and scope. Most studies have been produced by researchers outside academe in partisan think tanks or non-government organisations, as well as by journalists who did not subject their work to peer review.[4] Such assessments are more likely to be politically driven and less likely to exhibit methodological rigour, even professionalism. For example, Anton Shekhovtsov, the former leader of the Crimean branch of the pro-Russian far-right Eurasian Youth Union, likened the Trade Union building arson attack during the Odesa massacre on 2 May 2014, to his killing of Colorado potato beetles by collecting them in a box and burning them alive. He directly inferred that this was a massacre with far-right involvement but omitted this in his publications.[5] Other works have relied on narrow metrics such as the vote-share of far-right parties in Ukraine, without assessing the violence itself in terms of the perpetrators and effects.[6] Some researchers have claimed that the presence of Russian speakers in the Azov regiment and other neo-Nazi-led armed formations is evidence of their relative tolerance

and asserted that the Azov regiment had moderated by abandoning its far-right roots.[7] Such analyses have tended to uncritically rely on Ukrainian and Western government narratives, accepting their claims at face value.

By contrast, other studies suggest a greater degree of far-right involvement in Ukrainian political violence. One quantitative study found that far-right groups in Ukraine, such as Svoboda and Right Sector, fielded the most violent perpetrators and committed the lion's share of attacks.[8] That study is restricted temporally, however, to the 2014 Maidan protests, which led to the violent overthrow of the relatively pro-Russian government and ultimately spiralled into the civil war in Donbas, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and Russian military interventions in these regions of Ukraine.[9] Similarly, qualitative studies have presented evidence in the form of videos, eyewitness testimonies, confessions, and forensic examinations of Svoboda and Right Sector involvement in the Maidan massacre.[10] Some other studies have focused on specific aspects of the far-right paramilitary and other armed formations during the war in Donbas.[11] One academic publication is specifically devoted to the Odesa massacre, which is called "The Odesa Tragedy," though it concentrates on the public perceptions rather than the perpetrators and their consequences.[12] This list of prior works is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. The research landscape around these issues is growing, but uneven in scope and reliability; a lacuna remains in the literature in terms of evaluating rigorously, comprehensively, and dispassionately the nature and extent of far-right involvement in the Donbas war and Odesa massacre, which matters in terms of our understanding of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and political violence more generally.

To elucidate this understudied topic of the far-right in Ukraine, this study makes substantial use of primary source materials in Ukrainian and Russian—the main languages in Ukraine—as well as in English. This linguistic capability is conducive to a more nuanced, accurate assessment. Methodologically, the two case studies employ qualitative process tracing with the benefit of fluency in all three languages.[13] The substantive focus and period of analysis are both tightly bounded; the role of the far-right on the Russian side and in the Russia-Ukraine war since February 2022, as well as during the Euromaidan, are weighty topics explored in our other works but fall outside the scope of this study.

The term "far-right" denotes ultranationalists and both racial and ethnic supremacists in accordance with prior scholarship.[14] The term "neo-Nazi" refers to far-right organisations that revamp elements of Nazi ideology, particularly its racial and ethnic supremacism, and use symbols associated with Nazi Germany or their stylised versions. As with Nazis, neo-Nazi organisations represent a form of fascism. Major neo-Nazi organisations in Ukraine during the time period covered by this study include the Social-National Assembly, its paramilitary wing Patriot of Ukraine, the National Corps, the White Hammer, and C14. Also included in the analysis are paramilitary and other armed formations organised and led formally or informally by these neo-Nazi organisations, such as the Azov battalion and regiment. Admittedly, militant groups are known to exhibit ideological heterogeneity.[15] Within the political violence literature, a burgeoning area of research emphasises that members of the rank-and-file may be motivated by a variety of factors that diverge from the leadership, leading to a principal-agent problem.[16] In this study, we classify organisations as neo-Nazi, or at least neo-Nazi-led, when commanders are neo-Nazi, even if not all members can be presumed to share this exact ideology.

A prominent example is Andriy Biletsky, the leader of Patriot of Ukraine and the Social-National Assembly (SNA), both of which were transformed along with the Azov battalion and regiment veterans into the National Corps Party in 2016. He called the ideology of Patriot of Ukraine and SNA "Social Nationalism." In a collection of his articles published in 2013, he described

that social nationalism, as the name suggests, combines elements of ultranationalism of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists with elements of national socialism and called both radical nationalism and national socialism "great ideas." He wrote that social nationalism is based on "Sociality, Racism, and Great Power."[17] Specifically, it is based on the ideas that the "white race" is "superior" to other races and is the foundation of the Aryan Ukrainian nation; the Ukrainian nation is a "blood-racial community"; and that "the historical mission of our Nation (…) is to head and lead the White Peoples of the world in the last crusade for their existence, a march against the Semitic-led subhumans."[18] Biletsky openly made antisemitic and racist statements, such as his claim that the Jew is "an economic and political parasite." He saw "a serious clash of native European peoples with foreign colonisers, mainly of African and Muslim origin" and believed that "an ethnic civil war can be won by the native Europeans only under the banner of the New Right National Revolutions."[19]

Biletsky was called the "White Leader" and his writings were published by both SNA and Patriot of Ukraine. He was the first commander of the Azov battalion, which was organised and led by Patriot of Ukraine and SNA in May 2014. Patriot of Ukraine, SNA, and the Azov battalion all used a symbol resembling a stylised swastika and Wolfsangel. Azov commanders and their historian, who himself serves in Azov, called the symbol the "Idea of the Nation" and claimed that it is an ancient Ukrainian symbol, even though it was created in 1992 for the Social National Party of Ukraine (SNPU). The creator of this symbol acknowledged that it was called "Idea of the Nation" to represent the radical nationalist ideas of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). He also admitted that SNPU deliberately chose this symbol with the Latin letter N, instead of the equivalent Ukrainian Cyrillic letter, fully aware of its resemblance to Nazi symbols and association with the swastika for many Ukrainians, in particular in Lviv. As with other extremist groups that rebrand out of political expedience, the Social National Party of Ukraine changed its name to Svoboda in 2014, because the Nazi association was politically inconvenient.[20] However, this symbol was retained by the SNA and by Patriot of Ukraine, whose Kharkiv branch split from SNPU because of these changes. [21] The Azov battalion and its propaganda magazine, which was named Black Sun, also used the Black Sun symbol, an ideological symbol used by Nazis and various neo-Nazi organisations. In addition, groups and individuals—including Patriot of Ukraine, SNA, National Corps, and Azov battalion and regiment leaders, commanders, and members—have displayed on their uniforms various neo-Nazi and Nazi symbols, such as the swastika, the SS sign, and 88 (Heil Hitler code). These, along with Hitler images, Nazi flags, and Totenkopf have also been seen in the form of patches, photographs, flags, and tattoos.

Although the term far-right incorporates both ultranationalist and neo-Nazi organisations, they are not ideologically identical despite their frequent overlap. This study empirically investigates the role of Ukrainian ultra-nationalist organisations such as Svoboda, the Right Sector, the Ukrainian National Assembly–Ukrainian People's Self-Defence (UNA-UNSO), and Bratstvo; neo-Nazi organisations such as the Social-National Assembly, Patriot of Ukraine, the White Hammer, and C14; and various other paramilitary formations, special police forces, and National Guard units organised and controlled to various extents by them. These armed units include the Azov battalion and regiment, Dnipro, Donbas, Aidar, Sich, Carpathian Sich, OUN, and St. Mary's battalions, and the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps. To assess these actors, this study analysed thousands of Russian and Ukrainian primary sources: online recordings of live broadcasts, videos of the armed conflict in Donbas and Odesa, and information posted on websites and social media by far-right organisations, their armed units, and activists. It also analysed media reports in Ukrainian, Russian, and English from diverse outlets such as Ukrainska pravda, Strana, BBC, The Guardian, The Washington Post, The New York Times, YouTube, Telegram, V Kontakte, Facebook, and Twitter. To mitigate bias, the authors analysed the primary source materials rather than relying on secondary interpretations.

## The Conflicting Narratives

Assessments of the far-right in Ukraine have been wracked by self-serving and thus unreliable perspectives. Russian and separatist leaders, as well as the media, have described the post-Maidan violence in Ukraine, especially in Donbas and Odesa, as perpetrated by "fascists" and "Nazis" akin to genocidal massacres against Jews, Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians during the Holocaust and World War Two.[22] They often called the Odesa massacre the "Odesa Khatyn," a reference to the large-scale massacre of Belarusian villagers in 1943 by the Nazis and an auxiliary police battalion, which was based on a paramilitary formation of the Melnyk faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists. Based on this narrative, President Putin and his allies have claimed that invading Ukraine is not only justified, but "inevitable" to counter the "Nazi" or "Neo-Nazi regime" in Kyiv.[23] Putin and his government thus declared the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine as a key goal of "the special military operation" launched in February 2022.[24] This perspective—in its entirety—is widely assailed in the West.[25]

By contrast, the Ukrainian and Western governments and the media tend to claim that the far-right—including neo-Nazis—is marginal, even non-existent in Ukraine.[26] They argue that since Euromaidan, Ukrainian fighters have almost entirely—if not entirely—shed their far-right elements, particularly neo-Nazi. To this end, it is a common point that the Azov Battalion ceased to be led by the neo-Nazi Patriot of Ukraine, a paramilitary wing of the SNA, since integrating into the National Guard as one of its regiments. Kyiv has stressed that the integration of Azov in November 2014 is proof of its transition to moderation and the absence of extremist fighters post-Maidan.[27] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky awarded "Hero of Ukraine" titles in 2022 to prominent Azov leaders such as regiment commander Denys Prokopenko, deputy commander Sviatoslav Palamar, and senior officer Oleh Khomenko.[28] After the commencement of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, many Western media outlets, politicians, government officials, and academics adopted this stance that Azov and other controversial Ukrainian fighters on the far-right had not only abandoned extremist elements, but were heroes against Russia's illegal invasion.[29]

The Indexing Theory of political communications emphasises that Western media follow narratives of its governments in covering foreign conflicts, including in post-communist countries.[30] In some cases, Western media may have taken their cues directly from the Ukrainian government. After the Odesa massacre on 2 May 2014, the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine blamed the arson attack on provocateurs that were "paid generously by the Russian special services", and the New York Times immediately adopted the same line that pro-Russia groups may have been responsible for torching the building.[31] The Western narrative of the far-right in Ukraine since the Euromaidan is not without controversy. Volodymyr Ishchenko, a Ukrainian sociologist who specialises in the far-right in Ukraine, concludes: "The dominant narrative since Maidan in Ukrainian and much of the Western public spheres has been systematically downplaying the problem" by arguing that "the Ukrainian far-right" is "small and marginal." He stated that "often, the far-right is just ignored."[32]

Notably, Western concerns over far-right fighters in Ukraine were more prevalent before the February 2022 invasion. For example, The Nation described Azov in 2018 as "pro-Nazi, as evidenced by its regalia, slogans, and programmatic statements."[33] In 2019, Radio Free Europe called Azov "far-right."[34] In 2020, The Guardian referred to Azov as a "neo-Nazi extremist movement."[35] Consistent with Indexing Theory, such coverage of the neo-Nazis in Ukraine before the February 2022 Russian invasion overlapped with similar expressions by Western governments. In its 2018 Human Rights report, the US State Department called the political wing of the Azov Regiment "a hate group."[36] In 2019, ambassadors from G7 countries warned against "extreme political movements in Ukraine, whose violent actions are worrying in

themselves." The warnings referred specifically to the Azov movement and its violence during the 2019 presidential elections.[37] The US Congress has displayed longstanding ambivalence over its designation of Azov. In 2018, forty Congress members signed a letter to the State Department with the request to designate Azov as a terrorist organisation because of its links to terrorist attacks in multiple countries and its recruitment of neo-Nazis in its ranks.[38] A defence appropriations bill amendment was adopted by the entire US Congress in 2018, which banned US government funding and training of the Azov regiment due to concerns over its neo-Nazi views and members. Such concerns had been expressed by American officials for several years after the Euromaidan. The amendment was first unanimously adopted by the US House of Representatives in 2015. Congressman John Conyers put it bluntly, "I am grateful that the House of Representatives unanimously passed my amendments last night to ensure that our military does not train members of the repulsive neo-Nazi Azov Battalion."[39] Under pressure from the Pentagon, however, Congress subsequently removed this first amendment. A similar amendment, proposing a ban on US military assistance to radical nationalist and neo-Nazi organisations, voluntary police, and paramilitary formations under their command, was blocked in Congress in 2014.[40]

In general, however, American and European governments have been careful not to issue public statements against the far-right in Ukraine or to call attention to it. This hesitancy began after the Euromaidan and became starker following the February 2022 Russian invasion. Indeed, Western governments and media increasingly whitewashed the empirical record to present the Ukrainian far-right formations as categorically moderate in order to boost international support. In June 2024, the US State Department stated that the Azov brigade was eligible to receive US weapons under the "Leahy Law" because it was cleared of human rights violations. It made this determination after claiming that the Azov brigade is a new unit that is not subject to the previous Congressional ban, even though in reality this brigade was created on the basis of the Azov regiment, celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Azov battalion creation as its own anniversary, and is led by original Azov battalion commanders.[41] However, a subsequent amendment, which was included in the US defence bill which was passed by the US House of Representatives, specifically stated that "none of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available by this Act may be used to provide arms, training, intelligence, or other assistance to the Azov Battalion, the Third Separate Assault Brigade, or any successor organisation."[42]

Such instrumental portrayals of allies are not limited to this conflict. Other recent cases of political violence have also featured public relations campaigns by governments and media to present allies as arguably more moderate than their history and contemporary ideology indicate. For example, in the Syrian war, anti-Assad jihadist organisations allied with the West were euphemistically referred to as "rebels," sometimes "moderate" ones, even when they fought under the direction of a Foreign Terrorist Organisation, as designated by the US State Department.[43] A large body of literature within terrorism studies has found that the labelling of violent perpetrators by governments and media is not value-neutral, but expedient to serve political agendas.[44] Particularly in these controversial cases of political violence, academe can play an important role in interrogating the empirical record to adjudicate the truth.[45]

## The Far-Right in the Donbas War

Research within the field of terrorism studies has repeatedly noted the difficulty of determining the ideological beliefs of participants in political violence.[46] However, fine-grained knowledge of the organisations can substantially increase confidence. Svoboda and the main organisations that remained within the Right Sector after the Euromaidan were widely understood as far-right for maintaining ultra-nationalist and ethnically supremacist views. They openly

described themselves as the natural successors of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), inspired by the notorious OUN leader and Nazi collaborator, Stepan Bandera.[47] Along with the UNA-UNSO, these organisations used the "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the Heroes!" slogan, the official greeting of the Bandera faction of the OUN (OUN-B). This greeting, along with a fascist-style hand salute, was modelled on greetings and salutes of other well-known fascist parties in European history, from the Nazi party in Germany to the Ustashe party in Croatia.[48] The Right Sector also adopted its red and black flag from the OUN-B and the UPA, which symbolized Ukrainian blood and soil, which were also pervasive in Nazi ideology and flags.[49] But the existence of these symbols alone offers weak evidence of far-right influence in the Donbas war without understanding the cultural and historical context.

The violent overthrow of the Viktor Yanukovych government by means of the Maidan massacre triggered the resurgence of separatism in Donbas.[50] After his overthrow in February 2014, far-right parties and organisations in Ukraine expanded and organised their armed formations. Along with Ihor Kolomoisky, an oligarch who became the head of the Dnipropetrovsk regional administration, the Right Sector was instrumental in the formation of the Dnipro battalion in the spring of 2014.[51] The Azov battalion, notorious for its use of neo-Nazi symbols in its official insignia, was also organised in the spring of 2014 and led by the SNA and the Patriot of Ukraine with the involvement of the Radical Party. As mentioned, "White Leader" Andrii Biletsky was the first commander of Azov.[52] Based in Mariupol, the St. Mary's battalion was formed in the fall of 2014 and led by the far-right Bratstvo party, which is described by its leader (Dmytro Korchynsky) as the "Christian Taliban."[53] Around this time, the Aidar battalion, nominally subordinated to the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, was formed by the Maidan Self-Defence. One of its platoons was led by the White Hammer, a neo-Nazi organisation belonging to the Right Sector during the Euromaidan. Ilia Kiva, a Right Sector member, was the commander of another volunteer police battalion. A previously convicted criminal with a swastika tattoo became the commander of the Tornado Company, a special police unit. He and seven other members of his company were arrested and convicted for various crimes in the warzone, such as torturing detainees. A Nazi-style flag with a swastika was found in their prison cell.[54] These units were all under the formal jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Guard, or the Ministry of Defence. From the start of their formation, they remained under de facto command of radical nationalist or neo-Nazi organisations. These armed formations sprouted up in the early stages of the conflict in Donbas and were stationed there in an attempt to suppress pro-Russian separatism in the region by force. The Right Sector and the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists actively organised various militia and paramilitary units that were not subordinate to the central government of Ukraine. The Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, the largest paramilitary formation, was formed and led by the Right Sector specifically for the war in Donbas, though it also included battalions in Western Ukraine.[55]

The paramilitary formations, special police, and National Guard units, organised and led by far-right organisations such as the Right Sector, the Social National Assembly, Patriot of Ukraine, Svoboda, C14, and Bratstvo, constituted a small minority of Ukrainian fighters in the Donbas. Based on reports, we estimate the number of members of radical nationalist and neo-Nazi organisations who served in various far right-led, regular, and other armed formations in the Donbas, at around five thousand. This estimate is conservative and represents just one percent of approximately 400,000 people who participated in this war on the side of the central government.[56] Additional metrics of influence, however, are also important to consider.

Despite their relatively small numbers, far-right fighters exercised disproportionate influence in the Donbas civil war, particularly in the early stages before the first direct Russian military intervention in August 2014. Far-right Ukrainian groups proliferated after the Euromaidan

because they were eager to fight and were responsible for a disproportionate level of violence, especially against civilians and prisoners of war in Mariupol and Krasnoarmiisk. Far-right organisations and far-right-linked battalions thus played a crucial role in escalating the armed conflict in the Donbas. Svoboda and C14, an avowedly neo-Nazi group affiliated with Svoboda until the summer of 2014, organised and led the Sich battalion from June 2014 onwards.[57] Meanwhile, the Right Sector carried out a deadly attack on a separatist checkpoint in Sloviansk on 20 April 2014. While Ukrainian and Western media denied far-right involvement in these events, the evidence to the contrary includes business cards linked to far-right members found after the attack. As well, Ukrainian court proceedings revealed that the weapons used by the Right Sector checkpoint attackers were the same as the snipers from this group who killed and wounded police during the Maidan.[58] And two years after the attack on the separatist checkpoint, Dmytro Yarosh—the leader of the Right Sector—admitted his personal involvement in this attack.[59] Oleksandr Turchynov, then acting president of Ukraine, and Kolomoisky's deputy in the Dnipropetrovsk regional administration, reportedly orchestrated this Right Sector operation, aimed to seize and destroy a television transmitter near Sloviansk, several days after this area was seized by the Strelkov-led armed group of Russian nationalists and Ukrainian separatists.[60] This attack by the Right Sector constituted a major escalation of the conflict in Donbas because it broke both the Geneva Agreement signed on 17 April 2014 by Ukraine, Russia, the EU, and the US for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, as well as the Orthodox Easter truce between the Ukrainian government and separatists in Donbas.

Far right-led armed formations were also behind many other violent attacks in the Donbas, further escalating the conflict into a civil war. Videos, media reports, and admissions from commanders and other members of the Azov and Dnipro battalions indicate that they participated in the storming of the district police headquarters in Mariupol on 9 May 2014. Approximately ten people, including at least one protester, were killed.[61] Analysis of online video streams, media reports, and Ukrainian government documents, also make clear that Azov played a major role in taking back the city of Mariupol from the control of separatists in June 2014.[62] The Dnipro battalion, along with other units, seized civilians in the Donetsk Region to prevent the separatist referendum on 11 May 2014. Videos show them shooting unarmed pro-separatist protesters with Kalashnikovs, killing two locals. The Ukrainian government denied the presence of the Dnipro battalion, but it was confirmed by other credible sources, including admissions by battalion members in videos, like Volodymyr Parasiuk's statement on social media, who became the People's Deputy of Ukraine.[63]

The far-right-led armed formations perpetrated a disproportionate amount of violence in the first few months of the Donbas conflict and thus played a major role in escalating it into a larger civil war because the radical nationalist and neo-Nazi-led groups were far more willing to use force at that time. The Ukrainian armed forces, the security service, police and National Guard units were more reluctant to use force against the separatists in Donbas because their commanders and members were publicly blamed by the new government for attempting to forcefully suppress the Maidan protests—and in particular, for the Maidan massacre. Because the new Maidan government came to power through violence, which included the killing of police and protesters, it lacked legitimacy among many military, police, and SBU members in the Donbas region during this initial period of the conflict. Further, compared to the newly ascendant far-right groups in the aftermath of Euromaidan, the regular Ukrainian armed forces, the security service, the police and National Guard units were known for lower morale and higher desertions. Examples of this included the Donetsk SBU Alfa commander and Luhansk Berkut members, who joined the separatists.[64]

The relative role of the far-right in the political violence was not constant; it began to decline in the Donbas when newly elected president Petro Poroshenko ordered the Ukrainian military, SBU, police, and National Guard to wield lethal force against the separatists and launch the offensive in June 2014.[65] The war was most intense and violent in 2014 and 2015, but the fighting declined significantly following the Minsk Agreements in 2015. However, ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi fighters continued to exert a non-trivial role, even after the Ukrainian military intensified its operations in Donbas and purported to moderate the far-right fighters. After its formal incorporation into the National Guard of Ukraine, the Azov regiment and its commanders maintained a close organisational and ideological relationship with the neo-Nazi National Corps party. This party was formed by the Azov battalion founder and the first commander on the basis of neo-Nazi SNA and Patriot of Ukraine, and it included many Azov battalion and regiment veterans. The Azov regiment functioned as a military wing of the National Corps, which, in essence, represented overlapping elements of the same Azov movement.[66] Indeed, Azov regiment commanders shared a neo-Nazi background and had served in the neo-Nazi-led Azov battalion.[67] In other words, the rebranding from "battalion" to "regiment" did not alter the key personnel.[68] For example, Azov regiment commander Denys Prokopenko was a member of the neo-Nazi White Boys Club, which was formed by the ultras of the Dynamo Kyiv football club. This group of ultras displayed various Nazi symbols and the Nazi salute on their social media and during football games. His Azov battalion platoon had used the Totenkopf insignia of the Nazi SS.[69] Andriy Biletsky became the commander of the Third Assault Brigade, which was created by veterans of the Azov battalion and regiment and activists of his neo-Nazi group, the National Corps.[70] In 2023, he stated in an interview with Ukrainian media that the united Azov movement included this Azov brigade under his command along with the Azov regiment and the Kraken unit.[71] Such admissions in Ukrainian media highlighting enduring far-right allegiances seldom make their way into the Western press.

Importantly, Azov commanders never publicly renounced their neo-Nazi views, symbols, and organisations. In fact, Azov leaders routinely denied in media interviews that they, their units, and organisations, were neo-Nazi, claiming that the well-documented Nazi symbols were fakes or Russian propaganda. Our research of Ukrainian social media as well as other researchers of the far-right in Ukraine, such as Lev Golinkin and Moss Robeson, have identified over one hundred cases of Nazi and neo-Nazi displays by at least several hundred Azov commanders and other members from 2014 to 2022. This number includes displays on uniforms, patches, photographs, flags, and tattoos of neo-Nazi and Nazi symbols, such as the swastika, SS sign, 88 (Heil Hitler code), Hitler images, Nazi flags, and Totenkopf, and a fascist hand salute.[72] The continued relevance of far-right extremism in Azov was evident at the very top. Arsen Avakov, the Minister of Internal Affairs, was personally involved in the Azov battalion formation and its later expansion to a regiment.[73] President Petro Poroshenko circulated photographs awarding Ukrainian national medals and commendations to some of the most well-known neo-Nazis in Azov.[74] The Nazi connection to Azov was clearly not due to a loss of agency control.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reported that Azov was involved in many cases of torture, illegal detention, and disappearances during the war in Donbas.[75] The impact of these far-right organisations cannot be measured strictly in terms of the direct physical effects, as terrorism researchers have emphasised in many other contexts.[76] Ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi organisations were instrumental in blocking or "spoiling" a peaceful resolution of the armed conflict in Donbas, another well-established source of leverage for extremists.[77] Far-right groups such as the Right Sector, Svoboda, and the Radical Party opposed the adoption by the parliament of Constitutional amendments based on provisions from the Minsk Agreements.[78] To this end, Svoboda activists launched a grenade attack on 31 August 2015 in front of the Ukrainian parliament, killing four and wounding dozens of policemen and National Guard troops, which helped to block these amendments, undercutting the logic of implementation.[79]

Far-right groups also challenged the implementation of President Volodymyr Zelensky's electoral promise to peacefully resolve the Donbas war.[80] In October 2019, Zelensky travelled to a front-line position in Donbas to personally convince the Azov fighters to stop blocking the implementation of the Minsk agreements by withdrawing along with separatist troops from the frontline, as he agreed during the summit with Putin and German and French leaders in Paris. But video of the encounter shows that Zelensky was taunted by activists of this neo-Nazi organisation who flouted his appeal.[81] According to the Associated Press, thousands of far-right and nationalist activists shouting the far-right OUN and UPA slogan "Glory to Ukraine. Glory to the Heroes" marched through Kyiv protesting against a peace plan for eastern Ukraine.[82]

The radical flank threatened Zelensky for implementing Minsk on other occasions as well. In May 2019, Dmytro Yarosh, the former Right Sector leader, publicly threatened to hang the new Ukrainian president on a tree if he fulfilled his election promise of a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Donbas.[83] In 2021, Yarosh, the commander of the Ukrainian Volunteer Army organised by the Right Sector, was appointed Adviser to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valerii Zaluzhnyi.[84] In the same year, videos, photos, and Ukrainian media reports show police standing down while neo-Nazi and other far-right protesters attacked the Office of the President of Ukraine and painted swastikas on its walls.[85] The Russia scholar Stephen F. Cohen concluded that Zelensky "can't go forward with peace negotiations" because "crazy fascist movements" in Ukraine "literally threatened his life."[86] Although far-right peace rejectionists posed political problems for Zelensky, they were also known to work closely with him. An activist of the neo-Nazi Patriot of Ukraine and former deputy commander of the Azov regiment was appointed the acting head of the National Police of Ukraine during the Poroshenko presidency and then became a deputy minister of Internal Affairs during the Zelensky presidency.[87] Prime Minister Oleksii Honcharuk spoke at a "veterans party" organised by a front organisation for the neo-Nazi C14 with a stylised swastika of a neo-Nazi rock band behind him.[88] The advisory council of the Ministry of Veteran Affairs under Zelensky retained activists of this neo-Nazi group, including those charged with assassinating the prominent opposition journalist, Oles Buzyna, in 2015.[89]

In sum, ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi militant organisations were deeply involved on the side of the central government throughout the Donbas conflict. Although representing a small fraction of Ukrainian forces throughout the conflict, they committed a disproportionate amount of violence, particularly before President Poroshenko ordered the Ukrainian military to increase its use of force against the separatists in the summer of 2014. The much-touted absorption of Azov and other extreme right-wing militia under the official Ukrainian National Guard, police, and military command did not change either their command or their ideological displays. Many of the fighters worked closely with the Kyiv political leadership across administrations, when not using de facto veto power to block peaceful resolution of the conflict in this region.

This interpretation departs from others that rely strictly on vote-share as the proxy for far-right influence. The influence of the far-right in Ukraine after the Maidan far exceeded its electoral support and membership. Svoboda and Right Sector leaders each won only one percent of the votes in the snap presidential elections in May 2014. In the parliamentary elections of October 2014, Svoboda narrowly failed to clear the five percent threshold, receiving 4.7 percent. The Right Sector fared even worse, receiving only two percent of the votes. Ruslan Koshulynsky, one of Svoboda leaders, who was backed by the Right Sector, OUN, and C14, received only 1.7 percent of the votes in the 2019 presidential elections, while Svoboda won 2.2 percent of the votes in the 2019 parliamentary elections. These weak electoral results indicate the limited national support of the far-right in Ukraine, but not its outsized role in the Donbas conflict.

## The Far-Right in the Odesa Massacre

Other than the Donbas war, the Odesa massacre was the most significant and deadly instance of political violence after the Maidan massacre in Ukraine since its independence in 1991 until the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022. The violence took place on 2 May 2014, between a "United Ukraine" rally and pro-Russian separatists, carried out with petrol bombs, gunfire, and rock-throwing, which ended up killing 48 people, primarily separatist protesters.[90] The vast majority of the fatalities took place in the Trade Unions House, where 42 separatist activists and employees (forty men, seven women, and one boy) were killed when the building was set ablaze.[91]

This massacre contributed to the escalation of the separatist conflict in Donbas into the civil war. As noted, the massacre was presented by separatist and Russian leaders and the media as akin to the Nazi massacre of Khatyn in Belarus, and many Odesa separatists joined the separatist forces in Donbas. Despite the importance of this massacre, the International Advisory Panel of the Council of Europe, among other international authorities, has noted that the Ukrainian government failed to properly investigate and prosecute those responsible.[92] To ascertain the role of far-right groups in the Odesa massacre, a broad range of key information resources can be analysed, including videos and recordings of live broadcasts of the political violence (and the lead-up to it); published reports; primary source media in Ukrainian, Russian, and English; statements of responsibility; interviews; and testimonies from participants and eyewitnesses on both sides, as well as police commanders.

On 1 May 2014, the day before the mass violence, separatists protested in Odesa to demand a referendum on the newly installed government in Kyiv, which they blamed on far-right activists and Western interference.[93] Based on testimonies from a special parliamentary commission report in the immediate aftermath of the May 2014 massacre, Ukrainian and regional government officials planned to use far-right activists and the Maidan Self-Defence to suppress the separatists in the Odesa region and disperse those who were encamped near the Trade Union building.[94] Extensive evidence indicates that the police and firefighters were ordered by their superiors to stand by and not interfere during attacks. For instance, a special plan to deal with mass disturbances launched by the Odesa regional police was not authorised, reportedly because of decisions at the Ministry of Internal Affairs' top level.[95] Similarly, top regional officials of the police and other law enforcement agencies were ordered to attend a meeting with their national counterparts before and during the start of the clashes.[96] The presence of Andriy Parubiy and five hundred Maidan Self-Defence members, who deployed from Kyiv to Odesa on the eve of the massacre, further suggests that the violent dispersal of the separatist camp by far-right activists was orchestrated by top government leaders.[97] Parubiy was a founder and leader of the neo-Nazi Patriot of Ukraine, a paramilitary wing of the Social National Party of Ukraine in the 1990s. He was the head of the Maidan Self-Defence during the Euromaidan and headed the National Security and Defence Council at the time of the Odesa massacre. The State Bureau of Investigations of Ukraine launched a criminal investigation into Parubiy for the Odesa massacre soon after he was replaced as the ex-head of the Ukrainian parliament following the early parliamentary elections in 2019.[98] One of the participants acknowledged in an Israeli documentary that he engaged in "provocations" in the Odesa massacre under the command of Parubiy, who had issued orders to attack the separatists and "burn everything." We assess this acknowledgement as credible because he was filmed along with Maidan activists in the left wing of the Trade Union building in Odesa when the deadly fire began to burn the central entrance.[99] He and five other Georgian ex-military members also stated in American, Italian, and Israeli TV documentaries, Russian media interviews, on Macedonian TV, in depositions to Berkut lawyers for the Maidan massacre trial, and in testimonies to the Prosecutor General Office of Belarus for the Prosecutor General Office of Ukraine investigation that their groups of Georgian, Baltic,

and far-right-linked Ukrainian snipers received weapons, payments, and orders from specific Maidan and Georgian politicians, including Parubiy, to engage in a mass killing of police and protesters.[100] The Maidan massacre trial subsequently confirmed their identities.[101]

A march led by the Right Sector and football ultras on 2 May 2014 was used as cover to implement this plan to destroy and burn the separatist tent camp.[102] The SBU in the Odesa Region received advanced information about planned "provocations" and violent clashes between football ultras and pro-Russian separatists on game day between the Odesa and Kharkiv teams on 2 May. A special train transported hundreds of football ultras from Kharkiv to Odesa.[103] Football ultras in Ukraine were notorious for displaying neo-Nazi symbols and expressing neo-Nazi slogans during games and have historically linked up with the Right Sector and other far-right organisations, as during the Maidan protests.[104] Both the Right Sector and football ultras in Odesa and Kharkiv were dominated by the neo-Nazi Social National Assembly/Patriot of Ukraine, which organised the Azov battalion right after the Odesa massacre.

Odeska Druzhyna, a small separatist organisation in Odesa, was present among other separatist activists based on evidence from internet streams, videos, testimonies of participants and eyewitnesses, and special parliamentary commission reports.[105] Odeska Druzhyna used identifiable red tape labels, and were not Right Sector agent provocateurs, as the Russian media and separatists claimed. However, the Ukrainian government and media also mischaracterised the involvement of Odeska Druzhyna by overstating its coordination with other separatist activists.[106] The balance of forces was asymmetric; the groups of numerically superior activists of the Right Sector from Odesa and Kharkiv led by the neo-Nazi Social National Assembly/Patriot of Ukraine, far-right football ultras, and Maidan Self-Defence units from Odesa and other regions attacked the separatists. Numerically disadvantaged, the latter took cover behind a police cordon.[107]

An Odeska Druzhyna activist was filmed shooting in the direction of the far-right protesters with an AK-74-type assault rifle.[108] The official investigation and the May 2 Group maintained that a Right Sector activist was killed by this separatist group member with a 5.45mm calibre bullet.[109] However, leaked forensic medical expert reports describe a 5.65mm calibre bullet extracted from his body.[110] This bullet reportedly disappeared and reappeared during the investigation. The fact that it did not match bullet samples of any legally registered firearms, the weak sound of the gunshots, as well as the lack of a recoil observed in the videos of the shooting, also suggest that the far-right protester may not have been killed by this separatist, who maintained that the weapon seen in the video was a movie studio prop.[111] The killing of the Right Sector activist was not visible in that video nor in any videos of clashes. The investigation and various videos at the scene did not reveal the exact time or location of his killing, or the direction of the gunshot. An Odesa deputy police chief, who was filmed around the time of this killing before he himself was wounded, stated that he saw snipers in camouflage shooting from the second floor of a hotel there. He relayed that they killed this Right Sector activist and the second protester in order to blame the separatists for their killing and provoke a violent response against the separatists.[112] Videos filmed before and after his shooting suggest that the second pro-Maidan activist was killed around the same time in the same area during the violent clashes with separatists and shooting from a Kalashnikov-type weapon by one of the separatists.[113] However, the government forensic examination determined that he was killed by a bullet from a pneumatic sport-type weapon. Nobody was charged with his killing, and the moment and other circumstances of his killing remain not publicly known.[114]

In the clashes that followed the killings of these two pro-government protesters, four separatist protesters were killed and many other separatist protesters, policemen and at least one local

journalist were wounded. The forensic examination determined that three separatists were killed with hunting ammunition.[115] A pro-government activist was filmed shooting with a hunting rifle in the direction of these separatists.[116] This pro-government activist was later identified by the Minister of Internal Affairs as a Right Sector member.[117] The government investigation charged him with killing at least one of the separatists. However, he was released from arrest and his trial was suspended indefinitely because of threats by the Right Sector and other far-right activists against judges during his trial.[118] Evidence—including a recorded phone call—revealed that the events on May 2nd were coordinated by the Odesa regional administration official in charge of law enforcement agencies, and involved the participation of the Maidan Self-Defence commander, Right Sector activists, football ultras, and Maidan Self-Defence units.[119] They attacked and burned the tent camp of various separatist organisations, whose activists and supporters then escaped to the nearby Trade Union building and tried to barricade the main entrance doors. Videos, internet streams, and testimonies of eyewitnesses show that attackers threw Molotov cocktails and burning tyres at the main entrance, set the entrance doors on fire, and blocked other exits. Videos, recorded calls to firefighters, and eyewitness reports reveal that the fire and thick smoke started from those burning tyres and Molotov cocktails thrown at the main entrance.[120] The evidence does not support claims that the separatist protesters killed in this incident were Russian citizens, that they burned themselves by throwing Molotov cocktails from the roof of the Trade Union building or inside of the building, or that there was no far-right involvement in their killing.

After initial denials, the May 2 Group admitted that the deadly fire started at the main entrance. The May 2 Group was a nominally independent association of mainly journalists, formed after the massacre supposedly to investigate it. It was created with the involvement of the Governor of the Odesa region who was appointed by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko within a week of the massacre.[121] This governor represented not only the central government, but also the Kolomoisky's oligarchic network, which financed the Right Sector volunteers from the Volyn Region in the Azov battalion and the Right Sector-led Dnipro battalion. [122] The Azov battalion was organised by the neo-Nazi SNA and its paramilitary wing, Patriot of Ukraine, which dominated the Right Sector in Odesa and Kharkiv, a few days after the Odesa massacre. But the May 2 Group still claimed that it was impossible to determine who started the fire because both sides were throwing Molotov cocktails. However, there is no public evidence of Molotov cocktails being thrown by separatists at the main entrance; on the contrary, numerous videos feature the far-right protesters throwing Molotov cocktails and burning tyres into the Trade Union building at that time.[123]

Within Ukraine, far-right activists—particularly from the Right Sector and the SNA— were notorious for using tyres and Molotov cocktails to burn public buildings. Forensic examinations in the government investigation, recordings of radiocommunications by SBU Alfa group, an unpublished admission by a far-right activist to a French journalist, and an academic study determined that the Trade Union headquarters in Kyiv were burned by Maidan activists, including far-right ones, in order to stop its takeover by the Security Service of Ukraine Alfa unit.[124] Far-right protesters also started fires by burning tyres in the Inter TV channel building and threatened to burn down the parliament of Ukraine, the Lutsk City Council, the Sviatoshyn District Court that heard the Maidan massacre case, the Constitutional Court, and Inter and 112 Ukraina TV channels buildings by placing tyres next to their entrances.[125] Prior usage of the same tactics by the far-right increases the likelihood of their direct involvement.

Analysis of online video streams, government investigation findings, May 2 Group reports, forensic medical examinations, eyewitness testimonies, and other evidence strongly indicate that 42 people perished as a result of the fire, smoke, and from trying to jump from the upper

floors of the Trade Union building with far-right activists beating them on the ground and blocking the exits.. The victims were unarmed and included mainly separatists, their supporters, and several employees, in particular women, who were in the building at the time.[126] Some of the strongest evidence of far-right involvement in the arson attack comes from the far-right itself, in the form of credit claiming. A growing body of research within terrorism studies focuses on credit claiming. An important finding is that perpetrators are far more likely to deny responsibility for their attacks than to take credit for ones that they did not perpetrate.[127] This is particularly true when the targets are civilians. Nonetheless, many extremist groups do claim credit for civilian attacks.[128] Statements posted by the Right Sector, the SNA, and the neo-Nazi Misanthropic Division on their websites and social media sites admitted the involvement of their organisations in the massacre. The Right Sector celebrated on its website the massacre by describing it as "another bright page in our fatherland's history." Claiming responsibility for the slaughter, it wrote: "In the first minutes of the battle, the 'Right Sector' activist was seriously wounded in the stomach. Several more PS [Right Sector] activists received injuries of varying degrees of severity. However, this did not prevent the rest of the PS fighters, together with football fans, from repelling the attack of pro-Russian provocateurs, and as a result, they successfully countered attempts to seize buildings in Odesa. Standing shoulder to shoulder, Odesa activists, football fans and 'Right Sector' fighters defeated the forces of pro-Russian mercenaries. Order has been restored in Odesa."[129] The Right Sector—which was dominated in Odesa and Kharkiv by the Social National Assembly and its paramilitary wing, Patriot of Ukraine—and the neo-Nazi Misanthropic Division (which joined the Azov battalion after the massacre) admitted on the social media platform V Kontakte and in other public statements that the fire was set deliberately.[130]

The official investigation of the Odesa massacre was a farce. Nobody was found guilty of perpetrating this mass killing. As noted, the Right Sector shooter was initially arrested but then released. Only separatists were among those arrested and tried for the Odesa massacre. The Odesa massacre trial of separatists resulted in their acquittal by a local court. The Ukrainian court based its decision on the lack of evidence in support of prosecution charges. Even the verdict acknowledged both the weakness of the investigation into the perpetrators and the role of Parubiy and other government officials.[131] The Council of Europe and the UN Special Commission reports also noted the destruction of evidence.[132] A report by the special commission of the Council of Europe found that the Ukrainian government's investigation of the Odesa Massacre was inadequate, politically selective, and featured the falsification of evidence, despite the existence of video footage showing who threw the Molotov cocktails at the building.[133]

The Ukrainian media cited SBU sources that a far-right activist, who headed the Right Sector in Odesa during the Odesa Massacre, was a secret agent of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and that he and far-right associates were paid by SBU to attack opposition politicians, threaten judges, and conduct other illegal actions.[134] This would be consistent with the fact that the Right Sector was not investigated for the Odesa massacre even though the Right Sector publicly admitted involvement. His secret collaboration with SBU would also be consistent with the fact that SBU and the Prosecutor General Office refused to charge him for killing another person in Odesa in 2018. Moreover, in 2020, the SBU gave this far-right activist the status of a victim in this case, even though he streamed this killing on his social media account and the police investigation determined that he was the killer.[135] In this sense, the Odesa massacre was not entirely anomalous; it featured post-Maidan far-right involvement with apparent support from high-level political leaders in a corrupt country where investigations and media have inconsistently followed the evidence.

## Conclusion

This study assesses the role of the far-right in post-Maidan Ukraine, specifically, in the Donbas war and the Odesa massacre. These were two of the biggest episodes of political violence in the country leading up to the February 2022 Russian invasion. This area of research is worth close investigation because it represents intrinsically important episodes of political violence that have not attracted objective analysis based on available primary sources in Ukrainian, Russian, and English. Investigating the role of the far-right is also timely because the far-right in Ukraine is riven by duelling, self-serving contemporary narratives.

The predominant narratives propagated by governments and the mainstream media in Ukraine, the West, Russia, and separatist-controlled Donbas, concerning the role of the far-right in the war in Donbas and the Odesa massacre, have evidently been partisan. Contrary to the Russian government, separatists, and associated media, the Ukrainian government and military are not Nazi or even neo-Nazi. There were no neo-Nazis among the upper echelon of the Ukrainian government. President Zelensky is certainly not a Jewish neo-Nazi. He tried to placate and mainstream the far-right for political reasons, but has no observable personal affinity to that extreme ideology.

Neo-Nazis constituted only about one percent of the Ukrainian forces before the Russian invasion in 2022, and there is weak electoral support for neo-Nazi parties throughout the country. Similarly, the policy of glorification of the OUN-UPA, their leaders, such as Stepan Bandera, and the adoption and use of their "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the Heroes!" greeting by the state and the military, including Zelensky, do not make Ukraine a Nazi state. While the OUN and the UPA were far-right terrorist organisations, which collaborated with Nazi Germany and perpetrated the mass murders of Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians, they were not Nazis. Ukrainians could not join the Nazi party because Hitler and other Nazi leaders regarded Ukrainians as racially inferior and opposed independence of Ukraine while also dismissing the attempt to create even a puppet state by the Bandera faction of the OUN in Lviv shortly after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Thus, Putin cannot credibly justify the illegal invasion in February 2022 as a war to "de-Nazify" the "Nazi regime."[136] The power of the far-right and the glorification of the OUN and the UPA in Ukraine under Poroshenko and Zelensky were exaggerated and exploited by the Russian leaders to justify the invasion.

But the West's efforts to whitewash the far-right in Ukraine also rests on empirically shaky grounds. Despite their relatively small numbers militarily and politically, the far-right in Ukraine exercised outsized power. The far-right organisations, volunteer battalions, and paramilitary units organised and led by them played, along with separatists and Russian nationalists, a significant role in starting and escalating the incipient civil war in the Donbas and then impeding its peaceful resolution. Even after technically integrated into the official Ukrainian forces, Azov and other far-right groups continued to harbour extremist views. Often brandishing the same extremist symbols, the core leaders and members remained and even ascended within the police, military, and security services during the Donbas war. Western media accounts have drawn heavily from biased Ukrainian sources, including "official" investigations and the May 2 Group. Across numerous primary sources in Ukrainian, Russian, and English, we find evidence that the Right Sector, Social-National Assembly, its paramilitary wing Patriot of Ukraine, and groups of far-right football ultras from Odesa and Kharkiv played a critical role in the Odesa massacre against separatist protesters on 2 May 2014. Neo-Nazi SNA/Patriot of Ukraine, which dominated the Right Sector in Odesa and Kharkiv, organised the Azov battalion right after this massacre.

Despite the lack of international consensus over the definition of terrorism, a common interpretation is the use of violence by non-state actors aimed at creating fear for political ends, particularly when the targets are civilians.[137] Depending on one's definition, some attacks within the episodes of political violence covered in this study, such as the Odesa massacre, could, therefore, arguably be classified as terrorism. What is clear is that neither of the duelling narratives accurately captures the role of the far-right. This study has helped to fill that research lacuna by making use of substantial primary source materials in Ukrainian, Russian, and English. Besides the Maidan massacre, the Donbas war and the Odesa massacre are the two most substantial episodes of political violence from the independence of Ukraine in 1991 to the February 2022 illegal Russian invasion.

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Roman Shukhevych, etc. They removed or deliberately excluded scholarly studies and other evidence of the extremist ideology and involvement in mass murder of the far-right, such as the Maidan and Odesa massacres, the Holocaust, and the Lviv pogrom in Ukraine and smeared in biographical entries scholars and other experts whose studies show such ideology and political violence by the far-right in Ukraine. (See, for example, Azov Brigade, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azov_Brigade; Patriot of Ukraine, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriot_of_Ukraine; 2014 Odesa clashes, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Odesa_clashes; Far-right politics in Ukraine, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Far-right_politics_in_Ukraine. They included editors who misrepresented the Holocaust in Poland using similar tactics in Wikipedia, which is unreliable but widely accessed source, compared to academic studies (Grabowski, Jan, and Shira Klein. 2023. "Wikipedia's Intentional Distortion of the History of the Holocaust." *Journal of Holocaust Research* 37 (2): 133–90).

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Deradicalisation and Disengagement of Women Convicted of Terrorism Offences in Spain

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**Abstract:** Understanding what motivates a woman to deradicalise or disengage from a terrorist organisation remains among the less explored academic topics today. This study explores the reasons why thirteen women in Spain either began their process of disengagement from IS, and/or initiated a change in their belief system. The research is based on personal interviews with inmates linked to the Islamic State, as well as with prison officials, psychologists, and educators. The article shows that the decision to stop deviant behaviour, or the experience of a cognitive rejection of beliefs, was preceded by disenchantment, the acquisition of new goals, or the feeling of being accepted by and/or integrated into new social networks.

**Keywords:** Deradicalisation, disengagement, women, IS, terrorism

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# Introduction

Understanding how the deradicalisation process works and how an individual disengages from a terrorist organisation, remain two main areas of academic attention today. Attempts to get individuals to end criminal behaviour or to stop supporting a specific ideology can be traced back decades.[1] However, post-9/11 War on Terror rhetoric and the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) sparked an academic interest in understanding how these dynamics work.[2] Despite this increasing scholarly focus on disengagement and deradicalisation, there are only limited empirical results in this field.[3] Further, a vast amount of research in the field of terrorism studies suffers from the same lack of empirical results, largely due to the difficulty of accessing solid and representative sources.[4]

This lack of evaluative studies on deradicalisation and disengagement is more pronounced regarding women.[5] Despite the substantial body of literature focused on females and terrorism,[6] which increased significantly after the self-proclaimed 'caliphate' in June 2014,[7] the study of countering violent extremism (CVE) for women and strategies related to deradicalisation or disengagement are still insufficient.[8] This is a challenge that should be addressed, considering the significant number of women returnees, and states and communities must develop strategies to rehabilitate and reintegrate them back into society.[9]

This research examines the particular experience of thirteen women who were convicted of terrorism offences in Spain. The study delves into the reasons these females have either begun their process of disengagement from IS, and/or initiated a change in their belief system despite not following a deradicalisation programme. Both processes are explored in the study with the intention of avoiding any guiding of the testimonies of the participants towards one process in particular. The analysis identifies measures that were effective in the case of these women, so these results should not be deemed as representative bearing in mind the limited number of the sample.

Due to the lack of literature and information available on this phenomenon, this contribution is considered relevant for both academia and counter-terrorism policymakers as it draws upon original data and empirical evidence. This article complements existing research on women's disengagement and deradicalisation processes, while also exploring the relationship between these two phenomena. Additionally, it offers insights into how these dynamics can occur outside of formal deradicalisation programmes.

The article starts by defining disengagement and deradicalisation processes, followed by a discussion of the analytical framing of these practices regarding women. Next, it describes the research methodology and the contextualisation of women prosecuted for jihadism in Spain. Finally, the study discusses and analyses the factors that led these women to abandon the ideology of IS and/or to stop their felony offences as narrated by the participants. The research also relies on other primary sources, such as the testimony of prison officials, psychologists, and educators, to confront different points of view.

# Terminology and Definition of the Processes of Disengagement and Deradicalisation

The concepts of disengagement and deradicalisation are complex and face a significant challenge: the lack of precision in their use.[10] In academia, these terms have been defined in varied and often imprecise ways. This has resulted in political and practical actions lacking clear theoretical frameworks.[11] This study focuses on assessing whether the women interviewed

have undergone a process of disengagement and/or deradicalisation. To do so, it is crucial to first examine how the existing literature defines and evaluates these terms.

While deradicalisation and disengagement concepts involve a process of moving away from violent extremism, they refer to different aspects of this transformation. There is a difference between experiencing a cognitive rejection of beliefs (deradicalisation) and simply ending criminal behaviour but remaining committed to the ideology that motivates violence (disengagement).[12] It must be taken into account that an extremist belief system is usually deeply rooted in an individual. It can be difficult to deconstruct due to the emotional involvement that may exist or the defence mechanisms that have been developed to justify their actions.[13] There are several definitions of these two concepts; for instance, Horgan and Braddock define deradicalisation as:

> *the social and psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to, and involvement in, violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity.*[14]

Disengagement is defined as:

> *the process whereby an individual experiences a change in role or function that is usually associated with a reduction of violent participation. It may not necessarily involve leaving the movement but is most frequently associated with significant temporary or permanent role change.*[15]

It is more accessible, and even reachable, to appeal to the concept of disengagement, which refers to a break with the criminal and terrorist actions of a particular group, without necessarily implying the renunciation of convictions upon which an individual has built a criminal record.[16] Moreover, disengagement often marks the initial phase of deradicalisation, during which individuals become more receptive to considering new perspectives and values that differ from their previous beliefs.[17]

Assessing whether an individual has disengaged or deradicalised is also a hard task.[18] Comparative studies of successful strategies have rarely been conducted and information on deradicalisation programmes is seldom shared.[19] Behavioural indicators (e.g., avoiding recidivism) can suggest disengagement, while deradicalisation is often assessed through interviews,[20] psychological evaluations or self-report surveys.[21] However, the reliability of these assessments is often debated, as they can be influenced by external factors, such as the participant's desire for social acceptance.

## Literature Review: Women Disengagement and Deradicalisation Practices

Women have been involved in terrorism for centuries.[22] The Russian group The People's Will (*Narodnaya Volya*), the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (in Sri Lanka) and Peru's Shining Path all had female members.[23] Women have also held leadership roles in organisations such as the Red Army Faction (Germany), the Red Brigades (Italy) and the Weather Underground (United States).[24] A remarkable number of publications deal with the question of how to explain why women become involved in political violence.[25] That interest in research on women and terrorism increased after an unprecedented number of women joined IS. According to Cook and Vale, around 6,902 foreign women worldwide travelled to join the group in Syria and Iraq.[26]

The representation of women in political violence has been characterised by strong gender bias.[27] For centuries, women have been identified as victims, as beings with behavioural disorders, or as a sort of femme fatale.[28] The tendency to portray women as easily manipulated victims with no agency has hindered the development of an effective policy against female violent extremism,[29] where women are made invisible,[30] or are undervalued in counterterror and PCVE work. For instance, many European countries did not initially prosecute women returning from IS, and they are less likely to be charged with terrorism offences.[31] However, that is slowly changing, as courts in Belgium, Germany, France, and the Netherlands are convicting the majority of female returnees for membership of a terrorist organisation. There are judicial challenges in applying further charges, which are related partly to the difficulty of gathering sufficient evidence.[32] Furthermore, in contrast to their male counterparts, women are generally considered less dangerous by the general public.[33]

Nevertheless, women have proved capable of carrying out terrorist attacks in the name of jihad in the West,[34] and reports highlight the violent attitudes of some females who still remain in Kurdish camps awaiting their repatriation.[35] Government transparency regarding the total number of female returnees is limited. Still, sources indicate that approximately 609 women have been repatriated worldwide—including 240 from various European countries—since the fall of the self-proclaimed 'caliphate'.[36] This summary should be sufficient to eradicate gender stereotypes in interventions to counter violent extremism (CVE). Specifically, addressing women's own needs in the design of strategies for disengagement and deradicalisation is seen by some scholars as indispensable.[37] This necessity was emphasised in several studies focusing on the demobilisation of women from armed groups in Guatemala, Sierra Leone and Ethiopia.[38]

Studies on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of women highlight the need to investigate the reasons that led women to join these guerrilla movements and how they were treated once in them. This understanding is crucial for providing women with proper treatment in subsequent programming.[39] Female ex-fighters have found that access to education, development of new skills, and the broadening of networks of women as indispensable factors in their demobilisation.[40] On the other hand, women have had trouble dealing with the loss of meaning and purpose once they leave the insurgency. The return to traditional gender relations was also identified as a challenging factor to deal with once they abandoned the fight.[41]

Some of these lessons can be incorporated into disengagement and deradicalisation practices concerning women in the West, as the literature on this topic is still in its infancy, with few but noteworthy studies to date.[42] The scholar Muhanna-Matar conducted a study on the experiences of 28 individuals from Tunisia (18 men and 10 women) in rejecting Salafist/jihadist ideology. It reveals that "interpersonal experiences among female Salafis appeared to be the main motives for their deradicalisation."[43] Some of these extreme experiences or 'trigger events' that led them to initiate a cognitive rejection included experiencing a lack of support from supposed Salafi fellows during difficult times, and being beaten by an abusive Jihadi husband. For its part, Gielen's survey offers a proposal on how to carry out a realistic assessment to evaluate exit programmes for female jihadists and argues that:

> *Exit requires a holistic and long-term approach that takes into account push and pull factors, combining multiple interventions that activate different mechanisms such as family support, physical and psychological assessment and counselling, and theological and ideological guidance.*[44]

This approach aligns with the main contributions that seek to identify the reasons leading individuals to abandon violent extremism.[45] Kruglanski considers that deradicalisation

constitutes a decrease in the commitment of individuals to their convictions and this involves the acquisition of new goals and interests.[46] Participation in artistic activities with which individuals could express themselves, as well as the development of new skills, were found essential in the case of former members of LTTE.[47]

According to the UNDP report 'Invisible Women', extremist offenders in Lebanon also showed good responses after undergoing psychosocial therapy. The document pointed out the positive initiative implemented by the non-profit organisation 'Rescue Me'. The association treated 61 men and nine women who had been members of violent extremist groups, including IS. The treatment consisted of offering psychosocial support, art therapy, and aggression replacement therapy (ART) to rehabilitate radicalised inmates. The participants displayed a great attitude and disposition to work from this approach, which was applied after building bonds of trust between practitioners and inmates.[48]

Today, more strategies are being tailored to individuals' needs and circumstances. Regarding this matter, prison programmes in countries such as Belgium, France and Germany are tailored to the needs of female violent extremists and cover different psychological aspects.[49] Moreover, the focus of these strategies lies on achieving a behavioural change rather than provoking a cognitive rejection of beliefs in the beneficiaries.[50] A recent analysis of autobiographical data from over 80 members of diverse terrorist groups—including religious organisations and extreme left-wing groups—suggests that abandoning violent ways has little to do with a change in ideological beliefs, and instead, disengagement is the result of factors linked to emotional exhaustion. Disillusionment, disagreements, or dissatisfaction with the group or their members are all identified as signs of abandoning the organisation.[51] Disenchantment with unfulfilled expectations is also found in exploratory research examining the motives underlying radicalisation and disengagement of female jihadists incarcerated in Spanish prisons from a psychological perspective.[52]

More recently, Perešin, Hasanović and Bytyqi revealed that female returnees from Syria to the Western Balkans expressed sentiments of disillusion and a decrease in their commitment to the group. Female returnees in France have shown the same feeling of disappointment based on their life in the caliphate, a situation that is not shared by most of the women incarcerated who did not travel to Syria.[53] Perešin, Hasanovic, and Bytyqi also remarked that the most pressing challenge for these repatriated females is "how to rebuild their lives, resocialise into their communities, gain economic independence, and secure a future for themselves and their children."[54]

## The Prosecution of Jihadist Women in Spain

Spain has faced major jihadist attacks throughout its history, such as the 1985 explosion at the El Descanso restaurant, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and more recently, the 2017 Barcelona and Cambrils vehicle-ramming attacks. Despite these terrible episodes, the number of foreign fighters who joined IS—in relation to the size of the national Muslim population—has not been as high in Spain as in other European countries.[55] The majority of the Islamic community in Spain comes from Morocco, which began to have a small presence in the country in the 1960s due to the economic boom. In 2021, Muslims represented 4.2 percent of the total population.[56]

Until the emergence of IS, no woman had been convicted in Spain for crimes related to jihadist terrorism.[57] In August 2014, two young women aged fourteen and nineteen were arrested when they tried to cross the border of Melilla, with the intention of joining the organisation in Syria or Iraq.[58] This episode led to the dismantling of a network involved in sending women to the territory under IS control. Six women (two of them minors) who were part of this network were

later convicted of terrorism offences. Since then, at least twenty females have been sentenced for participating in activities linked to the group in the country and nine remained in prison as of February 2024.[59]

The average age of the 23 women arrested between 2014 and 2016 was 24 years old, but in early 2022 a 72-year-old woman was charged with recruiting activities, becoming the oldest woman to be detained for this type of crime in Spain. Around 60 percent of the detained women had Spanish nationality and most were descendants of people born in Morocco, whereas the remaining 40 percent held Moroccan nationality.[60] A large proportion of those women resided in what are considered to be important hotspots of jihadism in the country: the cities of Ceuta, Melilla, and Barcelona province.[61] Notably, the number of female jihadist offenders increased in 2022 and 2023 after no arrests were made in 2021. This data highlights the changing role of women in jihadist activities in Spain, particularly after the 2019 arrest of a woman for showing intentions of preparing a terrorist attack in the country.[62]

Although Spain is one of the European states that has experienced the least female mobilisation,[63] around 30 women joined the group in Syria and Iraq. Four of them were located in camps guarded by the Kurdish authorities in 2019. Three years later, in November 2022, the Spanish government began repatriation procedures for these women. Two of these women returned to Spain with thirteen children in their care in January 2023; the rest have been unreachable by the Spanish security forces. Today, these women remain in custody awaiting trial for their possible crimes linked to IS.[64]

# Methodology

## *Sample*

This research examines the experiences of thirteen women who were convicted of terrorism offences in Spain between 2017 and 2020. To build the sample the author conducted in-depth interviews with twelve females sentenced in Spain for terrorism offences, while the experience of the thirteenth woman was shared by the psychologist who treated her. In addition, to confront different points of view, the research relies on the testimony of prison officials, psychologists, and educators who have treated some of the women sampled. Taking into account other primary sources—beyond the narratives of women in the sample—allowed for comparisons between the narratives of the women and those familiar with their cases, which can help avoid a biased version of the women's experiences. It is important to highlight that none of the participants followed a specific deradicalisation programme in jail, as no such initiative is currently available. The intervention of these professionals is only part of the standard treatment provided to the entire prison population, aimed at inmate rehabilitation.

The study was proposed to the Secretary of the Penitentiary Administration by submitting a standard application for conducting research in Spanish prisons. The form included a confirmation letter expressing the full support of my college board, the Instituto Universitario Gutiérrez Mellado (IUGM-UNED), as well as a detailed description of the chosen methodology to carry out the study. Once the penitentiary administration approved it, the author contacted the wardens of the four prisons that hold female inmates convicted of terrorist offences to finalise details for visits and to determine the sample of potential participants. The initial contact with inmates and prison officials was made through wardens and deputy directors of treatments, as they are part of the daily life of the convicts and have close contact with them. This interaction was used to explain the ongoing project and inquire about the women's willingness to participate, emphasising that their involvement was voluntary.

Subsequently, an appointment was scheduled between the author and the participants who had expressed interest in taking part in the study. The first step of these encounters served to provide detailed information about the project, resolve enquiries, and provide information to them about the academic scope of the research. At this point, one woman opted not to be part of the study after the information meeting, as she was reluctant to disclose intimate and distressing experiences with someone lacking her trust. The rest of the women approached agreed to participate, on the condition that they would not be recorded or identified with their names in order to avoid stigmatisation. Interestingly, most of the women who participated in the study asserted that they experienced relief after having the opportunity to express their feelings and stories, as their perception was that the press depicted them negatively and their voices had been usually forgotten.

Informed consent was individually obtained from all participants, and conversations were conducted in Spanish, as the individuals in the sample were all proficient in this language. Consequently, the statements were translated into English by the author during the writing process of this article. All interview data was anonymised following the policy of Data Protection of UNED in accordance with the European Legislation to protect the women's identities as well as that of the prison officials. The period of the field research was between September 2018 and January 2023.

The sample age group ranged from 22 to 48 years old, with an average of 26.5 years age. Six were born in Spain, six in Morocco, and one was from a Latin American country.[65] All of them had been living in Spain since their early childhood. Ten of the women in the sample resided in the main hotspots of jihadist activity in Spain. In terms of religion, ten came from a Muslim family and three converted to Islam at some point in their adolescent life. None had a criminal record prior to their terrorism conviction. The main crime for which these women were convicted was joining a terrorist organisation. They were also charged with other felonies, including collaborating with a terrorist organisation, and self- indoctrination crime.[66] None of the women in the sample committed violent crimes.

During their imprisonment, these women were in a closed regime department. Article 10.1 of the Penitentiary Regulations in Spain establishes that the criteria for classifying inmates in this type of regime are based on their perceived level of danger or unsuitability for ordinary and open regimes. Those convicted of terrorism offences, regardless of their behaviour or the nature of the crime, are usually included in this category, where there is greater security and isolation.[67] This means that young women incarcerated for a minor crime, for instance, self-indoctrination, share space with dangerous inmates charged with murder. At the time of their interview, each woman had been in prison between six months and three years.

## *Research Method*

The research methodology is mainly qualitative in order to study the personal experiences and narratives of the participants. The method of narrative analysis is useful to explore how individuals construct a story from their personal experience.[68] In this sense, the analysis was carried out through open and separate interviews with both the inmates and the prison officials themselves. In the case of the inmates, they were asked about their experiences upon detention, including their feelings, emotional states at the time of arrest, how they coped with various events, and their stance on IS doctrine. These interviews were unstructured in order to obtain a flow of information and not to direct their answer. The ultimate aim was to identify whether

the women sampled have begun a process of disengagement from IS, and/or have initiated a change in their belief system, and to generate new insights about the factors influencing these dynamics.

Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, ethical implications were considered in the design of the research. Most of the sessions were held in prison, but the author managed to have conversations with three of the inmates in public spaces following their release. These encounters took place in cafeterias in Ceuta and Madrid.[69] The period of each encounter lasted from sixty minutes to two hours, and they were always conducted alone, without the presence or the supervision of any authority, so participants felt free and comfortable to express both feelings and experiences.

In the study names are replaced by the letter X followed by an identification number. Through the analysis of the data collection, I was able to detect some measures that have been effective in the cessation of their crime activities, and in the process of doing so, at least some of them experienced a cognitive rejection of their radical beliefs.

# Findings

After completing the interviews, which were conducted using the methodology described above rather than a structured clinical assessment, the analysis of transcripts focused on the sequence of events the women described as well as their feelings, confessions and reactions, in order to identify patterns and insights into their experiences and transformations. Patterns revealed by this analysis were also cross-checked with the testimonies of prison officials, psychologists, and educators, who provided additional perspectives and a more comprehensive profile of these women, helping to categorise the participants as being in a process of disengagement, deradicalisation, or another state. Table 1 indicates the assessed state of the participants at the time of their interview.

*Table 1: State of the Women Sampled*

| | |
|---|---|
| Deradicalisation | X2; X3; X4; X8; X10; X11; X13 |
| Disengagement | X5; X6; X7; X9; X12 |
| Maintained support for IS doctrine | X1 |

The analysis of the narratives provided by the participants indicated that seven of the women experienced a deradicalisation process. This term is understood here as the procedure of distancing oneself from extremist views, which is measured in ending their support for IS doctrine. This change happened naturally as a result of life events and in response to a variety of external conditions. Triggering factors for this change included experiencing disenchantment with an idealised life that turned out to be false. Additionally, the feeling of being accepted by and/or integrated into new social networks played a significant role. For instance, one woman (Case X1) pointed out that she still harboured extremist thoughts because her process of radicalisation came from some of her relatives with whom she still maintains contact. Indeed, as other researchers have highlighted, family ties often play a key role in explaining the shift towards radicalisation,[70,71] and also have a significant influence in facilitating the opposite outcome, contributing to a process of deradicalisation.[72]

*Table 2: Factors that Motivated Deradicalisation*

| | |
|---|---|
| Disenchantment | X8; X13 |
| Feeling of being accepted by/ and/or integrated into new social networks | X2; X3; X4; X10; X11 |

On the other hand, five women sampled did not appear to have extremist views when they committed crimes related to jihadist offences; instead, other circumstances had led them to engage in these crimes. These findings support the argument made by the researcher John Horgan, who warned that not all individuals who are radical become terrorists, nor do all terrorists hold radical views.[73] Horgan argues that there is a tendency to assume a causal connection between the holding of radical views and engaging in terrorist actions, which can lead to errors when devising intervention strategies for inmates. Appropriate measures to counteract these challenges should, therefore, address the reasons that led an individual to commit these crimes in order to rehabilitate them. In such circumstances, the use of the term deradicalisation (and all that it entails) could achieve the opposite effect. For instance, five women in this sample ceased their criminal activity mainly after replacing their deviant social world and establishing ties with new social networks, which provided them with gratification and a different social identity unique from the one they developed with the terrorist group. The acquisition of new goals and priorities was a key factor in the disengagement process of Cases X8 and X13, contributing toward their deradicalisation.

*Table 3: Factors that Motivated Disengagement*

| | |
|---|---|
| Replacing their deviant social world with a new social network | X5; X6; X7; X9; X12 |
| Acquisition of new goals | X8; X13 |

The decision to cease deviant behaviour or undergo a cognitive rejection of beliefs is often preceded by a variety of factors and a combination of several of them, making it difficult to prioritise one over another. In this case, the identification was through what the participants remarked as the most prominent factor, but it is important to recognise that this does not negate the influence of other contributing elements. Disengagement and deradicalisation are complex processes that are usually interconnected, which is why a holistic approach has been adopted. This approach is used to discuss in detail the set of factors and experiences encountered by the participants in the following section.

# Discussion

## *New Motivations and Priorities*

Studies have identified the acquisition of new motivations and priorities as one of the factors leading to the deradicalisation process or disengagement of individuals.[74] This factor was reflected by two of the women in the sample. For instance, Cases X8 and X13 noted that starting a family and becoming a mother were significant experiences that challenged them. "I found out I was pregnant shortly after I was taken into custody. Now I just want to leave all that behind and dedicate myself to my family" (Case X13). Another one of the interviewees remarked that her change of attitude arose because of her husband:

> *When I got married, my husband gave me an ultimatum: You either stop your contact with groups online (referring to the chats she had with women arrested for links with IS) or we will break up. I always wanted to have a family, so I stopped these interactions. Then I got pregnant, a much-wanted baby, and now I just want to be with my daughter* (Case X8).[75]

These women identified a change in their personal priorities as the 'trigger event' that caused them to abandon their contacts with extremist environments. Once they severed these ties and acquired another identity outside the organisation through motherhood, it generated feelings of disenchantment with the life they had before their arrest. This led them to question their previous beliefs and ultimately resulted in a loss of support for the IS doctrine. Two of these women had grown up in conservative Muslim communities where traditional gender roles are deep-rooted.[76] These dynamics influenced the way they perceived or defined themselves in their communities. Motherhood and family provided them with a new purpose and social recognition, as these roles are deeply embedded and highly valued in their network.

Men have also alluded to personal reasons for disengaging from an extremist group. For instance, former members of the Spanish separatist organisation ETA remarked that becoming a parent and starting a new relationship was crucial to disengaging from the organisation.[77] This argument reinforces the idea that men are also influenced by emotional or personal factors, and the change of priorities just may come for both women and men naturally as a result of maturity or a change in life circumstances.[78] It is worth noting that a majority of the women sampled were particularly young at the time of being arrested. At that stage, teenagers tend to go through a period of self-definition within society,[79] and they do not have the necessary mental and intellectual abilities to navigate both extremist points of view and the dynamics of public opinion.[80] Case X8 and Case X13 also mentioned that they no longer recognise themselves from that time or understand how they came to support IS's ideology. For instance, one of the women confessed during the interview that she was foolish and vulnerable at that moment in her life, and she regretted everything that she had done (Case X13).

Education has also been identified as a contributing factor when reducing interest in violent extremism as well as in a DDR process.[81] Through education, individuals can experience new concerns in life and develop proper skills to enter the labour market, and in doing so establish new ties with their community. However, education does not appeal to everyone—for example, women jailed for terrorist activities in Kenya have reported a lack of interest in the prison-based education and job training programmes available.[82] There may also be a lack of adequate programmes that take women's needs or interests into account. In the case of the women sampled, some of the officials explained that studying was a 'key factor' in the change of belief system of the young women. Furthermore, they also became involved willingly in education and showed interest in learning while in prison.

Seven women (Cases: X2, X4, X5, X7, X8, X10, X11), all under thirty years old, reported during the interviews that they resumed their studies while in prison. Four of them have obtained—or were in the process of obtaining—their school-leaving certificate, and others are taking the university entrance course. Teaching, social work and pedagogy are among the degrees they are considering studying and the jobs they would like to pursue once they are released from prison. One woman has begun her studies in Hispanic philology after her release. According to a pioneering study on the criminal desistence of female street offenders, "education and occupational roles reaffirm noncriminal identities and bond themselves to conventional lifestyles,"[83] so it is unsurprising that the majority of the women in this study found—through education and a new occupation—a way to feel valid in society. Only one of the women

sampled "did not show any interest in culture or education" (Case X9), which, according to the psychologist who treated her (and per the woman's own admission), was due to a lack of confidence in her own intellectual abilities.

## *Positive Reinforcement and Individualised Treatment*

Psychological assessment and individualised treatment have been proven indispensable in changing the attitudes and cognitive views of some of the women in the sample. During one of the interviews, an educator and a psychologist from a penitentiary emphasised the significance of this approach. They provided an example, citing the response of one of the women (Case X11) who had entered prison with highly extremist Islamic ideological beliefs:

> *When she entered prison, she was very young (nineteen years old) and had a very impulsive temperament. She needed to interact with people and the isolation was killing her, so we started to induce her to change her attitude and to do the things she liked, such as sports. When she felt that she was supported and that not everyone had bad intentions, she started to change her attitude and to trust us, although she had a hard time and cried because she didn't know where to go.*

This tension between "staying straight and returning to her old social world" was also found in a study by Sommers, Baskin, and Fagan.[84] These researchers noted that such a transition is not an easy task, as it implies living in a period of uncertainty and crisis.[85] During this process, the individual resigns from the beliefs that had formerly sustained their criminal attitudes and redefines their ideological views and social identity. As the Spanish officers noted, the interaction with Case X11 was initially challenging, and it was essential to identify her vulnerabilities before intervening effectively:

> *When the young woman arrived at the centre, we realised that she had serious emotional deficiencies, and that the few friends she had were no longer keeping in touch with her. Through sport, she found positive reinforcement, and we encouraged her to do so. Gradually, she began to interact with other women and groom herself, and she became interested in other issues. She managed to pass her university entrance exam and developed constructive thinking towards issues that she had previously viewed very rigidly. She became convinced that she had been manipulated and even apologised for what she had said on social media. In the end, she was remorseful.*[86]

Engaging in exercise and gaining the support of various individuals provided the woman (Case X11) with positive emotions, a key mechanism for countering extremist ideology. In a radicalised state, subjects tend to resist arguments unless they are accompanied by an emotional willingness to pay attention to them.[87] They also frequently perceive prison officials as the enemy, creating a barrier that is challenging to overcome. This sentiment may be intensified after negative experiences with public-sector employees. For example, three women sampled were rebuked for their offences. Their testimonies reflect how negative experiences or excessive disciplinary measures in prison affected them psychologically:

> *I had a difficult experience in the first prison I was taken to. Some officials spoke to me with a violent attitude or sarcasm, and I saw the psychologist once or twice in three months and she didn't show any interest in me either. Once she told me: "Wow, your parents will be proud of you." That was all I needed at that time. However, they transferred me to another*

> *centre, and everything changed. The staff and the technical team were different. From the beginning, they were interested in getting to know me, my story, and the radicalisation process I had undergone. They trusted me and gave me a chance* (CaseX11).

> *One of the officers who arrested me cursed at me. This attitude further reinforced in me the idea that they were my enemies. When you are treated badly, you tend to believe in the discourse of IS even more* (Case X4).

> *I was in prison when the attacks in Brussels and France took place. During that time, security levels increased, and I couldn't leave the cell unless escorted by four officials. They only allowed me to speak in Spanish on my phone calls... All of this eventually affects you psychologically in such a way that you end up believing that you are dangerous* (Case X13).

At this stage, when negative feelings and a context of suspicion have been established, it becomes even more difficult to provide proper treatment or to create effective communication between inmates and prison staff. According to the experience of Spanish officials, providing inmates with some form of incentive or reward was a helpful strategy for beginning to create a trusting environment. This approach of giving incentives enables prison staff to establish cooperative links with female inmates and promote a shared space of understanding, thereby reducing feelings of suspicion or uncertainty. The good behaviour shown by the women sampled also facilitated interaction between these two different actors. Interestingly, females convicted of terrorist offences in other European countries have been shown to share the same positive conduct in detention settings.[88]

Sometimes it is assumed that women convicted of terrorism offences support the doctrine of an extremist group. Notwithstanding, radicalised ideology may arise due to emotional deficiencies or may not manifest itself at all. Regarding this, prison officials emphasised the need to delve into the personal circumstances behind these women's involvement with the group in order to provide appropriate treatment. For instance, two women in the sample (Case X6 and X12) were psychologically and physically assaulted by their partners for years. Both females were arrested for attempting to join IS in Syria. The first woman was detained in Spain, while the second was apprehended in Turkey along with her husband and daughter.

> *I know that after everything my husband did to me, it might be hard to understand why I would want to get back with him in Syria. But I was really angry about how he left me. I had to deal with eviction, take care of four kids, and, despite all, I just believed I had to stick with my husband. I had this idea that you are supposed to endure with a husband, and I needed a man by my side* (Case X6).

> *Another inmate had gone to Syria to follow her husband. She had no religious feelings whatsoever and had been controlled and abused by him. After the treatment we provided her, she came to tell us that we had given her freedom. During the two years he spent in prison, she divorced her husband who was serving a prison sentence in Morocco* (Case X12).[89]

Psychological abuse and intimate partner violence have been shown to have an impact on the mental health of individuals, potentially leading to a loss of self-esteem or depression.[90] Additionally, the deprivation of liberty brings about a series of effects on the mental health of individuals, including social withdrawal, sadness, and anxiety.[91] These can exacerbate pre-

existing psychosocial characteristics of prisoners that need to be addressed. One woman, who is not part of the sample and was serving a five-year sentence for recruitment in Spain, fell into a state of depression during her time in prison that led her to commit suicide. As related by one of the women sampled (Case X13): "We were in prison together and she was not well; she tried to go to Syria to sort out her problems. In prison she spent the whole day crying; she missed her son very much."

## *Feeling Validated and New Social Networks*

During an interview with a woman from the sample (Case X9), she confessed that the reason she committed a crime related to terrorism offences was because she felt lonely and went on social networks to look for companionship. She had no friends and was married to a man of Moroccan origin who was 20 years older than her. "I had a boring life and that's why I started to go on the internet, and to keep in touch mainly with a man who talked to me about IS."

Loneliness is a state of mind that is linked to feelings of sadness, misunderstanding, or insecurity. When an individual experiences loneliness, he or she may seek support in other areas to compensate for this, which may have nothing to do with holding a radical view. In fact, when asked about this particular case, a psychologist explained that this woman (X9) was rather frivolous in her relationships, so her commission of the crime seemed to respond to utilitarian reasons rather than a sign of deep religious conviction. In fact, in prison, she began a new relationship with another inmate through correspondence that had her excited. She also said she had improved her self-esteem and insecurity thanks to the psychological treatment. From the beginning, she showed remorse for what she had shared on social media and never exhibited an extremist view.

Finding a path of inclusion was identified as a 'trigger event' for one woman in the sample (Case X4). She explained during her interview that she arrived at prison with extremely radical thinking, but she found a way out thanks to the positive feelings she experienced after interacting with a new social network:

> *When I entered prison, I was alone, isolated and without any support, so I became even more radicalised. When the centre's director left, the policy regarding us shifted. I started to participate in activities and engage with volunteers from outside. My change came when I felt I was treated like a normal person. Many people around me told me how wrong I was, but I did not listen or pay attention to them. In that state, you don't see it.*

Rejection and isolation perpetuate negative feelings, so interaction with a new group of people through which feelings are validated was also identified as indispensable for four women in the sample (Cases X2, X3, X10, and X11). The testimony describing the first experience in prison of one of them reinforces this point:

> *The first months [in prison] were very complicated. I couldn't talk to anyone; I didn't have any companions with something in common. I was nineteen years old and most of them were over forty. My loneliness doubled in two ways: the loneliness of being in a prison, within four walls, in an individual cell, and the loneliness of not finding anyone to talk to, or trying to forget a bit of the anguish and sadness that was eating me up inside. Those were very difficult days* (Case X11).

Research also indicates that when women begin to feel accepted and trusted within certain conventional social circles, their determination to exit from crime is strengthened, as their social and personal identities as non-criminals are reinforced.[92] Finding a supportive social network was a key event for the cases described above, considering the social stigma and the state of mind they have to deal with after being arrested for this type of crime.

For instance, most women stated that they had changed their character and the way they relate to people. Now, they admit, they are colder and more distrustful. One young woman in the sample observed that she no longer makes new friends so as not to have to tell them what she had experienced; in the past, if she ever did this, she felt rejected (Case X13). Another young woman expressed the same opinion. "Most of the friends I had before distanced themselves from me when I was arrested. Now, they only greet me, but they don't invite me to birthdays or other celebrations. I only have my family, who are the ones truly there in difficult moments" (Case X8). Before being arrested, both women experienced strained relationships with their close families, marked by frequent arguments over their support for IS doctrine and the adoption of new codes of conduct, such as stricter attire. Coming from moderately religious families, these changes became a source of conflict. However, after their arrest, these relationships began to mend and now serve as an essential pillar of support in their lives.

Being labelled as a terrorist is one of the factors that explains the difficulty of creating new ties, sometimes because individuals fear that contact with these inmates could get them into trouble with security forces. One woman expressed this concern: "We have a lot of baggage with this word; what does it mean to be a terrorist? I feel guilty for what I shared on the internet, but I am not a terrorist" (Case X9). Complementing this consideration, another woman showed dissatisfaction with the media's representation of her: "I am portrayed as a monster and I have family, I have children. I am not like that" (Case X6).

Most women are not aware of the seriousness of having committed these crimes and try to justify their actions as a self-defence mechanism. Nevertheless, media coverage and the exaggerated reaction of criminal law to certain types of crimes create a stereotypical narrative of these inmates that does not help their reintegration into society. For instance, Case X11[93] was expelled to Morocco when her sentence was fulfilled, despite the recommendations of the psychologist and educator who treated her in prison. The sanction was imposed in accordance with Art.57 of Organic Law 4/2000, which regulates the expulsion of foreign nationals.

> *She ended up recognising that she had been manipulated and even apologized for what she had said on social media. She was regretful, and despite all the advances she made while serving her sentence, she was expelled to Morocco. This decision was very unfair. In that country, she has neither immediate family nor a support network.*[94]

These specialists believed that despite any positive changes or attitudes the inmate showed during her time in jail, the seriousness of the crime for which she was convicted remained the most important factor. Moreover, expulsion does not serve any rehabilitation or reintegration purpose. According to the psychologist who treated Case X11, this decision can have negative consequences and reverse all the progress that has been made up to date. The feeling of helplessness or defeat was shown by more than one woman during the interviews: "No matter what I do, people will always think the same about me" (Case X5).

## Conclusion

This study of the experiences of thirteen women convicted of terrorism offences in Spain reveals crucial insights for understanding the process of female deradicalisation and disengagement. The key factors influencing their change in attitude or mentality include disenchantment, the acquisition of new goals, and a sense of acceptance or integration into new social networks. Additionally, psychological treatment played a vital role in identifying the shortcomings and weaknesses of some of these women. Once identified, professionals could address the factors that contributed to the radicalisation process or the motivations behind committing such crimes.

The reasons behind experiencing a cognitive rejection of beliefs and simply ceasing criminal behaviour in these women are consistent with existing literature on deradicalisation and disengagement. Although this study is based on a small sample, some of the obtained results support the arguments put forth by other researchers on this phenomenon. Specifically, the outcomes in Cases X8 and X13 illustrate the connection between disengagement and deradicalisation, highlighting how the former can facilitate the latter through the acquisition of new goals, as noted by Kruglanski.[95] Moreover, the research literature has also identified the crucial importance of psychological support tailored to individuals' needs. Education and the feeling of being accepted by/or integrated into new social networks align with findings from studies on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and changes in criminal behaviour among female offenders.

Thus, one of the most noteworthy findings in this study is that some of the women in the sample had not committed crimes related to jihadist offences because of ideology, but due to other circumstances which had led them to do so. This is reflected by the analysis of the different primary sources used to conduct this research. Consequently, programmes designed to address this phenomenon should dispel the assumption that ideology or an extremist interpretation of religion is the sole motivator for all individuals committing these types of crimes.

The change these women experienced in prison did not result from a specific deradicalisation treatment but rather from measures outlined in general penitentiary regulations aimed at rehabilitating the entire prison population without distinction based on their crime. Considering this, it may be more advantageous to explore how broader rehabilitation strategies can impact individual transformation and promote these approaches, rather than developing deradicalisation programmes that inmates may typically distrust. These programmes could reinforce feelings of injustice or discrimination that promote radicalisation, as they target a specific group and may be perceived as stigmatising, potentially deepening the divide between the group and broader society. While this article specifically examines the situation of a limited sample in Spain, and further research is needed for more definitive conclusions, these findings may be relevant and tested in other countries facing similar issues.

Academics and counter-terrorism policymakers should focus on creating new motivations or roles for inmates in society, allowing inmates to gain a sense of worth, and establishing a robust network for them to integrate into the community upon release. This approach can help mitigate the stigma associated with having been in prison, enabling them to overcome the terrorist label and fostering reintegration into society, thereby minimising the risk of recidivism.

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Grounds for Cooperation in the Radicalisation Governance Milieu? A Qualitative Exploration of Stakeholder Issue Frames of Online Radicalisation

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**Abstract:** In the study of online radicalisation, little attention has been paid to the way local stakeholders within the broader online radicalisation milieu define, frame, and problematise online radicalisation. As these conceptions and problematisations are crucial to the possibility of cooperation and coordination between them, this lacuna represents a curious oversight. Drawing on a cross-national and highly diverse sample of stakeholders, including law enforcement actors, religious and community leaders, policy-makers and activists, and scientific experts, we inductively identify four largely shared 'issue frames'. We conceptualise issue frames as ways of organising knowledge and meaning, and as crucial to the way problems – in this case online radicalisation – come to be defined, constructed, and contested by various social actors. Uncovering four shared issue frames, we show how stakeholders commonly 1) highlight the tension between individual and social understanding of radicalisation; 2) reflect on the national embeddedness of radicalisation discourse; 3) comment on the complex politics of online radicalisation monitoring; and 4) warn against the mysteries inherent in algorithmic surveillance and control. Demonstrating that these specific issue frames are largely shared between a highly diverse group of stakeholders, we emphasise the need for cooperation and coordination between these actor groups.

**Keywords:** Radicalisation, online radicalisation, qualitative research, interviews, stakeholders, security

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## Online Radicalisation: A Contested and Contestable Term

On the 6th January, 2021, a large group of protestors stormed the Capitol Building in Washington, looking for ways to stop the supposed 'steal' of the US election. The digital app *Parler* had functioned as a crucial coordination and planning technology for individuals looking to overturn the supposed 'theft' of the elections by the Democratic candidate Joe Biden. In the same month, the Dutch extreme-right party Forum for Democracy (FvD) splintered due to leaked antisemitic jokes from its youth department's *WhatsApp* group. These simultaneous events demonstrate that online communications and the internet play a crucial role in processes of radicalisation. Since then, online disinformation campaigns by specific groups or states increasingly fed into the distrust of citizens in public institutions and, in this way, also became a threat to democracies on a larger scale.[1] These events highlight the importance of studying online radicalisation and exploring better monitoring and governance of online platforms amid national security threats. Europe, for example, has seen terrorist attacks from a variety of groups, such as jihadist, ethno-nationalist, left-wing, right-wing and single-issue groups.[2]

Radicalisation does not necessarily lead to violent extremism or terrorism, but refers to the cognitive embracing of extremist opinions. Such cognitive radicalisation may lead to behavioural radicalisation.[3] The internet plays an increasing role in such radicalisation processes, as it makes it easier to disseminate, promote and justify hate speech and recruit vulnerable individuals.[4] While extremist groups do not solely rely on the internet, they may use online content for recruitment and desensitisation purposes.[5] Obviously, not every cognitively radicalised person will commit extremist violence, yet online radicalisation does represent a sensitive and crucial phase in broader radicalisation processes. Understanding and intervening in this phase is generally taken to be an important tool in de-radicalisation and anti-terrorist activities.

Radicalisation has no generally accepted definition. A comprehensive review of 270 studies points to the multileveled nature of the phenomenon.[6] This includes geopolitical factors, such as wars or societal polarisation, environmental factors, such as family relationships or other social relations, and individual factors, such as the experience of a trigger event or specific psychological vulnerabilities.[7] Moreover, the concept of radicalisation is mobilised in a variety of political agendas, institutional processes, and different *issue frames,*[8] so that its meaning is far from stable across contexts. In the field of policy analysis and the sociology of meaning-making, issue frames are generally understood to be the ways by which specific social problems or controversies come to be defined and constructed.[9] Often, these issue frames introduce a specific understanding of the social problem or situation and, in that sense, also attribute (political, legal, social) responsibilities over specific actors. Radicalisation as a phenomenon has been subject to a variety of such issue frames. For instance, securitisation issue frames construct radicalisation primarily as a national threat and highlight the role and responsibility of law enforcement in combating it. Community-centred issue frames define and construct radicalisation as rooted in community life and organisations, and tend to point out the role of community leaders, like religious and civil society leaders, in tackling it.[10] Working with a heuristic definition, however, we understand online radicalisation as a process by which individuals' 'moral, ethical, logical and emotional societal norms and awareness are compromised through the use of online activities', which then creates an 'increased risk of supporting, or directly engaging in, possibly illegal and anti-societal activities'.[11] As this process is intrinsically multi-layered and multi-faceted in nature, this heuristic also suggests that a multitude of diverse stakeholders needs to be involved to tackle this phenomenon: law enforcement actors, but religious and community leaders, policy-makers and political activists, and experts as well.

## *Stakeholder Conceptions of Radicalisation: Our Contribution*

The academic literature on the concept of radicalisation has, however, produced a specific empirical blind spot. In contesting the meaning and stability of the concept of radicalisation, scholars have so far failed to engage systematically with the way societal actors and stakeholders themselves define, understand, and frame radicalisation. This is a curious lacuna, because law enforcement professionals, religious and community leaders, as well as political activists and experts, are thought to play an important role in detecting, preventing, and responding to online radicalisation. As radicalisation itself is notoriously difficult to define, operationalise, and monitor in any straightforward sense,[12] this relative neglect of stakeholder perspectives is rather surprising.[13] A few studies helpfully show how, for instance, specific understandings of radicalisation inform practices of community policing,[14] or explore conceptions of mechanisms of radicalisation and deradicalisation among social workers.[15] This article builds upon these efforts to examine how such societal stakeholders within the broader radicalisation governance milieu perceive and understand online radicalisation. In so doing, we advance contemporary approaches to online radicalisation by demonstrating how online radicalisation is subject to particular issue frames that define, construct, and contest (dimensions of) online radicalisation.

Drawing on a uniquely diverse sample of both Law Enforcement Actors (LEAs) and non-LEA stakeholders across seven European nations, we identify four dominant issue frames that inform the way stakeholders approach the definition, the explanation, the governance, and monitoring of online radicalisation. In so doing, we broaden the scope of contemporary approaches to the concept of radicalisation and identify a set of surprising frame *resonances and convergences* between these stakeholder perceptions. As such, not only do our data present a strong case for understanding and accounting for these stakeholder perspectives; it also complicates the dominant assumption that limited forms of cooperation and coordination between these stakeholders are due to an absence of shared meanings and frames. Instead, we show that both LEAs and other stakeholders go well beyond the securitisation issue frame, for instance, and identify similar dilemmas when it comes to the monitoring and governance of online radicalisation. In this article, we introduce the problem of cooperation and coordination within broader radicalisation government networks in more detail, then move on to a discussion of our strategic case selection and variability sampling, after which we focus on four shared issue frames of online radicalisation. We conclude by offering recommendations for further research, policy, and practice, emphasising in particular the surprising convergences between the various stakeholders.

# Working Apart Together? The Radicalisation Governance Milieu, the Problem of Cooperation and Coordination, and the Assumption of Irreconcilable Differences

Radicalisation—and specifically online radicalisation—is not a word with a stable meaning, as noted above; it means different things to different actors, either within or beyond law enforcement. In this article, we highlight *issue frames* as shaping and informing how radicalisation is understood and acted upon.[16] The notion of an issue frame, which we can trace back to Erving Goffman's seminal work on frames as 'schemata of interpretation' that shape the way individuals 'perceive, label, and identify' phenomena and guide them in their (social) action,[17] is helpful to understand how a concept such as 'online radicalisation' acquires specific meanings, depending on the specific issue frame adopted. Issue frames, then, become more or less structured ways to define, construct, and contest particular social problems or controversies,[18] and often distribute specific responsibilities to specific social actors.

In the field of radicalisation, the *securitisation issue frame* has been especially dominant. Within this frame, radicalisation tends to be understood as an imminent threat to national security, and primarily a responsibility of and for law enforcement, which tends to give rise to difficult ethical, legal, and practical questions about the role of local law enforcement in ensuring not only local and public safety but also national security.[19] For example, the emphasis on threats intrinsic to this issue frame may be mobilised to strategically introduce and legitimise far-reaching measures of prevention and control, even where those challenge civil rights.[20] Meanwhile, such securitised issue frames often decontextualise the phenomenon of radicalisation, while the rivalling *community policing issue frame* of radicalisation asks for more consideration of the broader social embeddedness of radicalisation processes in specific communities. This frame also tends to emphasise outreach and community relations by law enforcement,[21] and points to the importance of non-law enforcement actors such as community leaders in shaping conditions for deradicalisation.[22]

Online radicalisation, furthermore, also invites the engagement of legal and policy advisors, cyber security specialists as well as privacy watchdogs and NGOs, who in varying ways may contribute to the specific framings of online radicalisation as a phenomenon more or less amenable to digital forms of surveillance and control, and more or less linked with offline processes.[23] As such, online radicalisation also becomes an object of yet new frames of understanding radicalisation, as, for instance, an 'onlife' phenomenon, blending on- and offline dynamics.[24] Issue frames, then, order and structure social actors' understanding of the social world, and there are often considerable tensions between and within such issue frames.

Contemporary literature further assumes that specific stakeholder communities operate on the basis of diverging issue frames. For instance, community leaders, because of their familiarity – and sustained engagement – with their communities, tend to challenge the securitisation frame,[25] while law enforcement professionals are thought to frame radicalisation as an imminent threat to public and national security and act accordingly. National differences in policing cultures may also be a factor in explaining the adoption of divergent issue frames between LEAs.[26] Crucially, these differences are then thought to explain a broader lack of interprofessional cooperation and coordination in radicalisation governance networks, both nationally and internationally. Noordegraaf et al. contend that successful cooperation requires a better, albeit not entirely identical, and more commonly shared understanding of the nature of the problem.[27] Achieving a somewhat shared understanding of online radicalisation and related phenomena is thought to be challenging, as perspectives develop within specific disciplines where formal education, training, and networks exert normative pressure, shaping the values, principles, and professional identities of those involved.[28] However, evidence for the existence of different perspectives is mixed: while there are some differences present at a granular level of analysis, researchers may also point to surprising convergences between professional and social groups in the way they define and frame online radicalisation.[29] Our research here is an attempt to tackle this critical gap in the literature, and to empirically tease out commonalities as well as differences within the broader online radicalisation milieu.

In order, then, to get a deeper understanding of the commonalities and differences of conceptions of online radicalisation among professionals in different contexts, we designed a study to answer the following questions: How do law enforcement, religious and community leaders, activists, and experts in different European countries approach and frame online radicalisation? How do they perceive surveillance and the supposed trade-off between privacy and security regarding the prevention of online radicalisation?[30] On what concerns do they base their considerations and insights? To what extent are they aligned, and how do they differ? The study was part of PROPHETS, an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project which ran from 2018 to 2021.[31] PROPHETS

was a collaboration between law enforcement agencies, academic institutions and centres of expertise across Europe and had as its goal to 'look at redefining new methods to prevent, investigate and mitigate cybercriminal behaviours'.[32] The deliverable on which we draw for this article was coordinated by Erasmus University Rotterdam and had as its goal to investigate the opinions of citizens and LEAs about the supposed privacy-security trade-off in dealing with online radicalisation.[33]

## Cases and Method: Maximising National and Professional Variability, Semi-Structured Interviewing

Guided by the question of how stakeholders within different national and professional communities define and frame online radicalisation, we adopted a strategy of maximising stakeholder variability in our selection of cases.[34] Inspired by our multi-stakeholder understanding of countering online radicalisation, we identified three important groups: (A) law enforcement actors, (B) religious and community leaders, and (C) policy advisors and activists. These groups were chosen because they are deemed important within the aforementioned community policing issue frame. Over the course of our investigation, we added a fourth category—(D) experts whose work directly or indirectly engages with online radicalisation, and whose work specifically engages with novel challenges and problems associated with the online dimensions of radicalisation. Our selected professional groups are structurally situated highly differently in relation to online radicalisation: while LEAs are charged with preventing and acting on online radicalisation, community leaders tend to be more engaged with their communities. Policy advisors and activists in the field of online security, meanwhile, were initially expected to highlight legal constraints and specific advantages and risks of online surveillance, while the fourth category, academic experts in the field of online culture and surveillance, presented itself over the course of the investigation as a group contributing to societal debates and awareness of online radicalisation as well.

As online radicalisation is an internationally salient phenomenon, we strategically selected seven European countries – Netherlands, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Greece, and Italy. These countries were selected for two reasons. First, combining countries from Western, Eastern, and Southern Europe, this selection was geared to represent regional variation throughout Europe. Secondly, these countries all have a variety of experiences with terror attacks and/or arrests in 2019 when we collected our data:[35] Eastern Europe (Estonia: 0 attacks and arrests), Western Europe (Netherlands: 2 attacks, 37 arrests), Central Europe (Germany: 3 attacks, 35 arrests), Southern Europe (Italy: 28 attacks, 132 arrests; Greece: 4 attacks, 7 arrests), Southeast Europe (Bulgaria: 1 attack, 11 arrests; Croatia: 0 attacks and arrests). As a result, our selection of countries represents a strongly varied sample and, as such, maximises contextual diversity.

A total of 66 interviews were conducted across the aforementioned EU countries. Table 1 (see below) displays the distribution of informants by stakeholder group and country. In selecting individuals for interviews, the project sought to find a harmonious balance between the aforementioned stakeholder groups in each country. While the sample, in demographic terms, skews older and male, it nevertheless represents a highly diverse and, therefore, unique sample of stakeholders in the broader online radicalisation monitoring and governance milieu. While not generalisable to all such networks and milieus across Europe due to the unique composition of countries, it nevertheless contributes to a broader, cross-national understanding of stakeholder conceptions and problematisations.

*Table 1: Distribution of Informants by Stakeholder Group and Country*

| | A. LEAs (in private sector) | B. Religious/ community leaders | C. Policy advisors/ activists | D. Experts | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bulgaria | 4 | 1 | 4 | 3 | **12** |
| Croatia | 4 (1) | 3 | 2 | 0 | **9** |
| Estonia | 3 (1) | 4 | 4 | 0 | **11** |
| Germany | 5 | 3 | 1 | 0 | **9** |
| Greece | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | **5** |
| Italy | 5 (1) | 3 | 3 | 1 | **12** |
| Netherlands | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 | **8** |
| **Total** | **25 (3)** | **16** | **15** | **10** | **66** |

## *Semi-Structured Interviews: Constructivist Tenets and Variation-Maximising Scenarios*[36]

The interviews employed an interview guide approach, ensuring consistent pursuit of fundamental lines of inquiry while allowing the interviewer the flexibility to probe and explore.[37] This approach helped informants to outline their occupational background and career, as well as reflect on four predefined themes: safety and security, (online) radicalisation, surveillance and privacy. In so doing, we aimed to explore stakeholders' specific insights, conceptions and problematisations,[38] keeping an eye out for both similarities and differences. Following Ravn et al., we stress that the interpretation and approach to radicalisation are not objective but rather a subjective understanding that has developed over time,[39] and thus examine what subjective understandings stakeholders mobilise to frame online radicalisation. As such, we asked open-ended questions to probe the meanings our informants attribute to online radicalisation and asked them to elaborately reflect on their reasoning. The guide included a list of 38 suggested questions, intended as examples or guidelines rather than a checklist to be completed in a specific order.

In the design of these interview guidelines, we were helped by a survey, executed in the context of the same research project.[40] This survey was used to define areas of concern to LEA and non-LEA actors, such as the balance between public safety and individual rights and the novel opportunities represented by the internet. The survey data was also used to construct four scenarios, which offered specific, fictional examples of online radicalisation taking place in a context of heightened security risk to the national population and legalised, algorithmically assisted forms of police investigation.[41] These scenarios were constructed to maximise variability once again, including, in different constellations, scenarios involving vulnerable or influential *enablers* of radicalisation and vulnerable or influential *perpetrators* of radicalised action.

Interestingly, while the quantitative survey data demonstrated some differences between LEA and non-LEA professionals in their acceptance of online surveillance of suspect activities.[42] the qualitative interviews yielded surprising resonances in the broader meanings and issue frames our informants mobilise when prompted to more fully and elaborately engage with online radicalisation. We will reflect on this difference in the conclusion of this paper.

In order to zoom in on recurring issue frames, we adopted a method of inductive coding, a coding procedure that foregrounds interviewees' own perspectives, definitions, and accounts on a given set of issues. In so doing, we arrived at four specific issue frames that were remarkably similar across countries and actor groups. In the coming pages, research participants will be denoted by means of their nationality (e.g. NL) and number (e.g. 05), and by their stakeholder category (A = LEA, B = religious or community leader, C = policy advisor or activist, and D = expert) in order to safeguard their anonymity.

## Framing 'Online Radicalisation': Data and Analysis

Like most terms, the notion of 'online radicalisation' evokes a host of not necessarily coherent meanings and associations. In the following, however, we zoom in on four largely shared issue frames. The first of these emphasises the tension between approaching online radicalisation as an individual process versus a socially contextualised practice; the second issue frame emphasises the national embeddedness of the very definition of radicalisation and its use in specific national and political contexts; the third issue frame highlights the complex politics of online security, while the fourth issue frame approaches the monitoring of online radicalisation, particularly so by means of 'mysterious' algorithms, as a practical and pragmatic challenge.

It is, however, important to notice from the start that radicalisation itself is not a term with a stable meaning to our informants. When asked to define radicalisation, informants often posit it as a process resulting in the desire to take away freedoms from others, implicitly understanding radicalisation as a threat to others' positive freedoms. Informants may also associate it with becoming obsessed or stuck in a 'bubble' (BG05C) and suffering from 'tunnel vision' (e.g. EST04B and DE07B), with people losing awareness of broader society and rejecting, in particular, diversity of opinion and way of life. They also associate it with extremism, yet also express a rather complex understanding of what is to be counted as 'extreme', which may, in fact, simply be an 'exaggeration of something intrinsically positive' (HR02B), hence subtly distinguishing between extremism and violent extremism in action. Indeed, radicalisation may even have emancipatory potential (DE03A), it being a process whereby previously unrepresented people claim a voice and public visibility. In this regard, too, our informants challenge simple models of radicalisation that fail to distinguish between these two – a particularly problematic tendency, as specifically adolescence can be characterised in general as a transition period marked by extreme emotions and opinions.[43] Indeed, 'the line distinguishing a radicalised person from a person who wants a better future for his or her children is very thin', one police officer comments (BG03A). Given this unstable character of the term radicalisation, it is no surprise, then, that we see our respondents mobilise the following four issue frames to attend to its complexity.

### *1) The Roots of Radicalisation: The Isolated Individual and/or the Broader Social Context*

When asked to reflect on why and how certain individuals are radicalised – or radicalise themselves – our respondents generally identified an important tension between individual-level explanations on the one hand, and broader social processes and dynamics on the other. Some informants emphasised certain individual characteristics such as low intelligence and lack of critical thinking skills, low educational attainments, or a bad childhood and traumatic experiences, whereas others privileged social and economic factors in their explanations, ranging widely from unemployment (e.g. some people 'don't have a normal life or anything else to do', EST02D), economic deprivation, to broader societal injustices against specific minorities (DE04A). At the same time, our informants also articulated holistic approaches to radicalisation, which tend to understand radicalisation as a multifactorial, sometimes multi-staged process,

involving both precipitating causes and triggering catalysts that evolve to a 'point of no return' (DE04A). On the one hand, then, they put forth the trope of the radicalising 'lone wolf', but point to the structural factors that allow such 'lone wolves' to emerge in the first place.

Informants also reflected specifically on the impact of online media, suggesting that online media and the algorithms that steer users to specific content play an important role in their radicalisation. Some emphasised, for instance, the 'bubble' created in certain online spaces, pointed to the wide reach of such media, and also pointed out that spending a lot of time online is simply incompatible with living a more socially engaged life in one's community. Here, the online world represents an additional social scene that may compensate for the alienation individuals experience in broader society.

For our informants, the multifactorial nature of radicalisation poses the challenge of how to effectively intervene and stop these processes. If they are a matter of complex interlocking causes and catalysts, where do you focus your efforts to halt or subvert such radicalisation processes? Here, informants generally emphasised community-based solutions targeting especially vulnerable populations and individuals within these populations as a first and crucial step. For instance, informants mentioned it is possible to target those 'without strong social ties' (IT05A), by offering strong education programs and educational efforts to combat radicalisation (GR03B) or state-sponsored reintegration programs highlighting sports and civic education (DE02A). The extent to which our informants thought these more general efforts should be combined with online surveillance and security efforts is a question that will be dealt with below (see issue frame number three) after we have discussed the importance of national and political contexts to our informants.

## *2) The Importance of (National and Political) Context: Radicalisation as a Moving Target*

Throughout the interviews, many of our informants emphasised the importance of specific national and political contexts in confronting online radicalisation. The importance of such contexts could be presented implicitly, in references to country-specific phenomena of interest: e.g. our informants from Bulgaria often used football as an example of a social setting in which radicalisation may occur, an emphasis which echoes the strong right-wing presence within Bulgarian football hooliganism.[44] More explicit framings of the importance of national and political contexts were also present, however. For instance, many of our informants commented on the supposed link between radicalisation and Islam or migrant communities, yet contest the assumption that radicalisation is something that only or uniquely affects such communities. Most of our German police officers, for instance, noted that it is a mistake to think that culture or Islam explains Islamic radicalisation; instead, the roots of these processes have to be sought in experiences of socio-economic deprivation and anti-Muslim discrimination (DE01A, DE02A, DE03A, DE05A). This recognition is echoed by informants who variously pointed to Christianity as a source of radicalisation (EST09C) and who see the idea that radicalisation only or uniquely affects Muslim communities as deeply irrational (IT09C). Moreover, religious or ethnic identifications are themselves not stable or given but may assume a particular salience in specific contexts: an Italian law enforcement professional emphasised, for instance, that in order to understand radicalisation processes in, and as mediated by, the broader Balkan area, one has to account for politically motivated mobilisation of such identities in recent history (IT01A).

Indeed, some challenged the very label of the 'radical' itself, understanding it as a political tool in majority attempts to silence or marginalise specific communities who may be in the process

of arguing for community rights and justice (EST02D). For instance, a Dutch Muslim community worker emphasised that mainstream political discourse in the Netherlands is itself radicalised and anti-Muslim, wondering whether this radical 'centre' is not more harmful societally than the youth she works with. Commenting on the scenario involving a radical and homophobic Imam, she confided in the researcher: "Can I be honest? What this imam does is very bad. What he says. But if I compare this with Wilders," – Geert Wilders is a prominent right-wing, anti-Islam politician in the Netherlands – "I mean, that is a hundred times as bad. [...] Because he [Wilders] affects the whole society. And whatever that Imam says, at least it doesn't affect the whole of society" (NL05B). Her appraisal of these exclusionary, Islamophobic discourses was shared, coincidentally, with that of a Dutch rabbi, who similarly lamented the ease with which the right wing was projecting anti-Semitism onto Muslims – conveniently remaining silent about anti-Semitism within its own ranks and within broader mainstream society.

Taken together, these data suggest that our informants operate with an issue frame of radicalisation that understands it to be a 'moving target' for our informants: a term that fails to have a stable meaning across contexts, and that – as they argue – becomes implicated in specific political agendas. The broader implications of such stakeholder issue framing of radicalisation will be unpacked more fully in the conclusion, but suffice to say here that these contestations and challenges of dominant radicalisation frames test the definitional power of authorities in delineating 'radicalisation'.

## *3) The Politics of Online Surveillance and Security: A 'Delicate Balance'*

Speaking more specifically of forms of online radicalisation, many of our informants were quick to point out that online surveillance and online security may play a crucial role in combating online radicalisation: after all, state authorities do have the responsibility to ensure security for their citizens. Offending websites of online fora may be taken down (GR02A), for instance, and patterns of internet use may provide hints about specific individuals. However, we were struck particularly by the broader issues our informants brought up when it came to online surveillance and security in what we call the issue frame of 'finding a balance'. Some of our informants focused on issues related to privacy, particularly the balance between individual privacy and state power. There should not be 'mass surveillance' of entire populations, for instance (GR04A), nor should law enforcement seek to emulate Chinese (DE04A) or Russian (IT10B) authorities, or even the UK, with its massive amount of CCTV (DE05A). Serving as a counterpoint to more moderate and privacy-sensitive use of surveillance technologies, these countries were thought to have transgressed the boundary separating legitimate from illegitimate use.

Targeted surveillance of specific populations, however, was also thought to be fraught with ethical dangers. Such efforts may reinforce negative stereotypes, 'put labels on people', (GR03D), and have discriminatory effects more broadly. At the level of the individual, surveillance may be especially dangerous as well: if used in the wrong way – without certain contextual safeguards (see issue frame number four below) – it may even 'jeopardise someone's life' (HR02C) when law enforcement acts on spurious information. Even when certain societal fears of surveillance may be somewhat 'overblown' (EST01D), informants generally emphasised the necessity of proper legal and regulatory frameworks and democratic accountability mechanisms. For this reason, private ownership of the means of online surveillance or the data hence generated may exacerbate these dilemmas, creating a situation in which surveillance methods may 'evade the public eye' (NL07D).

In this context, some informants again pointed to local histories of governmental surveillance and control (see issue frame number two above). A Dutch rabbi, for instance, was particularly

hesitant when it came to online surveillance, bringing to mind how, under the German occupation of 1940-1945, the German occupying forces had a rather well-developed bureaucracy at its disposal detailing (among other things) the place of residence of its Jewish citizens. It is often claimed that this is the reason for the particularly high percentage of Dutch Jews deported during the Holocaust.[45] This history explains his hesitance to support large-scale surveillance of targeted populations, even when they threaten his Synagogue's safety and security. In so doing, he brought to mind the ill uses to which such instruments may be put and their more general tendency towards 'function creep' – an insistence that mirrors more general public anxieties with regard to such processes of creep.[46] As a result, we suggest that our informants share this concern for the potentially undemocratic and unaccountable uses of surveillance algorithms and generally adopt an issue frame in which online monitoring is conceived of as a delicate balancing act.

### *4) The Mysteries and Limitations of Algorithmic Surveillance*

Aside from the more political and ethical issues we unpacked in issue frame number three, our informants also tended to stress the pragmatic limitations of digital surveillance. First of all, the internet itself is evolving so fast that the use of online surveillance is simply limited: once the algorithm has 'learned' to recognise certain patterns, radicalising communities may already have moved on, so that 'we're tapping in the dark' (HR03D). But the opacity of the 'inner workings' of surveillance algorithms was also taken to represent a pragmatic problem. Algorithms, being changeable and self-learning, depend on the quality of the data they are fed, and it is not always clear how they end up attributing risk. The extent to which algorithms can accurately 'read' and understand human interaction is also a specific point of critique: while some argue that massive data storage and analysis may help to distinguish those who are seriously radicalising from those who 'simply tell a joke' (HR02C), 'robots' are nevertheless thought to inadequately understand the meaning behind specific online utterances (IT06D).

An additional and crucial problem our informants tended to associate with surveillance algorithms is what we call the problem of context. While algorithms may be excellent at pattern recognition, they provide little detail about the how and why of radicalisation in specific cases, nor do they adequately predict actual risk. One participant argued that as algorithms have initially been developed to predict chess games – situations with a lot of variation, but predictable rules – they are severely limited when it comes to predicting terrorist attacks, as these are caused by much more variable and less rule-bound factors (NL07B). More generally, however, our informants tended to place absolute importance on grounding one's understanding of specific individual risk profiles in hands-on experience and specific and detailed police investigation – often assisted by information from within the community (if there is one). A Bulgarian LEA emphasised that if algorithms offer the 'theoretical' knowledge, there is simply no substitution for the 'practical experience' that comes with 'being out there in the community' (BG03A). In general, then, our informants approached the promise of algorithmic control with a lot of caution, framing the issue as one of closely attending to, and mitigating, the inherent 'mysteries' and pragmatic limitations of algorithmic surveillance.

## Conclusion

We identified four recurring issue frames: (1) individual vs. social explanations, (2) social/political embedding, (3) online surveillance as a balance, and (4) complexities of algorithmic surveillance. As such, our informants recognised the tension, also present within academic research on radicalisation, between individual-level and social explanations for radicalisation.[47] Our informants also alerted us to the political uses of the term 'radicalisation' and implicitly or explicitly contested the idea that the term is a neutral descriptor. Emphasising the political

nature of radicalisation discourse, our informants were rather close to contemporary criticisms of the ideological uses and assumptions within radicalisation and terrorism discourses[48] and to research that emphasises broader unequal political and social milieus within which specific radicalisation processes take place.[49] Some informants also raised the possibility that radicalisation may have benign, even emancipatory effects.[50] Meanwhile, they seemed acutely aware of the ethical, legal, and political challenges of online surveillance, as evident by their use of the balancing act frame, while they also pointed to the pragmatic problems of meaning and context that accompany algorithmic policing.

We have also demonstrated that these issue frames are largely shared between our informants – a surprising finding, as our sample is highly diverse both in national contexts and in professional terms. Instead of setting dividing lines and a lack of shared understanding of the radicalisation process – as has traditionally been assumed – stakeholders across professional groups actually demonstrated a shared understanding of this phenomenon. Hence, it is likely that whichever challenges exist in stakeholders' collaboration, these do not largely stem from diverse normative stances and issue frames but have to be explained by other factors, such as informational barriers, political and regulatory contexts, and more general collective action problems. Our data suggest harmonising national standards, like the 2015 EU criminal proceedings effort and the 2011 Radicalisation Awareness Network,[51] might rely on shared issue frames among key actors. Similarly, while police cultures and traditions may differ across countries[52] and countries may have highly specific experiences with radicalisation and extremist violence,[53] these shared issue frames provide some hope for future possibilities for coordination and cooperation. Our data, showing that LEAs tend to emphasise social factors in radicalisation and the value of community work and policing, also suggest that law enforcement actors are equipped and able to coordinate, cooperate, and possibly co-create with other stakeholders as well.

## Practical Recommendations for Policy and Practice

We offer several concrete recommendations for those involved in online radicalisation efforts. First, our data suggest that our informants are acutely aware of the political uses of the radicalisation frame. Hence, specific conceptualisations of radicalisation – legal or otherwise – need to be accounted for and rendered explicit, as these may mitigate actors' hesitance to cooperate with or contribute to attempts to foster security and combat radicalisation. The hesitance of some of our informants in putting faith in state authorities when it comes to balancing privacy and the state's surveillance mandate is instructive in this regard, showing how national and political histories and contexts may influence the readiness of stakeholders to cooperate and coordinate action. Public concerns around the use of online surveillance and AI by law enforcement agencies[54] and discriminatory practices facilitated by predictive policing[55] AI further feed into this caution.

Second, our informants emphasised that online surveillance is an option fraught with ethical and political dilemmas. As such, surveillance instruments targeting specific populations should be precisely explained and detailed where possible. Especially in cases where the cooperation of crucial stakeholders within such communities is required (e.g. in prevention programs targeting specific communities), investigating and law enforcement actors should be ready to motivate the choice for specific technologies in order to take away or mitigate concerns with ethnic or religious profiling. This also means that in some cases, the choice for online surveillance may simply not be the best one given broader political pressures[56] and human rights concerns[57] – the fact that it is a possibility does not mean, in short, that it is the first or best option to explore.

Third, regardless of context, most informants stressed the practical limitations of online surveillance, emphasising the mysteries of algorithms and the decontextualised character of the information they yield. In other words, to be of use, they have to remain coupled with and firmly embedded within other investigatory practices. For those seeking to introduce online surveillance, it is imperative to explicitly account for the limitations of these technologies, and to highlight the centrality of 'good old-fashioned police work' in order to mobilise cooperation with law enforcement professionals. Moreover, a transparent emphasis on the limitations of such technologies may also mitigate other stakeholders' ethical and practical concerns with their mysterious power. The relevance of 'negotiated management',[58] thus personal interaction and flexible attempts to avoid coercive measures, has not only been proven to be more effective under several circumstances, but also to maintain or even enhance the legitimacy of the police in the broader society.

Finally, our study has identified a significant consensus regarding the issues surrounding the prevention and mitigation of online radicalisation. It is essential to note, however, that this consensus is based on respondents' self-reported beliefs and attitudes rather than their real-world actions when confronted with online radicalisation in their daily activities. Institutional theorists are quick to point out that, while organisations and their embedded actors might pay lip-service to the values and procedures that grant them institutional legitimacy, these can be largely decoupled from actions on the ground.[59]

In reference to the vignettes presented at the outset of this article, the political situation in both the Netherlands and the United States has evolved quite notably. In the Netherlands, the FvD secured three seats in the 150-seat House of Representatives – a stark departure from its 2019 success in regional elections, during which it emerged as the largest political party. Meanwhile, in the United States, legal proceedings have resulted in the conviction of more than seven hundred people associated with the January 6th storming of the Capitol, including key leaders of organisations like the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys.[60]

Nonetheless, the issue of radicalisation continues to be a prominent concern on the policy agenda of both nations. As of the time of writing, former President Donald Trump is leading the polls for the 2024 presidential election, despite being found guilty of 34 felony counts of falsifying business records and facing a number of other legal challenges. Further, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, a majority of Republican voters still think their candidate is the 'true' winner of the 2020 presidential election.[61] Additionally, radicalisation via social media remains a pressing issue in the country.[62] And even though we have to be mindful of how the discourse around polarisation can be seen as a way to not discuss material politics,[63] mutual antipathy among ideological factions in the Netherlands remains on the rise as well,[64] especially manifesting itself around issues of gender and sexuality.[65] In light of these ongoing developments, it is advisable for national governments to heed the voices of those on the ground – who, according to our study, are surprisingly aligned in their assessment of the issue and aware of the nuances and pitfalls that come with addressing such a fractal phenomenon.

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH NOTE

# Demographic Profile, Mapping, and Punishment of Terrorist Convicts in Indonesia: An Introduction to the Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database

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**Abstract:** To support counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism in Indonesia, the Center for Detention Studies (CDS) has collected data on court decisions of criminal acts of terrorism that occurred from 2002 to 2023. A total of 712 cases have been collected and processed in the Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database. The database contains information related to terrorist offenders such as demographic profile, network characteristics, and sentencing patterns. This database also displays terrorist crime hotspots to guide authorities, NGOs, and practitioners in directing their prevention efforts. The target users of this database are the National Counter-Terrorism Agency staff, judges, prosecutors, police, correctional institutions, as well as academics, NGOs, and researchers. This article is our initial attempt to introduce the database to a wider audience.

**Keywords:** Indonesia, terrorism database, counter-terrorism, preventing violent extremism, terrorist offender

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# Introduction: Why a Terrorism Cases Database Matters for Indonesia

The importance of a reliable and accessible terrorism cases database for counter-terrorism (CT) or preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has been recognised by state and non-state actors. A database will strengthen the criminal justice process, support the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts,[1] and also help the development of scientific terrorism studies.[2] In general, existing terrorism databases could be divided into at least two categories. The first category is based on terror attacks like the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)[3] or Database on Suicide Attacks (DSAT).[4] The second category is based on terrorist individuals, such as the European Database of Terrorist Offenders (EDT),[5] the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS),[6] and the European Lone Actor Terrorism Database.[7]

To date, the lack of an accessible terrorism case database that can be utilised by various parties remains a big gap in the prevention and prosecution of terrorism in Indonesia.[8] In handling terrorism cases, law enforcement agencies do not have a good database regarding terror groups or networks and the people who have been involved in terrorism.[9] Meanwhile, despite having the most complete files on terrorist perpetrators, the Densus 88 Anti-Terror—a special police unit tasked with combating terrorism—still faces digitalisation and documentation problems.[10] On the non-governmental side, while some academics and researchers have developed terrorism-related databases, their scope of information is often limited, and access is restricted. Consequently, data and information are typically owned by specific institutions or individuals, hindering efforts to prevent and counter-terrorism.[11]

The absence of a database also affects the management of terrorist inmates in prison and post-prison. Prison officers who directly handle terrorist inmates do not have complete and accurate information regarding all existing terrorist prisoners, so there is a risk of misplacement and mistreatment of high-risk terrorist inmates.[12] At the post-prison stage, parole/probation officers—who play an important role in the social reintegration of terrorist inmates into society—face difficulties in accessing initial data related to their client's involvement in terrorism, social and individual background, types of criminal acts committed, a person's role in the network/group, and group affiliation due to limited reliable supporting data. Difficulty in accessing information hampers the implementation of appropriate intervention programmes to prevent the recidivism and re-engagement of terrorist inmates after release.[13]

To resolve this database-related problem, the Indonesian government has made the establishment of a terrorist perpetrators database one of the important pillars of its P/CVE strategy.[14] The Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database, initiated by the Center for Detention Studies (CDS), serves multiple purposes, including creating terrorism-prone area maps and supporting tailored deradicalisation programs. CDS—a Jakarta-based research organisation focusing on prison reform and P/CVE within the correctional system—developed the database to provide accessible information for government institutions, civil society actors, scholars, experts, and deradicalisation practitioners. This research note aims to introduce the terrorism case database compiled by CDS.

# Conceptual Framework

The creation of the Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database was inspired by three key concepts. The first concept is crime mapping, which involves processing and analysing spatially referenced crime data to generate visually informative displays customised to the user's requirements.[15] According to Boba, crime mapping has three main functions in crime analysis, namely (1) providing visual and statistical analysis of the spatial aspects of crimes and other events, (2)

helping analysts to connect data from various sources based on similar geographical variables (e.g. linking census, education, and crime information in the same area), and (3) providing a map as a medium for delivering analysis.[16] One of the main assumptions in crime mapping is that there is a relationship between pre-crime location (for example: perpetrator's place of residence, place of work, place of school, and parents' address), and the location where the crime occurred. Previous studies have proven that criminals tend to execute their crimes not far from the places they are familiar with[17] or close to where they usually carry out their daily activities,[18] revealing how spatial familiarity plays an important role in the process of crime occurrence. In terms of mapping terrorism-prone areas, the assumptions in mapping crime-prone areas can be applied as well. Terrorists, like criminals in general, are influenced by the cost and benefit calculations of their actions.[19]

The second concept draws from social network analysis (SNA) in terrorism research. SNA helps us to understand the dynamics within (intra-) and between (inter-) terrorist groups. SNA research focuses on group membership, operational methods, group dynamics, similarities between groups, and interactions among them. Previous research that employed SNA has discovered the roots of different terror groups,[20] detected important figures/key players in terror groups, networks, or movements,[21] and identified the pattern of recruitment and mobilisation.[22]

The third concept is sentencing patterns, which involves a study of court decisions. Studies on court decisions are generally carried out to examine ongoing criminal practices and provide an analysis of the course of these practices.[23] By examining sentencing patterns, researchers can gain insights into how criminal policies are implemented, the effectiveness of judges as adjudicators, and potential reforms within the criminal justice system.[24] These studies typically explore the relationship of legal factors (such as the severity of the crime, offender's culpability, role, criminal history, motive, and evidence) and extra-legal factors (such as race, age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) with regard to sentencing outcomes.[25]

## Data Sources and Selection of the Case

The Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database primarily relies on court decisions from terrorism cases, particularly those from the first-level or district courts. Court documents serve as the main data source due to their accessibility and legal reliability. These documents contain essential information such as the offender's identity, case chronology (as presented by the prosecutor), legal violations, indictment length, crime location, charged articles, and imposed criminal sanctions by the judge.

The court documents for the Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database were sourced from three primary channels. Firstly, they were obtained from the Directory of Supreme Court Decisions of the Republic of Indonesia, which serves as a repository for digital copies of court rulings from all courts across Indonesia. Secondly, documents were acquired from district court archives in Jakarta, as Jakarta has been the main venue for terrorism case hearings since 2010. Finally, documents were gathered from the prisoner registration unit in prisons, where every prisoner is provided with a decision file or summary of decisions for registration purposes.

The development of the Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database began in 2018, and the data collection process is ongoing. No specific final data target has been set due to challenges in determining the actual number of convicted terrorists in Indonesia, with each law enforcement agency maintaining its own count.[26] At this point, the database includes 712 terrorism cases with sentencing decisions from 2003 to 2023. The definition of terrorism used in the Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database is derived from the existing Indonesian Anti-Terrorism Law. The law defined terrorism as "an act which uses violence or threat of violence which causes a

widespread atmosphere of terror or fear, which can cause mass victims, and/or creates damages or destructions to strategic vital object, environment, public facility, or international facility with a motif of ideology, politic, security disturbance."[27] As a result, the database only includes cases that are punished under the law that regulates criminal acts of terrorism, namely Act No. 15 of 2003 or old Anti-Terrorism Law (Old ATL), Act No. 5 of 2018 or new Anti-Terrorism Law (New ATL), and Act No. 9 of 2013 or Anti-Terrorism Financing Law (ATFL).

Convicted violent extremists not prosecuted under terrorism-related laws are omitted from our database due to definitional concerns. For example, perpetrators of armed violence in Papua who carried out attacks on national soldiers or civilians were not included. Even though separatist groups in Papua have been designated as terrorist groups in 2021, the government is still using the act of treason under the Criminal Law to prosecute them. Similarly, followers of groups like *Khilafatul Muslimin*, aiming to alter the national ideology, are not included as they are punished under the Law on Mass Organizations.

## Information in the Database

According to the conceptual framework used, the database encompasses three primary information domains and 42 variables extracted from court documents. The offender characteristics domain contains variables related to the personal information of a terrorist convict, starting from the official name to the aliases of the defendant, age of arrest, place of residence, to criminal record. The group or network characteristics domain includes variables such as the defendant's affiliation with other terrorists, group affiliation, radicalised media, and the existence of terror plots or terror attacks. Meanwhile, the sentencing pattern domain contains variables such as length of detention, length of indictment, length of criminal sanctions, aggravating and mitigating factors for the sentencing, and even the name of the judge who tried the case. Details of the domains and variables can be seen in Table 1 (see below).

## Some Descriptive Statistics: Offenders' Demography

As indicated in Table 2, male offenders dominate acts of terrorism in Indonesia, accounting for 97 percent of cases. Although women are showing an increase in their involvement in terrorism, both in quantity and quality,[28] it is shown that there are only 21 female offenders in the database during the period of data collection. Offenders' ages vary, but the majority fall within the 18-30 and 31-40 age brackets, indicating that most terrorists are in their productive years when committing crimes. Only five offenders are below 18 years old, categorising them as juveniles.

Furthermore, terrorists originate from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds. We categorised offenders' educational attainment into four groups: elementary, junior high, senior high, and university. However, recognising that court records may not always include the latest education status, we introduced a fifth category: "not mentioned" for cases lacking this information. Out of the collected data, 301 offenders have unspecified educational backgrounds. Nevertheless, the table indicates that senior high school is the most prevalent last educational background among terrorist offenders in Indonesia, comprising 224 individuals.

For the "occupation" data, there are ten categories: unemployed, unskilled worker, small entrepreneur, employee, professional worker, civil servant, businessman, police/military officer, high-ranking officials, and not mentioned (i.e. cases in which the court's decision documents do not explicitly specify the offenders' latest occupations). As shown in Table 2, the majority of terrorism act offenders were small entrepreneurs, with the amount of 308 offenders (43.25 percent), then followed by unskilled workers (26 percent) and employees (21.62 percent).

Meanwhile, businessmen, police/military officers, and high-ranking officials stand as the minority with only one offender for each category.

*Table 1. Relevant Information in Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database*

| Domain | Variable |
|---|---|
| Offender characteristics/demography | 1. Offender's name<br>2. Gender<br>3. Place of birth<br>4. Date of birth<br>5. Offender's address<br>6. Age (when arrested)<br>7. Latest education<br>8. Latest occupation<br>9. Date of arrest<br>10. Criminal records |
| Group or network characteristics | 1. Crime scene location<br>2. Affiliation with other terrorists<br>3. Motivation<br>4. Chronology of the accusation<br>5. Chronology of the trial<br>6. Chronology of the verdicts<br>7. Media of radicalisation<br>8. Motivation<br>9. Chronology<br>10. Type of offences<br>11. Type of offender (lone-actor/group actor)<br>12. Name of group/network<br>13. Duration of membership in group/network<br>14. Target of attack (plot)<br>15. Target of attack (act)<br>16. Pledge of allegiance<br>17. Number of casualties<br>18. Number of injured<br>19. Building damaged |
| Sentencing Pattern | 1. Trial location<br>2. Length of detention<br>3. Accompanied by lawyers<br>4. Lawyer name<br>5. Length of indictment<br>6. Aggravating factors<br>7. Mitigating factors<br>8. Article used<br>9. Goals of punishment<br>10. Length of criminal sanctions<br>11. Release date<br>12. Judge's name<br>13. Date of court decision |

*Table 2. Demographic Profiles and Individual Characteristics of 712 Terrorist Convicts in Indonesia between 2003 and 2023*

| Variable | Category | N | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 691 | 97% |
| | Female | 21 | 3% |
| Age | <18 | 5 | 0.7% |
| | 18-30 | 293 | 41.1% |
| | 31-40 | 240 | 33.7% |
| | 41-50 | 140 | 19.7% |
| | >50 | 34 | 4.8% |
| Education | Elementary school | 40 | 5.61% |
| | Junior high school | 60 | 8.42% |
| | High school | 224 | 31.46% |
| | University | 87 | 12.21% |
| | Not mentioned | 301 | 42.3% |
| Occupation | Unemployed | 33 | 4.63% |
| | Unskilled worker | 185 | 26% |
| | Small entrepreneur | 308 | 43.25% |
| | Employee | 154 | 21.62% |
| | Professional worker | 3 | 0.42% |
| | Civil servant | 6 | 0.84% |
| | Businessman | 1 | 0.14% |
| | Police/military officer | 1 | 0.14% |
| | High-ranking officials | 1 | 0.14% |
| | Not mentioned | 20 | 2.8% |
| Criminal record | Terrorism | 34 | 4.77% |
| | Non-terrorism | 16 | 2.2% |
| | No criminal record | 662 | 93% |
| Motivation | Belief | 522 | 73.31% |
| | Financial gain | 18 | 2.52% |
| | Sense of belonging | 74 | 10.4% |
| | Grievance | 40 | 5.61% |
| | Familial factor | 19 | 2.66% |
| | Not mentioned | 87 | 12.21% |

Other variables mentioned are "criminal records," where the data indicate that 6.93 percent of terrorism offenders had some type of criminal history, and 4.77 percent had a prior criminal record related to terrorism offences. Interestingly, our data show relatively lower numbers of terrorists with a criminal history compared to other sources. For example, previous researchers have noted that the rate of re-engagement or recidivism among former convicts exceeds ten percent,[29] which suggests ineffective legal-institutional intervention or failed reintegration

process.[30] However, the difference in our findings is likely due to the fact that we solely used court proceeding documents as data sources, whereas many court proceedings did not include the offender's criminal record in their documents.

Regarding the "motivation" variable, there are six categories that may have influenced or motivated offenders to commit acts of terrorism: belief, financial gain, sense of belonging, grievance, familial factors, and "not mentioned." Of course, many individuals are motivated by more than one factor. Analysis of the data indicates that the most frequent motivation for offenders was belief, often associated with religious teachings. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that court documents may not always accurately capture an individual's true motivations for engaging in terrorism. Many convicted terrorists disclose their complete involvement story to correctional officers during their imprisonment rather than to judges during court proceedings.

## Terrorism Mapping Based on Offenders Domicile and Crime Scene Location

The data on the residence of terrorist convicts used here refers to the province where they lived or the address listed on their ID. Although terrorists' residential locations could be narrowed down to districts/cities or even sub-districts, for simplicity in data presentation, we opted to display the data at the provincial level. Table 3 depicts the provinces where perpetrators of terrorist crimes reside, based on court documents, with 912 data points obtained. The number of provinces of domicile exceeds the number of perpetrators (712), as some terrorists were documented with multiple residential addresses.

Four of the top five provinces where terrorist criminals reside are located on Java Island, the most populous island in Indonesia. West Java ranks first (214 individuals), followed by Central Java (144 individuals), East Java (73 individuals), Jakarta (70 individuals), and Central Sulawesi (51 individuals). Notably, among the 34 provinces in Indonesia, only North Sulawesi and West Papua are not recorded as places of origin or residence for terrorist convicts. This data enables the identification of areas where terrorists may network and connect with adherents of extremist beliefs, potentially leading to acts of terrorism.

In addition to the convict's address, another crucial aspect of terrorism mapping is crime scene location data, documented in court records by prosecutors. This data enables the identification of where terrorist activities occurred, encompassing a range of offences beyond terror attacks like bombings or shootings. These offences include military training, weapons manufacturing, fundraising, and conspiring to carry out attacks. From 712 cases, we obtained 1,395 data points regarding crime scenes spanning across 31 provinces, indicating that some terrorists commit offences in multiple places.

The five provinces with the highest number of terrorism offences are West Java (361), Central Java (161), East Java (120), Jakarta (109), and North Sumatra (90), with four of the top five provinces located on Java Island. Notably, West Papua, West Sulawesi, and Gorontalo are not recorded as places of terrorism offences. However, it is interesting to observe cases like in Gorontalo, where a terrorist convict resides, but the province is not registered as a location of terrorism offences, suggesting the offence was committed elsewhere. Conversely, provinces like North Sulawesi, with no terrorist convicts, recorded terrorism offences, indicating the perpetrators were from outside the area.

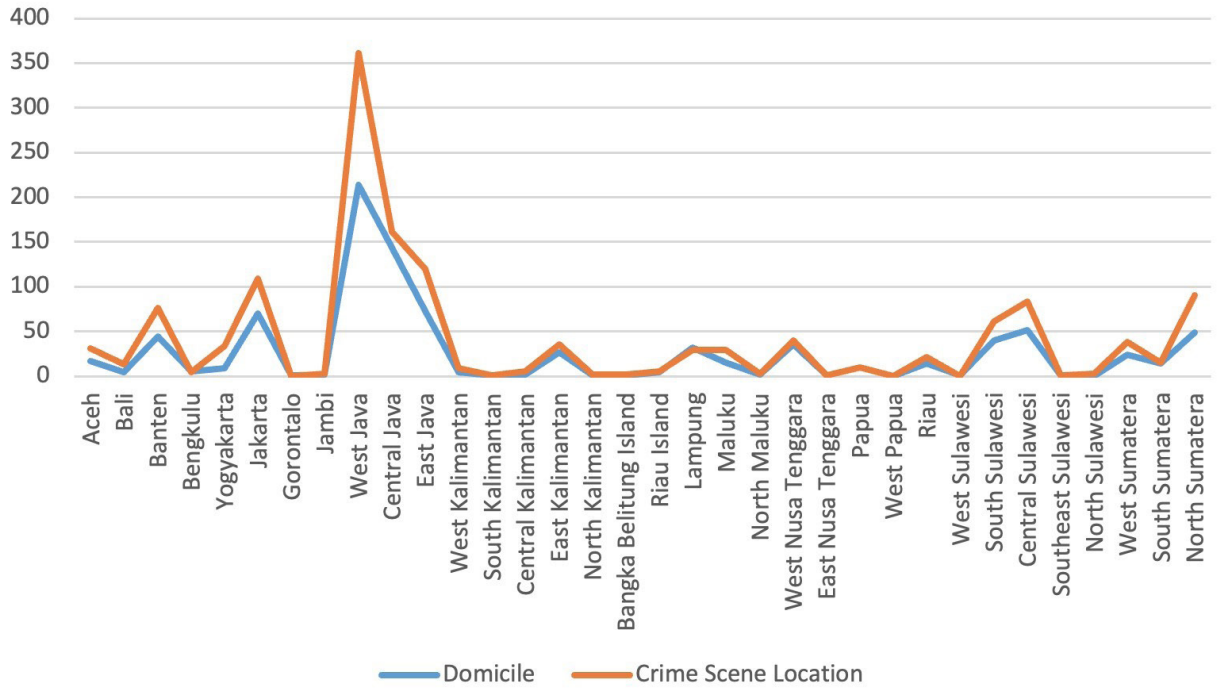
*Table 3. Terrorist Domicile and Crime Scene Location based on Province*

| Province | Domicile (N = 912) | Crime Scene (N = 1395) |
|---|---|---|
| Aceh | 17 | 31 |
| Bali | 4 | 13 |
| Banten | 44 | 76 |
| Bengkulu | 5 | 4 |
| Yogyakarta | 9 | 34 |
| Jakarta | 70 | 109 |
| Gorontalo | 1 | 0 |
| Jambi | 2 | 3 |
| West Java | 214 | 361 |
| Central Java | 144 | 161 |
| East Java | 73 | 120 |
| West Kalimantan | 4 | 9 |
| South Kalimantan | 1 | 1 |
| Central Kalimantan | 2 | 5 |
| East Kalimantan | 27 | 35 |
| North Kalimantan | 1 | 2 |
| Bangka Belitung Island | 1 | 2 |
| Riau Island | 4 | 5 |
| Lampung | 32 | 29 |
| Maluku | 15 | 29 |
| North Maluku | 2 | 3 |
| West Nusa Tenggara | 35 | 40 |
| East Nusa Tenggara | 1 | 1 |
| Papua | 10 | 10 |
| West Papua | 0 | 0 |
| Riau | 14 | 21 |
| West Sulawesi | 1 | 0 |
| South Sulawesi | 40 | 61 |
| Central Sulawesi | 51 | 83 |
| Southeast Sulawesi | 1 | 1 |
| North Sulawesi | 0 | 3 |
| West Sumatera | 24 | 38 |
| South Sumatera | 14 | 15 |
| North Sumatera | 49 | 90 |

The top four provinces where terrorism offences occurred align with the top five provinces where terrorist convicts reside, indicating a correlation between residence and criminal acts of terrorism. However, does this pattern extend to all provinces? A correlation test conducted

on domicile and crime scene variables yielded a coefficient value of 0.973, indicating a very strong and positive relationship. This suggests that the number of terrorist convicts residing in a province correlates with the number of terrorism offences committed there, as reflected in Figure 1. Therefore, spatial familiarity appears to influence terrorism offences, with the majority of perpetrators committing crimes in the same province where they reside.

*Figure 1. Relationship between Domicile and Crime Scene*

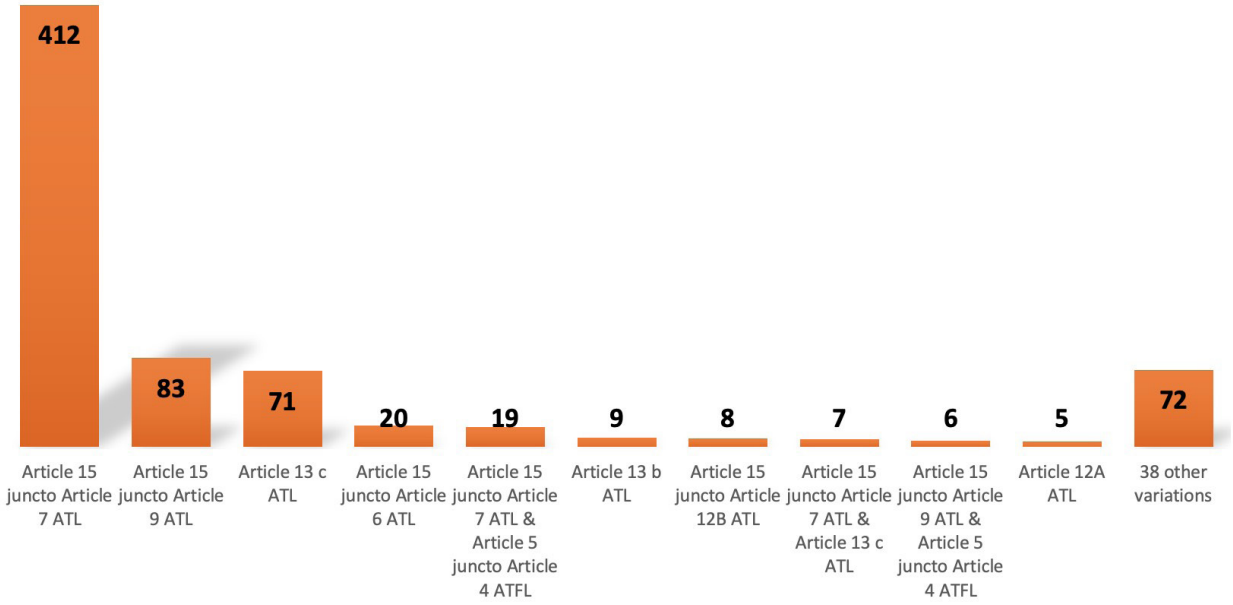



# The Sentencing Pattern of Terrorism Offences

## *Most Frequently Used Articles*

There are 48 variations in the use of articles against terrorist perpetrators. A total of 638 cases were convicted using a single article, while 74 remaining cases were punished cumulatively using more than one article. The database also indicates that there are three most frequently used articles: article 15 in conjunction with article 7 (412 convicts), article 15 in conjunction with article 9 (83 convicts), and article 13c (71 convicts) of the Anti-Terrorism Law (ATL). This accounts for 566 convictions (79 percent of the cases processed), as depicted in Figure 2 (see below). If we include cases that were convicted cumulatively (i.e., using these articles in various combinations with others), the figure reaches 88 percent of the total cases in the database.

*Figure 2. Frequency of Article Usage in Sentencing Terrorist Offenders*



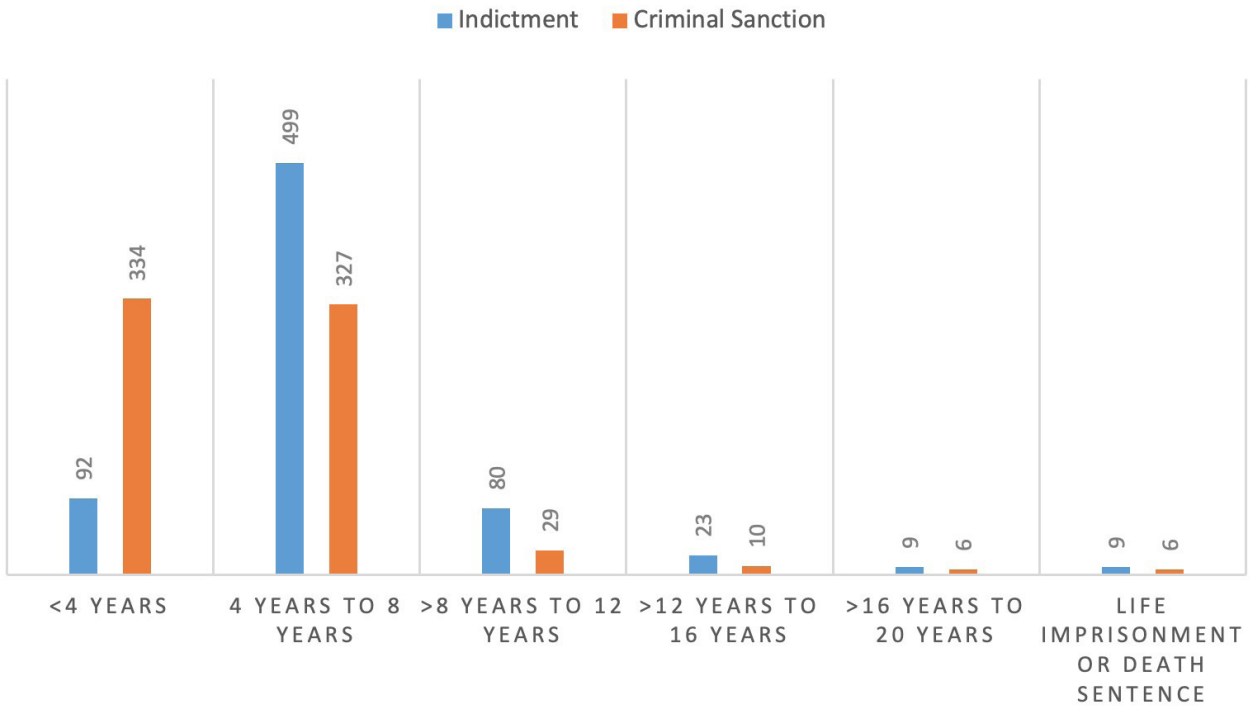

Article 7 of the ATL regulates preparatory actions for terror attacks and Article 9 of the ATL regulates the possession of firearms, ammunition, explosives, and bombs to carry out terror attacks. Meanwhile, Article 15 of the ATL regulates acts of conspiracy, attempt, or assistance to commit criminal acts of terrorism. When Article 15 is used in conjunction with (*juncto*) other articles, that means that a terrorism offence is committed by more than one person or the action is not completed yet. Thus, the data indicate that the majority of terrorists in Indonesia commit their crimes together. Apart from that, it also shows that the majority of terrorist perpetrators were caught and convicted while still at the preparation or trial stage of an attack, or were assisting other people who: (1) intended to carry out terrorist attacks (in conjunction with Article 7); or (2) were in possession of firearms, ammunition, explosives, or bombs (in conjunction with Article 9).

Meanwhile, Article 13c is an article related to assistance in hiding information concerning acts of terrorism. The words "concerning acts of terrorism" here include information related to the whereabouts, plans, or activities of terrorist perpetrators or terrorist groups. Many people were convicted under this article because they had acquaintances with terrorist perpetrators or were aware of discussions regarding plans for terror acts but did not report them. There are also several people who were punished under this article because they provided food, clothing, medicine, and even shelter instead of reporting the location of a terrorist.

## *Prosecution and Punishment*

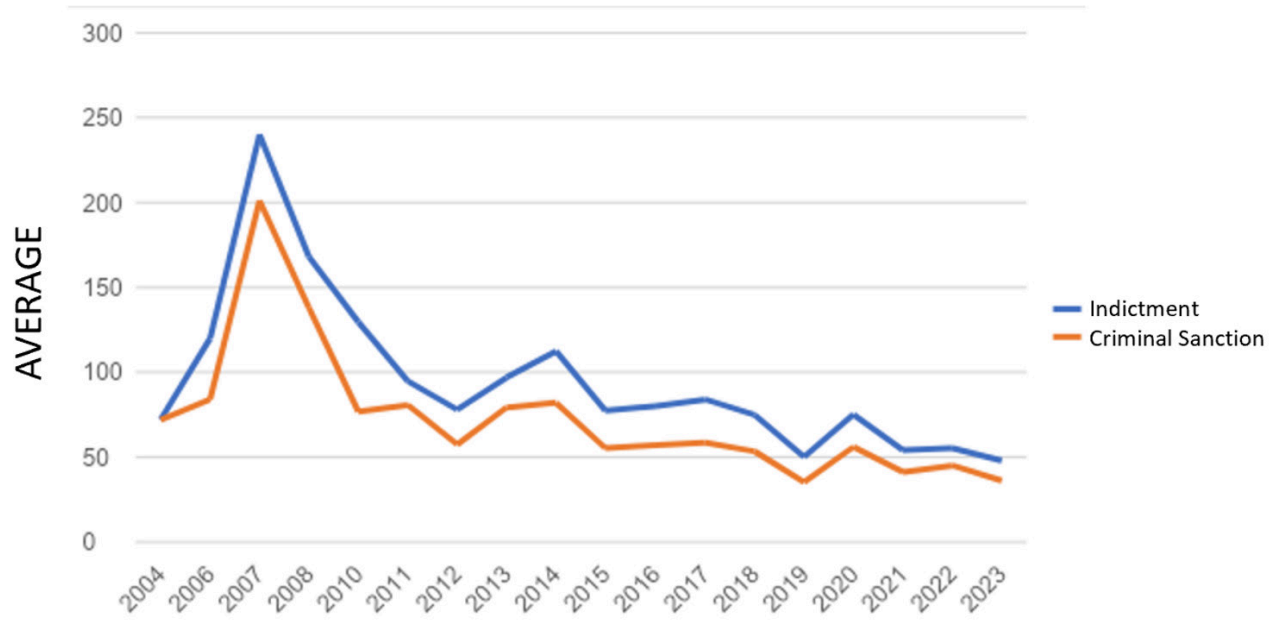
We also examined the length of indictment and criminal sanctions for terrorist convicts in Indonesia. The majority of offenders received relatively short prison sentences, as illustrated in Figure 3 (see below).

*Figure 3. Length of Indictment and Criminal Sanctions by Years*




Of the 712 cases, we analysed 702 court documents to identify trends in indictment length and criminal sanctions since the 2002 Bali Bombing. We excluded ten cases resulting in life imprisonment or the death penalty, as they could not be quantified. Thus, for valid average data, these cases were omitted from the calculation. Figure 4 depicts the average indictment and criminal sanctions based on the remaining 702 cases.

*Figure 4. Annual Average of Indictment and Criminal Sanctions from 2004 to 2023*



The graph illustrates the trend in prosecutions and convictions for terrorism in Indonesia after the 2002 Bali Bombing. No data is available for average indictment and criminal sanctions in 2005 and 2009 due to the absence of court documents in those years. Excluding cases with life imprisonment or the death penalty, the trend indicates a decrease in the length of indictment and sanctions for terrorism offenders. This decline aligns with the frequent use of specific articles, such as Article 15 in conjunction with Article 7 or Article 9, and Article 13c, as shown in Figure 2. These articles pertain to conspiracy, preparations, attempts, or assistance in acts that don't directly result in casualties or material losses, leading to lower criminal sanctions imposed by judges.

## Benefits and Limitations of the Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database

The Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database has already played a crucial role in enhancing counter-terrorism efforts in Indonesia, according to feedback from various users including deradicalisation practitioners, government officials, scholars, and NGOs. Notably, the database has been praised by one of the highest-ranking officials in the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT). It serves as a valuable resource for policymaking, enabling BNPT to understand court rulings related to Indonesian citizens implicated as foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), their travel routes, network origins, activities in conflict zones, comparisons of FTF arrests during travel or upon reaching destination countries, and criminal histories. The database's specialised features, including structured court decision files categorised by demographics, network characteristics, sentencing patterns, and geospatial maps, allow BNPT to compile success stories and effectively analyse challenges. This facilitates both internal BNPT needs and the dissemination of clear and factual data to international forums.

In the correctional system, probation officers utilise the database for terrorist client assessments, obtaining essential supporting data, and improving assessment accuracy, thereby facilitating case plan development. Previously, probation officers faced barriers in accessing important information about terrorist convicts' backgrounds and histories from other sources. Additionally, terrorist inmates' personal officers, known as "*wali*", also utilise the database. Wali relies on the database to gather information on affiliations and networks of terrorist inmates, crucial for comprehensive profiling. Comprehensive profiling is particularly important for terrorist inmates due to their high level of security and safety risks. Without adequate information, there is a risk of misplacement and mistreatment, which could compromise prison security, order, rehabilitation, and reintegration programmes.

The Indonesian Terrorism Cases Database serves as a crucial resource for NGOs working in deradicalisation. It provides important personal information about terrorist convicts, such as their journey of involvement in terrorist groups/networks, affiliations, and social backgrounds. This information assists in determining the appropriate approach to disengage or deradicalise terrorist convicts. Additionally, the database supports assessments to identify former extremists who could contribute as resource persons in high-risk terrorist inmates' rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. Understanding the history and influence of former extremists helps in assessing their credibility to be involved in P/CVE as state's deradicalisation partners.

However, we acknowledge the limitations of the database, primarily related to case coverage. It includes only cases punished under terrorism-related law, excluding cases of violent extremism punished under other laws. Consequently, the majority of perpetrators included in the database are associated with Salafi-jihadist groups such as Jema'ah Islamiyah, pro-ISIS groups like

*Jema'ah Ansharut Daulah* and Eastern Indonesian Mujahideen, and the Islamic State of Indonesia/Negara Islam Indonesia. This bias towards Islamist groups may give the impression that terrorism in Indonesia is exclusively religious and confined to Muslims, a bias that researchers and policymakers should be cautioned against.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

BIBLIOGRAPHY

# Bibliography: Conflict in Syria (Part 5)

Judith Tinnes*

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**Abstract:** This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on the Syrian conflict. To keep up with the rapid changing political events, the most recent publications have been prioritized 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 as well as reference retrieval systems have been employed to broaden the search.

**Keywords:** Bibliography, resources, literature, Syria, conflict, uprising, civil war, Assad regime, opposition, rebels, terrorism

*NB: All websites were last visited on 11 August 2024. This subject bibliography is the fifth instalment of a five-part series. To avoid duplication, this compilation only includes literature not contained in the previous parts. However, meta-resources, such as bibliographies, were included in the sequels. Literature focusing specifically on the "Islamic State" (a.k.a. ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) has been excluded as it is covered in a separate multi-part bibliography. For an inventory of previous bibliographies, see: https://archive.org/details/terrorism-research-bibliographies*

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

BOOK REVIEWS

# Online Radicalisation: A Contested and Contestable Term

Reviewed by Joshua Sinai*

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**Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism*** (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017), 280 pp., US $15.36 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-7883-1032-1.

**Julia Ebner, *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*** (London, England, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 368 pp., UK £9.89 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-5266-1679-1.

**Julia Ebner, *Going Mainstream: Why Extreme Ideas Are Spreading, and What We Can Do About it*** (London, England, UK: Ithaka Press, 2024) 304 pp., US $28.59 [Hardcover], US $14.56 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-8041-8378-6.

Few topics in the study of contemporary terrorism warrant more attention than Islamist and far-right wing extremism, particularly in Europe and North America, and possible solutions to mitigate and resolve these threats. With that in mind, this review explores three recent books by Julia Ebner that combine the application of social science theories on radicalisation into extremism with extensive field research. Dr. Ebner, an Austrian researcher and author based in London, is a postdoctoral affiliate at the Calleva Centre for Evolution and Human Science at Magdalen College, Oxford University, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in London.

In ***The Rage*** (2017), Ebner explains that she began studying radicalisation into extremism around 2015 when it had become a pervasive threat in Western societies, especially with the proliferation of far-right wing extremism. Her first book was written to understand the "drivers and dynamics" of what she terms "the vicious circle of spiraling extremism known as 'reciprocal radicalization'" (p. xviii) that characterised those who became Islamist and far-right-wing violent extremists. In explaining the term reciprocal radicalization, Ebner cites the work of British academic Roger Eatwell, who introduced the concept of 'cumulative extremism', in which one type of extremism feeds off and magnifies other types of extremism in what Matthew Feldman termed a 'tit-for-tat extremism' (p. 10).

To gain insights into their motivations and beliefs, Ebner went undercover to infiltrate far-right extremist groups such as the English Defence League (EDL), and Islamist extremist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, penetrating their social media sites and participating in some of their demonstrations. In these cases, which are detailed throughout the book, she found similarities in their rhetoric and *modus operandi*, with both "inciting hatred against the other, which is presented as representative of society as a whole. Both sides feel under attack in their collective identity and dignity" (pp. 9-10). Also, both shared a common enemy scapegoat in the form of their society's establishment, with their grievance messaging directed towards their target constituency of disenfranchised youth (p. 11). Interestingly, she notes that both were misogynistic, with the far-right wing extremists promoting a hyper-masculine "Manosphere" (p. 10). What makes both types of ideological extremism so potently pervasive, she notes, is their effectiveness at using social media-based communication strategies to radicalise and mobilise their adherents (p. 11).

To counter both types of ideological extremism, Ebner concludes that both need to be addressed simultaneously by "challenging both sides' binary worldviews and to create a stronger sense of collective identity that reunites rather than divides our societies" (p. 198). This is done through education, which is intended to empower them with critical thinking skills, and private sector initiatives that bring together current and former adversaries to overcome their enmities towards each other (pp. 205-206). These recommendations can easily apply to confronting other types of extremism as well.

In ***Going Dark*** (2021), Ebner's ideological extremism landscape was expanded by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which she noted had "given rise to a staggering infodemic that spreads even faster than the virus itself" (p. xi). Exploiting grievances over government-mandated measures such as lockdowns, facial masks and vaccines, "conspiracy theory-driven protests" inspired by QAnon-type conspiracy communities were expressed in social media and street demonstrations, particularly in the US, Europe, and Australia. Attesting to the widespread appeal of conspiracy theories, she found that the QAnon conspiracy movement grew to an estimated "4-5 million aggregated followers in at least fifteen countries" (p. xii).

Based on the numerous cases detailed throughout this book, one finding is that individuals are especially "susceptible to conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies in times of personal or collective crisis" (p. xiii). As Ebner explains, "[e]mbracing simplistic versions of a more complex reality can be tempting, especially when that reality is so starkly opposed to what we want it to be" (p. xiv). Extremist ideologies, such as QAnon's conspiracy-laden theories, are appealing as they provide their own invented simple explanations and answers to what would otherwise require greater expertise to be knowledgeable about the subject (p. xiv).

The spread of ideologically extremist conspiracy theories, Ebner finds, has 'real-world consequences.' For example, "[i]n the UK, proponents of the 5G conspiracy theory set phone masts on fire across the country. In Germany, protestors used Nazi-era slogans and anti-Jewish conspiracies and attacked several news reporting teams. And in the US, armed protestors stormed the Michigan State Capitol" (p. xiv). The author also notes that, like their predecessors, the new generation of ideological extremists are tech savvy, while cyber innovations, such as artificial intelligence tools and their capability to create deep fakes, have vastly expanded their ability to reach and deceive wider audiences (pp. 254-256).

In an interesting chapter on "Ten Predictions for 2025," the author cites experts on radicalisation on extremism such as Daniel Kohler, who argues that "New means of online communication and issue-based mobilization" are enabling extremists to organise themselves in new ways that are not dependent on formal group organisations (p. 266). And in the concluding chapter, "Ten Solutions for 2020," Ebner recommends a comprehensive approach, such as utilising technological companies to counter extremist content through monitoring and counter-narratives, and even 'hacking the hackers' by hacking and embarrassing them (pp. 274-278).

And in her most recent book, ***Going Mainstream*** (2024), Ebner highlights the shift from ideologically extremist movements as "radical fringes" without 'political relevance' in their societies to the "mainstreaming of these ideas" in which their "alternative media ecosystems" have become influential (pp. viii-ix). This is manifested by the gaining of political power by political leaders embracing extremist ideas in countries such as the United States, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Austria, and others (p. viii). The author notes that 2016 represented an important transformative period, especially with the passage of Brexit in the UK, which was influenced by a Russian-led disinformation campaign, and the US presidential election of Russian-favourite Donald Trump. The significance of these two events, the author observes, was the introduction of a new communication strategy by extremist political leaders that is "based on exacerbating societal tensions through strategic provocation, triggering powerful emotional reactions from potential voters as well as opponents, and undermining belief in institutions" (p. xi). Ebner highlights a prominent example of the so-called mainstreaming of extremist ideologies with former President Donald Trump's urging of his followers to storm the US Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the results of the November 2020 presidential election.

As in her previous books, Ebner went undercover to examine the nature of contemporary extremist groups and movements, such as the Alt-Right (whose Great Replacement theory has inspired several terrorist attacks), QAnon, Neo-Nazis, and pro-Russian extremists who promote Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, with numerous case studies detailed throughout the book. In the concluding chapter, Ebner highlights the need to address the "underlying structural and psychological sources" driving susceptible individuals into adopting extremist ideologies and joining their movements (p. 202). This includes understanding the aspirations of the young generations, such as Gen Z, who are drawn to extremist beliefs through social media sites such as TikTok (p. 210).

Finally, the author recommends solutions such as urging the Internet's technology firms to assess how their algorithms "amplify the most radical voices and what can we do to support those that stand up for respectful dialogue on the most controversial topics?" (p. 202). In another solution, the author recommends applying artificial intelligence and virtual reality tools to be used as early detection mechanisms against extremist beliefs and disinformation (p. 221). This reviewer would add that a solution to the pervasiveness of far-right wing and Islamist extremist messaging is for national leaders who promote them (for their own partisan political purposes) to start disavowing them and call on their adherents to cease believing in wild conspiracy theories, ranging from election result denials to opposing the need to be vaccinated against future pandemics, that have no basis in reality. Until this happens, it will be difficult to counter such extremist ideological beliefs.

As a corpus of work, Ebner's three books represent an indispensable contribution to the literature on latest trends in radicalisation into violent extremism and the governmental, private sector, and academic/public policy research institute programmes that are required to counter what has become one of the most significant security threats facing the global order.

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