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About

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

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Words of Welcome

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume XIX, Issue 2 (June 2025) of *Perspectives on Terrorism* (ISSN 2334-3745). This Open Access journal is a joint publication of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague, Netherlands; the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at University of St Andrews; and the Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA) at Leiden University. All past and recent issues can be found 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 19th 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, Emma Ylitalo-James and Andrew Silke provide the results of a study in Northern Ireland that compares former paramilitary members with a control group of paramilitary sympathisers, exploring the question of why relatively few people radicalise when many appear to have been exposed to potential causes of radicalisation. Then Marina Eleftheriadou examines how extremists within leaderless movements acquire, interpret, store and disseminate knowledge. Next, Emma Rath and Thea Tollersrud examine the scope and impact of propaganda efforts by Islamic State Khorasan Province. And in the final research article for this issue, Yuliya Shapoval, Madina Bekmaganbetova, Timur Aimukhambetov and Natalya Seitakhmetova examine Kazakhstan’s approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of children repatriated from Syria and Iraq.

In our Research Notes section, Angie Benda and Austin Doctor introduce and analyse an original dataset of US federal charges associated with terrorism-related IED incidents in the United States observed from 2009 through 2024. Then Stephane Baele identifies a pattern of data distribution among digital extremism and terrorism that yields insights about linguistic content, individual behaviours, and overarching structures of extremist/terrorist digital ecosystems.

Our Resources Section begins with an extensive bibliography on Counter-terrorism Cooperation, compiled by Associate Editor Judith Tinnes. Then Kathryn Loosemore reviews the recent book by Javier Argomaniz, *Resisting Terror: Civil action and Non-Violent Resistance to Terrorism in Basque Country*, and our Book Review Editor Joshua Sinai provides a comparative overview of seventeen textbooks, handbooks and general books used in college and university courses on terrorism and counter-terrorism. And finally, the June issue concludes with a brief announcement that the Steering Board of *Perspectives on Terrorism* has selected Professor Rashmi Singh to be the new Editor-in-Chief of the journal. This issue of the journal has been produced in collaboration between James Forest and Anna-Maria Andreeva, with considerable assistance from Noemie Abtan, for which we are very grateful.

Prof James Forest, Editor-in-Chief

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Similarities and Differences between Terrorists and Their Supporters: Findings from Northern Ireland

Emma Ylitalo-James and Andrew Silke *

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Abstract: Why do only a few people radicalise when many appear to have been exposed to potential causes of radicalisation? This issue is referred to as the specificity problem and is widely recognised as one of the fundamental questions facing terrorism research. Also recognised is that meaningful answers will only be obtained through comparative research using control groups who share many of the same traits, characteristics and contexts of the terrorists, but who did not progress to involvement in terrorism. The current study was conducted in Northern Ireland and compares seventeen former paramilitary members with a control group of twelve paramilitary sympathisers using a structured survey. Twenty-two variables connected to radicalisation were examined. Significant differences were found between the two groups on four of these variables. The findings are discussed in relation to the specificity problem and the wider literature on radicalisation.

Keywords: specificity problem, radicalisation, control groups, Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Our understanding of how people become involved in terrorism and violent extremism has transformed since the turn of the century. That transformation occurred at the same time that 'radicalisation' took over as the dominant framework for considering questions around terrorist psychology, motivation and recruitment.¹ While the 9/11 attacks in 2001 kick-started an enormous increase in interest and research on terrorism, the conversion to the radicalisation framework crystallised in 2004 and 2005 in the aftermath of serious terrorist attacks in Spain and the United Kingdom.² While radicalisation as a concept has troublesome baggage, it has nevertheless largely worked as an overarching theme for research on questions looking at support for and involvement in violent extremism.³ In this regard, it has arguably proven both more flexible and more cohesive than previous frameworks. It has almost certainly made it easier to connect disparate research findings across a range of academic disciplines.⁴

Radicalisation is typically seen as a complex and dynamic process which results in individuals coming to embrace a violent ideology in support of a political or religious cause.⁵ The current study follows Horgan and Braddock's definition of radicalisation as: "the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology".⁶

Within this framework, radicalisation is not seen as an inevitable process, and neither does it follow a single route. Instead, there are potentially multiple pathways, and the process of getting there can often be an erratic experience capable of going in a variety of directions. Specific radicalisation factors will not feature in every case of radicalisation. The general trend in research findings is that radicalisation is the result of the interaction of both personal factors and environmental factors, with different variables potentially playing roles at different stages in the process, emphasising a complex, non-linear and dynamic process.⁷

The Specificity Problem

What causes radicalisation remains a critical question. A better understanding of the causes opens avenues to prevention and to safely diverting individuals away from pathways towards extremist violence. It also offers the potential to mitigate the severity of ongoing conflicts and potentially facilitate a resolution to violence. That said, understanding the causes of radicalisation faces some formidable obstacles. One of the most serious has been limited data on many key issues. Terrorism research overall has traditionally been beset by a small range of methodologies and often less than ideal raw data.⁸ This problem is also seen in the research focused specifically on what drives radicalisation.

There is a particular lack of good data around the specificity problem.⁹ Hundreds of different factors have been identified in the research literature which could play a potential role in radicalisation processes.¹⁰ Corner and Taylor, in their systematic review, identified 786 separate variables which had been flagged in the literature as potentially playing a role.¹¹ Their review looked at grievance-fuelled violence, which meant a potentially wider net was cast than for reviews with a tighter focus on terrorism. Nevertheless, Corner and Taylor noted that the evidence based on the majority of these 786 variables was very weak, with most being speculative, conceptual or theoretical. In a systematic review with a tighter focus on factors which had more robust empirical support, Wolfowicz et al. identified 101 factors connected to radicalisation in democratic countries.¹² These 101 factors were grouped into four broad domains: (1) socio-demographic factors, (2) attitudinal and experiential factors, (3) psychological/personality trait-related factors, and (4) criminogenic factors.

Factors can be static or dynamic. Static factors can include demographic factors, such that

young people aged 15-24 are most at risk, and males are usually more affected than females.¹³ Dynamic factors can include, for example, social relationships, community contexts, identity issues and psychological states.¹⁴ From across a span of unrelated conflicts, research has identified common factors and themes connected to radicalisation processes. A sample of some of the major factors and themes includes grievance, discrimination, or injustice¹⁵, community support and social influence¹⁶, social identity¹⁷, revenge and/or justice¹⁸, exposure to violence, threat and distress¹⁹, significance and meaning²⁰ and isolation.²¹

We know that very large numbers of people are exposed to at least some of the factors connected to radicalisation. We also know that not all factors have to be present for radicalisation to occur. Given that, the specificity problem asks why so few people become radicalised? What was different about those who do engage in terrorism and violent extremism compared to their many compatriots who were exposed to many similar factors? Alex Schmid has referred to this problem as “perhaps the greatest mystery” facing terrorism studies.²²

The specificity problem poses a fundamental challenge to our current understanding of radicalisation. As John Horgan warned:

*If we only examine people who have become terrorists, and don't equally consider why so many comparable people in the same situations do not become terrorists, we can't be sure why those small few do (or even whether we have a reliable picture of who they are). Ideally when we look at a group of people who become terrorists, we would also consider those in the same age group, from the same places, and exposed to the same conditions but who choose not to participate in terrorism By only considering those who ended up as terrorists, we overlook those who did not, rendering any conclusions speculative at best.*²³

It is not enough to just identify potential radicalisation factors; more detail is needed around the strength and dynamics of different sets of interactions. The key to unlocking such detail is better data, and in particular better data around the counterfactuals: individuals who share many of the same traits, characteristics and contexts of the terrorists, but who did not progress to involvement in terrorism. As Alex Schmid has warned, ultimately:

*We will only have good answers to [the specificity] question if research is conducted not only on terrorists, but also on control groups that share many of the same characteristics as deemed 'typical' for terrorists themselves.*²⁴

Identifying Relevant Control Groups

To date, much of the work focused in this area has explored role variation within terrorist movements, usually attempting to identify differences between those who become directly involved in violence versus members involved in non-violent activities.²⁵ This work has established that there are different roles within terrorist movements or groups and that there are also some discernible different characteristics in the behaviour and backgrounds of the individuals connected to the different roles. For example, in one early study, Silke highlighted that in the case of paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, individuals involved in carrying out bombings and shootings were significantly younger than those individuals who were involved in financing and fundraising activities on behalf of the terrorist group.²⁶ Later work has brought deeper detail and granularity to the potential differences.

For example, Schuurman and Carthy found a wider range of significant differences between

terrorists directly involved in attacks versus those involved in other elements but not directly in attacks.²⁷ This drew on a sample of 206 terrorists from Islamist-inspired and far-right backgrounds. The attackers, for example, were significantly more likely to have access to weapons and were less likely to be parenting children and also recorded lower levels of self-control. The attackers were also significantly more likely to be lone actors and to have mental health issues. For 38 cases, the researchers were able to conduct semi-structured interviews with the individuals involved, but most of the other cases relied on secondary data analysis for information.

In another study, Merari et al were able to compare three different “types” of terrorists through clinical interviews with 41 imprisoned Palestinian terrorists.²⁸ The researchers divided the sample into three groups based on their roles: (1) suicide terrorists, (2) non-suicide terrorists and (3) leaders. Data on each terrorist was gathered through semi-structured interviews as well as a series of psychological tests. The research found significant differences between the suicide terrorists and the other two groups, with the suicide bombers more likely to have dependent and avoidant personality types. They were also significantly more likely to display depressive and suicidal tendencies. No significant differences were reported between the non-suicide terrorists and the leaders.

Research examining role variation *within* terrorist groups and movements has developed considerably. In contrast, our understanding of the potential differences between terrorists and their supporters/sympathisers is much less advanced. In the studies discussed above, most of those involved had committed terrorist or extremist offences of some nature. The research was effectively concerned with distinguishing those involved in different types of offending. This leaves unanswered questions as to the differences of the majority who sympathise, support and provide an essential base from which terrorist organisations can operate from a logistical, financial, political and ideological viewpoint. The main question over the years has been what causes the minority to escalate. The question of what stopped the majority from escalating may provide greater insight and bridge the gap between theoretical models and practical application, and is the aim of this research.

In contrast to the focus on the radicalisation pathway into violent extremism, sympathetic supporters are an essential part of the development and continuance of violent extremist or terrorist organisations.²⁹ As Waldman argues in relation to Northern Ireland, without public support, terrorist organisations will fade from view and become insignificant. He also makes the point in his 2008 paper that it was only after public support diminished toward the latter stages of The Troubles that peace talks became possible. The fundamental question within this is how are supporters’ familial, psychosocial and actual experiences different from, and possibly the same, as those who escalated?

Supporters who have not offended offer excellent potential to be an effective control group, particularly in a context of understanding pre-offending pathways and trajectories towards terrorism. Currently, extremely little research has explored this issue, and most of what is available is largely qualitative in nature. For example, Rogelio Alonso conducted detailed semi-structured interviews with 27 individuals connected to different terrorist groups/causes in Northern Ireland and the Basque country in Spain.³⁰ Four of the interviewees had been directly involved in terrorism, three were “neutrals”, and the remaining twenty had varying levels of support and/or sympathy with the terrorist groups and causes. The research was interested in understanding why most individuals had not become actively involved in terrorism, given that they all appeared to share many of the background and environmental characteristics typical of individuals who had. Analysis of the interviews suggested a number of factors which appeared

to inhibit involvement in terrorism, including a “lack of precipitant events and connectedness at a vulnerable age” and “alternative socialization away from the subculture of violence”.

The Current Study

The current paper reports findings from a larger study on a sample of former terrorists and their supporters in Northern Ireland. A previous paper from that larger study reported on qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews with the participants.³¹ This supported some of Alonso’s findings, in particular that a lack of alternative socialisation was a feature of the terrorists compared to the supporters. This suggested that reducing prejudice through increased socialisation with out-groups could help create alternative routes away from active involvement in terrorism. The qualitative findings also suggested that closer proximity to areas of violent conflict increased the likelihood of individuals becoming involved in terrorism. The current paper aims to build on this evidence base and reports the findings from a structured survey, which can provide some quantitative data to help build on the currently small pool of available qualitative data.

Methodology

Participants

This study is based on research which focused on two groups of participants from Northern Ireland. Data was collected in a variety of formats, and this paper describes the results from a structured survey completed by the participants. The first group of participants was composed of seventeen former paramilitary members, and the second group was composed of twelve paramilitary supporters. Eleven of the former paramilitaries had been members of Republican paramilitary groups, and six had been members of Loyalist paramilitary groups. Three of the supporters had supported Republican paramilitary groups, and the remaining nine had supported Loyalist groups. Previous research has suggested that similar radicalisation processes and factors have been applied in the context of both Republican and Loyalist radicalisation.³² Twenty-four of the participants were based in Belfast and five were based in Newry. In terms of age, the former paramilitary groups were comprised of individuals who would have been between 18-35 years during at least some phase of the Troubles era (1969-1998). Ten of the supporters would also have met this criteria, though two of the supporters were pre-teen/early teen in 1998.

A purposive sampling process was used to recruit the participants. Purposive sampling is a form of non-random sampling³³ that aims to systematically select participants who have characteristics which are important to the research questions.³⁴ The first author had access to gatekeepers, and introductions to potential participants were also facilitated through (1) *Extern*, a social enterprise which supports and re-integrates marginalised individuals into the community, including ex-offenders, and (2) *Combatants for Peace*, a Northern Ireland group of ex-paramilitary prisoners engaged in international peacebuilding. Snowball sampling was used to recruit further participants. Snowball sampling is a common method in areas of social sciences where referral is used to gain access to further contacts and participants.³⁵ It is a non-probability sampling strategy to gain contact with subjects who have the same position, experiences, characteristics, or attributes required for a study. The strategy is mainly used when subjects are part of a concealed group, hard to reach or where a level of trust is required to gain introduction to another member of the group,³⁶ and it is a well-established and recommended approach in terrorism-related research.³⁷

Process

Fieldwork was conducted by the first author in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland between July 2019 and August 2020. The surveys were conducted at locations negotiated with the approval of the participants. Twenty-four were conducted in person and five were conducted via Skype following the lockdowns imposed in 2020 to combat the Coronavirus pandemic.

The surveys took place on a one-to-one basis and typically lasted between one and a half to three hours. Participants were provided with an informed consent form and an information sheet. The focus for this paper is on the participants' response to a set of structured questions which formed a survey. The structured questions involved are listed in Appendix A. A voice recording device was used, as well as taking notes. For any participant who preferred not to be recorded, a notebook was used to record responses. This applied in 8 cases. The audio recordings were assigned a participant number and transcribed. Both files, audio and text, were kept in secure, encrypted storage at the author's university, and both files were destroyed at completion of the research. All data was anonymised with only the participant's number assigned to all files.

Survey Structure

As already flagged, previous research has identified potentially hundreds of factors which potentially play a role in radicalisation processes. For reasons of practicality, the current study could only examine a selection of potential factors, those factors being the variables listed in Table 1, shown below. The factors selected focused on issues relating to exposure to violence, exposure to ideology, social dynamics and perceived motivations. This allowed for a relatively broad range of factors to be explored, all of which had been flagged as potential radicalisation factors in previous research.³⁸ In total, 22 factors were examined, and these are listed in Table 1 below. For clarity, these were divided into three domains (1) the individual's experience of the conflict (e.g. if friends or family had been killed or injured), (2) relationships (e.g. were friends or family members of paramilitary groups) and (3) motivations (e.g. was the individual's involvement or support motivated by ideology). This reflected the main areas of investigation, which appear to be the most relevant in the current literature already mentioned.

Table 1: *List of 22 Variables Examined*

<i>Experience of Conflict</i>	
1.	Family/Friend Killed/Injured
2.	Number of Family Killed/Injured
3.	Number of Friends Killed/Injured
4.	Perpetrator Identity of Family Killed/Injured
5.	Perpetrator Identity of Friends Killed/Injured
6.	Engaged in Rioting
7.	Community Under Threat
8.	Violent Incident Exposure
9.	Under Paramilitary Threat
10.	Daily Perceived Threat
<i>Relationships</i>	
11.	Perceived Family/Community Support
12.	Family Paramilitary Involvement
13.	Friend Paramilitary Involvement
<i>Motivations</i>	
14.	History of Prior Belief Change
15.	Motivated by Ideology
16.	Furthering Political Cause
17.	Country
18.	Justice
19.	Revenge
20.	Community
21.	Making a Difference
22.	Gaining status

Under the experience of conflict theme, questions were split into “direct” and “indirect” subsections. Indirect exposure was through family, associate and community exposure from an opposing force, which may also include security forces. Direct exposure was through personal experience of violence from opposing forces, which may also include security forces. The questions were designed to give yes or no closed-ended answers, followed by Likert scaling if answered yes, to elucidate details pertaining to that question. Questions were at the meso and micro-level within the structure of the conflict exposure questionnaire and followed a similar format to that used by the Measuring Conflict Exposure in Micro-Level Surveys.³⁹ Ideological exposure in an environment has been highlighted in many studies as a driver of radicalisation. Questions were included in the survey to try to establish the degree of influence ideology had on the participants’ decision to escalate.⁴⁰ Also included were wider motivational questions to attempt to explore other drivers. Social dynamics questions were included to identify the degree of influence membership had on in-group collaboration which draws on a range of research

that has flagged the potential importance of small-group dynamics and social psychological processes in radicalisation.⁴¹ Closed-questions and Likert scaling were used to establish the presence or lack of ideological influence and scaling to assess the degree of influence it had. Similarly, the group dynamics section also had closed questions with Likert scaling to establish the degree of cohesion that the out-group threat had on decision making to escalate. The list of questions used is provided in Appendix A.

Results

Of the 22 variables considered, significant differences between terrorists and the supporters were found for four variables. These are listed in Table 2 below in order of the strength of the difference. Two further variables came close to significance and will be discussed later in this section.

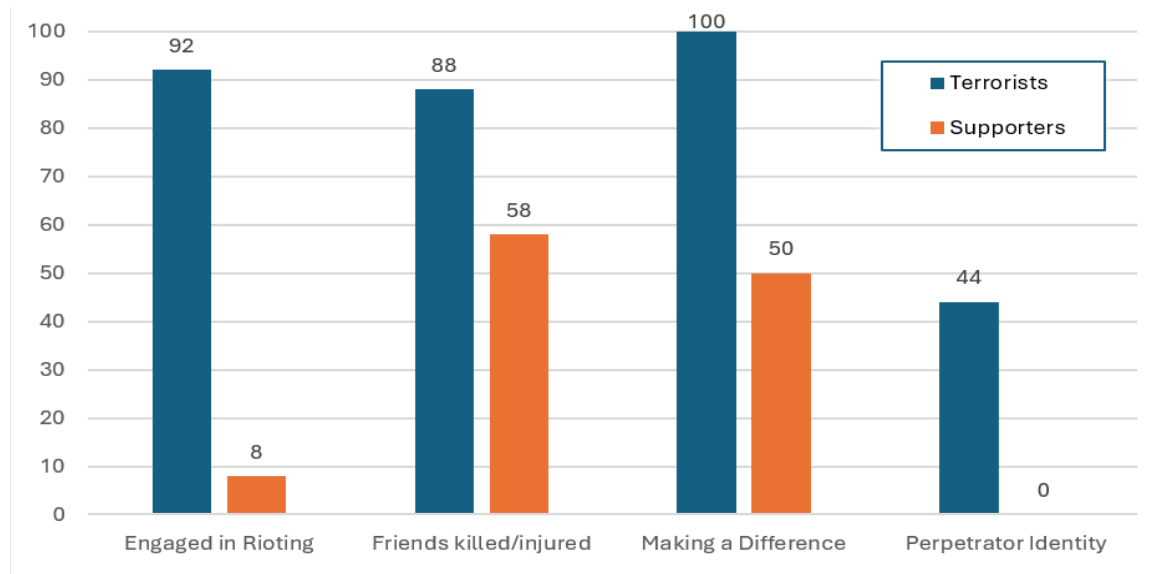
Table 2: *Variables Showing Significant Differences Between Terrorists and their Supporters*

Variable	Fishers Exact Test P value
Engaged in Rioting	P = 0.003
Number of Friends Killed/Injured	P = 0.014
Making a Difference	P = 0.02
Perpetrator Identity of Family Killed/Injured	P = 0.023

Three of the significant variables came from the *Experience of Conflict* domain of variables: Engaged in Rioting, Number of Friends Killed/Injured, and Perpetrator Identity. The fourth significant variable came from the *Motivations* domain: Making a Difference. Figure 1 below provides descriptive statistics on the four variables and the nature of the differences.

As outlined in Table 2, the strongest significant difference between the two groups related to previous involvement in rioting. As Figure 1 shows, 92 percent of the paramilitaries reported that they had been involved in rioting prior to joining the paramilitary group. In comparison, only 8 percent of the supporters had a history of being involved in riots.

The next strongest difference was seen in relation to the experience of friends being killed or injured as a result of the conflict. No significant difference was found between the paramilitaries and the supporters in terms of experiencing family members being killed or injured. Paramilitary members were significantly more likely, however, to report friends having been killed or injured. Eighty-eight percent of the paramilitaries reported that four or more friends had been killed or injured compared to 58 percent of the supporters.

Figure 1: *Descriptive Statistics on variables with significant differences*

The third most significant difference between the two groups came from the *Motivations* section. On only one motivation variable was a significant difference found, and this was *Making a Difference*. All of the paramilitary groups identified “making a difference” as one of their motivations for involvement. In contrast, just 50 percent of supporters said that making a difference was a motivation for their support.

The final significant difference between the two groups was found in relation to who the perpetrators of violence against family members were. While there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of the number of family members who had been killed or injured, there was an effect when the perpetrators of that violence were the security forces. Forty-four percent of the paramilitaries reported that family members had been killed or injured by the security forces, whereas none of the supporters had experienced this.

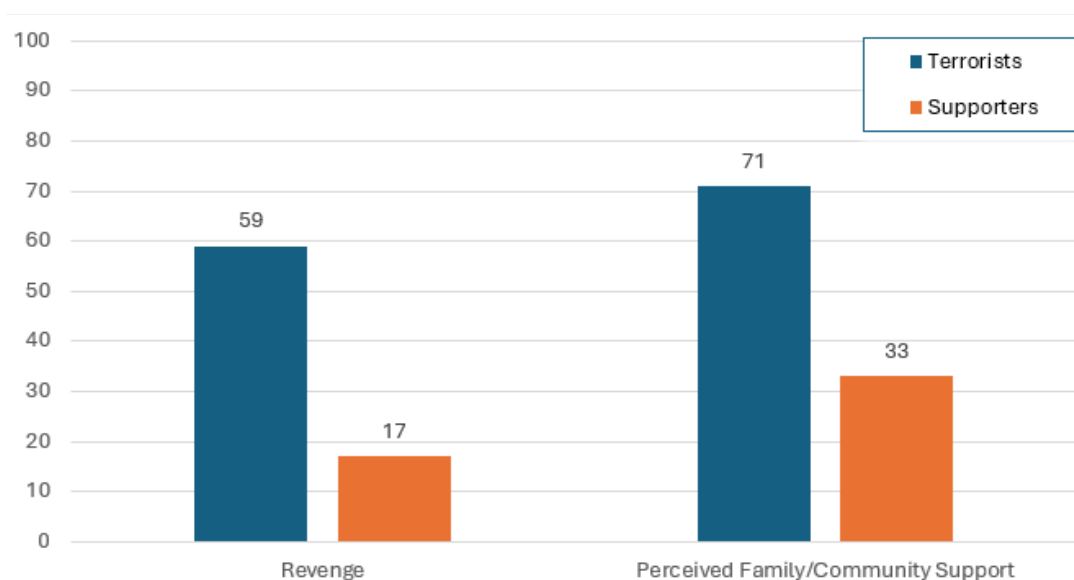
It is very notable that no significant differences were found between the two groups on the overwhelming majority of the factors. All 18 of those factors have been flagged in previous research as being potential drivers of radicalisation and/or associated with involvement in terrorism and violent extremism. The current study, however, suggests that these factors may not distinguish between those who support or sympathise with terrorist violence and those who will become directly involved. Much of the research literature on radicalisation has measured how various factors relate to holding extremist or terrorist attitudes, but not necessarily direct involvement in violent extremism or terrorism.⁴² The assumption has often been that there will be a direct connection between holding extremist attitudes and an increased likelihood of engaging in extremist offending. The findings from the current study cast some doubt on such assumptions. A general finding from other psychological research has been that the connection between attitudes and behaviour is complex, and the two only partially correlate.⁴³ The findings here suggest that this also holds true with regard to terrorist offending. Certainly, the suspicion has always been that some radicalisation factors would not, in fact, distinguish between those who become involved and those from similar backgrounds, and the results here endorse that view.

That said, it is worth noting some caveats. Two variables came very close to recording significant differences, and these are outlined in Figure 2 below. The first of these was the revenge

motivation. A desire for revenge has long been flagged as a potential factor in radicalisation processes, often linked to perceived injustices and grievances, and sometimes linked to catalyst events (i.e. violent acts which are perceived to be unjust).⁴⁴ Fifty-nine percent of the former paramilitaries said that revenge was one of their motivations for involvement. In contrast, just 17 percent of the supporters said that it was a motivation for their support. A two-tailed Fisher's Exact Test found $P = 0.053$, which is very close to significance.

The second factor is related to perceived community support. Seventy-one percent of the former paramilitaries believed that most of their family and community also supported the "cause". In contrast, just 33 percent of the supporters felt that most of those around them also supported it. Other research has suggested that perceived peer and community support can be a significant factor in radicalisation,⁴⁵ and the perceived support of the "imagined community", for example, is frequently flagged in models of online radicalisation.⁴⁶ With $p = 0.067$, this factor did not reach significance with this sample, though it is sufficiently close to justify further research attention.

Figure 2: *Descriptive Statistics on Revenge and Perceived Family/Community Support Variables*



While these two factors came close, the remaining 16 variables did not. Given that many of these are variables which are routinely flagged as drivers of radicalisation, the findings here support a view that they may not be distinctive of radicalisation *to violence*.

Discussion

Who becomes a terrorist and why? This question has dominated terrorism studies for over half a century.⁴⁷ A general lack of good data to work with has undermined efforts to reach meaningful answers. Progress has been made, especially in the most recent decade,⁴⁸ but the unanswered specificity problem has cast a long shadow over that progress. In the end, meaningful answers will only be obtained when specificity has been unravelled.

The current study represents an early step in that effort. Perhaps the most important takeaway from the results was how similar the terrorists and their supporters looked on most factors. On only four of the 22 factors considered here were there significant differences. On the rest, the two groups painted similar pictures. Inevitably, particular attention will be focused on the factors where significant differences were found and what their potential implications might be. Prior

involvement in rioting, for example, perhaps says something about a general willingness to *act*, though other results suggest not mindlessly so. The fact that the only motivational difference related to the terrorists' belief that their action was *making a difference* suggests that this was potentially an action in a context of perceived agency. In contrast, though they were alike on so much else, the supporters potentially lacked indications of a similar sense of agency. This would echo some of the findings from Alonso, where one interviewee, for example, who did not become involved in terrorism, commented that this was partly because: "The anger could develop in ways, in fantasy that would never ever really express itself in terms of practical terms."⁴⁹

From another perspective, the issue may not have been about a willingness to act, but rather a willingness to act *illegally*. Again, as an example, one of the supporters in the Alonso study commented: "I wouldn't have been a person that broke the law."⁵⁰ Involvement in rioting indicated that a threshold to act illegally had already been breached by those who engaged in it, increasing the possibility for further, more serious, steps. Returning to the current research project, the findings from the qualitative interviews, which have already been published, also flagged that involvement in rioting could expose individuals to further grievance and provocation. As one terrorist put it: "when my friend got shot dead during a riot I says right, we have to do something, we have to defend our area by ourselves so I progressed into the UDA."⁵¹

Northern Ireland, with its lengthy historical conflict, provides a relatively benign environment to access still active paramilitary groups, past members and communities who continue to support paramilitary activity. However, the province is still underused in primary source terrorism research to gather data that represents so many dimensions of other conflicts worldwide.⁵² As Gill and Horgan note:

*..... curiously absent from much of the astonishing array of literature ... are empirical, data-driven perspectives of those who engaged in non-state paramilitary activity throughout the Troubles. There are notable exceptions of course, but by and large empirical analyses of political violence in Northern Ireland at the individual level have been scarce...*⁵³

This pertains particularly to geopolitical conflicts where information about individual or organisational behaviours and their vulnerability to radicalisation remains one of the key questions.

Going further, Northern Ireland still provides a parallel platform from which the consequences of those geopolitical conflicts can be examined. For example, the movement of displaced populations to migrant camps, settlements or communities where the possibility of radicalisation within those isolated communities and their mechanisms, remains.

Overall, factors connected to exposure to violence and threat presented a mixed picture in the current research. These have been significant themes flagged in some previous studies, though there were some surprising results. There was no significant difference between the terrorists and supporters in terms of family members killed or injured, for example, or on the three factors measuring different levels of perceived threat. Perceived threat has been repeatedly flagged as a radicalisation factor in other work,⁵⁴ though the finding here raises questions around how well it distinguishes between actors and supporters.

Limitations of the Current Study

The findings certainly offer a great deal of tantalising food for thought, though it is important to note that there are also a number of limitations with the current study. The most important relates to the small sample sizes. While limited sample sizes are a common issue in research with hidden populations,⁵⁵ this does affect the generalisability and validity of the data.⁵⁶ For this study, some caution is needed over how well the results might apply to wider terrorist and supporter populations. Added to this, the use of snowball sampling could also have had an impact. While snowball sampling is a very common and indeed recommended technique in research involving direct access to terrorists,⁵⁷ it does come with caveats regarding how representative the resulting cohorts are of the wider populations of interest. Snowball sampling is vulnerable to selection biases including for example potential gatekeeper partialities and social network limitations.⁵⁸

Another important limitation is that the participants in this study were answering questions about their lives and events which were potentially many years in the past. There is uncertainty around how accurate and reliable those recollections are. Factors which the participants do not now recall as having been significant, perhaps actually were at the time. Additionally, the role of other factors may have become exaggerated in memory or may also have been affected by presentation biases.

A final limitation worth flagging is that most of the factors being considered here were effectively measured by one question each. This was a consequence of the study's desire to consider a broad range of variables, but multiple questions per factor may have given both greater granularity and validity to the findings.

Conclusions

Reflecting on the limitations above does, though, offer obvious recommendations for future research. The first and most important is that more work using similar control groups is badly needed. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study which has compared a sample of terrorists with a control group of supporters in this manner. A few significant differences were found, though overall, on most factors, the two groups presented a similar picture. Clearly, this is only an initial step on a long journey.

Replicating this approach with other populations and in the context of other conflicts and campaigns of violence is necessary. In ideal circumstances, it would be wonderful to increase the size and representativeness of the samples involved, but realistically, this will not be easy. It took a long time to get even this far, and it is likely to take considerable effort to develop and build on this work. Indeed, one surprise in the current study is that it proved even harder to identify and recruit supporters for the research than it did to identify and recruit former paramilitaries. Nevertheless, the current study has at least shown that such work can still be done, and it offers a stepping stone for future studies to follow.

A further issue which will require attention concerns the range of factors considered. The current study looked at 22 variables. That is a reasonably large sample to examine, but is still far short of the 101 factors identified by Wolfowicz et al. in their systematic review or the 786 potential factors identified by Corner and Taylor.⁵⁹ Effort will be needed to expand the range of factors examined in later studies. It will also be important to consider that context probably matters a great deal in terms of the impact of many factors. Some which are important in a Northern Ireland context may not be as relevant elsewhere, and vice versa.

Ultimately, answering the specificity problem is a crucial task for terrorism studies. Unravelling it will allow the field to finally answer who becomes a terrorist and why. While there are major obstacles to be faced, overcoming these offers the potential of major breakthroughs in our understanding of terrorism. The issue is a critical one, and it is important to recognise the complexities involved. Those who are hoping for simple solutions are likely to be disappointed. This current study has hopefully offered a helpful starting point on what is likely to be a long but enormously worthwhile journey.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

Variable	Question
1	Was any member of your family or friends killed or injured as a result of an incident in the Northern Ireland conflict?
2	Please indicate which of the following describes most accurately how many members of your family were killed or injured in the Northern Ireland conflict.
3	Which of the following describes most accurately the number of friends injured or killed in the Northern Ireland conflict?
4	Of those family members killed and/or injured, please can you identify the responsible parties? You can click more than one if applicable. Rival Group Same Background Rival Group Other Background Security Forces Internal Accidental
5	Of those friends killed and/or injured, please can you indicate the responsible parties? You can click more than one. Rival Group Same Background Rival Group Other Background Security Forces Internal Accidental
6	Were you involved in rioting before active involvement or sympathetic support?
7a	Prior to becoming active in/sympathetic toward your organisation, was your immediate community subject to threat, injury, or mortality from an incident in the Northern Ireland conflict?
7b	Prior to becoming active in/sympathetic toward your organisation, was your immediate community subject to threat by an opposing organisation and/or state forces?
7c	If yes, was it: Not Continuous Continuous
8	Please indicate, prior to becoming active/sympathetic, how many times you were caught up in a bomb explosion, gun fire or other violence-related incident? Never 1 or more
9	During the Northern Ireland conflict, and prior to escalation, were you ever threatened by a paramilitary group?
10	Did you consider yourself under threat by opposing factions on a day-to-day basis?
11	Please indicate the degree of support your family or community shared with your own ideology. Up to 50% Above 50%
12	Were family already involved in the conflict?
13	Were friends already involved in the conflict?
14	Was there a time in the past where you had a different or lesser belief before becoming involved with an organisation during the Northern Ireland conflict?
15	Did ideology play a part in your decision to escalate?
16	Past active Group: Do you consider at that time when you made the decision to become active that you were furthering a political cause? Sympathetic Group: Do you consider when you were sympathetic toward that organisation that you were furthering a political cause?

17	Past Active Group: Do you consider at that time when you made the decision to become active that you were: Sympathetic Group: Do you consider when you were sympathetic toward that organisation that you were: Past active: Fighting for your Country? Sympathetic: Supporting Fighting for your country?
18	Past active Group: Do you consider at that time when you made the decision to become active that you were: Sympathetic Group: Do you consider when you were sympathetic toward that organisation that you were: Past active: Fighting for justice? Sympathetic: Supporting Fighting for justice?
19	Past active Group: Do you consider at that time when you made the decision to become active that you were: Sympathetic Group: Do you consider when you were sympathetic toward that organisation that you were: Past active: Fighting for revenge? Sympathetic: Supporting fighting for revenge?
20	Past active Group: Do you consider at that time when you made the decision to become active that you were: Sympathetic Group: Do you consider when you were sympathetic toward that organisation that you were: Past active: Fighting for your community? Sympathetic: Sympathetic to fighting for your community?
21	Past active Group: Do you consider at that time when you made the decision to become active that you were: Sympathetic Group: Do you consider when you were sympathetic toward that organisation that you were: Past active: Fighting for making a difference? Sympathetic: Supporting fighting for making a difference?
22	Past active Group: Do you consider at that time when you made the decision to become active that you were: Sympathetic Group: Do you consider when you were sympathetic toward that organisation that you were: Past active: Fighting to gain status? Sympathetic: Sympathetic to the organisation to gain status?

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learning in Times of Organisational Fluidity: Processes of Knowledge Production and Transfer in Leaderless Extremist Movements

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Abstract: Extremist groups must learn to survive and achieve their goals. While previous research has explored terrorist learning at both individual and organisational levels, it has primarily focused on hierarchical groups. This article examines leaderless movements, arguing that their learning process extends beyond the mere sum of individual knowledge. Using far-right accelerationism as a case study, it analyses how these movements acquire, interpret, store and disseminate knowledge. By tracing this process, the article identifies the factors that enable or hinder learning, drawing on scholarship on collective learning, while highlighting the similarities and differences between learning in leaderless movements and hierarchical groups.

Keywords: Learning; leaderless movements; post-organisational extremism; far-right extremism; jihadism

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Introduction

Recent studies and empirical evidence indicate that violent extremism has been undergoing a significant organisational and tactical transformation. Scholars have noted, for instance, the decline of erstwhile prominent far-right organisations and their substitution with influencers, ad hoc fluid groupings and individuals with loose and ambiguous connections to specific groups.¹ This signals a movement away from (hierarchical) vanguardism towards strategies favouring “leaderless resistance.”²

The shift towards post-organisational extremism, as it is often dubbed,³ renders old patterns of activity dated and traditional modes and channels of knowledge production and transfer obsolete. This raises an important question: if “traditional know-how” is ill-suited and contemporary knowledge production insufficient, then how do violent extremists learn? More broadly, can leaderless movements learn collectively and, if so, how do they manage that?

One of the key problems in portraying leaderless movements as learning organisations is the difficulty of attributing the actions of lone actors to the movement and, thus, “interpret[ing them] as markers of organisational learning.”⁴ This study, which is part of a larger project on learning and innovation in leaderless extremist movements, claims that contemporary leaderless movements, taking advantage of this post-organisational transformation and assisted by modern technology, are capable of learning as a movement rather than merely learning at the individual level. Focusing on the process of learning and drawing from organisational studies literature on organisational learning—particularly the scholarship on collective and informal learning—it outlines the main characteristics of this process and identifies points of convergence and divergence with existing models of organisational learning in terrorism. To illustrate the concepts and clarify the arguments, the article draws examples primarily from the far-right and, to a lesser extent, the jihadist movement.

The remaining discussion is organised as follows. The first part examines leaderless movements as distinct from both formal organisations and lone wolves, showcasing that these movements exhibit a level of cohesion that allows them to have shared goals and strategies. The second part places the concept of learning in leaderless movements in the context of the broader literature on learning. The third part examines the factors that affect learning, the components and the phases of the process, while identifying the particularities of learning in leaderless movements. Finally, the fourth part offers an empirical exploration of the learning process within far-right accelerationism.

The Organisational Traits of Leaderless Movements

Leaderless resistance is certainly not new.⁵ However, there is renewed interest in the concept both from the extremist milieu, particularly the far-right, and the research community.⁶ A key question in the study of leaderless resistance is whether those who adopt it can be described as organisations. According to Ligon, and colleagues,⁷ there are three features that make a terrorist group an organisation: shared performance goals, collaboration towards achieving these goals, and identifiable boundaries in terms of their membership. Of the three, the last one is clearly missing in leaderless resistance because membership fluidity is one of its core traits. This might lead us to the conclusion that leaderless resisters merely constitute a ragtag collection of individual actors with little in common. Indeed, the term “lone wolf” has seen a steady increase in academic writing since 2000⁸ but a growing literature suggests that the term is a misnomer⁹ and that most lone wolves are not as lonely as they appear, but instead they are embedded in wider radical milieus and depend on support networks for their violent actions. In this respect, Lubrano¹⁰ distinguishes between lone wolves, who might borrow ideological

beliefs from—but operate outside of—an organisation, and leaderless resisters who engage in militancy as part of a leaderless movement.

Hence, leaderless movements fall somewhere in between formalised organisations and unconnected lone actors. They might present varying levels of connectivity, ranging from relatively integrated to more diffused networks, but they are neither centralised nor amorphous. In this respect, they resemble what Gerlach described as segmentary, polycentric, and integrated networks (SPIN),¹¹ since they are composed of diverse and ever-changing groupings (segmentary), have multiple centres of influence that often alternate (polycentric) and form a loose network with multiple linkages, fluid membership and shared ideals and opponents (networked). Gerlach focused on the American social movement landscape, but an emerging feature of SPINs is that they are increasingly transnational in nature and reach.¹² Kelshall and colleagues employ the term violent transnational social movements (VTSMs) to describe contemporary violent movements that “transcend state boundaries to unite individuals... with shared ideologies, perspectives or grievances particular to identity.”¹³

Transnational connections between extremist organisations and individuals are not entirely unprecedented, even among leaderless movements. Environmentalist groups such as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) developed ties across the Atlantic, but those were based on personal connections and frequent travels.¹⁴ Although this type of connectivity continues to exist, it is supplemented with online gathering spaces. Their role is not limited to providing information and one-directional communication channels. The increasing interactivity of these spaces, combined with the flattened authority structures that flourish in these domains, creates an ideal environment for leaderless movements to formulate shared goals and foster collaboration. In this sense, they form social movement online communities (SMOCs), which are defined as “networks of individuals who work to maintain an overlapping set of goals and identities tied to a social movement linked through quasi-public online discussions.”¹⁵ Hence, as Fürstenberg accurately points out, lone wolves are embedded in “digital wolf packs”, forging a movement that is decentralised and heterogeneous, but manifests a certain degree of cohesion built around common identities and practices.¹⁶

Although there are many examples of leaderless movements that grow out of these settings, two deserve special attention. The first one—the jihadist movement—is a rather complicated case because there are proper organisations within the jihadist milieu (e.g. al-Qaeda and ISIS), which render the leaderless label slightly problematic. In this regard, a useful distinction would be to treat group-affiliated jihadists and those who are inspired by—but not affiliated with—jihadist groups as interconnected yet separate movements. The latter draws influence from the established groups but develops an identity, goals and strategies autonomously, outside the established processes set by formal groups.

A similar trend can be identified in the contemporary far-right. Despite the fact that leaderless resistance was born in the far-right milieu, the traditional far-right has professed hierarchy and has been dominated by formal organisations. However, as mentioned above, there seems to be a shift towards a post-organisational far-right, and none exemplifies this trend more than the accelerationist trend that advocates the intensification of social conflict to the point of race war and eventual societal collapse.¹⁷ Accelerationism’s organisational and ideological characteristics will be discussed in more detail below. What is important to note here is that accelerationism does not only celebrate leaderless resistance but also displays a clear disdain towards formal far-right groups; a trait that differentiates it from jihadists who look up to groups and leaders within their ideological sphere of influence.

These two examples illustrate how leaderless movements can form and operate alongside hierarchical groups in a wider radical milieu. Previous research has shown that terrorist groups can operate simultaneously as hierarchical organisations, networks and social movements.¹⁸ However, there is an important difference in how hybridity manifests in contemporary violent extremism. While in the past the general strategic directions were set by the formal group and—most importantly—there was some level of functional differentiation between the different components, nowadays authority relationships are fragmentary or bidirectional, and the various components are often functionally similar. In other words, hierarchical groups cannot always set the tone or direct the movement operating in the same radical milieu; the former might influence the latter, but they cannot command their activities. Moreover, movements are not confined to the role of a support base, but engage in the same violent activities as the formal groups, not only by copying the latter's practices but by reshaping existing knowledge and creating new knowledge, often leading to ideological,¹⁹ strategic and tactical hybrids. This process of learning is explored in the following pages.

Organisational Learning in Perspective

In the context of the nature-nurture debate, learning holds a key place. If genetics is deemed insufficient to explain human behaviour, then (as proponents of the nurture argument posit) all social behaviour, whether it is socially beneficial or not, is learned behaviour. In this regard, various iterations of the social learning theory suggest that any new behaviour is acquired by observing and imitating others.²⁰ The literature on learning is vast—spanning many fields of study ranging from psychology and education to organisational studies and criminology—but boils down to three important questions: how learning occurs (the process of learning), wherefrom knowledge is drawn (sources of learning) and what its result is (outcomes of learning).²¹

The first question, regarding the process of learning, is possibly the most complex one because it explores the inner workings of the human mind.²² In the field of psychology, from which most learning models originate, the object of study is the human being. However, as scholars in other fields suggest, the process of learning extends beyond the individual to encompass larger entities formed by individuals and, as technology advances, even non-human-mediated artefacts. Theories of organisational learning offer the most comprehensive exploration of how learning exceeds the individual, creating “learning organisations”, which do not store simply the sum of the knowledge held by their members, but have their own “memory” that is not tied to specific individuals.²³

Drawing from scholarship in the field of psychology and organisational studies, terrorism studies perceive learning as either an individual process in the context of radicalisation²⁴ or an organisational process that leads to innovative practices.²⁵ These two approaches are situated at the two extremes of the terrorist activity spectrum; the former being closer to lone actor terrorism, while the latter relates to what one can describe as “old terrorism” practised by hierarchical groups. Therefore, these two approaches largely disregard terrorist activity perpetrated by actors falling somewhere in between; that is, terrorist networks or extremist movements operating under the principle of leaderless resistance. With the exception of a few studies on learning and innovation in Islamist extremist networks and radical environmentalist groups,²⁶ the question of learning in non-hierarchical movements has been left largely unexplored,²⁷ even though other fields have delved into the study of informal learning.

The concept of organisational learning is no stranger to definitional pluralism.²⁸ For the purposes of this article, it is defined as the “process through which a group acquires new knowledge or technology that it then uses to make better strategic decisions, improve its ability to develop

and apply specific tactics, and increase its chance of success in its operations.”²⁹ Organisational learning is a form of collective learning, whether we approach it as an aggregate of individual learning or as one that resides within the organisation.³⁰ Learning, in this respect, is not necessarily a top-down regulated process, but it can be launched as a bottom-up initiative and develop further as a self-organising collaboration.³¹ Hence, learning can occur in non-formal entities with fluid borders consisting of individuals operating in “a shared action arena” that does not preclude—yet does not depend on—direct cooperation, and more importantly, is “not tied to just one particular place, moment, person or team.”³²

Some researchers in organisational studies have been sceptical about the ability of networks to integrate anything other than explicit (encodable) knowledge.³³ This scepticism has been shared by some terrorism studies scholars as well. While they acknowledged that individual cells could engage in learning, compartmentalisation—accentuated by the needs of operational security under conditions of clandestinity—rendered organisational learning at best localised,³⁴ limiting the group’s ability to learn on a strategic level.³⁵ In highly decentralised networks and leaderless movements, learning was regarded as individualised, unsophisticated³⁶ and—in the case of jihadist lone actors—even unnecessary, considering that many engaged in suicide terrorism.³⁷

An alternative way to conceptualise leaderless learning is through the notion of “communities of practice.” A “community of practice” is brought together by a common domain of interests that shape the identity of the participants, forming a community that is built by relationships of trust, support and commitment. These relations are forged through engagement in a shared practice linked to their common interest, which over time generates a shared repertoire of resources, such as experiences, stories and tools.³⁸ Max Taylor and John Horgan were the first to employ the concept of “community of practice” in the study of political violence to explore how implicit and explicit knowledge is transmitted in the absence of direct face-to-face meetings.³⁹ More recently, Lee and Knott,⁴⁰ and Michael Fürstenberg⁴¹ used the same concept to examine learning in far-right online extremist communities.

A common feature of these explorations of far-right extremist “communities of practice” is the centrality of information and communication technologies (ICT) in allowing the post-organisational far-right not only to share explicit knowledge but also to forge a common identity.⁴² According to Laat and Simons, one of the key challenges for online communities of practice is “to be able to coordinate, clarify and regulate the discourse themselves.”⁴³ The theory of connectivism might help us comprehend how this can be achieved. Connectivism, described as the learning theory of the digital age, posits that learning rests “on connecting specialised information sets,”⁴⁴ boiling down to “the ability to construct and traverse those networks.”⁴⁵ In other words, it places more emphasis on the connections between learners than the knowledge itself, as understanding comes from these connections. In extremist leaderless movements, these connections not only provide information-sharing conduits, but also allow prospective members to showcase their credentials or—to borrow James Forest’s term—to exchange online “trusted handshakes.”⁴⁶ These interactions thus act as an initiation routine that sets the fluid yet perceptible borders of the movement, introducing core ideas, and setting the stage for learning.

The Process of Terrorist Learning: from Organisations to Leaderless Movements

Factors that Facilitate and Hinder Learning

Learning might be natural, but it is not necessarily easy. Several factors affect learning by either facilitating or inhibiting it, some internal to the learning entity and some external. From a structuralist perspective, the environment in which groups operate and the external pressures they face define the opportunities and constraints they encounter in learning.⁴⁷ Exogenous factors include the emergence of competitors, heightened pressure and uncertainty, and technological innovations.⁴⁸

Although for some leaderless movements (such as anarchist), leaderless resistance is a deliberate strategy stemming from their ideological beliefs, for many it is the product of structural adaptations to state pressure and/or failures of established groups. Indeed, the idea of leaderless resistance was articulated by Louis Beam in response to the intensification of state repression and the arrest of far-right militants in the 1980s United States. A similar dynamic can be identified in the jihadist movement, which entered a forced process of decentralisation in the wake of the “war against terrorism.” In this respect, leaderless movements are a manifestation of strategic learning from the outset. However, learning does not stop there. They engage in “competitive adaptation”—that is, a relentless interactive struggle with law enforcement agencies to outsmart each other.⁴⁹ Leaderless movements cannot debrief captured members, as for example the IRA did,⁵⁰ but they must resort to publicly available information about foiled attacks and arrests to learn about new counterterrorism techniques. That means that this information might be incomplete and slower to appear.

Similarly, the emergence of competitors fuels learning through a process of outbidding. The rift between al-Qaeda and ISIS is illuminating, as several innovations that were introduced by ISIS supporters stemmed from their desire to outbid al-Qaeda. By the same token, the recent re-popularisation of leaderless resistance in the far-right stemmed from disappointment towards established far-right groups, which either chose the metapolitical path of radical -yet not extremist- populist far-right or failed to grasp and respond to the changing landscape of threats. In the same vein, rifts and disagreements between groupings in the wider movement might create an impetus to learn as a means to gain more influence within the movement.

Leaderless movements’ ability to learn is inextricably linked to the development and diffusion of modern ICT. It is almost a truism to say that without the Internet, contemporary leaderless movements would not be able to sustain transnational networks across the globe. It suffices to compare pre-Internet leaderless movements, such as the radical environmentalist movement in the 1980s and 1990s, with the diffuse yet interconnected movements of today. The new technological landscape spearheaded by Web3.0 and other emerging technologies can create opportunity structures that are even riper for learning. Whether they can take advantage of those depends on a series of internal factors that affect learning.

According to Heikkila and Gerlak,⁵¹ internal factors can be grouped under three broader categories: structure, social dynamics, and the technological and functional domain. Trujillo and Jackson identify similar factors in terrorist groups’ learning processes, namely structure, culture and knowledge resources.⁵² Structure’s impact is not straightforward. The literature suggests that decentralised groupings with more pronounced differentiation in roles and responsibilities foster dialogue and learning by allowing access to diverse sources of information and integrating diverse perspectives.⁵³ On the other hand, structured groups benefit from more

resilient knowledge distribution mechanisms, even though they are susceptible to information loss as it travels across organisational levels,⁵⁴ while their members tend to groupthink.⁵⁵

To combine the advantages of both, successful networks tend to have the following characteristics: diversity, autonomy, openness and connectivity.⁵⁶ The advent of Web 2.0 brought multimedia-enriched interactivity to digital interactions. Thus, contrary to one-directional knowledge production, exemplified by the “Dear Ned Ludd” column published on ELF-affiliated websites,⁵⁷ information is now multi-directional, facilitating the exchange of opinion and creating personal learning environments where users can consume but also produce learning resources.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the Internet, as the great equalising force that it is, fosters engagement by minimising status and making everyone feel impactful.⁵⁹

A survey of jihadist and far-right social media use found that much content came from regular users, not central (group-affiliated) accounts.⁶⁰ While al-Qaeda’s As-Sahab and ISIS’s Al-Hayat media arms remain influential, Ali Fisher’s “Swarmcast” concept highlights the increasing importance of a diffuse network of “media mujahideen”, further blurring the line between audience and creators.⁶¹ Hence, contemporary leaderless movements can avoid distribution failures and merge active and passive supporters into a broader learning space,⁶² which, combined with the Internet’s low entry barriers,⁶³ means that the pool of potential learners is big.

However, while ICT-mediated connectivity forges common identities, myths and references,⁶⁴ its inherent pluralism hinders the implementation of a coherent strategy, particularly if it is complex and requires coordination of different elements.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, if the said strategy falls into the category of provocation and/or polarisation, as is the case with accelerationist far-right, the lack of upper-tier coordination is less problematic, at least during the initial phases of “destroying the old world.”

Furthermore, diffused networks are not entirely anarchic. Individuals or places of learning often act as boundary spanners or knowledge bridges, identifying what or who is important. Contradictory as it may sound, leaderless movements do not lack leadership (albeit of a different kind), but this leadership becomes decentralised, informal, diffused, and shared.⁶⁶ Often, leaderless movements operate under the guidance of “ideational oligarchy/-ies”⁶⁷ that frequently are formed spontaneously and hold their influence temporarily.⁶⁸ Akin to “influencers”, they set the tone of the movement. These might include celebrated (or sainted, in the far-right jargon) attackers,⁶⁹ websites (e.g. Daily Stormer), online forums (e.g. Iron March, Fascist Forge) and social media accounts and platforms (e.g. 8chan/8kun). A case in point is the Iron March forum, which was central in the popularisation of accelerationism in far-right circles.⁷⁰

Structure’s impact on the learning process is largely contingent on the collective culture. Groups that are characterised by openness to new ideas and celebrate creativity—or, as Jackson & Trujillo put it, demonstrate “organisational interest in learning and organisational tolerance for risk-taking”⁷¹—are better at learning. The more rigidly structured the groups, the more dependent learning is on the character and the preferences of the leadership. Leaders who are averse to risk-taking or lack a learning culture⁷² will stifle learning either by discouraging it in the first place, punishing those who diverge from accepted practices or creating dissemination bottlenecks. In more diffuse networks, the key is the general attitude to learning and innovation. The far-right’s celebration of self-sufficiency and the pervasive DIY mentality, for instance, are expected to encourage learning. In contrast, the pressure to succeed, especially in single-attack contexts, might discourage innovation, but not necessarily learning.⁷³ Competition between

perpetrators to “achieve the highest score” in terms of victims⁷⁴ and the harsh mockery in case of failure might act as negative reinforcement to learn from others’ mistakes.⁷⁵

The Process of Learning

Even if an organisation has all the attributes abetting learning, it must have access to useful knowledge and mechanisms that allow its interpretation and storage. Organisational learning theories usually understand learning as a phased process.⁷⁶ Along the same lines, Jackson and colleagues approach learning in terrorist groups as a process consisting of the following phases: acquisition, interpretation, storage and distribution.⁷⁷

Learning begins with information acquisition. Sources may be both external and internal, including history, state opponents, other groups (either through vicarious experience or direct cooperation), external to the group individuals with useful expertise (e.g. explosives’ experts), information access, organisational know-how, and direct experience.⁷⁸ Leaderless movements face an important disadvantage, as their decentralised structure means that they can have only indirect access to information from state opponents, other groups and even their own movement. This translates largely into vicarious learning that does not benefit from deeper and publicly unavailable knowledge. Similarly, considering that most of their members engage in a single terrorist act, they fail to learn from personal experience. This disadvantage is mitigated by the enormous amount of information available online, but useful confidential information remains out of reach. Nevertheless, leaderless movements, due to their general openness, benefit from a much more unbiased approach to possible sources of information compared to hierarchical groups. An example would be far-right militants’ eagerness to learn from and imitate jihadist practices, as some studies suggest.⁷⁹

Interpretation entails the evaluation of the validity and appropriateness of new knowledge vis-a-vis past, present, and future activities,⁸⁰ but also its adaptation to new contexts.⁸¹ Knowledge that heavily diverges from existing practices, especially if they are considered still effective, might be disregarded as irrelevant. This can result from both a conscious and a subconscious heuristically-driven process that may often lead to “biased assimilation.”⁸² Broad distribution aids interpretation,⁸³ but increases vulnerability to communication interception and eventual penetration by security forces. Leaderless movements, though less vulnerable to communication interception, especially in light of new communication technologies that allow wide distribution under relative anonymity, struggle with determining who assesses and interprets knowledge.

In jihadism, *ijtihad* (independent interpretation of religious texts) has been a double-edged sword. It enabled autonomous decision-making, but also created confusion and encouraged ideological and strategic dissidence, as seen in the al-Qaeda-ISIS rift.⁸⁴ Similarly, disillusionment with far-right groups resulted in an unprecedented scarcity of ideological authorities promoting violent strategies,⁸⁵ leaving room for more bottom-up, yet chaotic, interpretations. Influencers, whether they are prominent attackers or prolific online contributors, might demarcate the interpretation process, but leaderless movements will never reach the point of “one voice.” Hence, while it is wrong to assume that the process is fully anarchic, largely due to the presence of common concepts, language and references, fragmentation in interpretation is and will remain a defining feature of these movements.

Acquired knowledge, apart from interpretation, must be stored to have a lasting impact. An obvious and rather easy answer is the vast storage capabilities offered by modern technology. Unlike past terrorist groups that had to rely on individual member memories or manuals, contemporary groups can benefit from online repositories to host terabytes of information, as shown by the 2019 discovery of a pro-ISIS cloud-based repository containing more than

two terabytes of material.⁸⁶ However, in an era of information overload, the challenge lies in navigating this information abundance, since one can easily "drown in information, while starving for wisdom." Hence, the question is whether leaderless movements have the absorptive capacity and, most importantly, whether they can develop transactive memory systems where they can encode, store, and retrieve knowledge when needed. To manage information overload, groups compile condensed knowledge in the form of compendiums.⁸⁷ Jihadist martyrdom videos⁸⁸ and especially far-right manifestos are another example of condensed ideological and tactical knowledge that have been used to forge a common identity and inspire copycat attacks.⁸⁹ A quite innovative source of knowledge is also the browsing history or social media activity of attackers.

This brings us to an important distinction between types of knowledge. This is crucial not only for storing knowledge but also for its dissemination, which is instrumental for turning individual knowledge into shared understanding. Knowledge can be explicit or tacit;⁹⁰ the former is codifiable and the latter is more intangible as it is acquired through experience.⁹¹ Explicit knowledge is easily transferable because it is essentially technical and can be illustrated as a step-by-step process. Whereas, tacit knowledge is considered nearly impossible to transfer because it is harder to put down on paper and requires interpersonal interaction between a mentor and a mentee.⁹² One of the main drawbacks of leaderless movements is that violence is usually exercised by lone actors who often engage in a single attack with no opportunity to accumulate experience that will translate into tacit knowledge. The question, then, is whether such movements can complement explicit knowledge with tacit knowledge.

Ikujiro Nonaka's knowledge creation theory outlines four processes of knowledge conversion: combination, socialisation, externalisation, and internalisation.⁹³ Combination refers to merging explicit knowledge into more complex forms, as seen in the aforementioned extremist compendiums. The remaining three types of knowledge conversion describe processes through which tacit knowledge is shared across the group (socialisation) or converted from one into another (externalisation and internalisation), indicating that the two types of knowledge—explicit and tacit—exist in a state of mutual interaction.⁹⁴

Externalisation converts tacit knowledge into an explicit form, usually through codification. Successful conversion requires a "sequential use of metaphor, analogy and model."⁹⁵ In the absence of professionalised communication norms, "a shared or common language can help individuals in a group translate ideas in similar ways, and ultimately agree upon new ideas."⁹⁶ Language in this context is broadly understood to include collective rituals, symbols,⁹⁷ belief systems, organisational stories and myths.⁹⁸ Conversion is thus similar to the way subcultures forge identities and cultural dictionaries through verbal (slang, music) and non-verbal (gestures, art, clothes) *talk*.⁹⁹ Coded language is supplemented with memes, distinctive iconography and obscure chan culture references,¹⁰⁰ creating an ecosystem of meaning that is accessible to insiders and impenetrable to outsiders; a typical manifestation of subcultural bricolage. These symbols and references not only forge a common identity but also compile a dictionary that translates and converts knowledge to be shared across the movement.

Socialisation occurs through shared experiences, either in formal or informal settings.¹⁰¹ We could infer a similar process in online "gatherings" and discussions in the informal settings of internet forums and social media. Moreover, as Nonaka notes, in apprenticeships where tacit knowledge is shared, apprentices learn "not through language but by observation, imitation, and practice."¹⁰² The Christchurch attack, live-streamed by Brenton Tarrant and viewed by thousands during and after it unfolded, exemplifies this phenomenon, as several copycat attacks were attempted in the following weeks, imitating the first-person shooter perspective

of Brenton Tarrant's live-streaming.¹⁰³

What is missing here is practice, which is an essential part of internalisation that converts explicit knowledge into individual tacit knowledge. This is achieved through a process of trial and error that includes action, practice, simulations and experiments, akin to "learning by doing."¹⁰⁴ Traditional training camps have historically played a crucial role in skill development, but leaderless extremists often lack access to such environments. Some individuals resort to isolated training—like Anders Breivik, who experimented with bomb-making in a remote farm. This "do-it-yourself" mentality might appeal to a large segment of the far-right, especially in the United States, where they might conceal these activities much more easily. Alternatively, they might forsake real-world training in favour of virtual alternatives.

Writing in 2006, James Forest expressed scepticism about online training replacing physical camps, citing the lack of interactive learning.¹⁰⁵ However, research on terrorist use of gaming¹⁰⁶ suggests that the immersive experiences they provide might offer a substitute. Lakomy¹⁰⁷ claims that video games' interactivity, modifiability and engaging nature make them ideal for deep learning and skill-development at low cost and risk. Augmented and virtual reality further enhance this experience, offering lifelike training simulations. The recent hype around the metaverse has triggered a discussion within terrorism studies regarding how extremists could take advantage of the emerging virtual landscape.¹⁰⁸ It could provide a more immersive and emotionally engaging training environment than conventional video games. Potential applications include realistic combat simulations and psychological conditioning, such as desensitisation to violence and moral disengagement that can be acquired only through experience.¹⁰⁹ The latter two are extremely important because talking about violence is vastly different from committing an act of lethal violence, especially in close-range attacks.¹¹⁰ Thus, emerging technologies unlock a wide spectrum of untapped learning possibilities that we are still unable to grasp.

Learning in Far-Right Accelerationism

Ideological and Organisational Traits

Accelerationism is a multifaceted ideology that advocates for the acceleration of societal collapse by exploiting existing political and social contradictions. Although it is politically agnostic,¹¹¹ its far-right iteration envisions an apocalyptic struggle against the so-called "System", which is perceived as irrecoverably compromised by hostile forces. Accelerationism's appeal rests on its broad scope, allowing for diverse conceptualisations of in-groups and out-groups. Hence, it can accommodate opposition to abstract constructs like liberal modernity and globalism, as well as specific out-groups, such as Jews, Blacks, Muslims, women and the LGBT community. Similarly, it can adapt to various definitions of the in-group, ranging from racial (e.g., Whites) to cultural (e.g., individuals of European descent) classifications.¹¹² This ideological fluidity enables accelerationism to integrate and synthesise multiple ideological currents, including neofascism, esoteric fascism, white supremacy and neo-Nazism,¹¹³ often resulting in unusual hybrids, such as the Satanist neo-fascist Order of Nine Angles (O9A).

Ideological fluidity is mirrored at the organisational level. Accelerationism eschews the traditional hierarchical structures characteristic of conventional far-right groups. An analysis of prominent figures within accelerationist circles—such as Brenton Tarrant, John Earnest and Payton Gendron—reveals that none of them maintained direct ties to established extremist groups. This absence of formal membership is frequently acknowledged in their manifestos and is actively encouraged in accelerationist literature.¹¹⁴ Therefore, far-right accelerationism

has been variously described as a “culture”,¹¹⁵ “network”¹¹⁶ and “multi-node structure”.¹¹⁷ Other studies have offered a more layered conceptualisation of accelerationism’s organisational structure, as consisting of “a hard core with a layered periphery”¹¹⁸ or as a “loose organisation of individuals and groupuscules.”¹¹⁹ However, even these groupuscules exhibit minimal resemblance to conventional extremist groups. For instance, the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), which at its peak in 2017-2018 had more than two dozen chapters in the United States¹²⁰ alongside a handful of additional cells across the globe, is more accurately characterised as a “brand” rather than a traditional extremist organisation.¹²¹ Instead, these groupuscules and the accelerationist movement at large seem to engage in a cyclical process of “continual collapse, reshuffling, and reemergence,”¹²² as evidenced by the trajectory of AWD and its affiliated or spin-off groupings.

In this regard, far-right accelerationism can easily be described both as an example of a SPIN network and a VTSM, as well as a “community of practice” that is forged by shared grievances, symbols, language and rituals, as the discussion below shows. These characteristics enable accelerationism to learn, adapt, evolve and persist.

The Learning Environment

Among the various exogenous factors that affect learning, technological innovations are undeniably the most salient. There is increasing recognition of the “chan terrorist” phenomenon¹²³ that refers to far-right terrorists who attribute their radicalisation and subsequent militancy to online platforms, such as 8chan.¹²⁴ Studies have demonstrated that digital spaces—such as the Iron March forum (and its short-lived successor, Fascist Forge) and the network of accelerationist Telegram channels, collectively known as Terrorgram—functioned as incubators for radicalised individuals and fluid groupings.¹²⁵ These online spaces facilitate ideological debates, strategic discussions, and the dissemination of propaganda.

Competition has also played a crucial role in shaping accelerationist learning processes, both in terms of “competitive adaptation” and outbidding. In the early stages, accelerationists exhibited relative disregard for operational security, partly due to the initial lack of attention from law enforcement agencies. Iron March participants often failed to employ security measures, frequently using personal emails or sharing information that could lead to their identification.¹²⁶ Likewise, early accelerationist groupuscules, such as AWD and National Action, defiantly showcased their activities. However, subsequent law enforcement crackdowns and journalistic exposés¹²⁷ compelled a process of forced learning. For instance, some accelerationist Telegram channels that emerged following the shutdown of Iron March implemented a vetting process to mitigate infiltration risks.¹²⁸

Additionally, accelerationist publications emphasised enhanced information security practices and criticised individuals who engaged in potentially incriminating discussions.¹²⁹ Notably, the intensification of law enforcement scrutiny prompted a strategic adaptation, with some accelerationist publications advocating for attacks on infrastructure rather than mass shootings,¹³⁰ a recommendation that seems to have been internalised by the movement as a whole, given the increase in such attacks.¹³¹ This shift was accompanied by the promotion of the “no names, no logos, no websites” operational doctrine, encouraging the formation of offline, local, trust-based cells.¹³²

Competition with other far-right factions was an equally important driver. Accelerationism emerged partly as an outbidding effort against “movementarians,” a term denoting established far-right organisations. Iron March was created as a niche alternative to mainstream far-right

forums such as Stormfront and Daily Stormer, while its associated groupuscules positioned themselves in direct opposition to far-right parties and organisations.¹³³ For instance, National Action in the United Kingdom openly denounced the British National Party (BNP) and the English Defence League (EDL). To secure a place in the already crowded milieu, it sought to differentiate itself through a distinct identity and an incendiary aesthetic. This competitive dynamic also manifested in efforts to infiltrate and recruit from rival far-right organisations.¹³⁴ Competition within accelerationist circles has been equally fierce. Leaked internal chats reveal that Feuerkrieg Division (FKD) resisted attempts by AWD to absorb it,¹³⁵ while AWD itself was subjected to similar efforts by O9A-affiliated factions, such as the U.S.-based “Temple of Blood.”¹³⁶

Intra-movement competition could have been disastrous for learning, had it not been mitigated by a pervasive culture that prioritises continuous learning. With “redpilling” being a core notion of accelerationism, seeking the truth and knowledge has been an often-cited driver in the radicalisation trajectories of far-right attackers¹³⁷ and those frequenting accelerationist online spaces.¹³⁸ Another fundamental tenet is the emphasis on self-improvement, which, due to vehement opposition to intellectualism,¹³⁹ is expected to be both psychical and intellectual. The example of successful attackers, who developed skills and engaged in disciplined meticulous planning, is often framed as an aspirational model¹⁴⁰ that every true fascist should strive to emulate.

The Accelerationist Learning Process

One Iron March publication asserted that “faith may move mountains, but only knowledge moves them to the right place,”¹⁴¹ exemplifying thus the learning quest, but also alluding to the necessity of acquiring appropriate knowledge. A central theme in accelerationist literature is the need to adapt to current times, and to portray old tactics as a certain recipe for failure.¹⁴² In terms of learning, this broadens the range of potential learning sources. Traditional fascist writings remain significant, as they continue to feature prominently in various recommended reading lists,¹⁴³ ranging from the work of Julius Evola to James Mason, with “Read Siege!” becoming a sort of rallying cry.¹⁴⁴

However, they are supplemented by recent—and less conventional—learning materials. Manifestos have become a defining feature of far-right extremism. Following the example of Anders Breivik, the self-interview format, plagiarism of other material, and detailed documentation of the preparation phase have been recurrent elements in nearly all the manifestos that followed.¹⁴⁵ Attacks are meticulously studied to extract lessons from both successful and failed attempts.¹⁴⁶ A key example is the use of GoPro camera to live-stream the attack, which has been repeatedly replicated since Tarrant first employed it. At the same time, though, Tarrant’s imitators, such as Earnest, Manshaus and Gendron, opted for alternative platforms to stream their attacks after realising that Facebook Live was unreliable.¹⁴⁷ Learning from failures is particularly crucial. For instance, Payton Gendron frequently reflected on how to avoid the mistakes of others, while Juraj Krajčík, in his manifesto, emphasises that if he were to fail, others should analyse his errors to prevent repeating them.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Stephan Balliet studied Philip Manshaus’s failed attack, while the issues he faced with his 3D-printed firearm were scrutinised as a cautionary lesson for others considering similar weapons.¹⁴⁹

A rather distinct source of ideological and tactical learning is fiction. *Turner Diaries* remain extremely influential, but there are also more recent works, such as those authored by Mike Ma.¹⁵⁰ The case of Lyndon McLeod, the Denver shooter, is particularly illustrative, as he authored a fictional novel titled *Sanction* before carrying out his attack, providing a different type of

insight into his ideological beliefs.¹⁵¹ Technological advancements have further diversified the forms and mediums of relevant material. Tiktok videos,¹⁵² Spotify playlists¹⁵³ and Discord logs¹⁵⁴ have all been used to produce and disseminate extremist content.

However, sources of knowledge are not confined to the fascist milieu. As one Iron March publication noted, “we adopted our methods from the enemy. Mussolini learned from Lenin, Hitler learned from the commies he fought against, fighting fire with fire.”¹⁵⁵ Of particular importance is accelerationism’s fascination with jihadism,¹⁵⁶ leading to a novel form of bricolage, wherein jihadist themes, practices and aesthetics are repurposed.¹⁵⁷ It is not uncommon to find references to “martyrs”, “white jihad”, “great and minor struggle”, or even Islamic phrases such as “Peace Be Upon Him” next to the attackers’ names.¹⁵⁸ This extends beyond rhetoric to encompass tactical and technological knowledge, whether it is vicarious or explicit, with the latter facilitated by the availability of jihadist instructional manuals in English.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, several publications advocate for learning from various insurgent groups, including the IRA, EOKA, the Taliban and ISIS, while also analysing specific events such as the Marawi siege, the Antifa-led 2020 Seattle Capitol Hill protests and the Sheikh Jarrah protests in Jerusalem.¹⁶⁰

As discussed in the previous section, the mere accumulation of information is futile unless properly interpreted and transformed into actionable knowledge. Also mentioned above is the observation that accelerationism’s strength lies in its ideological inclusivity; however, this inclusivity also presents challenges in terms of unified knowledge interpretation. As Lee and Knott observe, the guided interpretation characteristic of structured groups such as al-Muhajiroun is impossible to replicate and enforce in online accelerationist spaces.¹⁶¹ Instead, ideological divergences can occur rapidly due to internal conflicts, membership anthropogeography or the rise of new influencers, as evidenced in AWD’s and National Action’s coerced shift to O9A-influenced ideas.¹⁶²

Nevertheless, this does not mean that accelerationism resembles a chaotic Tower of Babel. The widespread use of English facilitates the interpretation and dissemination of knowledge across linguistic and national boundaries.¹⁶³ More crucially, the movement has developed a subcultural cryptography and vernacular that serve as a shared lexicon of symbols, comprehensible within the movement while remaining obscure to outsiders. While style has always been a defining characteristic of subcultures, including far-right ones, in accelerationism, symbolism assumes particular significance. An article published in Iron March’s compendium “Next Leap” provides a compelling account of how the far-right seeks to weaponize coded language and symbolism:

*We express our worldview through fables, pictures and stories, rather than exclusively with technical jargon like the Marxists [...] one can mention “#ropeculture” and we will all chuckle knowingly, and where a party can call itself “golden dawn” and we all know it refers to the end of the iron age. This coded language will become more complex and impenetrable as time goes on, to the point where non-fascists will become utterly unable to understand our communications.*¹⁶⁴

Thus, style serves a dual function. On one hand, it forges a distinct identity or brand,¹⁶⁵ as exemplified by the skull mask, which has become a symbol of accelerationism.¹⁶⁶ However, unlike in the past, the objective is to make the brand fashionable and cool, as a means of normalising modern fascism, whether through fashion or propaganda.¹⁶⁷ Accelerationist material, as one National Action publication suggests, should be, on the one hand, simple and fun¹⁶⁸ and, on the other, shocking in order to attract true believers, ridicule opponents and generate media attention.¹⁶⁹ To achieve this, accelerationism engages in extensive bricolage, appropriating

and repurposing mainstream cultural elements.¹⁷⁰ Fashwave, for instance, builds on the wave trend of the 2010s (e.g., Vaporwave) to establish a unique musical and visual aesthetic.¹⁷¹ This approach is also evident in accelerationist video productions, which employ grainy, low-quality footage based on extensive content bricolage¹⁷² to align with the “internet ugly” aesthetic.¹⁷³ More broadly, internet culture provides most of the bricolaged artefacts, while also facilitating the second purpose of subcultural style, which is fostering a common language and culture that enables the interpretation of ideology and strategy. Memes, dog whistles, trolling,¹⁷⁴ phrases like “I hear that” or “Did you know that”,¹⁷⁵ gaming references¹⁷⁶ and an overarching “kidding-not-kidding” vernacular¹⁷⁷ all contribute to a shared language that is both esoteric and accessible.

The cover page of an influential Terrorgram publication boldly declared “Archiving is the praxis of those who wish to remain heard,” underscoring the significance accelerationism places on preserving and storing knowledge.¹⁷⁸ As noted in the previous section, explicit knowledge is the easiest to absorb, store and disseminate. Indeed, accelerationists have produced and disseminated numerous compendiums with condensed ideological and tactical knowledge.¹⁷⁹ Alongside manifestos and reading lists, these form the core of accelerationist thought. While some are self-produced, one can also find externally produced material, particularly tactics-related, from various sources, including military and jihadist manuals.¹⁸⁰ In self-produced compendiums, long-form prose has gradually been replaced by short vignettes akin to social media posts. This format is also evident in the so-called “Saints cards”, which resemble fact sheets with attack details (e.g. photos from the scene and weaponry) alongside links to additional material, such as manifestos and documentaries.¹⁸¹

However, explicit knowledge alone is insufficient if it is not supplemented by tacit knowledge. In Fascist Forge, newcomers were required to articulate their ideological positions, which were subsequently scrutinised by more experienced participants who engaged in doctrinal instruction, recommended readings and encouraged new members to take an informal exam to test their newly-acquired knowledge.¹⁸² Despite these instances of rudimentary intimate learning, self-learning has remained the norm.¹⁸³ In the absence of formal learning environments, a shared language and cultural references become crucial, not only for interpretation but also for converting tacit knowledge through externalisation and socialisation. One subtle form of socialisation is “lurking”, a type of passive online observation akin to vicarious learning.¹⁸⁴ However, nothing illustrates the process of knowledge conversion as vividly as Payton Gendron’s Discord logs. These logs provide a detailed, real-time account of the tactical and technical aspects of attack preparation, while also offering insight into his mental preparation.¹⁸⁵ The journal-type entries detail his evidence-based decisions on issues ranging from the best time to attack to what shirt and socks to wear, interweaved with anxiety-ridden outbursts of debilitating self-doubt.¹⁸⁶

This insider perspective into the attack preparation process constitutes a critical component of the learning process; the closest one can get short of actual involvement. However, it does not solve the main challenge of practice, which is to translate all this knowledge into actual skills. Some accelerationists have suggested gaming as a substitute for real-world training. For example, the perpetrator of the 2024 Turkey attack reviewed the FPS game “Receiver” a day before the attack, stating it was “good for practicing gun handling virtually.”¹⁸⁷ Accelerationism has also developed several immersive games,¹⁸⁸ allowing players to simulate far-right attacks.¹⁸⁹

However, repeated calls for forming local cells and engaging in physical training indicate a recognition that genuine preparation requires offline practice. It is barely surprising, then, that accelerationist literature encourages the recruitment of individuals from the security forces or with other specialised skills (e.g. IT skills).¹⁹⁰ These can provide operational intelligence¹⁹¹

or take the role of “teachers.” Moreover, accelerationist publications stress the need for developing survival skills and creating cells consisting of individuals with a variety of useful talents.¹⁹² Consequently, various accelerationist groups have organised training camps¹⁹³ and sought to “infiltrate” martial arts and fitness clubs.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, some individuals have travelled to Ukraine to gain combat experience, which they can later apply either as perpetrators or as instructors,¹⁹⁵ indicating that learning can seamlessly transition between online radicalisation and real-world violence, making far-right accelerationism more lethal and adaptable.

Concluding Remarks

Learning is fundamental to human and social processes and interactions. It is essential for survival and improving one’s ability to achieve one’s objectives. Malevolent actors, such as extremist and terrorist groups, are no exception. Operating under conditions of extreme uncertainty and danger, these groups must continuously learn to adapt, both to evade law enforcement and advance their goals.

This article examined the process of learning in a specific subtype of extremist organisations: leaderless movements. These movements are widely perceived as lacking the cohesion and mechanisms that make learning possible beyond their individual members. However, this article demonstrates that they are capable of learning at a collective level and, thus, they can be regarded as “learning organisations.” Although they differ from hierarchical groups in terms of structural design, the learning process is similar. Assisted by modern ICT, these movements forge a common identity that infuses their learning process. By the same token, they develop mechanisms for interpreting, storing and disseminating knowledge, creating organisational memories that integrate, retain and retrieve information for both current and aspiring members.

In this process, leaderless movements face certain advantages and disadvantages. Their decentralised structure fosters openness and a culture that encourages learning, while they have access to a vast amount of online information. However, it limits the available sources since they can learn mostly from vicarious experience, while they cannot benefit from personal experience, given the limited number of attacks per individual/cell. Myths, symbols and movement-specific language help them interpret gathered knowledge in ways that surmount their dispersed character, creating shared identities and meaning. Yet, despite efforts to compile and systematise knowledge, they remain vulnerable to information overload. Modern ICT plays a crucial role in mitigating these challenges, facilitating knowledge storage, dissemination, and even the transmission of tacit knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible to the broader movement.

A striking example of this dynamic is far-right accelerationism. Emerging in opposition to established far-right groups, it has demonstrated a noteworthy capacity to sustain a geographically, and even doctrinally diverse movement. Collective learning has been fundamental for this process. Far-right accelerationism emphasises the need for adaptability, drawing knowledge from both traditional fascist writings and unconventional sources like jihadist materials, manifestos, fiction and social media, to learn from past successes and failures. Coded language, internet culture and distinct aesthetics enable learning, fostering a shared identity and a subcultural cryptography that are used to collectively interpret and store knowledge. While explicit knowledge is easily condensed and spread across the movement, tacit knowledge is disseminated through a process of socialisation and externalisation that heavily relies on ICT but also manifests offline.

In this respect, learning within leaderless movements remains an evolving and underexplored field. This article serves as a first step towards a more comprehensive study of how these

movements learn and innovate. A deeper understanding of their learning sources, processes, and outcomes will provide critical insights into the shifting nature of violent extremism and its evolving organisational structures.

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- 65 Jackson et al., *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1*, 1:38–9.
- 66 Lori A. Brainard, Katherine M. Boland, and John G. McNutt, "Social Media and Leaderless Social Movement Organizations," in *Technology, Activism, and Social Justice in a Digital Age*, Edited by John G., ed. John G. McNutt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 185–98; Hai Liang and Francis LF Lee, "Opinion Leadership in a Leaderless Movement: Discussion of the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in the 'LIHKG' Web Forum," *Social Movement Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2023): 671, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2021.1989294>.
- 67 Phillip W. Gray, "Leaderless Resistance, Networked Organization, and Ideological Hegemony," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 5 (2013): 655–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.674077>.
- 68 Lubrano, "Lone Leaders of Leaderless Resisters."
- 69 Ari Ben Am and Gabriel Weimann, "Fabricated Martyrs," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 5 (2020).
- 70 For a detailed exploration of Iron March's role, see HE Upchurch, "The Iron March Forum and the Evolution of the 'Skull Mask' Neo-Fascist Network," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 10 (2021): 27–37.
- 71 Trujillo and Jackson, "Organizational Learning and Terrorist Groups," 61.
- 72 Nori Katagiri claims, for example, that ISIS was "closed" to opportunities to learn because the group's leader, al-Baghdadi, lacked personal exposure to learning opportunities. Nori Katagiri, "Learning Patterns and Failures: An Analysis of ISIS Operations between 2013 and 2019," in *How Terrorists Learn: Organizational Learning and Beyond*, ed. Carolin Görzig et al. (London: Routledge, 2024), 84–100.
- 73 The perpetrator of the 2019 El Paso attack, Patrick Crusius, for example, warned his readers and possible imitators not to choose their targets driven by a desire to "fulfil [their] super soldier Call of Duty fantasy." Cited in Fürstenberg, "Communities of Hateful Practice," 21. Anders Breivik posed a related question in his manifesto, where he wondered whether it is better to manufacture a bomb or stick to using firearms, implying that success in mission is more important than a newsworthy spectacular failed attempt. Cited in Paul Cruickshank, "Learning Terror," in *Understanding Terrorism Innovation and Learning: Al-Qaeda and Beyond*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp and Magnus Normark (New York: Routledge, 2015), 137–95.
- 74 Robert Evans, "The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror," *BellingCat*, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/08/04/the-el-paso-shooting-and-the-gamification-of-terror/>.
- 75 An example of how online ridicule and mockery can lead to learning is the discussion that followed the 2019 failed attempt by Stephan Balliet to use a 3D-printed weapon to attack a synagogue in Halle, Germany. Fürstenberg, "Communities of Hateful Practice," 46.
- 76 Heikkila and Gerlak, "Building a Conceptual Approach to Collective Learning," 487; George P Huber, "Organizational Learning: The Contributing Processes and the Literatures," *Organization Science* 2, no. 1 (1991): 88–115, <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2.1.88>.
- 77 Jackson et al., *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1*, 1:10–14. Similar models are proposed by Kettle and Mumford, "Terrorist Learning"; Görzig et al., *How Terrorists Learn*.
- 78 Jackson et al., *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1*, 1:11–12.
- 79 Marc-André Argentino, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Emmi Conley, "'One Struggle': Examining Narrative Syncretism between Accelerationists and Salafi-Jihadists" (London: International Centre

for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), 2022), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ICSR-Report-One-Struggle-Examining-Narrative-Syncretism-between-Accelerationists-and-Salafi%E2%80%91Jihadists.pdf>; Moustafa Ayad, "Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures" (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021), <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>.

80 Jackson et al., *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1*, 1:12–3.

81 Heikkilä and Gerlak, "Building a Conceptual Approach to Collective Learning," 489.

82 Heikkilä and Gerlak, 489–90; Gary Ackerman, "The Theoretical Underpinnings of Terrorist Innovation Decisions," in *Understanding Terrorism Innovation and Learning: Al-Qaeda and Beyond*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp and Magnus Normark (New York: Routledge, 2015), 30.

83 Jackson et al., *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1*, 1:13.

84 Marina Eleftheriadou, "Fragmentation and Cooperation in the Jihadi International (Sub) System: 'Islamic State' vs. Al-Qaeda and Beyond," *Religions* 11, no. 4 (2020): 168, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11040168>.

85 Ravndal, "From Bombs to Books, and Back Again?," 14.

86 Moustafa Ayad, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Audrey Alexander, "The Cloud Caliphate: Archiving the Islamic State in Real-Time" (Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), 2021), <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-cloud-caliphate-archiving-the-islamic-state-in-real-time/>.

87 The "Encyclopaedia of Jihad" is possibly the most well-known compendium, as it has been found on several jihadist attackers' computers. The "Lone Mujahid Pocketbook", which collected excerpts from the "open-source jihad" column in the AQAP Inspire magazine is another example. For far-right compendiums, see the following section.

88 Carol Winkler and Jonathan Pieslak, "Multimodal Visual/Sound Redundancy in ISIS Videos: A Close Analysis of Martyrdom and Training Segments," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (September 2, 2018): 345–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2018.1503701>.

89 Jacob Ware, "Testament to Murder: The Violent Far-Right's Increasing Use of Terrorist Manifestos," ICCT Policy Brief (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2020); Graham Macklin and Tore Bjørgo, "Breivik's Long Shadow? The Impact of the July 22, 2011 Attacks on the Modus Operandi of Extreme-Right Lone Actor Terrorists," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 3 (2021): 14–36; Julia Kupper and Tanya Karoli Christensen, "The Contagion and Copycat Effect in Transnational Far-Right Terrorism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 4 (2022).

90 Kenney uses the terms *techné* and *metis* to describe a similar distinction, where *techné* is equivalent to explicit knowledge and *metis* resembles but is not identical to tacit knowledge, as it refers to skills such as dexterity, ingenuity or cunning. He identifies one additional obstacle in that *metis* is often context-dependent, rendering transfer across groups or militants operating in different places not only difficult but possibly useless as well. Kenney, "Organisational Learning and Islamic Militancy," 17–8. As Kenney aptly points out: "Street smarts in London are different from cave smarts in Afghanistan." Kenney, 18. This echoes the scepticism of scholars in organisation studies who considered some types of knowledge as too culturally and organisationally-specific to allow successful sharing and integration between firms from different cultural backgrounds. David Lei, John W Slocum Jr, and Robert A Pitts, "Building Cooperative Advantage: Managing Strategic Alliances to Promote Organizational Learning," *Journal of World Business* 32, no. 3 (1997): 217, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9516\(97\)90008-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-9516(97)90008-0). However, arguably, the interconnectedness and the globalisation-induced cultural flattening of the modern world significantly reduce these differences, although it would be an exaggeration to claim that they are entirely absent.

91 Kim Cragin et al., *Sharing the Dragon's Teeth: Terrorist Groups and the Exchange of New Technologies* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2007), 14–6.

92 Gary Ackerman, "Understanding Terrorist Innovation through the Broader Innovation Context," in *Terrorist Innovations in Weapons of Mass Effect: Preconditions, Causes, and Predictive Indicators*, ed. Maria J. Rasmussen and Mohammed M. Hafez (Ft. Belvoir, VA: Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, 2010), 71.

93 Ikujiro Nonaka, "A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation," *Organization Science* 5, no. 1 (1994): 14–37, <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.5.1.14>; Ikujiro Nonaka, Ryoko Toyama, and Noboru Konno, "SECI, Ba and Leadership: A Unified Model of Dynamic Knowledge Creation," *Long Range Planning* 33, no. 1 (2000): 5–34, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-6301\(99\)00115-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-6301(99)00115-6).

94 Nonaka, "A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation," 19.

95 Nonaka, Toyama, and Konno, "SECI, Ba and Leadership," 9.

96 Heikkilä and Gerlak, "Building a Conceptual Approach to Collective Learning," 498.

97 Jackson et al., *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1*, 1:14.

98 Brian A. Jackson, "Organizational Learning and Terrorist Groups," in *Organizational Learning in the Global Context*, ed. M. Leann Brown, Michael Kenney, and Michael J. Zarkin (London: Routledge, 2016), 163.

99 A growing body of literature approaches (Western) jihadism and far-right extremism from the perspective of subcultures both in the sense of rebellion against the mainstream and subcultural styles. See for example Tony Karas, "Cultural Criminology, Counter-Extremism and the Contemporary Far Right,"

Crime, Media, Culture, 2024, 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590241279413>; Simon Cottee, “The Western Jihadi Subculture and Subterranean Values,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 60, no. 3 (April 4, 2020): 762–81, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azz081>; Jeppe Fuglsang Larsen and Sune Qvotrup Jensen, “The New Far Right, Subcultural Theory, and the Sociology of Emotions,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, January 4, 2023, 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2163458>; Sune Qvotrup Jensen, Jeppe Fuglsang Larsen, and Sveinung Sandberg, “Rap, Islam and Jihadi Cool: The Attractions of the Western Jihadi Subculture,” *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 18, no. 3 (August 2022): 430–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590211025573>; Thomas Hegghammer, ed., *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139086141>.

100 Lisa Bogerts and Maik Fielitz, “The Visual Culture of Far-Right Terrorism,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, March 31, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/03/31/the-visual-culture-of-far-right-terrorism/>; Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “What Makes a Symbol Far Right? Co-Opted and Missed Meanings in Far-Right Iconography,” in *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US*, ed. Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 123–35. Similar tropes have been used by the jihadist movement, which interestingly often mimics the far-right aesthetics. Imran Awan, “Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media,” *Society* 54, no. 2 (2017): 138–49, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0114-0>; Ayad, “Islamogram.” 101 Kenney for example claims that in jihadist cells knowledge was often shared in informal settings where jihadists would gather to watch a movie or play football. Kenney, “Organizational Learning and Islamic Militancy,” 58. He notes a similar trend in criminal networks. Kenney, “Organizational Learning Processes in Colombian Drug Trafficking Networks.”

102 Nonaka, “A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation,” 19.

103 Graham Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age,” *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (2019): 20.

104 Nonaka, Toyama, and Konno, “SECI, Ba and Leadership,” 10.

105 James JF Forest, “Training Camps and Other Centers of Learning,” in *Teaching Terror*, ed. James JF Forest (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 100. Others were slightly more optimistic, but overall scholars agreed that the Internet’s role was more that of a library or “university” than an actual training camp. See Anne Stenersen, “The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 2 (2008): 215–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550801920790>; Weimann, “Virtual Training Camps.”

106 Cori E. Dauber et al., “Call of Duty: Jihad - How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (2019); Miron Lakomy, “Let’s Play a Video Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (2019): 383–406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903>; Nick Robinson and Joe Whittaker, “Playing for Hate? Extremism, Terrorism, and Videogames,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2020, 1–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1866740>.

107 Lakomy, “Let’s Play a Video Game,” 386.

108 Bajwa, “Malevolent Creativity & the Metaverse”; Gabriel Weimann and Roy Dimant, “The Metaverse and Terrorism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 2 (2023): 92–107.

109 Weimann and Dimant, “The Metaverse and Terrorism,” 97–9.

110 Studies have shown, for example, that militants with prior criminal convictions for violent crimes crossed into terrorism much faster (and of course much more efficiently) compared to radicalised individuals with no such experience, Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, “Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 6 (2016): 32–3. and familiarisation with violence was one of the main reasons.

111 Musharbash, “The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism,” 41.

112 Ware, “Testament to Murder,” 6.

113 Matthew Kriner et al., “Behind the Skull Mask: An Overview of Militant Accelerationism” (*Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET)*, 2024), 11, <https://gnet-research.org/2024/04/04/behind-the-skull-mask-an-overview-of-militant-accelerationism/>.

114 For example, one Atomwaffen Division (AWD) publication reads “[a]nyone on Earth can be Atomwaffen Division... Atomwaffen Division has no member list or card carrying official membership, therefore the operative is not a member.” Atomwaffen Division, “AWD Program,” 2020, 3.

115 Bethan Johnson and Matthew Feldman, “Siege Culture After Siege: Anatomy of a Neo-Nazi Terrorist Doctrine,” *ICCT Research Paper*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.19165/2021.1.07>.

116 Upchurch, “The Iron March Forum and the Evolution of the ‘Skull Mask’ Neo-Fascist Network.”

117 Newhouse, “The Threat Is the Network.”

118 Fürstenberg, “Communities of Hateful Practice,” 8.

119 Kriner et al., “Behind the Skull Mask: An Overview of Militant Accelerationism,” 17. Another interesting conceptualisation of accelerationism’s organisational structure is articulated by one of its members, Juraj Krajčík, the perpetrator of the 2022 Bratislava attack. In his manifesto, Krajčík outlines “white resistance to ZOG” [Zionist Occupation Government] as comprising of three “prongs” that emerge from a single “stem.” Juraj Krajčík, “A Call to Arms,” 2022, 28. The first prong, the *Movement*, consists of “pub-

lic-facing groups [that] resist ZOG in an overt, non-violent way.” The second prong, *Passive Resistance*, “resist ZOG in a covert, non-violent way”, essentially building the substructure that will erode ZOG control and will replace it once it collapses. The last prong, *Active Resistance*, refers to covert local cells or lone actors like himself, who conduct violent attacks to accelerate the collapse of the “System.” As Kriner and colleagues note, some violent actors may fulfil this role without knowing it or deliberately subscribing to accelerationism or knowing the latter’s ideological tenets. Kriner et al., “Behind the Skull Mask: An Overview of Militant Accelerationism,” 18.

120 Johnson and Feldman, “Siege Culture After Siege,” 15.

121 John Lewis and Alex Newhouse, “Be Careful Attributing Anything to AWD,” *Accelerationist Research Consortium*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.accresearch.org/shortanalysis/be-careful-attributing-anything-to-awd>.

122 Newhouse, “The Threat Is the Network,” 17.

123 Fürstenberg, “Communities of Hateful Practice,” 9.

124 See, for example, Brenton Tarrant, “The Great Replacement,” 2019; John Earnest, “Manifesto,” 2019, 8; Payton Gendron, “Manifesto,” 2022, 14; Krajčik, “A Call to Arms,” 11, 64.

125 As Brendan O’Connor pointedly noted: “Iron March was like the Velvet Underground of Trump-era fascist organizing: not very many people used it, but everyone who did went out and started a neo-Nazi terror cell.” Brendan O’Connor, “The Accelerating Gyre,” *The Baffler*, no. 52 (2020), <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-accelerating-gyre-oconnor>. See also Deebea Shadnia et al., “Militant Accelerationism Coalitions: A Case Study in Neo-Fascist Accelerationist Coalition Building Online” (Tech Against Terrorism & Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, 2022), https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/hubfs/CTEC_TAT-Accelerationism-Report.pdf; Upchurch, “The Iron March Forum and the Evolution of the ‘Skull Mask’ Neo-Fascist Network”; Samantha Walther and Andrew McCoy, “US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 2 (2021): 100–124; Lee and Knott, “Fascist Aspirants.”

126 Jacques Singer-Emery and Chelsea Bray, “The Iron March Data Dump Provides a Window Into How White Supremacists Communicate and Recruit” (Lawfare, 2020), <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/iron-march-data-dump-provides-window-how-white-supremacists-communicate-and-recruit>. The lack of security awareness prevailed despite the fact that Iron March publications called members to be security conscious. Iron March, *E-Sec By Way of Common Sense*, Version 1, 2016.

127 Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), “Atomwaffen Division,” *Intelligence Report*, n.d., <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/atomwaffen-division/>.

128 Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, Chelsea Daymon, and Emil Archambault, “Learning from Foes: How Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists Embrace and Mimic Islamic State’s Use of Emerging Technologies” (Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 2022), 16.

129 Atomwaffen Division, “AWD Program”; Terrorgram, *Do It for the ‘Gram: The Collective Writings of Terrorgram*, n.d., 92–95.

130 Terrorgram, *Do It for the ‘Gram*, 48–50.

131 Matthew Loadenthal, “Infrastructure, Sabotage, and Accelerationism,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2021, <https://gnet-research.org/2021/02/15/infrastructure-sabotage-and-accelerationism/>.

132 Terrorgram, *Do It for the ‘Gram*, 152–53.

133 Upchurch, “The Iron March Forum and the Evolution of the ‘Skull Mask’ Neo-Fascist Network,” 30–1.

134 Kriner et al., “Behind the Skull Mask: An Overview of Militant Accelerationism,” 21; Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), “Alleged Patriot Front Offshoot May Be Astroturfed by Neo-Nazi Accelerationists,” 2024, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/alleged-patriot-front-offshoot-may-be-astroturfed-by-neo-nazi-accelerationists/; Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), “Visions of Chaos: Weighing the Violent Legacy of Iron March,” 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/visions-chaos-weighing-violent-legacy-iron-march/>.

135 Newhouse, “The Threat Is the Network,” 21.

136 Lewis and Newhouse, “Be Careful Attributing Anything to AWD.”

137 Several manifestos trace the beginning of their radicalisation path to their desire to learn more about an issue, often starting with a simple google search. For example, for Dylan Roof it was googling “black on white crime” in the wake of the outcry after the shooting of Trayvon Benjamin. Dylan Roof, “The Last Rhodesian,” 2015, 1.

138 Among the motivations listed by Fascist Forge’s members in their self-provided bios, the two most common were learning and engaging with like-minded individuals. Lee and Knott, “Fascist Aspirants,” 225–26.

139 Atomwaffen Division, “AWD Program,” 9; Iron March, *Open Letter to the White Man*, Version 3, 2015, 31.

140 Iron March, *Open Letter to the White Man*, 27; Terrorgram, *Do It for the ‘Gram*, 100.

141 Iron March, *Open Letter to the White Man*, 9.

142 Atomwaffen Division, “AWD Program,” 4–6; Iron March, *Open Letter to the White Man*, 22; Iron March, *Next Leap*, Version 2, 2018, 87.

143 Accelerationist forums and websites often feature specific sections dedicated to essential readings to where newcomers are often directed. Fascist Forge named it “The Crucible”, while AWD included essential readings in their website’s “Join Us” section. Lee and Knott, “Fascist Aspirants,” 223; Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), “Atomwaffen Division.” For other examples of reading lists, see Atomwaffen Division, “AWD Program,” 10; Krajčik, “A Call to Arms,” 63; Iron March, *Open Letter to the White Man*, 98–99. For an overview of reading lists and digital publishing, see Helen Young, “Far-Right Extremism and Digital Book Publishing” (Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 2023), <https://gnet-research.org/2024/09/23/far%E2%80%90right-extremism-and-digital-book-publishing/>.

144 Mason’s influence in accelerationist circles is profound. AWD came in contact with Mason, convincing him to step out of “retirement” and obscurity. Between 2017 and 2018, he wrote a column in the style of Siege, while several new editions of Siege were published, incorporating new material produced by AWD. He also took part in an AWD gathering. Johnson and Feldman, “Siege Culture After Siege,” 7; Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), “Atomwaffen Division.”

145 Joshua Molloy, “13 Years On: The Enduring Influence of Breivik’s Manifesto on Far-Right Terror,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2024, <https://gnet-research.org/2024/07/24/13-years-on-the-enduring-influence-of-breiviks-manifesto-on-far-right-terror/>; Ware, “Testament to Murder.”

146 For example, an Atomwaffen publication stated, “We remember those who stand out because of their victories and their failures.” Atomwaffen Division, “AWD Program,” 2.

147 Fürstenberg, “Communities of Hateful Practice,” 43; Gendron, “Manifesto,” 143.

148 Payton Gendron, “Discord Logs,” 2022, 8; Krajčik, “A Call to Arms,” 62.

149 Fürstenberg, “Communities of Hateful Practice,” 46–47.

150 Iron March’s founder, Alisher Mukhitdinov (aka Alexander Slavros), also wrote a fictional novel titled *A Squire’s Trial*.

151 Matthew Kriner, H. E. Upchurch, and W. Aaron, “Examining the Denver Shooter’s Ideological Views,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/01/03/examining-the-denver-shooters-ideological-views/>.

152 Abbie Richards, “Examining White Supremacist and Militant Accelerationism Trends on TikTok,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/07/18/examining-white-supremacist-and-militant-accelerationism-trends-on-tiktok/>.

153 Mariam Shah, “Amplifying Extremism: White Supremacists and Far-Right Groups on Spotify,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2024, <https://gnet-research.org/2024/10/25/amplifying-extremism-white-supremacists-and-far-right-groups-on-spotify/>.

154 In addition to his manifesto, Payton Gendron released 673 pages of Discord logs documenting his thoughts and preparations in the six months leading up to the attack. These logs resemble the diary entries found in Anders Breivik’s manifesto. A comparable function, though not in diary form, can also be seen in Robert Bowers’s public posting history on Gab.

155 Iron March, *Next Leap*, 86. For similar suggestions to learn from enemies, see Terrorgram, *The Hard Reset*, n.d., 171.

156 For examples of fascination that borders admiration, see National Action, “The Necessity of White Jihad,” n.d.

157 The video announcing the creation of an AWD cell in Germany featured a pledge of allegiance, similar to the ones offered to the “Islamic State.” The Soufan Center, “The Atomwaffen Division: The Evolution of the White Supremacy Threat” (New York: The Soufan Center, 2020), 19. Also, reportedly far-right extremists have used the “Tawhid” hand gesture and “a Nazified version of the Shahada.” Ariel Koch, “White Jihad: The Jihadification of White Supremacy” (Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 2023), <https://gnet-research.org/2023/08/23/white-jihad-the-jihadification-of-white-supremacy/>.

158 Koch, “White Jihad”; Terrorgram, *Do It for the ‘Gram*, 44.

159 Veilleux-Lepage, Daymon, and Archambault, “Learning from Foes,” 17.

160 Anonymous, “Pranking Clowns in Minecraft... and Getting Away with It,” 2022, 13–14; Terrorgram, *Do It for the ‘Gram*, 89–91, 111, 125, 213–14, 227.

161 Lee and Knott, “Fascist Aspirants,” 233.

162 Newhouse, “The Threat Is the Network,” 19; Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism (CTEC), “Dangerous Organizations and Bad Actors: National Action,” 2023, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/dangerous-organizations-and-bad-actors-5>.

163 Stephan Balliet’s manifesto and the streaming of his attack was done in English and not in his mother tongue German. That was the case also for Juraj Krajcik, who wrote his manifesto in English and not Slovak.

164 The article titled “Symbolism and Fascism” was authored by Alisher Mukhitdinov (aka Alexander Slavros) and Gabriel Sohler-Chaput (aka Zeiger), Iron March’s founder and prominent contributor respectively. Iron March, *Next Leap*, 210.

165 Iron March, *Open Letter to the White Man*, 78.

166 Iron March, *Next Leap*, 202.

167 National Action, “Strategy and Promotion,” 2013, 3, 6; National Action, “Year Review,” 2014, 9.

168 National Action, “Year Review,” 4. See also Gendron, “Manifesto.” It is no surprise then that although Breivik is revered as the first “Saint”, his rather dry manifesto and particularly the two first books are rarely cited. Molloy, “13 Years On: The Enduring Influence of Breivik’s Manifesto on Far-Right Terror.”

169 National Action, “Strategy and Promotion,” 10; National Action, “Year Review,” 8, 12, 14. A similar argument was made by Krajčík who suggested that extreme propaganda is key for pushing the Overton window in their favour. Krajčík, “A Call to Arms,” 53.

170 One example is the branding of Nazi insignia alongside logos (e.g. Nike and Adidas) Chris Allen, “National Action: What I Discovered about the Ideology of Britain’s Violent Neo-Nazi Youth Movement,” *The Conversation*, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/national-action-what-i-discovered-about-the-ideology-of-britains-violent-neo-nazi-youth-movement-83527>; Chris Allen, “National Action: Links between the Far Right, Extremism and Terrorism” (Commission for Countering Extremism, 2019).

171 John Hendry and Anthony F. Lemieux, “The Visual and Rhetorical Styles of Atomwaffen Division and Their Implications,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 14, no. 2 (May 4, 2021): 145, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2021.1913203>.

172 Ashley A. Mattheis, Mark Robinson, and Austin Blair, “Plug-and-Play Propaganda: Understanding Production Quality in Atomwaffen Division Videos,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/07/23/plug-and-play-propaganda-understanding-production-quality-in-atomwaffen-division-videos/>.

173 Hendry and Lemieux, “The Visual and Rhetorical Styles of Atomwaffen Division and Their Implications,” 147.

174 Starting with Tarrant, accelerationist manifestos are filled with trolling references to individuals supposedly involved in orchestrating the attacks. For example, Earnest sarcastically credited PewDiePie with planning and funding his attack. Earnest, “Manifesto,” 170. A particularly notable instance occurred when a Twitter user tricked celebrity gossip columnist Perez Hilton into saying “Read Siege.” Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), “Visions of Chaos: Weighing the Violent Legacy of Iron March.”

175 See for example Terrorgram, *Do It for the ‘Gram*, 30, 38, 177–78.

176 The perpetrator of the 2024 Eskisehir (Turkey) attack ranked possible targets according to their “difficulty level” and awarded points to different weapons and casualties. Arthur Bradley, “‘Dead Society’: Tracing the Online Dimension of a Militant Accelerationist-Inspired Attack in Turkey” (Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 2024), <https://gnet-research.org/2024/08/16/dead-society-tracing-the-online-dimension-of-a-militant-accelerationist-inspired-attack-in-turkey/>. Likewise, Terrorgram publication “Hard Reset” featured bomb-making instructions designed to resemble the game Minecraft. Terrorgram, *The Hard Reset*, 60.

177 For example, Tarrant used the abbreviation “JK” (just kidding) throughout his manifesto Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 97.

178 Terrorgram, *Do It for the ‘Gram*.

179 Terrorgram’s “Do it for the ‘Gram” and “Hard Reset” are among the most well-known. In these compendiums, one can find all sorts of instructional material, including a “potion” to be consumed before an attack and discount codes to buy body armour. Terrorgram, 130, 200.

180 One example is the “Tactics of the Crescent Moon: Militant Muslim Combat Methods”, which was posted online by AWD leader Brandon Russell prior to his arrest. Martin Laryš, “‘White Jihad’ and ‘White Sharia’: Jihadism as an Instrument of Intra-Extremist Outbidding among Right-Wing Extremists,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 36, no. 7 (October 2, 2024): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2023.2214240>. Tellingly, Russell also attempted to send bomb-making instructions to his comrades while in prison. Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), “Visions of Chaos: Weighing the Violent Legacy of Iron March.” Moreover, FKD posted a screengrab from an ISIS bomb-making video with instruction how to make TATP bombs. Ben Makuch and Mack Lamoureux, “Neo-Nazis Are Glorifying Osama Bin Laden,” *Vice*, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/neo-nazis-are-glorifying-osama-bin-laden/>. Similarly, the Base shared a plethora of manuals on various topics, ranging from gunsmithing and bomb-making to guerrilla war and counter-surveillance. Ben Makuch and Mack Lamoureux, “Neo-Nazis Are Organizing Secretive Paramilitary Training Across America,” *Vice*, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/neo-nazis-are-organizing-secretive-paramilitary-training-across-america/>. A special subcategory of instructional material is those related to 3-D printed guns. Rueben Dass, “3D-Printed Weapons and the Far-Right: The Finnish Accelerationist Cell” (Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 2023), <https://gnet-research.org/2023/10/06/3d-printed-weapons-and-the-far-right-the-2023-finnish-accelerationist-cell/>; The Soufan Center, “The Emerging Threat of 3D-Printed Firearms,” September 20, 2024, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-september-20/>.

181 Jonathan Lewis, Joshua Molloy, and Graham Macklin, “The Lineage of Violence: Saints Culture and Militant Accelerationist Terrorism,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/04/27/the-lineage-of-violence-saints-culture-and-militant-accelerationist-terrorism/>.

182 Lee and Knott, “Fascist Aspirants,” 226–27.

183 Lee and Knott, “Fascist Aspirants.” A less formal Q&A test was suggested by AWD as well. Atom-

waffen Division, "AWD Program," 4. Interestingly, Hard Reset provided instructions on pouring cement onto rail tracks, presented in the form of an educator-pupil exchange. Terrorgram, *The Hard Reset*, 41.

184 Lee and Knott, "Fascist Aspirants," 228; Fürstenberg, "Communities of Hateful Practice," 31.

185 The issue of mental preparation is also raised by Krajčák. Krajčák, "A Call to Arms," 59.

186 Gendron, "Discord Logs," 2, 15, 59, 62, 73, 77, 149.

187 Bradley, "Dead Society."

188 For a study of far-right themed games, see Emily Thompson and Galen Lamphere-Englund, "30 Years of Trends in Terrorist and Extremist Games" (Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 2024).

189 Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 98; Kriner et al., "Behind the Skull Mask: An Overview of Militant Accelerationism," 24.

190 Allen, "National Action: Links between the Far Right, Extremism and Terrorism," 12; Singer-Emery and Bray, "The Iron March Data Dump Provides a Window Into How White Supremacists Communicate and Recruit."

191 There have been several recorded cases of security forces' members that shared online classified information that could have been used in attacks. Jacob Ware, "Fighting Back: The Atomwaffen Division, Countering Violent Extremism, and the Evolving Crackdown on Far-Right Terrorism in America," *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 25 (2020): 84.

192 See for example, Atomwaffen Division, "AWD Program," 5; Terrorgram, *Do It for the 'Gram*, 22, 59, 104, 168. A similar trend was noted by Lee and Knott in *Fascist Forge*. Lee and Knott, "Fascist Aspirants," p. 229. In this regard, personal experience in criminal activities can be equally valuable both for individual learning and for spreading knowledge within the movement. Studies have shown that a large number of white supremacists in the United States and Europe have criminal records; many for violent crimes. Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 146.

193 Allen, "National Action: Links between the Far Right, Extremism and Terrorism"; The Soufan Center, "The Atomwaffen Division"; Musharbash, "The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism."

194 Obsession with fitness and martial arts is responsible for the creation of so-called "Active Clubs", which have seen an exponential growth in terms of popularity and spread. Center on Extremism Counterterrorism, Terrorism and Accelerationism Research Consortium, "Accelerationism: The Active Club Network" (Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 2024), <https://gnet-research.org/2024/07/25/accelerationism-the-active-club-network/>.

195 Musharbash, "The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism," 43.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Enemy Perception and External Communication Strategies of the Islamic State Khorasan Province: An Assessment of Voice of Khurasan and Sawt al-Khurasan.

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Abstract: The international attention on the Islamic State Khorasan Province has increased since the Taliban takeover in 2021. International assessments emphasise its growing international threat, potentially targeting Western countries. The Khorasan branch of the Islamic State has intensified its propaganda efforts to a level comparable to the Islamic State central at its peak, and is the only branch producing magazines in English since the decline of ISIS. This study examines the attitudes towards other nations and enemy perceptions expressed in the English language Voice of Khurasan and Arabic Sawt al-Khurasan, published between January 2022 and June 2023. We focus on attitudes communicated by Islamic State Khorasan Province toward Western and non-Western nations, as well as how these attitudes differ between the Arabic and English magazines. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative machine learning tools, BERTopic and sentiment analysis, and qualitative categorisation frameworks. The primary data consists of 26 magazine issues processed through Optical Character Recognition and machine translation tools. The analysis shows that, while foreign policy (i.e. enemy perception) represents the most significant theme in both magazines, Sawt al-Khurasan contains more explicit threats and strategic advice targeting regional actors, while Voice of Khurasan remains primarily ideologically critical towards both Western and regional targets. These results suggest that ISKP's propaganda reflects a predominantly regional focus, challenging the narrative of an immediate global threat posed to Western countries. The study underscores the need for deeper attention to ISKP's regional ambitions and its evolving media strategies.

Keywords: Islamic State, Afghanistan, propaganda, violent extremist discourse, computational methods.

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Introduction

Our foreign policy is to fight and combat the enemies of the religion until the last piece of land that was taken from the believers is regained. (Sawt al-Khurasan)

Recent international threat assessments identify Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) as a leading security threat emanating from Afghanistan, surpassing both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in its potential international impact.¹ This significant increase in the perceived threat posed by ISKP gained prominence following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, culminating in the subsequent Taliban government takeover.² ISKP has leveraged the greater strategic latitude it gained due to this power shift to increase its recruitment efforts, its propaganda output, and to intensify its attacks targeting the Taliban, as well as non-Afghan targets.³ Consequently, public officials and military personnel have expressed worry that Afghanistan could evolve into a breeding ground for terrorism, increasing ISKP's potential for operating internationally.⁴

Though past attacks on the Iraqi embassy in Kabul in 2017 and the 2016 assault on the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad demonstrate the group's willingness to target non-Afghan entities, these events did not invite concern about its international threat before 2021. Notably, from 2015 to 2018, ISKP expressed confidence in dominating large Afghan territories, but by late 2019, optimism waned due to territorial losses, the Islamic State's defeats in Syria and Iraq, and persistent clashes with the Taliban. However, recent violent activity by ISKP in neighbouring Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Iran, as well as Russia since 2021, signifies an expansion of ISKP's operational capacity.⁵

During the heavy military targeting by the Taliban, ISKP has intensified its media strategy to produce propaganda comparable to the Islamic State's peak in Iraq and Syria.⁶ Since 2021, ISKP has centralised its propaganda under the Al-Azaim Foundation, expanding content production to include English, Hindi, Malayalam, Russian, Urdu, Tajik, Uzbek, and occasionally Uyghur; in addition to the traditional Arabic, Pashto, and Dari.⁷ The group also launched two new online magazines, Voice of Khurasan (2022) and Sawt al-Khurasan (2023), further expanding its media ecosystem. As global interest in ISKP's activities and its perceived threat to the international community grows, this paper presents a timely analysis of ISKP's understudied views expressed in its propaganda magazines. We make a methodological contribution by combining quantitative machine learning approaches to investigate latent topics in the magazines in parallel with a thematic close reading of key articles to investigate the key narratives in articles relating to ISKP's enemy perception. The unit of analysis is the individual article, with the dataset comprising all articles published in Voice of Khurasan (VoK), issues 1–26 (January 2022–June 2023), and Sawt al-Khurasan (SaK), issues 1–8 (January 2023–May 2023), thereby offering a comprehensive overview of ISKP's magazine output during this period. Machine learning tools are rarely employed in the current strategic communications studies literature. Hence, the present paper offers a useful blueprint for employing quantitative tools to analyse large textual content in this field. The analysis is primarily concerned with answering the following questions about ISKP's external communications: What attitudes do they express in their propaganda magazines toward Western and non-Western nations, i.e. what is their enemy perception? What differences can we observe in ISKP's external communications and the conflicts it is preoccupied with to its Arabic-speaking and English-speaking audiences through VoK and SaK?

Our findings show that a similar proportion of articles overall in VoK (34.01 percent) and SaK (35.29 percent) are related to foreign policy (Table 4). By foreign policy, we refer to attitudes towards external nations, organisations, and other entities, i.e. enemy perception. While enemy perception constitutes a significant portion of articles, other categories like religious ideology

and anti-Taliban propaganda also receive significant attention. Furthermore, non-Western countries feature more heavily than Western countries in both magazines, although VoK cites Western countries more often than SaK. There is thus a contrast in the regional focus of SaK and VoK, which targets Arabic-speaking audiences with more regional conflicts. Moreover, there is a tendency toward ideological vilification of targets in VoK, whereas more explicit threats are expressed in SaK. These findings do not strongly resonate with the international assessments emphasising the increased threat that ISKP poses to the West, rather, they reflect a more imminent local dimension to ISKP activity. These findings speak to the expanding focus of ISKP's militant activity being primarily regional. We argue that the recent attack claimed by ISKP in Moscow reflects a transnational expansion by the group that is within their stated trajectory of expansion, which we discuss in the analysis.⁸

While the paper does not make any causal claims, we encourage more serious attention to be directed at the propaganda material published by ISKP. Our findings strongly suggest that ISKP employs a differentiated communications strategy to target its audiences. Therefore, no singular policy can effectively address or counter the propaganda of ISKP. These findings suggest that scholars and policymakers alike should incorporate a conception of strategic differentiation into their *modus operandi*. Rather than assuming a uniform global threat narrative, counter-terrorism frameworks should consider the locally grounded and audience-specific nature of ISKP's communication. For scholars, this underscores the need for further comparative research across languages and media formats to better understand how violent extremist groups adapt their narratives. For policymakers, the findings caution against overemphasising Western-targeted threats at the expense of monitoring regional developments that may provide early signals of strategic shifts. Finally, integrating propaganda analysis into assessments of operational intent, while avoiding deterministic assumptions, can enhance our ability to anticipate how ideological positioning might translate into action over time.

We have chosen to limit our investigation of ISKP's enemy perception to magazine publications in two languages—English (Voice of Khurasan, VoK) and Arabic (Swat al-Khurasan, SaK)—for several interrelated reasons. While ISKP's broader propaganda ecosystem also includes video content, radio broadcasts, brochures, and messaging via social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram,⁹ these different media serve distinct purposes and target different audiences. As Winter argues, the Islamic State's strategic communication operates through a “diverse array of ends and means,” and should not be treated as a single, unified narrative.¹⁰ Focusing on magazine publications thus allows for a more controlled and coherent analysis of one key mode of ideological messaging, without conflating different media strategies that may reflect divergent goals.

In addition, we have made this deliberate decision to focus only on English and Arabic publications, excluding ISKP materials in other languages, most notably Pashto, due to practical constraints, including the lack of reliable language expertise. While this inevitably limits access to certain regionally focused narratives, the exclusion is methodologically justified by the study's core aim: to analyse ISKP's external communications and, in particular, its portrayal of Western actors. The English-language VoK is especially well-suited to this purpose, as it explicitly targets an international audience and articulates ISKP's ideological positioning on global affairs. The inclusion of the Arabic-language SaK, published within a comparable timeframe, enables a comparative analysis to trace potential divergences in messaging strategies. By narrowing our focus to these two magazines, we are able to conduct a consistent and systematic analysis, while avoiding selective sampling from heterogeneous media that could distort the overall picture of ISKP's enemy perception.

Literature review

Limited work has addressed ISKP's regional and global interests after the Taliban takeover in September 2021. Nevertheless, key works offer essential insight into the group's activities pre-2021 and their strategic goals. Analyses of ISKP's geo-strategic goals suggest that ISKP's primary mission is to spread its influence in Afghanistan and the surrounding regions in Central Asia. Its short-term aim is to establish Afghanistan as its primary theatre of operations, as a safe haven for Islamic State leaders, and as a command centre in the region.¹¹ Once a stable foothold is secured in Afghanistan, ISKP plans to expand into Central Asia and Iran, eventually extending its influence to China and India,¹² which could be "followed by a focus on Western targets" according to Hassan Abbas' analysis of ISKP activity between 2021 and 2022.¹³ In this context, the present paper analyses the attitudes expressed by ISKP in terms of the areas they focus on strategically and ideologically.

While analyses of the official magazines of ISIS - the English-language *Dabiq* and the Arabic *Rumiyah* - and studies on terrorism and the media have been thoroughly conducted, ISKP's propaganda output and its enemy perception have received little attention thus far.¹⁴ Previous studies have investigated the enemy portrayal of specific countries like Russia, Turkey, as well as other international organisations like NATO in IS magazines.¹⁵ A key work contributing to the categorisation framework of the present article is Tyler Welch's thematic analysis of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* (discussed in further detail below).¹⁶ Thus, the present study is an important contribution, due to the lack of systematic analyses of ISKP's propaganda, and innovative, due to the mixed methods design incorporating machine learning, to the study of the Islamic State. To the degree that we can understand propaganda to have an effect on actual outcomes, which is a question outside of the scope of this paper, this paper adds to our understanding of the strategic and ideological positions of ISKP.

Methodologically, this paper builds on a growing body of work that employs rigorous qualitative techniques to analyse terrorist propaganda. Past analyses of ISIS's English-language magazines have employed content and discourse analysis to identify key ideological frames, audiences, and narratives.¹⁷ In particular, Colas critiques the assumption that recruitment is the single overriding purpose of *Dabiq*, illustrating how ISIS tailors its communications to a variety of audiences (e.g., would-be members, Western policymakers, disenchanted or second-generation Muslims). This research resonates with Torres-Soriano's quantitative study of jihadist propaganda in Spain, which also highlights how strategic communications can serve as indicators of a group's operational priorities. Overall, these studies demonstrate the utility of methodologically rigorous approaches to propaganda and text for understanding how terrorist organisations refine and differentiate their messaging strategies. Therefore, this case study makes a valuable contribution by providing insights into the specific communications strategies of ISKP.

In line with these insights, the machine learning-driven thematic analysis of the multilingual magazines of ISKP (SaK and VoK) expands on previous research in two ways. First, it offers a cross-language comparison that many earlier studies do not fully address.¹⁸ Although a rich literature examines propaganda in ISIS's English- and Arabic-language outlets, fewer works systematically compare content across multiple languages, an approach that can illuminate how terrorist groups fine-tune their narratives for distinct audiences (see also Tulga). Second, we make a methodological contribution. While thematic analyses of propaganda magazines have been extensively conducted, the growing possibilities of the 'text as data' approach have been underutilised in the strategic communications literature.¹⁹ The 'text as data' approach takes advantage of the incredibly rich textual data available to researchers today by applying machine learning tools to process text at a larger scale and significantly more effectively.²⁰ Thus, by

quantifying thematic emphasis, this paper provides a reproducible method for tracing whether and how ISKP's operational focus, ranging from local struggles to global ambitions, shapes its propaganda output. In doing so, it joins a larger conversation about how evolving operational capabilities influence extremist messaging, answering the reviewers' call for a more theoretically grounded contribution to our understanding of terrorist organisations' strategic communication and operational choices.

The purpose of this study is thus twofold. First, to quantify and give a comprehensive overview of the thematic distribution in SaK and VoK. Second, to assess in detail ISKP's enemy perception as expressed in these magazines. We employ Machine Learning techniques to thematically quantify the magazine contents, developing a reproducible method that allows for the comparison of propaganda outputs from different terrorist organisations and tracking changes in messaging over time. Furthermore, we add to a growing literature on thematic analyses of propaganda magazines produced by the Islamic State. Simultaneously, we problematise the West-centric threat assessments of ISKP's operational power by providing a comprehensive review of the areas of concern in SaK and VoK as the official communication channels of ISKP.

Methodology

This study combines qualitative and computational methods to systematically analyse the content of two ISKP propaganda magazines. We collected the magazines in PDF format and converted them to machine-readable text using Optical Character Recognition (OCR). Where necessary, we translated texts in Arabic into English using a custom-built machine translation tool. First, we carried out a frequency analysis to identify how often different countries were mentioned, as a proxy for ISKP's attitudes towards foreign entities. To assess the underlying themes of the content, we developed a categorisation framework informed by previous studies and refined through inductive coding of all articles. Each article was assigned to the category that best captured its dominant message. We also applied a more granular layer of subcategories to the articles to gain deeper insights into how different countries are portrayed. Finally, we used BERTopic, a machine learning model for text analysis, to validate our categories and identify additional themes across the corpus in a data-driven way. This mixed-methods approach enables both systematic comparison and interpretive depth in the analysis of ISKP's strategic messaging.

Data

The source material for the present study consists of magazines downloaded from jihadology.net,²¹ and converted to plaintext using an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software.²² The Arabic magazines were translated using a custom machine translation software.²³ Each issue of SaK is on average 77 pages and contains thirteen articles. Issues of VoK tend to be shorter, with an average length of 44 pages and nine articles within each magazine. In SaK, authors are credited in 26 percent of the articles. Some names appear multiple times, while others only once. Conversely, VoK does not state the author in any of its articles. VoK was first published in January 2022, while SaK was published only a year later in January 2023. After their initial publication, the release frequency of both magazines is approximately once a month. Notably, all issues were released after the Taliban takeover, indicating ISKP's strategic intensification of propaganda to challenge the Taliban's prominence in Afghanistan.

Country Frequencies

To get an overview of the relative importance ISKP places on different countries in their foreign policy, we conducted a country frequency analysis (Table 1).

Categorisation Framework

To comprehensively assess the content of VoK and SaK, we employed a categorical classificatory system developed by drawing on a previous typology and by analysing all foreign policy articles in VoK and SaK to inductively determine categories. We applied the typology developed by Tyler Welch to analyse the messaging of ISIS in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* as a basis for creating the categorical division for ISKP's magazines consisting of (1) religious ideology and theological teaching, (2) anti-Taliban propaganda, (3) stories of progress and heroism, (4) ISKP's foreign policy (Western countries), (5) ISKP's foreign policy (non-Western countries), and (6) Strategic advice to the Islamic State (Table 4).²⁴

1. Religious ideology and theological teaching

This category encompasses articles conveying religious and theological messages that are not primarily concerned with ISKP's enemy perception. While they may justify violent behaviour, the purpose of these articles is to lay down the theological basis for ISKP's dogma and to provide religious justification for their teachings.

2. Anti-Taliban propaganda

This category of articles aims to discredit the Taliban government by eroding its authority and legitimacy. Carving out an ideological niche in the jihadi space is a central purpose of ISKP's propaganda to increase its ideological appeal by discrediting other jihadi groups fighting for the attention of the same potential recruits; their anti-Taliban propaganda is part of this effort.²⁵

3. Stories of progress and heroism

The third category of articles showcases inspiring stories of progress, success, and heroism.

4. ISKP's foreign policy (Western countries)

5. ISKP's foreign policy (non-Western countries)

Categories four and five encompass articles that primarily concern ISKP'S treatment of Western and non-Western countries.

6. Strategic advice to the Islamic State

The sixth category comprises articles aimed at providing valuable advice to the Islamic State leadership and to ISKP fighters.

Articles in each issue were tagged according to the category they fit the most. In some instances, articles were multifaceted and encompassed themes related to multiple categories. In these cases, the article was labelled according to its most dominant theme. To give further insight into ISKP's enemy perception in the foreign policy category, we have divided articles within categories 4 and 5 into the following subcategories: (a) ideological condemnation of non-Muslims, (b) foreign power-Taliban cooperation, (c) direct threat against a foreign power, (d) declaring apostasy on other Muslims, and (e) expressing support to oppressed Muslims (Table 5). The subcategories were developed based on a previous study by Bröckling et al. which expanded upon Welch's classification typology, providing subcategories that give insight beyond the thematic singularity established by the initial classification.²⁶ The labelling process for subcategories closely mirrored the primary categorisation, the only difference being that articles which fit multiple themes received several tags.

Topic Modelling

We employed BERTopic for text analysis to produce a comprehensive overview and to conduct an unbiased control for the primary themes present in SaK and VoK.²⁷ BERTopic is a text analysis tool that leverages a large language model (LLM) to identify and group topics within large collections of text.

Results Country frequencies²⁸

Table 1. Country frequencies in SaK and VoK

Country	Frequency (VoK)	Country	Frequency (SaK)
Pakistan	375	Saudi Arabia	259
United States of America	268	Iran	249
China	177	Turkey	175
India	164	Pakistan	174
Turkey	120	United States of America	134
Iraq	103	Iraq	105
United Kingdom	86	China	69
Iran	85	Qatar	39
Russia	71	India	37
France	61	France	35
Saudi Arabia	58	United Kingdom	33
Qatar	44	Egypt	33
Syria	42	Syria	27
Egypt	35	Russia	26
Uzbekistan	33	United Arab Emirates	25
Bangladesh	29	Kuwait	21
Ukraine	26	Spain	19
Tajikistan	21	Yemen	19
Jordan	15	Libya	12
Libya	14	Tajikistan	11
Yemen	13	Germany	7
Azerbaijan	10	Italy	6
Lebanon	6	Lebanon	6
Sweden	6	Sweden	6
Germany	4	Denmark	5
Canada	3	Netherlands	5
Denmark	2	Norway	5
Australia	2	Uzbekistan	4
Netherlands	2	Belgium	2
Spain	2	Canada	2
Benin	1	Iceland	2

The Western countries mentioned in VoK are the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Ukraine, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Australia, the Netherlands and Spain. By 'Western' countries, we mean Western European countries and the US. SaK contains the same Western

countries (apart from Australia) with the addition of Italy, Belgium, Canada, and Iceland - all mentioned at low frequencies and not part of a direct threat.

Some of the most significant contrasts between the English language VoK and the Arabic SaK include Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United States, India, and China (Table 1). These trends may reflect the messaging ISKP wishes to emphasise to its Arabic-speaking and English-speaking audiences, which we comment on in more detail in the sections *TAnalysis of ISKP's Foreign Policy Toward Non-Western Targets* and *Analysis of ISKP's Foreign Policy Toward Western Targets*.

Topic Modelling

The outcomes generated through topic modelling corroborate the findings derived from the thematic analysis we conducted (see appendix). Many of the automatically identified topics align closely with the themes of Religious Ideology and Theological Teaching, anti-Taliban propaganda, and ISKP's foreign policy, which are part of the categorical classification we developed. Notably, SaK features references to Saudi Arabia in 4 out of the 20 identified topics, consistent with the high frequency count for Saudi Arabia in SaK (Table 1). In VoK, the topics related to foreign countries exhibit greater diversity, encompassing mentions of China, India, Pakistan, and Ukraine.

However, a point of divergence between the identified topics and the thematic overview occurred in the absence of references to the United States in any of the identified topics. Considering its frequent mention in SaK and VoK (Table 1), it was expected that USA would be included in the identified topics. Nevertheless, this absence can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, if USA is mentioned uniformly across a variety of different topics, without being particularly dominant in one of them, the country might be treated as a background term and filtered out. Secondly, it is plausible that "USA" appears in diverse contexts across articles, thus diluting its association among multiple topics and precluding its emergence as a dominant keyword within any particular topic. Similar dynamics could apply to other frequently mentioned countries, such as Iran and Turkey.

Employing BERTopic to analyse the article collections facilitated a comprehensive exploration of primary themes, reaffirming key findings from our thematic framework (that we developed using the method described above). While BERT gave us a more nuanced understanding of the content of SaK and VoK, we chose to retain our original thematic framework.

Sentiment Analysis

Table 2. *Sentiment analysis of VoK, sorted in descending order by negativity score*

Country	Sentiment	Negativity Score
Netherlands	Negative	0.39
Sweden	Negative	0.21
Russia	Negative	0.13
Pakistan	Negative	0.12
UK	Negative	0.12
USA	Negative	0.11
Turkey	Negative	0.11
Uzbekistan	Negative	0.10

India	Negative	0.10
Ukraine	Negative	0.09
China	Negative	0.09
Saudi Arabia	Negative	0.07
Iran	Negative	0.07
Tajikistan	Negative	0.06

The sentiment analysis quantifies the tone in which each country is discussed in the Voice of Khurasan (VoK) magazine, assigning a score that ranges from negative to positive. A higher negativity score reflects a more consistently hostile portrayal, based on the sentiment-laden language surrounding a country's mentions in the text. This does not necessarily correlate with frequency of mention, as a country may be mentioned only a few times but still receive a high negativity score if the language used is particularly inflammatory or condemnatory. Table 2 presents the results, with countries listed in descending order of negativity, all of which are on the negative end of the sentiment spectrum.

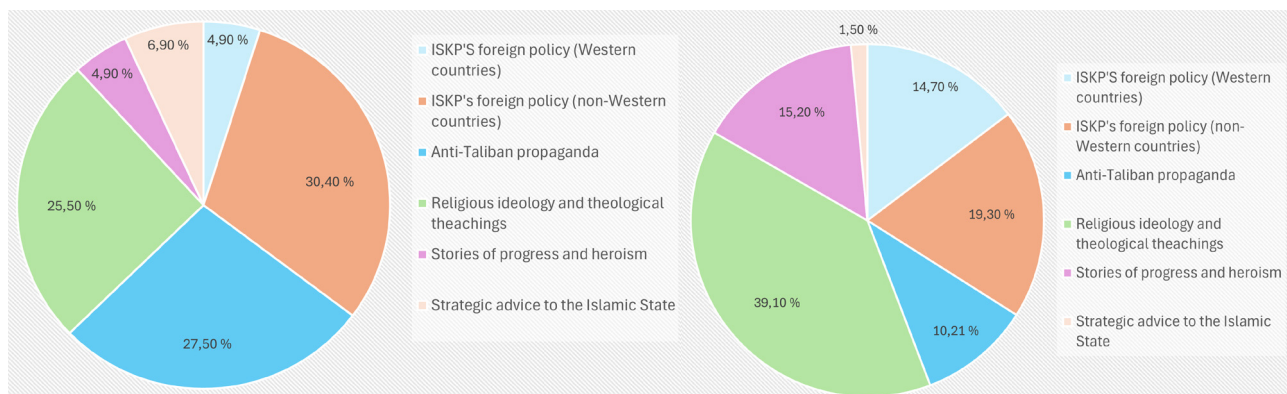
For instance, the Netherlands and Sweden receive the most negative scores among all evaluated countries. This is notable given their relatively low frequency of appearance in the dataset. The high negativity is driven by the contexts in which they are mentioned, primarily in relation to Quran burnings, without offsetting mentions in more neutral or unrelated discussions. In contrast, countries like the United States or India, while mentioned frequently and often critically, appear in a wider variety of contexts, some of which are strategic or descriptive, thus diluting their overall negativity score.

Table 3. *Sentiment analysis of SaK, sorted in descending order by negativity score*

Country	Sentiment	Negativity Score
Pakistan	Negative	0.12
Saudi Arabia	Negative	0.11
India	Negative	0.10
China	Negative	0.10
Russia	Negative	0.09
USA	Negative	0.09
Turkey	Negative	0.08
Tajikistan	Negative	0.08
UK	Neutral	0.06
Uzbekistan	Positive	0.09
Iran	Positive	0.04
Sweden	Positive	0.02
Netherlands	Positive	0.01

Category distribution

Of VoK's total 197 articles, 30 articles were coded as ISKP's foreign policy (Western countries) (14.72 percent), and 39 articles were coded as ISKP's foreign policy (non-Western countries) (19.29 percent), totalling 34.01 percent.

Figure 1. *Category distributions in SaK (left) and VoK (right)*

Out of the total 102 articles in SaK, 5 articles were coded as ISKP's foreign policy (Western countries) (4.90 percent), and 29 articles were coded as ISKP's foreign policy (non-Western countries) (30.39 percent), totalling 35.29 percent. The portion of articles relating to foreign policy in overall is similar, but the distribution in focus on Western and non-Western countries is drastically different with only 4.9 percent of SaK and 14.71 percent of VoK articles relating to Western countries. The thematic distribution also shows that foreign policy (categories 4 and 5) is the most significant category in SaK (Figure 1). In VoK, while a major part of the articles address foreign policy, this category is outweighed by Religious Ideology and Theological Teaching (39.09 percent).

Table 4. *Category distributions in SaK and VoK (percent of total articles)*

Category	SaK (%)	VoK (%)
ISKP's foreign policy (Western countries)	4.90	14.72
ISKP's foreign policy (non-Western countries)	30.39	19.29
Religious ideology and theological teaching	25.49	39.09
Anti-Taliban propaganda	27.45	10.15
Stories of progress and heroism	4.90	15.23
Strategic advice to the Islamic State	6.86	1.52
Sum	100.0	100.0

(1) Religious ideology and theological teaching

Most articles in VoK belong to the category (1) Religious ideology and theological teaching (39.09 percent), while it is the third most frequently appearing category in SaK (25.49) (Table 4). It is worthwhile noting that ISKP emphasises its ideology to a larger extent to its English-speaking audiences. This may be a more important focus in a non-Muslim majority context where familiarisation with ISKP ideology is more important for the target audience.

A central theme in this category is the justification of violent jihad. The article titled Jihad is the Pillar of Faith (VoK, 8) illustrates ISKP's stance where it argues that jihad holds equal significance in the Islamic faith as prayer, fasting, and making pilgrimage (hajj). Non-violent articles offer readers advice on religious practices such as how to worship during the months of Ramadan (VoK, 8), or explain Islamic concepts such as wala' (loyalty) and bara' (disavowal) (SaK, 3), while others offer historical accounts of exceptional Muslims like Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (VoK, Issue 24). Other non-violent articles in this

category emphasise the distinction between the followers of the Islamic State's interpretation of Islam and those following different interpretations or religions. The article *Shirk, the Opposite of Taweed* (VoK, Issue 13) for instance emphasises the importance of accepting the oneness of Allah, which stands in stark contrast to other "deviant" sects like Sufis and Shias who worship others besides God. These articles aim to separate the adherents of ISKP from others who do not adhere to the same religious ideology. This reflects both ISKP's, and the wider IS, worldview which states that the world is divided into two sides: on one side are the true Muslims, that is, those aligned with ISKP's interpretation, and on the other is everyone else.²⁹

(2) *Anti-Taliban propaganda*

27.45 percent of articles in SaK, which is the second most prevalent category, pertain to anti-Taliban propaganda, compared to 10.15 percent in VoK (see Table 4). This contrast gives further insight into the topics ISKP emphasises to its different audiences. Anti-Taliban propaganda is more prevalent in its propaganda targeting Arabic-speaking audiences who are likely more directly affected by Taliban leadership.

By producing extensive propaganda material portraying the Taliban as weak, corrupt, and anti-Islamic, ISKP attempts to create disillusionment with the Taliban government. They both directly discredit the Taliban and associate them with foreign powers to delegitimise their rule in articles like *The Underlying Kufr of Taliban in UN Charter* (VoK, Issue 11) and *What are the apostate institutions of the UN and America doing in the national Taliban government?* (SaK, Issue 6). SaK also contains two article series designated specifically to anti-Taliban propaganda: *The Taliban movement is a Deobandi Sufi Reformist movement 1-4* and *Afghanistan is a victim of the sectarian project and the silence of the national Taliban 1-5*. While these articles frequently reference foreign powers, these references occur primarily to discredit the Taliban, and do not say much about ISKP's attitudes towards foreign entities.

(3) *Stories of progress and heroism*

15.23 percent of articles in VoK and 4.9 percent of articles in SaK are categorised in (3) Stories of progress and heroism (see Table 4). Impressing the successes of ISKP's soldiers upon its English-speaking audience appears to be more important, likely because this audience is geographically further removed. This may be seen both as a recruitment effort and as a wider strategy to invite sympathy to the ISKP cause.

A portion of the articles included in this category are stories of victories from the battlefield, emphasising the superiority of ISKP and the humiliation of their enemies. This is exemplified in the series *Operations Paving the Path to Victory* in VoK and SaK, which gives accounts of successful raids against local militia carried out by ISKP. These articles present a one-sided view, often glorifying ISIS's victories and accomplishments, and often listing the number of dead enemies and war booty gained from the operation. They highlight heroic figures and their bravery and devotion to the cause. A further article series that fits into this category is *Memories of Shuhada*, which features obituaries of dead ISKP fighters, portraying them as heroic and dedicated believers. These stories invite sympathy by highlighting tragic stories, e.g. *The Piece of Cloth and a Handful of Beard* (VoK, Issue 9) and *A Long Dark Night* (VoK, Issue 12).

(4) *ISKP's foreign policy (Western countries)* and (5) *ISKP's foreign policy (non-Western countries)*

In VoK, 14.72 percent of articles relate to Western countries, and 19.29 percent to non-Western. The distribution in SaK is more drastic with only 4.9 percent of articles focusing on Western countries and 30.39 percent on non-Western. The articles belonging to this category are diverse in terms of the topics they discuss, but they all discuss some aspect of a foreign country, organisation,

country leader, or group. They explicitly and implicitly reflect ISKP's view of - and relationship to the entities they view as their primary enemies. To preserve the nuances of ISKP's foreign policy, the articles within (4) ISKP's foreign policy (Western countries) and (5) ISKP's foreign policy (non-Western countries) are further classified in the following subcategories: (a) Ideological condemnation of non-muslims, (b) Foreign power-Taliban cooperation, (c) Direct threat against a foreign power, (d) Declaring Apostacy on other Muslims, and (e) Expressing support to oppressed Muslims:

Table 5. *Subcategory distribution in SaK and VoK (per cent of foreign policy articles)*

Category	SaK (%)	VoK (%)
Ideological condemnation of non-Muslims	12.96	44.08
Foreign power – Taliban cooperation	7.40	15.05
Direct threat against a foreign power	14.81	11.82
Takfir (declaring apostasy on other Muslims)	55.55	19.35
Expressing support to oppressed Muslims	9.25	9.70
Sum	100.0	100.0

(a) Ideological condemnation of non-Muslims

This category encompasses foreign policy articles in which ISKP critiques non-Muslim nations, leaders, and non-muslim religious groups. A significant portion of foreign policy articles in VoK (44.08 percent) fit within this subcategory, while only 12.96 percent of foreign policy in SaK is concerned with the ideological condemnation of non-Muslims. This may reflect the different messages ISKP wishes to primarily convey to its audiences. For English-speaking readers in Muslim-minority countries, it seems more important for ISKP to establish the corruptness of such countries, perhaps because it is a more acute concern to this audience. A significantly larger proportion of VoK's foreign policy articles thus consist of ideological condemnation, as opposed to the more specific strategic directives in SaK, which we discuss in more detail in the section analysis of ISKP's foreign policy.

A portion of the articles belonging to this category focus on condemning Western countries. The prevailing theme is that there is a deep-seated ideological conflict between Muslims and the Western world, and that Western powers are trying to counter Islam through intellectual, military and political means. Western countries that interfere in Muslim countries militarily and politically are labelled "crusaders," a term used to describe infidel invaders who occupy Muslim lands and must be repelled.³⁰ Articles such as *The Crusade War* (VoK, Issue 3) and *Reality of the Wild West: United Kingdom of Kufr* (VoK, Issue 22) highlight the ideological warfare launched by Western 'Crusaders,' aiming to subjugate and to control Muslims.

Articles in this category typically end with a call for awareness, unity, and a strong defence against these foreign threats to protect the Islamic faith and the Muslim community. The moral corruptness of said actors is highlighted, and Western ideas of democracy, nationalism, secularism, and LGBTQ-rights are condemned and rejected (VoK 6, 22).

Additionally, some articles in this category focus on non-Western nations housing significant Muslim populations, such as India and China. These articles mention Hindu extremist factions targeting Muslims in India and the plight of the Uyghurs under the Chinese regime, detailing episodes of prejudice and violent offences against these communities (SaK 2, 5, 7, VoK 13, 24, 25).

(b) *Declaring apostasy on other Muslims*

Articles within the Takfir category feature Muslim countries, leaders, and sects that ISKP declare takfir on (takfir: declaration of a Muslim as an apostate by another Muslim) because they do not cohere to ISKP's interpretations of Islam. In SaK, over half of the articles about foreign policy (55.55 percent) fit within this subcategory, while 19.35 percent of VoK articles are about declaring Takfir. This contrast likely reflects that VoK is aimed at Muslims in minority contexts, where there are more non-Muslims, and SaK is aimed at Muslims in Arabic-speaking countries where most Muslims live, so *takfir* is more relevant. Emphasising the correct Islamic path and, therefore, the anti-Islamic behaviour of large swaths of the Muslim world is perhaps even more important for an audience that navigates a Muslim-majority context. This is further supported by category a) aimed at non-Muslims featuring far more heavily in VoK.

Predominantly, these articles target Muslim-majority nations and their leadership, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey and Iran. Typically, they criticise countries for collaborating with Western states and Western actors, enforcing secular laws, and opening up for secular ideology, such as LGBTQ rights and women's rights. For instance, in the series titled Proof of the Blasphemy of the Nation of Ibn Salman (SaK issues 1, 2, 3, and 4), ISKP denounces Saudi Arabia and its crown prince, Ibn al-Salman. The criticism revolves around perceived deviations from correct Islamic practice, such as Saudi Arabia's interpretation of Sharia, affiliations with the United Nations General Assembly, and the adoption of secular laws—evident in decisions like allowing women to drive and travel without the accompaniment of a legal male guardian (mahram). The overarching narrative is that Crown Prince Salman, through recent reforms, is leading Saudi Arabia down a path characterised by moral decay, endorsing activities associated with dancing, obscenity, and entertainment events. A distinct focus area within this category is denouncing other Muslim sects such as Sufis and Shias, accusing them of practising polytheism and of cooperating with enemy countries and actors (e.g. SaK, issues 3 and 7).

(c) *Foreign Power-Taliban Cooperation*

The narratives in the "Foreign Power-Taliban Cooperation" category seek to establish that the Taliban is actively collaborates with international powers to consolidate its rule over Afghanistan and reap financial benefits. 15.05 percent of foreign policy articles in VoK and 7.40 percent in SaK have been tagged with this category.

Most of the articles in this category address the Taliban's collaboration with the United States. ISKP argues that the Taliban, in its pursuit of power in Afghanistan, has sacrificed the country's autonomy for symbolic power granted by the United States. In this partnership, the Taliban is perceived as acting as a US proxy in the ongoing fight against the Islamic State (VoK, issues 21, 16, SaK Issue 6). Additionally, ISKP critiques the Taliban for integrating into the global system of what ISKP calls "infidel nations" (VoK, Issue 16), including China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran. See the section on the USA below for a more detailed analysis.

(d) *Direct threat against a foreign power*

This category consists of articles where ISKP threatens a foreign power or organization with violence. SaK contains a higher proportion (14.81 percent) of direct threats toward foreign powers than VoK (11.82 percent), which resonates with our assessment of SaK as containing greater levels of specific language and threats.

Direct threats against Western countries appear infrequently in VoK. The direct threats are found solely in the articles In response to the incidents of burning and desecrating the holy Quran by the infidels of Sweden and Netherlands (VoK, Issue 21) and in Kill them wherever you find them (VoK, Issue 22), where ISKP encourages supporters to kill "Crusaders," - Western

individuals - and identifies ideal locations for violence including shopping malls and outdoor music festivals (more detailed discussion below).

Some articles emphasise threats to regional neighbouring countries, while others encourage individual action. Indeed, some articles do not threaten direct ISKP action but rather encourage Muslims to rise up and wage jihad against infidel foreign powers. For instance, in the article *Pakistan- a tumour cell in the body of the Islamic Ummah*, their message to the Pakistanis is to "wage Holy Jihad in the way of Allah under the leadership of Islamic Khilafah and implement Islamic Shari'ah in the region."

(e) *Expressing support for oppressed Muslims and condemning the oppression of Muslims*

Expressing support to oppressed Muslims is the most equally occurring category with 9.25 percent of articles in SaK and 9.70 percent of articles of VoK being dedicated to this theme. It is a frequently employed narrative to foster sympathy for ISKP's cause by highlighting the tragic fate of oppressed Muslims under tyrannical rule of other nations.

Articles in this category offer detailed accounts of human rights abuses directed at Muslim minorities, including the Uyghurs in China, the Rohingyas in Myanmar, Muslims in India, and Sunni Muslims in Iran. A recurring theme in these pieces is the portrayal of Muslims living under what's termed *taghut* (earthly tyrannical powers) and their subsequent victimisation through oppressive and destructive tactics. These narratives emphasise the severe forms of oppression, highlighting events such as the establishment of concentration camps for Uyghurs in China and the prosecution of Muslims in India and the Rohingyas in Myanmar.

(6) *Strategic advice to the Islamic State*

These articles offer practical guidance on how individuals can support ISKP, including engaging in combat, contributing financially, providing medical aid to wounded fighters, and disseminating information about the noble deeds of the mujahideen to inspire others to follow their path. The slightly higher proportion of such strategic articles in SaK (6.86 percent) than in VoK (1.52 percent) may be explainable by the higher likelihood that Arab audiences can engage directly in ISKP activity due to their geographic proximity.

The SaK series titled *Valuable Advice Series for the Renewed Mujahideen in Khorasan* offers advice to the ISKP fighters regarding the emotional and spiritual aspects of jihad. The aim is to foster unity, resolve, and a sense of purpose among the mujahideen, thus reinforcing their commitment to the cause of ISKP. VoK contains a two-part series entitled *Advice to the Leaders of the Islamic State* (VoK, issues 12 and 16). These contain practical military advice to Islamic State leaders. They also include sayings by the Prophet Muhammad and historical Arab warriors to illustrate ideal models of leadership. It is noteworthy that, while both magazines contain strategic advice for ISKP soldiers, only VoK offers advice to the leadership of the Islamic State.

Discussion

Analysis of ISKP's strategic communications toward non-Western targets

South and Central Asia

Several of the most frequently mentioned countries (see Table 1) and most explicit threats are aimed at South and Central Asian nations. We analyse the data referencing these nations and suggest two explanations for their frequency. First, several articles establish a narrative of progression of violence from the most geographically proximate countries to more distant

targets, which is a recurring geographic strategy employed by ISKP. This approach aligns with the wider Islamic State's standard for strategic expansion progressing from local gains to global expansion. Second, ISKP's recruitment strategy draws on previously militarised individuals from other groups in the same geographic region.³¹ ISKP enjoys favourable recruitment conditions in a context characterised by increasing resentment, within non-Pashtun groups, of the brutal Taliban policy, as well as existing jihadist ideological infrastructures. While ISKP dedicates a significant amount of propaganda in local languages to target these fighters, it is notable that also SaK and VoK reflect these local recruitment efforts.³²

VoK and SaK establish an element of geographic expansion that echoes the strategy previously employed by ISIS. Issue 8 of VoK explicitly states that, after completing their attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, ISKP will turn to Iran and China. SaK's Issue 7 (April 2023) also mentions Uzbekistan, Tajikistan as well as Kazakhstan as areas to which ISKP's "geographic proximity" facilitates effective communication channels.

Several of the threats directed at South and Central Asian countries correlate to current events. Issue 8 of VoK (June 2022) boasts of recent attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, simultaneously as it warns that they should not "consider this latest attack as the last one." Issue 5 (May 2022) also explicitly mentions Iran, China, and Uzbekistan and Issue 13 (September 2022) references the "taghuti regimes of Pakistan, Tajikistan, Iran, China and Uzbekistan." Actual attacks claimed by ISKP in these regions include rockets launched into Uzbekistan in April 2022³³, rockets launched into Tajikistan in May 2022³⁴, and more recently the deadly suicide bombing at an election rally in the border district of Bajaur in Pakistan.³⁵ Likewise, ISKP activity in Iran has reportedly been intensifying since 2022³⁶ and reached new heights on January 3 2024 with ISKP claiming responsibility for a pair of suicide attacks in Kerman.³⁷ These attacks mirror ISKP's grown military confidence in post-2021 Afghanistan.

The VoK country fluctuation table on Uzbekistan shows spikes in mentions in the period May to July 2022 (see Figure 35). Similarly, mentions of Tajikistan in VoK spike in the months June - July 2022, corresponding to actual attacks executed by ISKP in these months. Both VoK and SaK also show spikes in the mention of Pakistan, respectively February to April 2023 and April 2023 (see Figure 13 and Figure 14). It is notable that, unlike the retrospective spike in mentions of countries where actual ISKP attacks occurred in the case of attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the spike in mentions of Pakistan preceded a major attack in the country, which was also one of ISKP's deadliest since January 2023.³⁸ We do not suggest making direct inferences about ISKP's future attacks based on their propaganda material. However, it is noteworthy that spikes in the frequency of country mentions correlate with actual attacks that ISKP has officially mentioned and claimed responsibility for.

Furthermore, the focus on South and Central Asian countries aligns with ISKP's broader recruitment strategy and reflects its recent expansion in the region.³⁹ Other work has shown that one of ISKP's central recruitment methods involves recruiting previous members from other militant cells.⁴⁰ Additionally, a 2022 assessment by the Stimson Center concluded that ISKP's strategy in Central and South Asia is heavily centred on taking "advantage of minority plight and sectarianism" to increase ideological traction for their cause.⁴¹ More recent recruitment efforts in Pakistan have targeted Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and sectarian anti-Shia group members in the southern Balochistan province.⁴² Consequently, the frequent occurrence of Pakistan in both VoK and SaK (see Table 1) is not unexpected, given ISKP's recruitment in the region. Likewise, considering the substantial presence of Tajiks and Uzbeks within ISKP's ranks, targeting these regions aligns logistically and strategically to attract recruits from a region historically linked with ISKP involvement. As we have seen, prior to expanding its ambitions

in China and Iran, it is evidently ISKP's goal to consolidate its follower base in its immediate geographical proximity. It is thus also not surprising that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation reported an uptick in ISKP propaganda efforts from their member states China, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2022.⁴³

International reports suggest that if ISKP grows stronger, the threat it poses to neighbouring countries is likely to increase.⁴⁴ Recent attacks in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan may be interpreted as confirming such assessments. Our analysis underscores that these countries feature heavily in ISKP's propaganda magazines. Notably, ISKP's recent history reflects a positive correlation between the threats present in their propaganda and the attacks that they executed. Attacks in Pakistan were preceded by an intensification of hostile propaganda directed at these countries in the months prior. While not directly preceding attacks, the increased focus on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan may also be seen as a materialisation of propaganda in hostile action.

China

The overarching themes in ISKP's perception of China is to portray it as an enemy of Islam, an oppressor (especially of the Uyghur population), and establishing a Taliban-Beijing link to delegitimise the Taliban government. Lucas Webber highlights that anti-China propaganda has been part of ISKP's propaganda since its inception but that it has gained in intensity and become more comprehensive since the Taliban's transition into government in 2021.⁴⁵ Scholars have also noted the establishment of a Taliban-Beijing link as a critical feature of ISKP propaganda.⁴⁶ Thus, fierce criticism of China and establishing connections with the Taliban represent an interconnected effort to increase anti-China sentiments and consequently delegitimise the Taliban government. Additionally, the heightened China-centred critique can be understood in the wider context of ISKP realigning according to current geopolitical trends. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, this propaganda narrative centred on US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has been weakened. By discussing the global significance of the US-China great power competition and tapping into local conflicts involving Uyghurs, ISKP creates a narrative around China as an archenemy, perhaps replacing some of the previous focus on the US.⁴⁷

The frequency of anti-China propaganda is relatively high in VoK with China being mentioned 177 times as the third most frequently mentioned country (Table 1). While it is still the seventh most frequently occurring country in SaK (Table 1), it only received 69 mentions in the Arabic magazine. Spikes in mentions of China occurred in VoK in July and November to December of 2022, before SaK had been published (Figure 9). However, after SaK was published in 2023, there is a detectable spike in mentions of China in both SaK and VoK in January and March 2023 (Figure 9 and Figure 10).

The focus on China represents a convergence of goals to first, vilify China as an enemy of Islam and second, to delegitimise the Taliban government due to its ties with China. VoK Issue 20 designates China as an ally of Satan, while SaK Issue 2 establishes China as an enemy of Islam, referring to how "communism wages a war against Muslims." Furthermore, establishing China as an enemy of Islam often goes hand in hand with ISKP's anti-Taliban propaganda. As previously established, one of ISKP's key propaganda strategies to discredit the Taliban is to establish it as beholden to foreign powers and thus delegitimise their rule, which we also see in the context of China.⁴⁸ Indeed, they refer to the Taliban as being hired by the "Chinese atheists" (VoK, Issue 13) and to China as one of the "masters" of Taliban (VoK, Issue 8). The convergence of these two themes is illustrated in VoK Issue 20: "Of all the enemies of Islam that the Taliban have sought to work with, China is surely one of the worst." First, China is established as an enemy of Islam and, second, the Taliban is seen as conspiring with this enemy of Islam.

China as an “oppressor” is a recurring theme in both magazines, specifically in relation to the Muslim Uyghur population. There is explicit mention of Chinese oppression of Uyghurs in issues 6, 8, 13, 17, 20, and 24 of VoK. Similar mentions occur in Issue 2 and 5 of SaK, with a detailed account of the Chinese government’s humanitarian crimes against the Uyghurs in the latter. Considering ISKP’s recent propaganda expansion and efforts to gain new recruits, it is likely that this narrative aims to increase anti-Chinese sentiments among Muslims to encourage attacks on Chinese targets among ISKP followers. The focus on Uyghur Muslims often occurs in the context of portraying China as a malicious actor suggesting that ISKP’s goal is to use the oppression of Uyghurs as a propaganda tool to strengthen anti-China sentiments and to invite sympathy to the ISKP cause. This narrative of China as oppressor reflects the historical ties of ISKP to Chinese Uyghur jihadi groups. Since its inception, ISKP played an important role in attracting Chinese Muslims from the Uyghur jihadi groups Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) and East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).⁴⁹ These groups had already been actively involved with the Islamic State in Afghanistan previously, to the extent that IS-Central had plans of establishing a separate branch in China.⁵⁰ The focus on Uyghurs in the China-centred propaganda may thus also reflect an effort to attract militant Uyghurs to ISKP’s cause.⁵¹

Although references to China are comparatively less frequent in SaK, it is noteworthy that the most direct threats toward Chinese targets occur in issues 2 and 7 of SaK. Comparable to the treatment of the USA, there is a greater tendency toward broad and sweeping statements in VoK, while SaK contains more specific and direct threats. VoK highlights China as one of their next targets: after they complete their agenda in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, “the turns are going to be for Iran and China” (VoK, Issue 8). Further, it provides precise attack strategies: they should be targeted for “killing and capturing,” for sowing “terror in the hearts of their employees, members of their missions, and embassies” as well as their “economic interests and investments by seizing them and causing destruction.” SaK expands upon this narrative in Issue 7 which establishes ISKP as having a unique responsibility for conducting jihad in China, due to their “geographic proximity” and “significant communication possibilities” with Uyghur Muslims in areas occupied with China. Such specific and instructive strategic directives are unique to SaK.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the most frequently referenced country in SaK, appearing 259 times, and the twelfth in VoK with 58 mentions (Table 1). The higher frequency of Saudi Arabia in SaK is likely related to its geographic proximity to Arabic-speaking readers of ISKP propaganda material; we see a similar trend in South and Central Asian countries. As we demonstrate in this section, discrediting Saudi leadership and promoting its immorality are prominent themes. The similarity of this tactic to the treatment of the Taliban suggests that ISKP’s goal in Saudi Arabia is also to make the population more receptive to its messaging by weakening support for the government.

One objective of articles relating to Saudi Arabia in VoK is to establish Saudi Arabia as a dedicated partner of the United States. Issue 9 goes as far as declaring Muhammad Ibn Salman a “puppet of America.” The series on “The Pugwash Conspiracy” in VoK further reinforces this narrative by associating Saudi Arabia with the Pugwash organisation, condemning it as obstructive to “the victory of Islam” (Issue 10) and highlighting its alleged Jewish origins. The discourse surrounding Saudi leadership mirrors the strategy applied to delegitimise the Taliban government by establishing links with foreign powers. Indeed, SaK establishes a deep connection between Saudi Arabia and the United States to show that the Saudi State is a mere extension of US influence. Notably, issues 7 and 8 highlight the alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia, while issues 2 and 6 respectively refer to the country as “the English Saudi State” and the “Saudi-British” state.

SaK contains somewhat more specific references as it connects the Saudi state to international organisations explicitly mentioning UNESCO, the Red Sea Fund and the UN (Issue 4), as well as the International Court of Justice, and the UN General Assembly (Issue 8). In light of the forthcoming discussion on Attitudes Towards Accepting Aid, which underscores ISKP's escalated violence targeting NGOs, the explicit mention of these organisations potentially establishes them as targets for future attacks. It is also significant that one of the few articles classified in the 2.4 direct threats category in SaK (Table 5) is *The American Military Bases in the Land of the Two Holy Mosques*. This article incites direct violence against these military bases, all located on Saudi Arabian ground geographically.

Analysis of ISKP's strategic communications toward Western targets

USA

While the United States is one of the most frequently mentioned countries - the third most mentioned in VoK and the sixth in SaK (see Table 1), it is predominantly referred to in an ideological context or in relation to the Taliban, intended to delegitimise the current Afghan government. Specific threats are confined to SaK and are limited to US targets on Saudi Arabian soil.

Mirroring the Beijing-Taliban narrative, the US-Taliban relationship is frequently employed to discredit the Taliban's government by associating them with foreign powers, in this case, the US. VoK consistently labels the Taliban as "US mercenaries" (VoK, Issue 2 and Issue 16), as a "US project" (VoK, Issue 10) and other similar designations in issues 5, 13, 16, and 18. This narrative occurs more frequently in VoK, where 15.05 percent of foreign policy related articles establish a Taliban - foreign power relation, compared to the 7.4 percent in SaK (Table 5). The frequency of references to the US in VoK experiences significant fluctuations (Figure 7), whereas distinct peaks emerge within SaK in January 2023 and April 2023 (Figure 8).

Despite establishing the United States as an archenemy of ISKP, references to the US are often expressed in general terms and reflect ISKP's ideological stance, establishing the US as an epitome of corruption. This is apparent in VoK articles like *American Boomerang* (Issue 10) painting a vivid picture of American wartime misconduct in e.g. the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. Other articles focus on domestic issues that make the US a hotbed of corruption like gun violence, homelessness, poverty and poor social conditions generally (Issues 14 and 23). Although these articles convey an ideological critique of American culture with a mocking tone (see for instance, the reference in VoK, Issue 23, to the "comedy show" of the Chinese spy balloon incident in the US), threats remain general in nature.

Echoing a broader trend in SaK, explicit threats toward US targets exclusively occur in the Arabic magazine. *The American Military Bases in the land of the Two Holy Mosques* (Issue 2) lists US land bases, air bases, civilian airports, and naval bases in the "land of the Haramain" (i.e. land of the Two Holy Mosques, i.e. Saudi Arabia). The message following this thorough list is clear and violent: "strike these American military bases..." This level of geographic specificity and incitement of direct action towards US targets is only present in the Arabic SaK. However, it should also be noted that the threats in SaK are primarily aimed at US targets within Saudi borders. This strategic approach mirrors ISKP's emphasis on pursuing local targets before expanding their scope.

Overall, anti-Taliban narrative constitutes a significant part of the US discourse in ISKP's propaganda. While immediate escalation against US targets remains debatable, this trend mirrors ISKP's overarching geographical strategy. Its immediate concern is geographically proximate targets and while it maintains the superficial vilification of the West, the discourse

remains ideological and generalised. The more explicit calls to violence in SaK may correspond with the respective magazine's target audience.

Sweden and the Netherlands

References to Sweden and the Netherlands are near-equally low on the country frequency table (Table 1) in SaK and VoK. However, the references to the Quran burnings that recently occurred in these European countries are some of the rare cases that VoK mentions specific international targets.⁵² VoK (Issue 21) refers to the burnings in Sweden in the explicitly titled *In Response to the Incidents of Burning and Desecrating the Holy Quran by the Infidels of Sweden and the Netherlands*. This article threatens the international community, vowing revenge for "the despicable and blasphemous actions of the infidels of the whole world." However, it stops short of an immediate call to violence, citing the fragmentation of Islamic unity due to "the false belief of nationalism" which has seeped in through international influence. In contrast, the subsequent issue of VoK contains a one-page article entitled *Kill Them Wherever you Find Them!* (Issue 22) which explicitly targets Sweden and the Netherlands. It lists ideal strike locations including "Armed Men and Women (Police and Security Guards)," "Markets, Streets and Large Outdoor Festivals," "Public places, Shopping [sic] Malls and Outdoor Markets," "Stadiums, Football Grounds and Music Concerts," and "Crowd, Protests, Public Rallies, and Public Parties." The Observatory of Events in issues 4 and 5 of SaK similarly address the Quran burnings in Sweden. The former focuses on Saudi Arabia's tolerance of Swedish diplomats, criticising their "false love for the Noble Quran" for allowing diplomats to remain unharmed, which aligns with SaK's broader anti-Saudi propaganda. Issue 5 shifts the discussion to Swedish institutions operating "under the shadow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan," despite Sweden's desecration of the Quran. Echoing the references to the Uyghur population in anti-China propaganda, the references to Sweden's Quran burnings in SaK seem to use the mistreatment of Islam and Muslims to condemn the Taliban and Saudi Arabia respectively.

Figure 2. *Kill Them Wherever You Find Them. VoK, Issue 22, page 30*

Ukraine and a wider East vs. West Narrative

ISKP makes clear that it is unacceptable for true Muslims to participate in Western struggles, such as the Ukraine War, and they reinforce an East vs. West discourse. Ukraine appears 26 times (Table 3) in VoK - but zero times in SaK - a noteworthy comparison of the conflicts they wish to emphasise to the respective audiences of SaK and of VoK.

VoK taps into the East vs. West 'Clash of Civilisations' narrative popularised by the likes of Samuel Huntington.⁵³ *The Black Hole in Ukraine* (Issue 11) portrays the Ukraine war as a cosmic justice, described as "the will of Allah" for a corrupted people. It places the conflict within a broader East vs. West frame, anticipating "a war not only between the Crusaders here and the Crusaders there, but the East and the West!" VoK advises Muslims in these conflict zones against taking sides, asking, "Will this Ummah remain underdog of the Eastern and Western tawaghit forever?... we have our own camp, the camp of Islam." Indeed, in Issue 24, VoK critiques Muslims who joined the Russian or Ukrainian armies, accusing them of neglecting their Islamic duties, yet it also urges them to "come to their senses" and join the Islamic State. This softer approach may reflect recruitment efforts, considering ISKP's history of recruiting militarised persons previously involved in other conflicts, which suggests that the Ukraine War could be a useful resource for potential recruits. The emphasis on this conflict in VoK may also suggest that their target Muslim audience in Ukraine is more likely English-speaking.

Figure 37 shows two spikes in the frequency of mentions of Ukraine in VoK in issues 11 and 24, respectively released in July 2022 and April 2023. Both peaks follow periods of intense military action and Russian progress in Ukraine, resulting in abundant coverage in Western media. VoK (Issue 11) actively engages with the Western media narrative by highlighting its differentiated treatment of white European civilian casualties in Ukraine from those of the Afghan and Iraqi wars. Targeting its English-speaking audience, ISKP shows flexibility in referencing current conflicts and tapping into problematic narratives to enhance its credibility and stronger engagement with its audience.

Attitudes toward accepting international aid

Table 6. *Frequencies of organisations mentioned in SaK and VoK*

Organisation	Frequency (SaK)	Frequency (VoK)
United Nations/UN	88	71
Red Cross	11	17
International Court of Justice	7	0
United Nations Charter	10	0
General Assembly	7	4
UNESCO	11	1
Red Crescent	4	0
Aga Khan Foundation	2	0

A recent analysis from the Program on Extremism at George Washington University showed a correlation between the steady increase of ISKP attacks on aid personnel since 2017—making it the second most notorious IS branch for targeting aid workers—and the parallel intensification of ISKP propaganda, which establishes NGOs mentioned in their propaganda as “legitimate targets for future violence.”⁵⁴ Therefore, it is important to distinguish articles in categories (4) ISKP’s foreign policy (Western countries), and (5) ISKP’s foreign policy (non- Western countries) that discuss international organisations and the attitudes ISKP expresses toward them. Both SaK and VoK address the issue of accepting aid from international organisations, with nuanced perspectives on its permissibility.

On a general level, VoK emphasises that accepting aid from international organisations and conforming to their international standards is against the principles of Islam. VoK (Issue 20) outlines ISKP’s rejection of aid from international organisations, claiming that NGOs are part of the “international community of the disbelievers who are at war with the Muslims.” SaK expands on this issue in the article *What are the apostate institutions of the UN and America doing in the national Taliban government?* which is dedicated to the impermissibility of accepting aid from NGOs. Table 6 shows that there is a higher frequency and greater diversity of NGOs mentioned in SaK, than in VoK. This resonates with other themes (China, the United States) where more details and a greater level of specificity are supplied in SaK than in VoK. SaK specifies CARE International, UNICEF, Red Cross, Norwegian Refugee Council, Aga Khan Foundation, and Save the Children organisation as some of the “most prominent disbelieving Crusader organisations” operating in Afghanistan.

However, SaK introduces a nuanced approach to accepting aid by categorising disbelievers into three different groups, each with different rules with regards to aid:

1. Disbelievers from the People of the Book.
2. Original disbelievers who are not from the People of the Book, such as Hindus, Communists, and others.
3. Apostate disbelievers.

For categories one and two, it is permissible to accept aid if the disbelievers are “peaceful or have treaties or are from the people of dhimma,” but not if they are “openly hostile warriors.” In the case of category three, it is not permissible to accept aid from apostate individuals or governments, however, an exception is made when the aid is a mixed contribution from Muslims and apostates, which falls under a separate category of “mixed wealth” and the aid may be accepted. The advice in SaK is thus far more practically orientated and nuanced than the outright ideological rejection of accepting aid from NGOs in VoK.

Conclusion

Foreign policy represents the most significant portion of articles in SaK and the second most significant in VoK. Our analysis has shown that more direct threats are expressed toward geographically proximate countries or international organisations that work in Afghanistan and surrounding countries. This prioritisation suggests that ISKP is currently a regional, rather than an international threat. It is unlikely that the enemy perception expressed in VoK and SaK can give specific information about future attacks, but it does reflect the priorities in ISKP’s strategic communications towards external entities. These priorities do not necessarily align with the international assessments evaluating ISKP as a threat to Western targets.

ISKP’s production of propaganda material in English is in itself noteworthy; apart from *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* produced by IS-Central between 2014 to 2017, these are the only English language magazines published centrally by an IS subsidiary. However, neither VoK nor SaK contain the kind of instructional articles on making weapons or incitement to Lone Wolf attacks that *Dabiq* or *Inspire* did. The main purpose of the foreign policy orientated articles in the ISKP’s magazines does not seem to be to inspire attacks on the West to the same extent.

The present analysis has demonstrated the prominence of direct threats toward South and Central Asian countries, as well as China and Saudi Arabia, in ISKP’s foreign policy. As demonstrated by recent ISKP attacks, particularly in Russia and Iran, these geostrategic goals are mirrored in ISKP’s attacks.

Furthermore, the present analysis has shown that, except for US military bases in Saudi Arabia, and civilian targets in the Netherlands and Sweden, threats toward the West are mostly ideological in nature. While there is a correlation between the frequency of mentions of countries and attacks executed in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, there is no similar trend with Western targets. What we do see, though, is an effort by ISKP to engage with current global conflicts such as the Ukraine War and the US-China great power competition. The recent trend of international expansion, as seen both in the intensification of multilingual propaganda and attacks directed at foreign targets, suggests that the threat posed by ISKP is acquiring a global dimension, but that military operations remain local and regional.

However, one should not dismiss the possibility of ISKP fulfilling its more global ambitions as it consolidates power locally. Future research could examine ISKP’s more recent magazines and propaganda materials in additional languages to explore how messages are tailored to distinct audiences. Moreover, while the present analysis is confined to assessing propaganda, further insight could be gained by investigating how far this propaganda is successful in infiltrating the milieus it targets. Crucially, our findings point to ISKP’s use of a differentiated communication

strategy, one that targets regional and international audiences with distinct rhetorical and strategic cues. This highlights the limitations of singular, mono-lithic policy responses to jihadist propaganda and underscores the need for more granular, audience-specific countermeasures in both academic research and counter-terrorism strategy.

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Appendix

Topic Modelling

Figure 3. Topic Modelling (VoK)

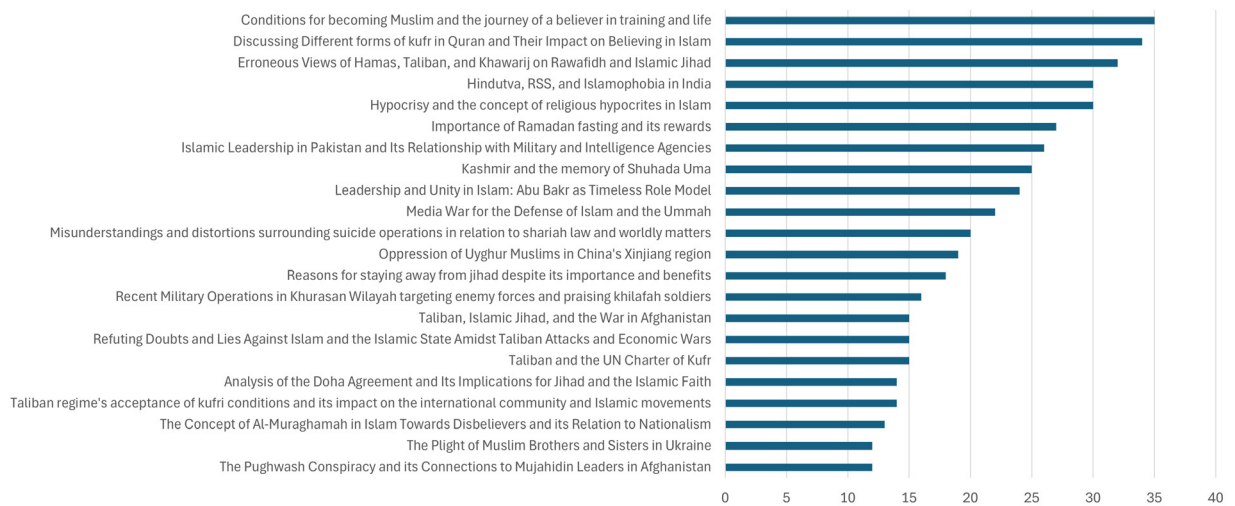
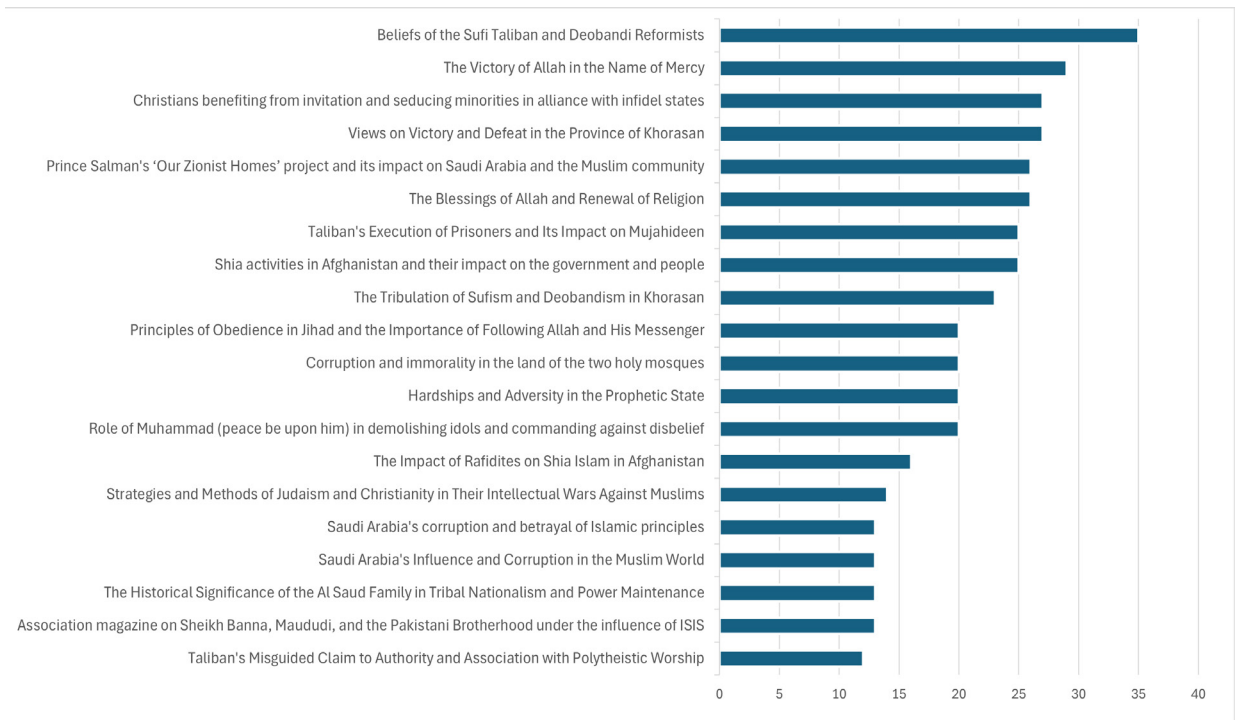
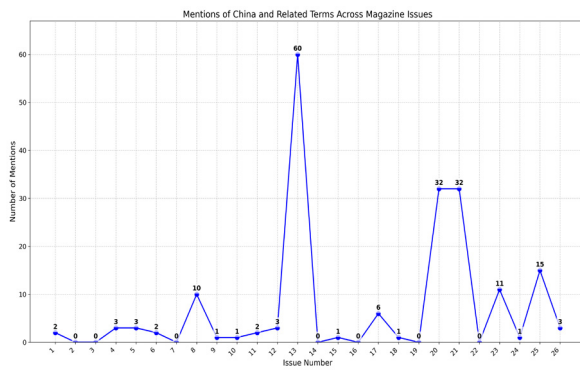


Figure 4. Topic Modelling (SaK)

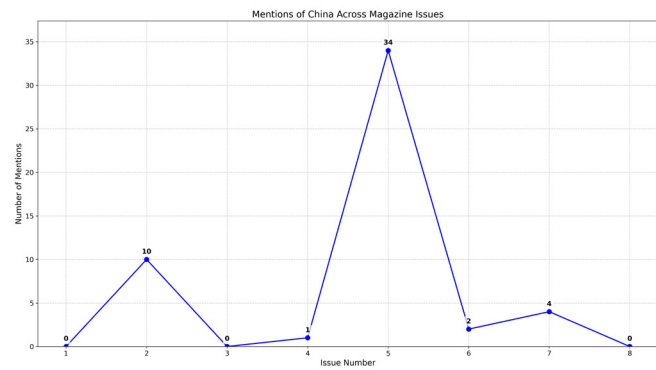


Country Fluctuations

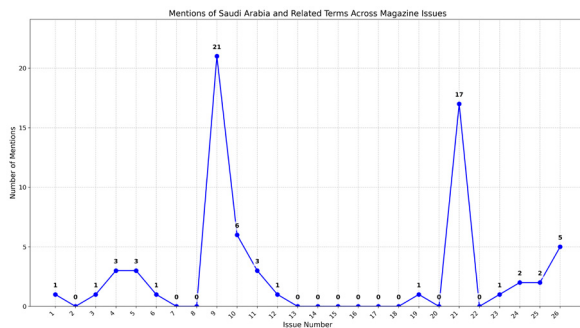
Figure 5: Country fluctuations: China, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan



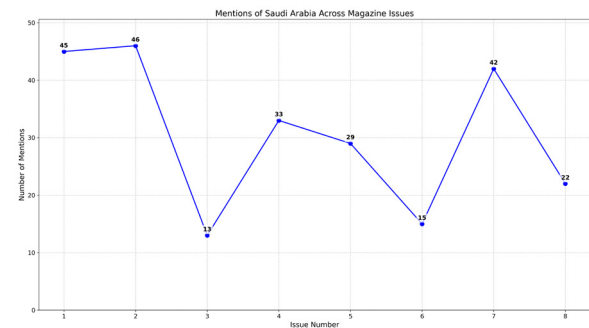
(a) China (VoK)



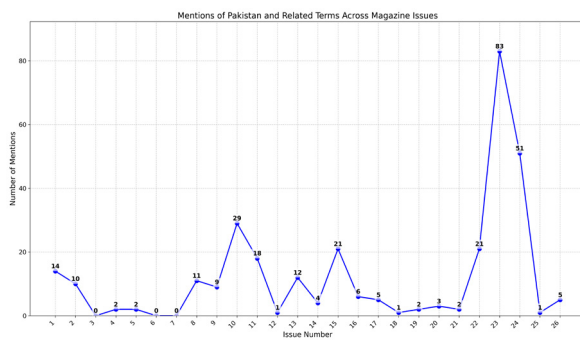
(b) China (SaK)



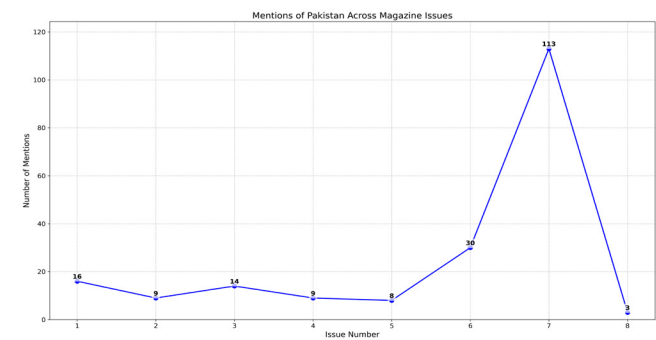
(c) Saudi Arabia (VoK)



(d) Saudi Arabia (SaK)



(e) Pakistan (VoK)



(f) Pakistan (SaK)

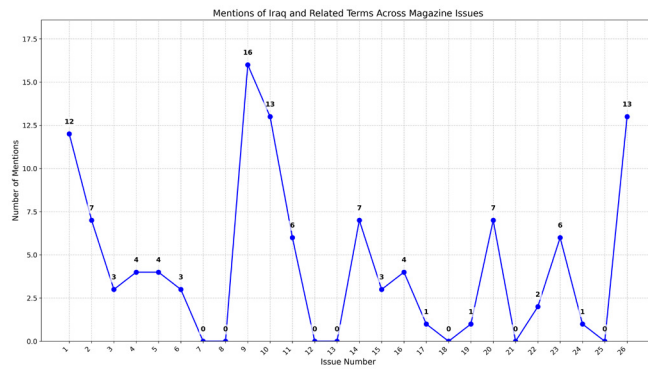
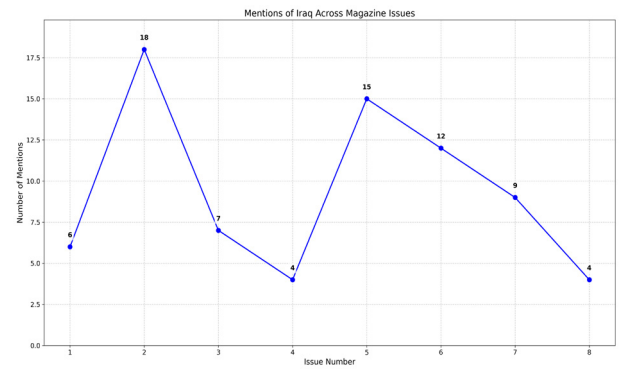
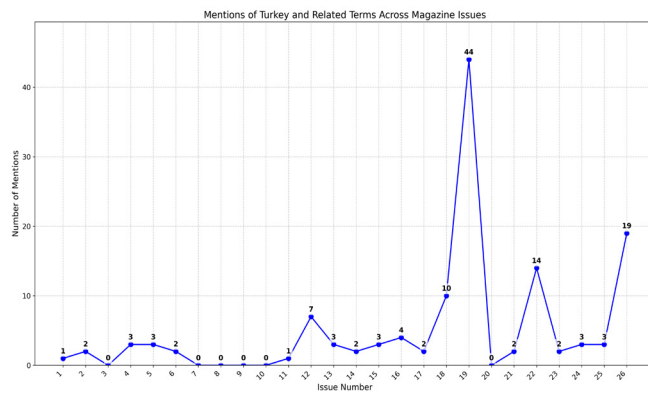
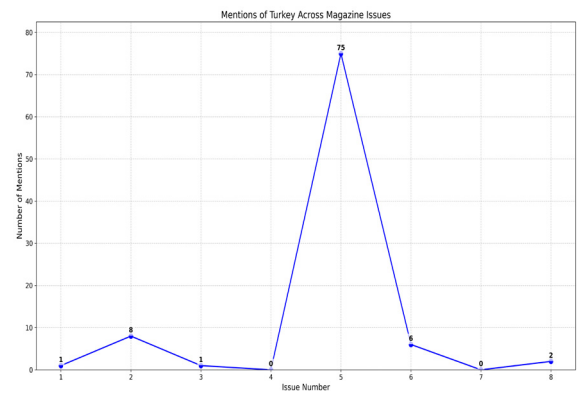
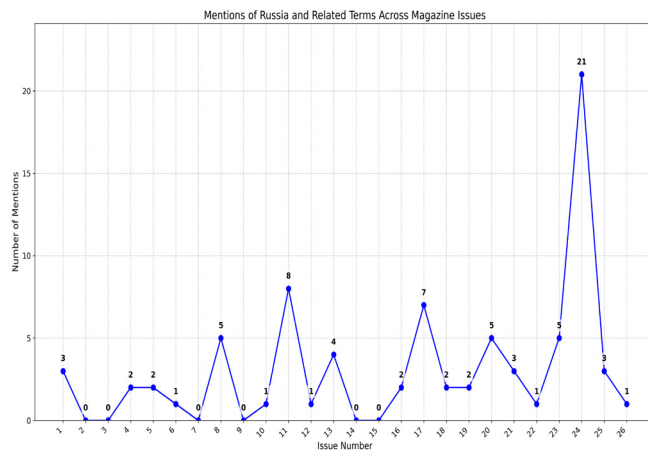
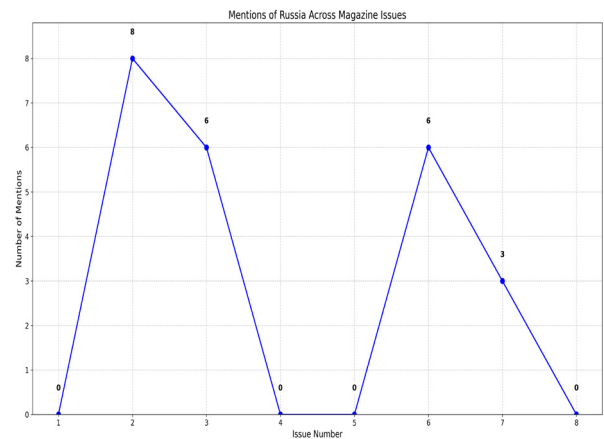
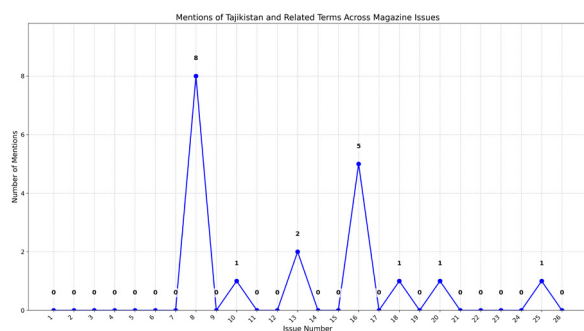
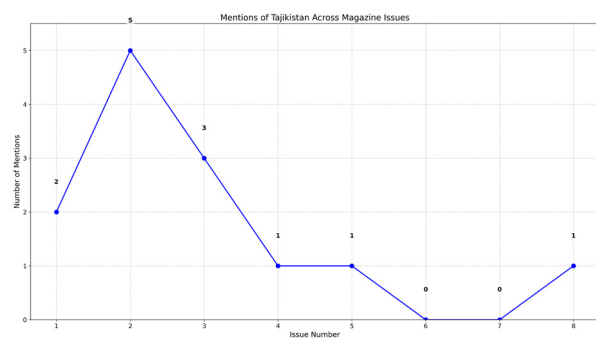
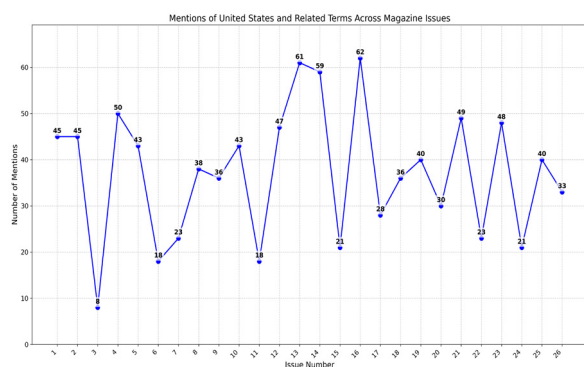
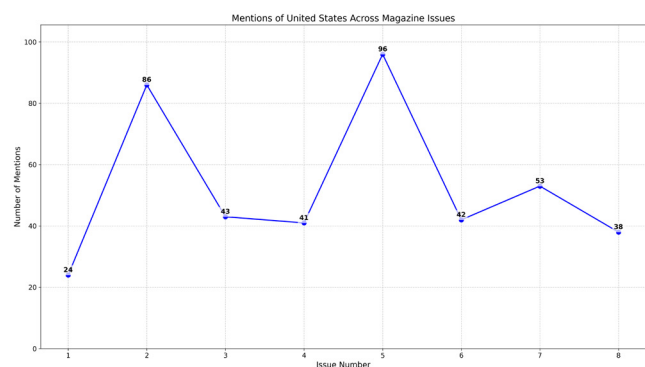
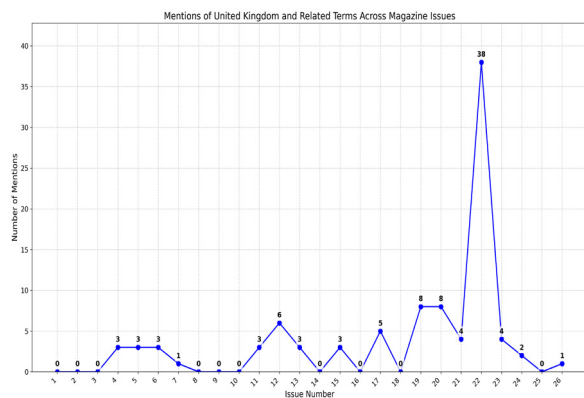
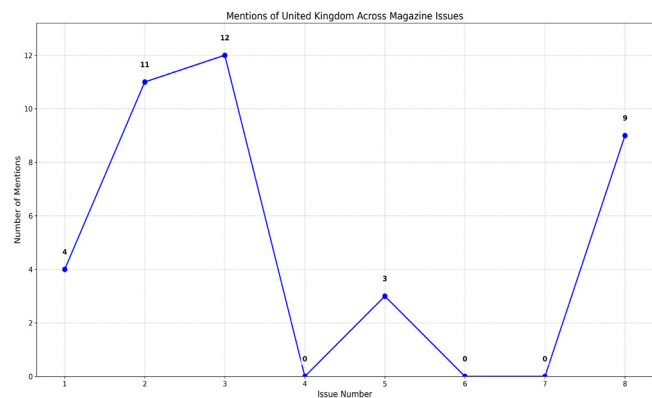
Figure 6. Country fluctuations: Iraq, Turkey, Russia**(a) Iraq (VoK)****(b) Iraq (SaK)****(c) Turkey (VoK)****(d) Turkey (SaK)****(e) Russia (VoK)****(f) Russia (SaK)**

Figure 7. Country fluctuations: Tajikistan, United States, United Kingdom**(a) Tajikistan (VoK)****(b) Tajikistan (SaK)****(c) United States of America (VoK)****(d) United States of America (SaK)****(e) United Kingdom (VoK)****(f) United Kingdom (SaK)**

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kazakhstan's Approach to the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Child Returnees from Syria and Iraq: Restoring the Rights to Life and Development

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Abstract: This article examines Kazakhstan's approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of children repatriated from Syria and Iraq during the *Zhusan* humanitarian operation. The analysis is based on data gathered through participant observation, conversational interviews with the children themselves, and discussions with an interdisciplinary team of experts involved in the rehabilitation process. Key elements of the Kazakhstani approach include restoring the legal status of these children and their families, implementing strategies to minimise stigmatisation, and supporting their social rehabilitation as a means of reintegrating them into Kazakhstani society. The article highlights both the successes and the effective practices in this process, as well as the challenges faced by the practitioners working with these child returnees. The authors suggest that adding a component focused on building resilience to re-traumatisation, involvement in violent extremism, and criminal behaviour could further enhance the effectiveness of the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

Keywords: Right to development, social rehabilitation, risks of stigmatisation, resilience, integration.

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Introduction

Kazakhstan is among the 80 countries worldwide whose citizens, along with their families, have travelled to join ISIS.¹ This migration has led to a significant number of Kazakhstani children residing in territories controlled by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In October 2013, a video titled *A Family of 150 Kazakhs Came to Syria for Jihad*² appeared on the Internet, in which, along with Kazakh adults, children took part, chanting verses of the Quran and speaking Kazakh. In November 2014, another video was disseminated online, showcasing Kazakh children undergoing weapon training and gaining combat skills in an ISIS camp. Recently, this video has resurfaced on Kazakhstani social networks, reigniting discussions on the involvement of Kazakh children in ISIS and its implications for national security and policy.

From January 2019 to September 2019, Kazakhstan carried out the humanitarian operation *Zhusan* in five stages. According to official open sources, within the framework of this operation, 607 Kazakhstani citizens were returned from the al-Hol camp in northeastern Syria. Most were women (157) and children (413, including 34 orphans). Of these, 303 children were under seven years old, 105 children were from 7 to 14 years old, and five children were aged between 14 to 18. Additionally, in November 2019, as part of the humanitarian operation *Rusafa*, fourteen children aged between 1.5 to 13 years were returned, whose mothers were serving sentences in Iraqi prisons.³ Before operation *Zhusan*, Kazakhstan had prior experience in rehabilitating men convicted of religious extremism and serving sentences in prisons. However, the emphasis of this work was on the efforts of theologians in deradicalising individuals, which was defined as guiding them towards traditional Islam as interpreted through the *Hanafi madhhab* of *Akida Maturidi*. This approach is recognised for its positive contribution to Kazakh culture, as affirmed by the Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations.⁴ This approach mainly involved theologians, and the involvement of psychologists in this process was limited. Efforts with women committed to radical ideologies were minimal and still in the early stages.⁵

The situation regarding child returnees represented a new challenge for Kazakhstan and required the development of new approaches to working with this category of returnees. Prior to their return, there was limited understanding of the specific needs and backgrounds of these children. As researcher Joana Cook emphasises, it is essential to understand the distinguishing characteristics of these children, whom she refers to as “ISIS-affiliated children”, including their experiences in ISIS-controlled areas and the resulting impacts on their well-being.⁶ This information serves as the foundation for rehabilitation and reintegration, enabling practitioners to anticipate and address the challenges and difficulties that may arise during implementation.⁷

Noman Benotvan and Nikita Malik have studied the case of child soldiers in ISIS pointing out not only the psychological, social, and economic influence on them but also the ideological indoctrination of children, who were called “lion cubs of the caliphate” and were central to the future of the “Islamic State” project. Additionally, Sara Zeiger, Farangiz Atamuradova et al., and Jacob Olidort have focused on the ideological influence exerted through ISIS’s educational materials for children, analysing how these resources were designed to shape young minds.⁸

Besides, researchers highlight significant gender differences in the experiences of boys and girls within ISIS due to the strict gender segregation in the so-called Islamic State and distinct life strategies imposed on children based on their gender.⁹

Reports and documents from UN agencies highlight that in territories controlled by terrorist organisations like ISIS, the rights of children as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child — ratified by nearly all UN member states — are consistently violated.¹⁰ Consequently, the UN asserts that the rehabilitation and reintegration of these children should comply with

the standards outlined in the Convention and ensure the full realisation of children's rights.¹¹ It stipulates several fundamental principles that apply to all children, including those affected by the actions of Islamic State militants. The first principle is the right to non-discrimination. In regard to children affected by the actions of IS militants, this also means avoiding discrimination based on the participation of family members or the child in terrorist organisations. The second principle emphasises that the child's best interests must be the primary consideration. Thus, decisions regarding the rehabilitation and reintegration of children from conflict zones should prioritise the child's well-being above all else. The third principle is the child's inherent right to life, survival, and holistic development, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and social growth. The fourth principle mandates respect for the child's views and the opportunity for meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives and their integration into society. The UN urges countries to repatriate children from the displacement camps, where they are at risk of re-traumatisation and re-radicalisation. This action is essential for upholding the principles above and ensuring the effective implementation of children's rights.¹²

Only a few states have undertaken humanitarian operations to return their citizens, or even just children from internal displacement camps, since the repatriation of children from the so-called Islamic State remains a cautious and security-focused approach. Among these, Kazakhstan, along with other Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as several European countries, including Finland, have undertaken such operations.¹³ These nations have developed their own approaches to the rehabilitation and reintegration of child returnees, guided by UN International Standards, taking into account the local context. Their experiences are documented in various expert reports and have spurred discussions and the development of models such as the 5Rs framework, which encompasses repatriation, resettlement, reintegration, rehabilitation, and resilience.¹⁴ The application of Bronfenbrenner's social ecology model to the rehabilitation and reintegration process is particularly noteworthy.¹⁵ To this day, there are ongoing discussions on best practices and models of rehabilitation and reintegration among experts and scholars.

This article focuses on Kazakhstan's approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of children, underscoring the protection and promotion of children's rights.¹⁶ It particularly focuses on the integration of these children into Kazakhstani society through social rehabilitation. This approach is formalised in the legal act Rules and Terms of Social Rehabilitation of Children Affected by Terrorist Activity, which was developed based on the hands-on experience of practitioners involved in the Zhusan and Rusafa operations.¹⁷

Methodology of the Study

The study was conducted in a cross-disciplinary manner. Data was collected using qualitative research methods, including observation, conversational interviews, and semi-structured interviews. Conversational interviews were conducted with children who returned from humanitarian operations Zhusan-2 and Zhusan-3 (May-June 2019) at rehabilitation camp Flamingo near Aktau (West Kazakhstan) during the course of these operations. The interviews were conducted in a child-friendly form, accompanied by drawing and sometimes playing, and lasted about 30 minutes. A total of 24 children aged between 9 and 16 years participated in interviews. It is important to point out that the sample has potential limitations, as the authors could not choose children based on their sex or age but only spoke with the children selected by the rehabilitation and reintegration programme's management. The National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan had authority over the humanitarian operation Zhusan and measures for the rehabilitation and reintegration of children and their families, which resulted in restrictions being put on the study.

In October-November of 2020, a year after the end of the Zhusan operation, interviews were conducted with practitioners involved in the work on rehabilitation and reintegration of returnee children. In particular, they were held with the head of the non-government organisation Foundation *Pravo* (translated as Right), Olga Ryl, whose regional centres *Shans* (translated as Chance) offering socio-psychological and legal support for minors, served as a basis for work with children on rehabilitation and reintegration. Therefore, interviews were conducted with the directors of Shans Centres in the city of Astana, Almaty, and Karaganda, as well as lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and theologians of these centres. A total of seventeen interviews were conducted with the listed practitioners. Also, the previously published data gathered from the interviews with Kazakhstani women repatriated from the displacement camp al-Hol during the humanitarian operations Zhusan-2 and Zhusan-3 were used in the article.¹⁸

In addition, the authors of the article took part in several national and international round tables, seminars, and conferences that focused on the rehabilitation and reintegration of children whose materials were included in the study. Using thematic coding, we analysed the data and identified the consequences of children staying in territories under ISIS control, key areas for rehabilitation and reintegration of children, effective practices, difficulties, and challenges.

The article avoids specifying children's names based on research ethics and the need to preserve anonymity and minimise risks of recognition to avoid harming children. Instead, it uses capitalised letters that are not related to their actual names. The names of other respondents, in particular the names of practitioners, are given or not given in agreement with the respondents.

The Experience of the Stay of Kazakhstani Children in the Territory of ISIS through the Lens of Children's Narratives and their Consequences

Kazakhstani children returned during the operation Zhusan can be divided into two categories. The first category is children brought to Syria by their parents. Families who moved included families with both parents and single-parent families. In most cases, it was a woman who divorced her husband and moved with the children to the Islamic State. The second category of returnee children consists of children born in the Islamic State, at least one of whose parents was a citizen of Kazakhstan.

Upon their arrival in Kazakhstan, they were interviewed in the rehabilitation camp called Flamingo close to Aktau city in Western Kazakhstan to gain insight into their living conditions in the Islamic State, identify the consequences of staying there, and determine their needs. The interviews revealed the circumstances of their lives in the territory controlled by ISIS.

Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik pointed out that ISIS is not only a terrorist organisation but also an ambitious state, and it requires not only soldiers but also a society with institutions that socialise, promote ideology, and educate the next generation.¹⁹ According to the terminology of Urie Bronfenbrenner, it is necessary to consider the ecological environment in which the children grew up, including both their direct interactions with family members and their indirect connections to the caliphate's structures, ideologies, and behavioural patterns that shaped their lives.²⁰ For example, there were Kazakh katibs, Uzbek katibs, and Tajik katibs, as well as mixed ones. Further, many of the children's fathers died shortly after arriving in Syria, leaving children and their mothers to live in widows' hostels (Arabic *maqarr*) until they remarried. It was often a standard practice that they remarried men of different nationalities. During subsequent marriages, many children were born in the Islamic State territory.

The narratives of children during our conversations about life in the Islamic state were centred around several key themes. The initial theme revolves around comprehending Islam. Islamic concepts influenced the perception of children and the circumstances of their lives. However, the interpretation of Islam was purely one-sided, with emphasis placed on rewards and punishments, the predestination of Allah, death, the arrival of Judgment Day, and hell and paradise. The most frequently encountered sub-themes were hell, heaven, and death. In the statement of the girl M. concentrated on understanding Islam, which surrounded them in ISIS, “I believe in Allah, it is a *qadar*, what Allah decreed, will happen. I had to witness it all. After death, I shall see paradise”.²¹ Explaining the death of their fathers and brothers, they often called them the *shahids*, who would go to heaven—the death of a *shahid* they perceived as a blessed death. The children vividly visualised paradise in their stories. According to girl A, “Paradise is eternal life, milk rivers, honey flows, fruits whose taste is unique and does not occur here on earth”.²² The *shahids*, they say, fought in the name of Allah against the *kafirs*. *Kafirs* are viewed by children as not worshiping Allah, not performing *namaz*, and murdering Muslims. As researchers note, the image of the enemy that was imposed on children in ISIS contributed to strengthening the intra-group identity of the Islamic State. This was presented as a genuine Islamic identity in contrast to other identities that were subjected to dehumanisation by ISIS.²³

This understanding of Islam in children was formed during the course of education in the Islamic State. The children stated that they were educated in mosques or *maqarrs*. The children named the following disciplines: mathematics, Quran studies, Arabic, some also mentioned Russian and Kazakh. The girls also named sewing. On one day, the boys were at school, while on the other day, the girls were. Boys who were 12 years old were sent to military training camp called *muaskar*. According to the published story of a repatriated woman, Tolganai Mukasheva, cases of paedophilia were uncovered in one of the *muaskars* in Raqqa; this *muaskar* was soon closed, and the case was hushed up.²⁴

Due to a one-sided and non-systemic education system, children experienced significant gaps in knowledge compared to their peers in Kazakhstan. As the researchers note, based on the ISIS curriculum they discovered, secular subjects were also taught through the prism of ISIS ideology.²⁵ During our conversations, they could not name any secular book, but only the Quran and Hadith. None of the children could name a single fairytale.

Violence is often the second major theme in children’s narratives. They often witnessed or were victims of violence, such as bombs and the death of relatives, friends, and neighbours. Kazakhstan’s children were among those who were injured during the bombings. There were also children who witnessed their mothers being killed. The girl G. said, “I buried my mother on my own. When the rocket landed, my mother was blown to pieces. I dug the sand, then gathered her pieces and buried them”.²⁶ Another Kazakhstani girl G., witnessed her mother being killed by a sniper and personally handled the burial of her mother. This girl complained that she began experiencing symptoms indicative of cardiovascular issues after that.²⁷

The third theme of children’s narratives is the deprivations they have faced. They mentioned starving and even having to eat grass, especially in active war zones. Additionally, they spoke about the hardships and humiliations in the Kurdish camp. Girl G. recalled, “The Kurds called us terrorists and shouted that nobody likes us.”²⁸

The experience of girls in ISIS was different from that of boys, as ISIS provided different life projects for children based on gender.²⁹ The girls wore a niqab from an early age. Girl S. indicated that she has been wearing a niqab since she was three years old, and that since she was six years old she has been performing *namaz*.³⁰ Another girl, L, said she has worn a hijab

since she was 7 years old. The coating was black.³¹ In response to the question of why the girls were covered before puberty, the mothers stated that they were instructed to learn how to wear hijab beforehand.

It should also be noted from interviews with psychologists and social workers that there were cases of role reversal or parentification in the family when the child took care of the parents. In some cases, “cold motherhood” or maternal neglect was evident when mothers saw themselves in a detached way in relation to their children, and were inattentive to the needs of the children.

Furthermore, the Islamic State did not have structures to treat children. Interviews with women returnees revealed that young children were dying from diseases.

The ecological environment of Kazakhstani children in the territory under ISIS control was characterised by a lack of a safe environment that allowed them to live and develop fully, as discussed above. It was a life lived in survival mode, which hindered the full development of the individual. The violence and deprivation Kazakhstani children experienced were traumatic, resulting in negative physical, psychological, and social consequences. First, there were physical injuries, acquired chronic diseases, and health problems (risks of cardiovascular diseases, gastrointestinal tract diseases, and so forth). Some children suffered severe injuries that resulted in permanent disabilities. Second, it had a long-term negative impact on the psychological health and well-being of children. The psychological consequences included sleep disturbance, nightmares and crying during sleep, fear of loud sounds, anxiety, behaviour disorders, and others, which were correlated with data provided by Save the Children and the results of psychological studies. Third, the lack of access to formal education and a stimulating social environment led to developmental gaps in these children compared to their peers in Kazakhstan. Fourth, it led to the legitimisation and normalisation of violence in relationships with other people instead of respect and tolerance. Fifth, the development of an inverted value system, where life was devalued and death was glorified, increased the risks of suicidal behaviour. Sixth is a notable deculturation, which involves a detachment from ethnic and cultural heritage and one’s cultural roots. This included the deculturation of Islam as interpreted by ISIS.³² Seventh, the risks associated with developing a negative identity, which may lead to criminal behaviour, victimisation, intergenerational radicalisation, and the transmission of traumatic experiences across generations.

Legal Aspects of Creating a Safe, Non-Stigmatising Environment for the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children

In Kazakhstan, the approach to rehabilitation and reintegration of repatriated children is being implemented based on restoration and safeguarding of the child’s rights to non-discrimination, life, and healthy development in accordance with national legislation and international law. The legal framework for this process is the foundation on which the entire system of comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration is built. Institutionally, the legal aspects of rehabilitation and reintegration were addressed in collaboration with state bodies and the non-governmental organisation Pravo through its Shans Centres of socio-psychological and legal assistance.³³

During the repatriation process, the Presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, first Nursultan Nazarbayev and then Kassym-Jomart Tokaev made clear in their statements how they treat the returned women and children as citizens of Kazakhstan who are in a difficult situation and need help.³⁴ The Presidents’ statements contributed to creating a safe, non-stigmatising environment for children’s rehabilitation and integration, which is an important condition for

successful rehabilitation and integration, according to psychologists.³⁵

Upon arrival in Kazakhstan, women and children were placed in a rehabilitation camp near Aktau (city in Western Kazakhstan), where they underwent adaptation and initial rehabilitation for one month. The first day of the week was spent in a rehabilitation camp. The main problem was the lack of documentation for women and children because in the Islamic State, it was common practice to burn documents of arriving *muhajirs*, symbolising a complete break with the past and the beginning of a new life in the so-called caliphate. Therefore, one of the main tasks of Pravo was to document children and their parents in the first year of rehabilitation. The documentation started in the rehabilitation camp and continued in the regions with the help of lawyers from the Shans Centre. This opened up access to health, educational, and social services that the state provides to its citizens.

Deputy Minister of Justice Akerke Akhmetova referred to the process of documenting children as “the right of the child to a name,” emphasising its importance as a fundamental right, which was realised through the issuance of birth certificates.³⁶ Lost birth certificates were restored to children born in Kazakhstan. The issue of birth certificates to children born in Syria was a more complex procedure, which was regulated by national legislation, in particular the Code of Laws On Marriage and Family of the Republic of Kazakhstan (art. 47) and other legal acts.³⁷

Due to the absence of birth certificates in Syria, the court established the fact of birth based on genome analysis. Of the 406 children returned during the humanitarian operation Zhusan, only nine children have Syria indicated on their birth certificates, since at the end of 2020 an amendment was adopted to article 188, paragraph 3 of the Code of Laws. According to this, the place of birth of a child outside the Republic of Kazakhstan indicates the place of factual birth of the child. Most children were registered as born in Kazakhstan, which protects them from potential questioning from others, as the place of birth is recorded on identification documents at age 16 and remains with the individual throughout their life. The director of the Shans Centre in Astana shared a case where, before the school year began, returning children were taken to visit the school in advance. When the teacher asked where they had come from, one of the girls became hysterical.³⁸

The documentation of children not only restored their “the right to a name” but also provided access to medical, educational, and social services that every citizen of Kazakhstan has the right to use. However, during the documentation process, some difficulties exposed problem areas in the legislation, as revealed in an interview by the Director of the Shans Centres and lawyers. Women and children returned from al-Hol camp not only lacked identification documents but also death certificates for relatives, which led to problems in receiving social benefits.

In particular, the head of the Shans Centre in Karaganda noted that issues related to recognising the fathers and mothers of returned children as dead or missing remain unresolved.³⁹ If there is no evidence of the parent’s death or missing status, the state authorities cannot grant a survivor’s benefit. The Law of the Kazakhstan Republic stipulates that anyone who is on the international wanted list for extremism cannot be declared dead or missing. Consequently, the family would not be granted a survivor’s benefit. In the event that it was impossible to prove that the husband and father of the children had died, lawyers from the Shans Centre helped the woman with a divorce so that she could receive help as a single mother. Moreover, the guardians of returned orphans, typically their close relatives, were not eligible for child benefits unless their parents’ death was proven or they were declared missing.

Mothers with many children in Kazakhstan cannot receive a corresponding allowance unless

they have a birth certificate or a death certificate in case of a child's death in Syria. The courts initially handed down a death sentence, but the prosecutor's office later prohibited it. If a mother with many children does not have documents for all her children, then she cannot get on the waiting list to receive housing from the state.

All of the listed problems in the legislation were discovered during the first year of rehabilitation and reintegration of children, and lawyers from the Pravo developed recommendations for overcoming them. The documentation process included cases of international guardianship by citizens of other countries in accordance with the guardianship organisation's rules.⁴⁰ The Director of Pravo, Olga Ryl, shared a successful case of formalising such guardianship. Four children from the same family were among those returned as part of the Rusafa humanitarian operation. Their father, who was a citizen of Kyrgyzstan, passed away. The mother, who is a Kazakhstan citizen, is currently serving a 25-year sentence at Rusafa prison in Iraq. The eldest girl confirmed the fact of her father's death in court. The grandparents of these children, on the deceased father's side, decided to take them to Kyrgyzstan. A genomic examination was carried out to establish family relationships, and then guardianship of the children was formalised. They are currently being raised by their grandparents. The custody in this case did not pose any significant problems.⁴¹

The documentation process for women and children was completed within a year of the start of the Zhusan humanitarian operation, instilling a sense of security, safety, and gratitude among the returning women. Tolganai Mukysh, one of the repatriated women whose case was publicly documented, highlighted the crucial legal assistance provided by the lawyers at the Shans Centre, "I had to prove that the children's fathers had died, but there was no way to obtain death certificates. A very good lawyer helped me... I went through a divorce trial. I needed to get a divorce so that I could receive assistance as a single mother, and she helped me sort it all out".⁴² It is important to acknowledge that the documentation adhered to the priority principle for the child's interests. The Director of the Shans Centre in Almaty noted in an interview that in the courts, judges tried to find norms in legal acts that would allow them to decide in favour of the child's interests to facilitate further development as an individual and citizen of Kazakhstan.⁴³ In the case above of Tolganai Mukysh, where it was impossible to prove the death of her husband and the father of her children, the lawyers found a solution by facilitating her divorce. This allowed her to qualify as a single mother and receive social benefits, which was in the best interests of her children. Tolganay returned with three children, and one child died in Syria during bombings.

Thus, documenting the repatriates was a complex process that involved not only issuing birth certificates to children but also navigating court proceedings to declare deceased children and fathers in Syria legally dead or missing, as well as facilitating divorces to ensure that women and their children could access social benefits. During the documentation process, challenges arose in officially recognising the fathers of the children as deceased or missing due to the fact that from the moment they travelled to the territory controlled by the Islamic State, they were listed as wanted individuals for extremism. Through the documentation process conducted in the child's best interest, legal conditions were established to ensure non-discrimination and non-stigmatisation of the repatriated children. This facilitated their access to various services in accordance with the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan, thereby assisting their integration into society.

Social Rehabilitation as a Way to Reintegrate Children into Kazakhstani Society

The Director of Pravo Olga Ryl pointed out that the goal of working with repatriated children was to integrate them into Kazakhstani society and show other behavioural and life strategies, unlike those they saw in ISIS.⁴⁴

The Pravo and its Shans Centre is a socially oriented non-governmental organisation that has previously worked with minors who found themselves in difficult life situations and with children in contact with the law. There are seventeen Shans Centres in Kazakhstan, which house children's hotels for temporary accommodation and a multidisciplinary team of specialists, including lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and teachers. After a month-long stay at the Flamingo rehabilitation oper, women and their children returned to their home regions, where their rehabilitation and reintegration process continued for a year and a half at the local Shans Centre. The Shans Centre collaborated with various government agencies in its work with the children, including the Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The chief expert of the Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights, during a speech at a practical seminar, emphasised that following the adaptation period in the Flamingo rehabilitation camp, the primary responsibility of practitioners in the regions is to establish a comfortable environment for children returning from zones of terrorist activity.⁴⁵

It is important to note that the returned women and children were equated to people in difficult life situations and need of special social services by the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan On Special Social Services (December 29, 2008) and the Standard for the Provision of Special Social Services to Children and Families in Difficult Life Situations (June 25, 2019).⁴⁶ Special social services, according to the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan, are a set of services aimed at providing a person (family) in a difficult life situation with conditions for overcoming social problems and creating opportunities to participate in the life of society along with other citizens.⁴⁷ Thus, the experience of working with people in difficult situations was taken as a basis which determined the emphasis on social rehabilitation.⁴⁸

Considering the aforementioned risks, reintegration into Kazakhstani society was addressed in the following areas. Firstly, efforts focused on the psychological rehabilitation of women and the restoration of their social skills for living in Kazakhstani society. Since children in Kazakhstan remained under the care of their mothers, the psychological well-being and successful rehabilitation and reintegration of the mothers had a profound impact on the rehabilitation and reintegration of the children. In terms of psychological rehabilitation, psychologists provided support not only by offering psychological assistance to the women but also by improving their interactions with their own children. A psychologist from the Shans Centre in Astana said in an interview, "[w]e taught women to interact with their own children".⁴⁹ In order to restore social skills and opportunities for reintegration for these women, in addition to social benefits, monthly food baskets and professional courses were provided for their further employment. Secondly, efforts were focused on the social rehabilitation of children to ensure their successful reintegration into a new social environment. From the moment of their arrival at the Flamingo rehabilitation camp, the process of socialisation for the children began. They were first introduced to the routines of a typical Kazakhstani family, which included activities such as waking up, brushing teeth, exercising, having breakfast, and engaging in either study or structured leisure activities.

In the rehabilitation camp Flamingo, there was a Psychological-Medical-Pedagogical Commission (PMPC) to determine the knowledge, social skills, and psychological development of children, including educational needs. According to the PMPC, many children are falling behind in education when compared to their peers. Therefore, educational sessions were organized in subjects including Arabic, English, Mathematics, Russian, Kazakh, and basic Geography. As Olga Ryl said in the interview, the Flamingo rehabilitation camp tried to cover the primary school programme up to and including the 4th grade. After the children arrived in the region, in August 2019 a Summer School was organised at the Shans Centres to fill in the gaps in knowledge. All these educational activities were aimed at getting children closer to their age in the classroom. This has reduced the threat of stigmatisation in the school environment. In addition, the practitioners managed to motivate children to study well and attend additional classes with tutors at the Shans Centres in order to quickly move into the appropriate class for their age. As a result, many children do well in school today. In November 2021, two years after the completion of the humanitarian operations Zhusan and Rusafa, the Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Aruzhan Sain, reported that half of the returned school-age children (252) were excellent and good students, seven became participants and prize winners of various Olympiads, 60 were participants and prize winners of various creative competitions.⁵⁰ As the practitioners of the Shans centre noted, children are diligent students with sharp minds. They understood that to survive and find their place in Kazakhstani society, they needed to excel academically.

The training provided in school was not solely focused on bridging knowledge gaps but also on becoming familiar with the rules of schooling in Kazakhstan.

In particular, having become accustomed to gender segregation in ISIS, children had to be prepared for girls and boys to be educated together. The children received instructions and a tour of the school. The girls we talked to at the rehabilitation camp allowed for co-education, with the condition of sitting with the boys behind different desks. In Kazakhstani schools, it is customary to wear a school uniform without a hijab. The school-age girls who returned mostly wore the hijab and were allowed to wear a headband when attending school. Also, children had limitations in drawing people, but concessions were made, and they could choose not to draw people or animals. During physical education, the girls wore sports uniforms, but they were looser and non-strapping. The preliminary work on comprehensive school preparation has helped children to reintegrate into their new school environment more smoothly and successfully.

In addition to mandatory classes, children attended various clubs and sports sections, which promote personal development and the formation of new social ties and, accordingly, deeper integration into Kazakhstani society. As part of the socialisation, children of pre-school age were placed in kindergartens, like all Kazakhstani children.

The third area, children's interaction with the wider community, was also addressed. The returned children did not know the history, traditions, mentality, and values of Kazakhstani society. To help them become familiar with their own country of residence, visits to museums, exhibitions, excursions, cultural events, and children's entertainment centres were organised. In the Shans Centre, both national holidays, such as Nauryz, and universal holidays, such as the secular New Year's, were held with the participation of children.

During practical work with women and children returnees, practitioners noted the difference in this category of children who found themselves in a difficult life situation. These children

are religious and have been performing *namaz* since they were seven. Therefore, at the Shans Centre, theologians were also involved in working with them to, as theologian Layla Rysakova put it, “increase resistance to religious extremism”.⁵¹ This theologian did not limit herself to classes on Islam but applied a broader humanistic approach, trying to introduce children to the achievements of spiritual culture, instil respect for different religions, and promote the development of thinking in children. Unlike with women, in working with children, special emphasis was not placed solely on theology. Instead, psychologists, teachers, and social workers took the lead in their rehabilitation. At the same time, it is essential to consider the children’s religiosity, as noted by these professionals, when working with this group.

Due to the differences in this category of children who find themselves in a difficult life situation, the interdepartmental working group developed a special algorithm for working with them, as specified in the Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan Rules and Terms for Social Rehabilitation of Children Affected by Terrorist Activity (09/04/2020).⁵² This Order specifically designates children affected by terrorist activity as a distinct category. Monitoring of social rehabilitation is carried out by the body for the protection of children’s rights. The overwhelming majority of practical work with children is assigned to educational organisations - schools. The term of social rehabilitation, according to the Order, is a calendar year with the possibility of extension.

Thus, in work with Kazakhstani returnee children, the focus was on their reintegration into a safe social environment with measures to mitigate threats and risks of stigmatisation from the social environment at the levels of family, school, and society. Initially, acting within the existing legal framework for the provision of special social services to people in difficult life situations, a specific document on social rehabilitation was developed based on the experience of working with returnee children. This document identified them as “children affected by terrorist activities.”

Challenges of Rehabilitation Work with Returnee Children at the Present Stage

Psychologists point out that rehabilitation work with children who have experienced traumatic events in childhood should be long-term.⁵³ Otherwise, unresolved childhood trauma can have a negative impact on personal development and lead to problems with identity formation and, as a consequence, to deviant behaviour, such as criminal acts, drug use, and suicidal tendencies. In addition, according to VERA indicators, the experience of violence in childhood and the involvement of family members in violent extremism are risk factors for the child’s involvement in violent extremism as they grow older.⁵⁴ In Kazakhstan, after a year of working on the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees, local experts involved in the process began discussing whether special attention should be given to the continued rehabilitation of children. Risks that experts and practitioners see for the further development of returnee children were identified during participant observation and interviews. These are the dangers of glorifying a *shahid* father, mental constructs of ISIS that remain in children’s memory, and the (in)effectiveness of deradicalisation of their mothers. On the other hand, opponents of further special work for these children argued that increased focus might trigger memories of Syria, potentially leading to re-traumatisation and stigmatisation. Consequently, they reasoned that the existing support provided by school psychologists would be adequate for addressing the children’s needs.

At the moment, returnee children study in schools and are under the supervision of school psychologists. As noted above, children affected by terrorist activities represent a special

category of children among children in difficult life situations; hence, their psychological support requires additional competencies. The problem of increasing the competencies of school psychologists is a serious challenge for the long-term process of rehabilitation and reintegration.

The training of school psychologists, as well as psychologists of non-governmental organisations involved in rehabilitation work, is the focus of joint international projects of the government of Kazakhstan. In 2021, as part of a joint project of the Government of Kazakhstan and the US State Department, Dr Stephen Wayne, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, and his colleagues conducted seminars, webinars, and round tables to train school psychologists and NGO psychologists in methods of working with this category of children.⁵⁵ In 2022, the circle of people involved in the seminars on psychological support for returnee children expanded. Namely, several female returnees were included, who, along with everyone else, learned the skills of providing psychological assistance to themselves and their children. An important aspect of the participation of women returnees in the seminars was that they had the opportunity to talk about their problems and the problems of their children and receive recommendations. A separate block of seminars was devoted to the topic of psychological trauma and trauma-informed care in working with returnee children and their

In 2022-2023, UNICEF experts, in collaboration with the Department of Psychology at LN Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Kazakhstan), undertook a joint project titled *Creation and Support of a National Center for Resource Groups on Education, Psychosocial Support, and Mental Health of Children and Their Families*.

As part of this initiative, an online course was conducted for school psychologists across all regions, focusing on *Providing Social and Psychological Assistance to Families and Children Returning from Conflict Zones*. Additionally, a supervision seminar and a workshop on *Application of Gender-Sensitive Indicators in Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs for Families Returning from Conflict Zones* were held. The project also produced several key teaching and methodological materials, including the *Practical Guide to Working with Children and Families Returned from Conflict Zones* and the *Guide to the Application of Gender-Sensitive Indicators for the Implementation of Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs for Families Returned from Conflict Zones*. The National Center for Resource Groups on Education, Psychosocial Support, and Mental Health of Children and Their Families was established within the Department of Psychology as a result of this international project.

The seminars showed that work with returnee children at the present stage should be more targeted with each specific case, based on the child's interaction with the different social environments where he or she is involved. Although the Kazakhstani experience of social rehabilitation and reintegration of children has shown good results, there are cases of outbursts of aggression in children, memory problems, and difficulties in interacting with school teachers because of their stay in conflict zones. Therefore, work with children should continue since the consequences of staying in the conflict zone are long-term.

The next serious challenge is the prospective return of fathers to their families. Some children's fathers did not die in ISIS but returned as part of the Zhusan Operation, were convicted, and are serving a prison term under extremism articles (37 people). At the moment, as Olga Ryl, the Director of Pravo said in an interview, the men serving their sentences are trying to apply for parole and probation control due to the fact that they have minor children.⁵⁶ The return of fathers to the family and their influence on children is also an important topic of work with returnee children, which requires serious attention and work not only with children but also

with their families. In addition, as they grow older, children begin to be interested in family history, and in the case of the death of the father, the circumstances of his death also become a challenge for the child's relatives and for psychologists.

Based on the above, the rehabilitation and reintegration of returnee children should be supplemented by the formation of resilience to the risks of involvement in violent extremism and re-traumatisation. The resilience component involves maintaining an integrated life, intentions for personal growth, and a positive life project in the long term, despite possible triggers that refer to the traumatic experience of being in a conflict zone.⁵⁷ The need to develop resilience in returnee children is also a serious challenge and requires further improvement of the Kazakhstani approach.

Conclusion

Restoring the right to life, safety, and healthy development of returnee children is the main goal of the Kazakhstani approach to rehabilitation and reintegration. The attitude towards returnee children was devoid of securitisation, and from the beginning of the rehabilitation and reintegration process, they were considered victims of terrorist activities. This perspective was expressed in speeches by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and other government officials and formalised in a particular document — *The Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan*. It was essential to restore the legal status of both children and their mothers to implement children's rights. In addressing the documentation of children and mothers, the approach prioritised the best interests of the child. It focused on creating a safe, stigma-free social environment for the child's development. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of children have Kazakhstan as their birthplace. However, there were a number of hardships in documenting women, primarily due to the difficulty in proving the deaths of their husbands and children in Syria, which consequently impacted their ability to receive the necessary social benefits related to the loss of a breadwinner or support for large families.

In the Kazakhstani approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of children after their return to the region, the emphasis was placed on social rehabilitation, aiming to facilitate their reintegration into Kazakhstani society and to create a supportive environment for their full development. Within the framework of social rehabilitation, the emphasis was placed on three key areas: first, on the psychological and social rehabilitation of the mothers with whom the children live; second, on preparing the children for school to reduce the educational gap with their peers and minimise the risks of stigmatisation in the school environment; and third, on their integration into the broader community by helping them assimilate its traditions, values, mental characteristics, and behavioural models.

As returnee children grow up, they face new challenges that require the development of resilience against factors leading to involvement in violent extremism, criminal behaviour, and social marginalisation. It necessitates the development of new approaches and methods and the exchange of experience between practitioners from different countries. Currently, efforts are underway to establish a network of practitioners from Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, who have conducted humanitarian operations to return their citizens. The goal of this network is to facilitate mutual learning and the exchange of experience in the rehabilitation and integration of children and their families, helping to identify effective methods and practices.

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RESEARCH NOTE

Investigating Terrorist Use of Improvised Explosive Devices in the United States: Evidence from US Federal Court Cases, 2009 – 2024

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Abstract: Terrorist use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) remains a persistent and evolving threat within the United States. Until now, few data collection and analysis efforts have focused on the systematic capture of terrorist bombing plots and attacks. Filling this evidence gap, this research note presents and analyses an original dataset of US federal charges associated with terrorism-related IED incidents in the United States observed from 2009 through 2024. The data features 110 related cases, the analysis of which indicates a sample peak in the use of IEDs in terrorist incidents occurred in 2024. Incidents are not siloed to a specific region within the US, but involve cases from coast-to-coast, with crowded spaces remaining the most prominent target. The most common form of device employment observed across the dataset is the person-borne IED, primarily involving pipe bombs and pressure cooker IEDs. Eighty percent of the incidents recorded in the sample were thwarted by intelligence and law enforcement professionals – the remainder either failed due to technical mistakes or were successful. The research note describes notable sources of change in IED threats over time and identifies emerging trends in the methods by which US-based terrorists may continue to utilise IEDs in their efforts to cause death, harm, and destruction. It concludes with implications for theory, study, and practice.

Keywords: Improvised explosive device (IED), terrorism, terrorist innovation, United States

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Introduction

It was only a few hours into the year 2025 when a US Army veteran inspired by the Islamic State ploughed a pickup truck at high speed down Bourbon Street in New Orleans, killing fourteen and injuring dozens. The attacker had planned to use improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as lethal adjuncts to the vehicle ramming assault – multiple IEDs were later found in his vehicle as well as in the immediate area¹. Across its history, the United States has experienced major terrorist attacks facilitated by the use of explosives, resulting in hundreds of casualties. Similar plots have been disrupted by the actions of law enforcement and intelligence professionals. The era of the bomb is not over; terrorists and homeland threat actors based in the United States continue to look to explosives to bring attention to their respective causes, maximise casualties, and cause significant damage.²

This research note presents and analyses an original dataset of more than 100 terrorism-related IED incidents associated with federal charges in the United States from 2009 through 2024. Leveraging hundreds of public federal court documents as primary source material, the data provides an updated, evidence-based baseline for anticipating and understanding terrorist tactical choices and informs future academic study into this phenomenon. Our analysis of the data underscores that the IED threat to US homeland security is persistent and evolving. The highest recorded number of cases within the sample time range was 2024, with a total of sixteen federal charges. Terrorist use of explosives for large- and small-scale attacks is likely to persist, even as threat actors continue to innovate their design and tactical employment of IEDs.

The Terrorist IED Attack: Definitions, Common Forms, and Underlying Logic

Improvised explosive devices vary considerably in their composition and degree of sophistication. The IED threat is generally low-tech in nature. Most IED components are inexpensive, do not require a lot of formal training or knowledge to manufacture, and can be made from locally available materials³ attack planners and plotters, IEDs are highly customizable and, thus, vary widely in their design as well as in their modes of employment or concealment. Ultimately, the final form and component parts of an IED are limited only by the creativity and skill of the bombmaker.⁴

But what counts as an IED? Paul Gill, John Horgan, and Jeffrey Lovelace synthesise nearly 30 different academic and practitioner definitions to argue that “An explosive device is considered an IED when any or all of the following...is modified in any respect from its original expressed or intended function. An IED’s components may incorporate any or all of military grade munitions, commercial explosives or homemade explosives. The components and device design may vary in sophistication from simple to complex, and IEDs can be used by a variety of both state and non-state actors.”⁵

While IEDs reflect the unique skills, needs, resources, and intent of the bombmaker, most modern devices feature five component types: (1) a switch, (2) an initiator, (3) a main charge, (4) a power source, and (5) a container.⁶ Some IEDs also make use of enhancements, such as metal shrapnel, which terrorists may choose to add to a device to increase its physical or psychological effects. This category includes “dirty bombs”, in which terrorists enhance an IED by adding chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear agents.⁷

Some of the most common IED types appearing in US-based cases include over-pressure devices, pipe bombs, pressure cooker bombs, and mailed packages.⁸ The retrofitted pressure cooker

bomb was made especially popular with violent extremists after instructions for constructing these were provided in the 2010 “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom” article published in the Al-Qaeda-linked *Inspire* magazine. In a homeland context, terrorists’ use of military grade plastic explosives, such as Semtex, in improvised devices is less common; most threat actors find the use of commercial explosives (e.g., smokeless powder) or homemade explosives (e.g., TATP or ANFO) to be more accessible or desirable. Pyrotechnics and fireworks continue to be among the most common explosive charges used in improvised devices.⁹

It is unsurprising that improvised explosive devices are common tools of the trade among a diverse range of terrorists around the world and in the United States.¹⁰ IEDs are affordable, relatively simple to make, difficult to disrupt, and can cause significant harm and damage. For threat actors at an asymmetric capabilities disadvantage, IEDs level the playing field with a credible guarantee of immediate impact. This weapon of choice has been popularised across nearly all threat actor groups, including anarchist violent extremists, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, jihadist homegrown violent extremists, and designated transnational criminal organisations.

A Brief Overview of Historic Terrorist IED Incidents in the United States

American militants, terrorists, and violent extremists have long integrated explosives into their operations. The late 1800s saw a surge of political violence enabled by the development, manufacture, and distribution of dynamite. Audrey Cronin writes that, as the first “widely accessible, commoditized, inexpensive, and highly portable high explosive,” dynamite quickly became the weapon of choice of anarchists, revolutionaries, and nationalists (2020, p. 68).¹¹ Recent research finds that more than 216 politically motivated bombing incidents occurred in the US between 1867 and 1934, including the 1920 anarchist bombing of the J.P. Morgan Building on Wall Street.¹² The threat did not end there. Other notable historic attacks include the 6th Street Baptist Church bombing of 1963 and the Weather Underground bombings in the 1970s.¹³ Scholars Jacob Ware and Bruce Hoffman remark on this tumultuous period, “During one 18-month stretch between 1971 and 1972, there were an astonishing 2,500 bombings. Many of which were committed by radical left-wing groups such as the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army, and the New World Liberation Front.”¹⁴ The ease of acquiring and using explosive devices to inflict damage and destruction acts as a linking function across these historic attacks, an enabling factor which persists today. Thus, improvised explosive devices remain a prominent choice for violent extremists today, with more recent high-profile attacks.¹⁵ For example, in a comprehensive study on more than 120 jihadist terrorist plots and attacks in the US from 1993 to 2017, Martha Crenshaw and colleagues found that almost half involved explosives.¹⁶ Other bombing incidents occurring during this time period include the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.¹⁷

Limiting the analytic aperture to only major incidents or successful attacks risks painting an incomplete picture of the terrorist IED threat.¹⁸ Many smaller-scale and failed IED incidents occur on a more regular cadence. For instance, in January 2011, a white supremacist affiliated with the National Alliance placed an IED along the route of a Martin Luther King parade in Spokane, Washington. The attacker designed the device – which was identified and rendered safe prior to detonation – to scatter metal fragments covered with rat poison to keep victims’ wounds from coagulating. The IED was discovered less than an hour before the parade started and was subsequently disarmed.¹⁹ In 2018, Cesar Altieri Sayoc was determined to harm elected officials by delivering over 16 IEDs via the mail.²⁰ Fortunately, this plot was thwarted by law enforcement.

Data and Methodology

This research note focuses on 110 identified cases from January 2009 through December 2024 in which an individual was charged with plotting, attempting, or executing an IED attack within the United States in support of a terrorist organisation, network, or cause. Using public court records pertaining to US federal charges, the underlying dataset includes information at the defendant level – with information on their biographic details and their violent extremist affiliation – as well as at the incident level – with information on time, location, and the IED(s) associated with the federal charge. To create the dataset and identify relevant cases, the research team followed a two-stage process. First, a comprehensive case archive was constructed using press releases and public statements from cases across the 94 Federal Court Districts. Second, court records were examined using the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) system, which is the US Courts’ online repository of court proceedings and documents. The dataset was supplemented with additional information from the Department of Justice press releases and related news reports. The following inclusion criteria were used to determine the cases comprising the final sample.

- **Clear attribution.** Federal court documents and related press releases associated with the IED incident – e.g., a criminal complaint or sentencing statement – must attribute the activity to a named individual or group.
- **Explicit terrorist motivation.** Federal court documents and related press releases associated with the IED incident must clearly state the defendant’s underlying motive as being directly tied to support for a violent extremist ideology or designated terrorist entity.
- **An IED incident.** The federal charge must pertain to an incident – i.e., an active plan, plot, or attack – involving the credible construction and/or use of an improvised explosive device.
- **Homeland target.** Federal court documents and related press releases associated with the IED incident must specify that the IED incident took place or was intended to be used against a target within the United States.

As a result of the inclusion criteria, the dataset does not include: incidents in which direct attribution is unclear; criminal IED incidents not explicitly associated with an ideological motivation; bomb threats and hoax explosive devices; cases of arson, plots or attacks against US facilities, personnel, or citizens abroad; federal investigations that did not result in a charge, or relevant cases in which relevant court documentation remain sealed. Overall, the dataset illustrates a highly representative but non-exhaustive picture of the terrorist IED threat to US homeland security. Thus, the following analysis can be understood to be a conservative but generally accurate estimate of the broader terrorism-related IED threat to US homeland security. In the following section, we analyse the data and discuss our findings.

Analysis: Terrorism-Related IED Incidents in the United States, 2009 - 2024

The analysis provides key insights into 110 recorded terrorism-related IED incidents in the United States from 2009 through 2024. We describe annual trends in related federal charges, the location where attacks occur, the nature of IED employment in identified cases, as well as selected targets, information on the demographics and affiliations of the case defendants, and the distribution of incident outcomes. Overall, the analysis provides evidence of an evolving threat landscape with a concerning recent uptrend in the terrorist IED-related threats across the United States.

Figure 1 illustrates the number of recorded cases by year. Throughout the span of the 16 years of recorded data collected, IED incidents have varied, with as few incidents as two cases (2022) and a high of 16 cases (2024). High levels of IED use are noted in 2015, 2017, and 2019, in which all years saw incident cases over ten per year. In the past five years, 2019 had the second largest number of incidents with 11 cases. In 2020 and 2021, IED incidents stabilised and there were six recorded cases for each year, respectively. In 2022, a downward trend in the use of IEDs was noted, with only two incidents. Since then, there has been an increase in the number of ideologically motivated cases, with 2023 marking a notable increase in incidents, with this pattern continuing into 2024. In the past year, a record high of 16 IED incidents have been recorded, which was also three times the number of cases seen in 2023.

Figure 1. *Federal Charges Associated with Terrorist IED Incidents in the US, 2009 – 2024*

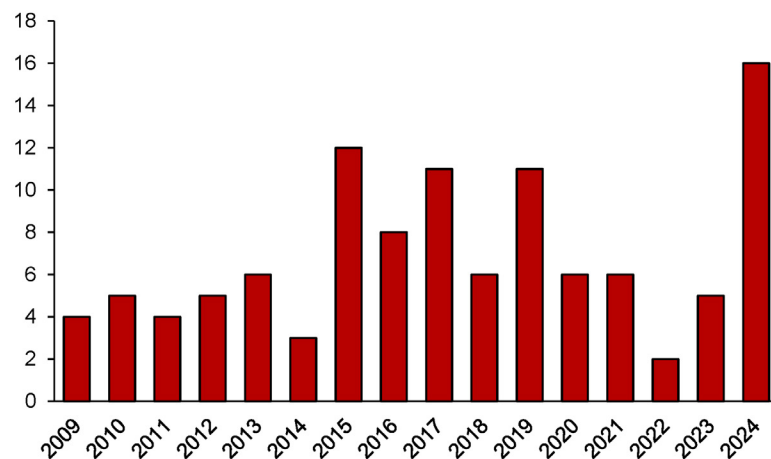


Figure 2 shows a heat map of the location of federal charges associated with terrorism related IED incidents across the continental United States. Terrorism motivated IED incidents are widespread throughout the US, with 31 states experiencing at least one related event over the past 16 years. Twenty-two states saw multiple incidents in that time span. New York stands out as the most targeted state, with 18 incidents being charged. Followed by Florida and California with eleven and ten cases, respectively. When scaled in proportion to the overall state population, the number of cases observed in Kansas, Colorado, and Washington is notable. Kansas, for example, has an estimated population of under 3 million. Michigan – another state in our sample with a recorded total of four terrorist IED-related federal charges – has an estimated population of over 10 million. Overall, terrorism related IED incidents are associated with federal charges in more than 50 percent of the continental US at least once in the recorded time frame, with a high level of geographic dispersion and state-level variance.

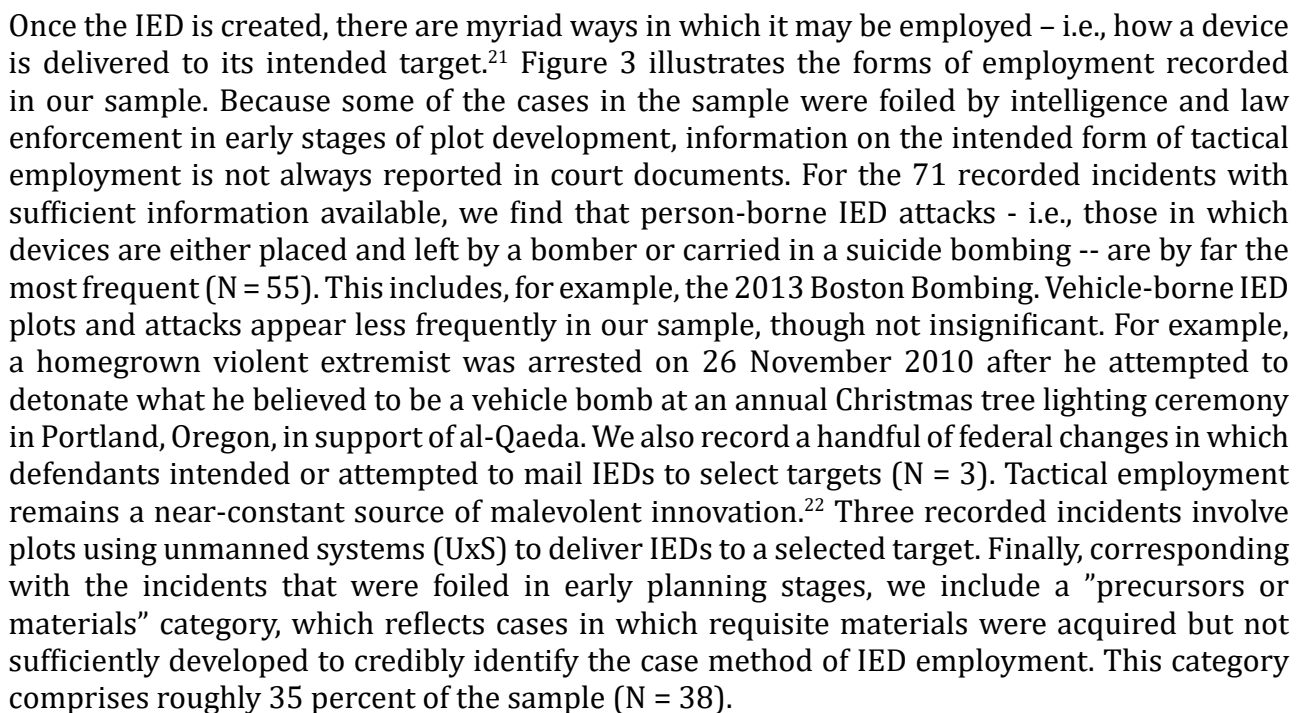
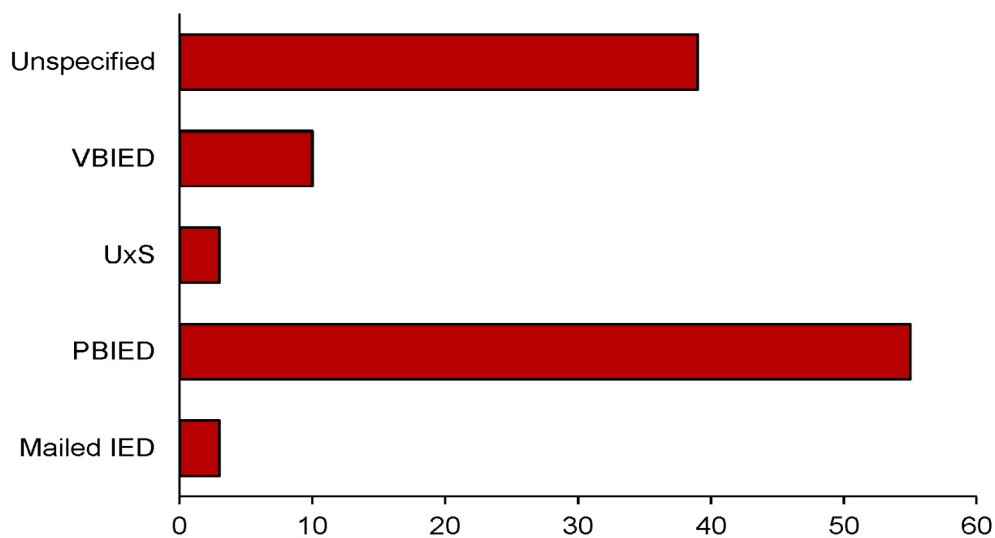
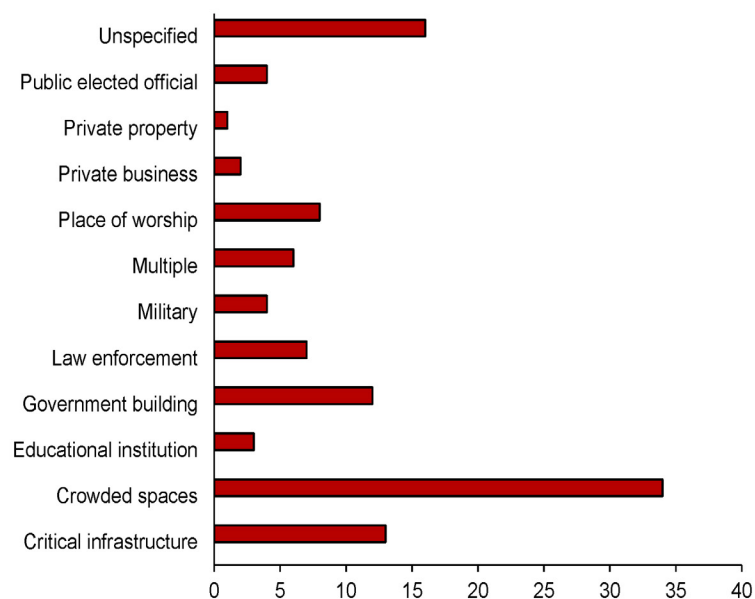


Figure 3. *Types of Employment in Terrorist IED Incidents in the US, 2009 – 2024.*

In addition to geographic location, it is worth noting differences in the specific targets at the centre of terrorist bombing plots and attacks. As Figure 4 illustrates, a wide range of targets have been subject to IED incidents across the 16-year recorded period. In general, crowded spaces such as parades, event venues, and other population-dense soft targets have been the most frequently targeted areas, with 34 incidents being planned or taking place. Following these, critical infrastructure (N = 13) – such as energy and transportation – and government buildings (N = 12) have also been among the most frequent targets of IED incidents. It is worth noting that traditionally harder targets, such as military bases, personnel and law enforcement locations, are also not exempt from IED attacks. For instance, in April 2015, a man was taken into custody as he was arming a vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) at a gate in Fort Riley, Kansas. The perpetrator hoped to get into the base undetected so he could detonate the VBIED, killing as many soldiers as possible.

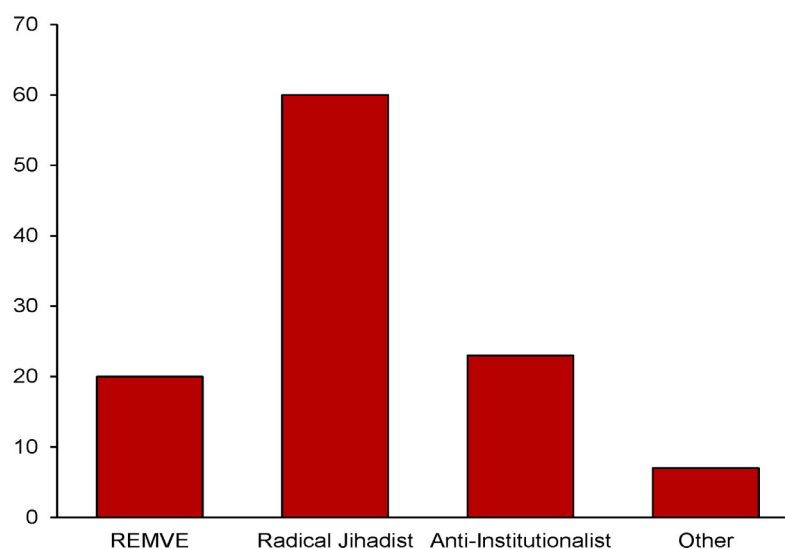
Figure 4. *Targets Associated with Terrorist IED Incidents in the US, 2009 – 2024.*

Next, we summarise available information on the specific individuals involved in the recorded IED incidents and their reported affiliations. Table 1 presents basic demographic information – i.e., gender and age – on the defendants associated with terrorist IED incidents in the United States. The demographic profile of perpetrators using IEDs, the average age of individuals was 31 years old (median = 28 years old) and ranged from as young as 15 to as old as 75. Our dataset includes four incidents where the defendant was a juvenile, being younger than 18 years old. Three out of the four teen-related cases have occurred since 2023, highlighting the growing increase and worsening pattern of youth and juvenile mobilisation to acts of terrorism. An overwhelming majority of defendants charged with using IEDs were male (N = 104), with only six cases involving females. Similar to more general profiles of terrorist defendants, it can be noted that the typical individual engaging in an ideologically motivated IED incident tends to skew towards younger adult males.

Table 1. *Defendants in Federal Charges Associated with Terrorist IED Incidents in the US, 2009 – 2024.*

Gender	Male	Female	Age	15-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-75
N	104	6	N	24	44	21	12	6	2	1

Figure 5. *Terrorist Ideologies Associated with IED Incidents in the US, 2009 – 2024*



Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the distribution of ideological motives promoted by the defendants as described in the original court documents across the whole sample and across time, respectively. Motivations and affiliations assessed in this data include racially motivated violent extremism (REMVE), anti-institutionalist violent extremism, radical jihadist violent extremism, and other single-issue causes. Based on the data, it is clear that persons enabled and inspired by jihadist foreign terrorist organisations such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda represent the greatest IED-related threat in the United States over the past 16 years. In 2015, a time during which the ISIS Caliphate campaign in Iraq and Syria was nearing its peak, the number of incidents connected to radical jihadism peaked, with 8 recorded incidents in that year. To be sure, there is a growing trend in individuals associated with other globalised terrorist networks and movements such as REMVE, anti-institutionalism, and single-issue causes. This is illustrated in Figure 7, which shows a breakdown of incidents over time by associated terrorist ideology. In 2024, anti-institutionalist violent extremism – which includes anarchist extremists and others who target public leaders – was the most common motive inducing IED incidents, with roughly 38 percent of cases being tied to this movement. REMVE use of IEDs has also increased in the

past three years, with a steadily growing number of cases in 2023 and 2024. Case in point, in November 2024, a 24-year-old man was arrested during his attempt to use a drone to deliver an IED to disable a Nashville, Tennessee power substation. According to statements by law enforcement officials, the attacker was dedicated to a neo-pagan white supremacist ideology and hoped that his attack would “shock the system,” causing other substations to fail.²³

Figure 6. *Terrorist Affiliation Associated with IED Incidents in the US by Year, 2009-2024.*

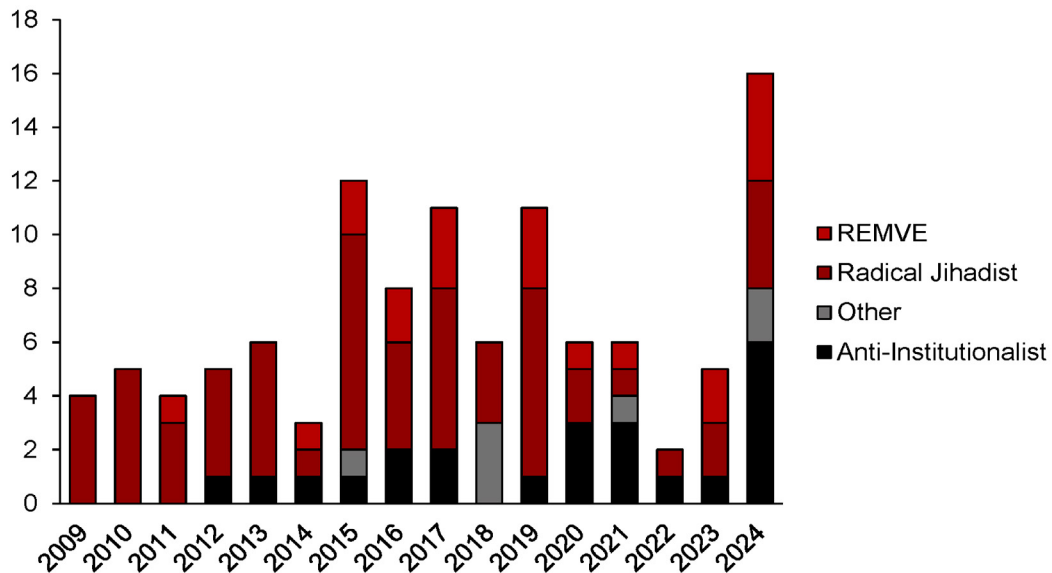
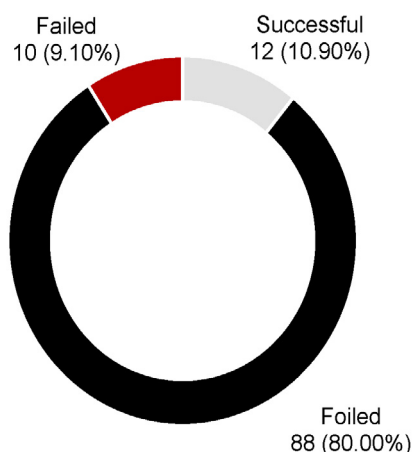


Figure 7 shows the distribution of outcomes associated with the incidents recorded in our sample. We find evidence of varying levels of success. The vast majority of incidents associated with a federal charge - 80 percent – were foiled or disrupted by intelligence and law enforcement professionals before the IED-plotted attack was initiated. Of the incidents recorded in our sample, only about 11 percent were considered successful, and roughly 9 percent failed as the result of a technical or operational failure. The distribution of successful, failed, and foiled IEDs highlights that, within the recorded time span, most terrorist IED incidents associated with a federal charge were thwarted, preventing injury and harm before the incident could be enacted.

Figure 7. *Distribution of Terrorist IED Incident Outcomes in the US, 2009 – 2024.*

Discussion

Overall, the analysis of the data reveals a number of notable trends and dynamics. First, the number of recorded terrorist IED incidents associated with federal charges in the US - after gradually receding from a prior peak in 2014 -- saw a sharp recent increase with a sample high of 16 cases in 2024. This underscores the persistent and dynamic nature of this threat. Second, the bomb clearly remains a weapon of choice for many US-based terrorists across the threat actor ecosystem. For instance, while these represent the plurality of cases, it would be incorrect to conceptualise the bomb as being strictly a tool of violent jihadists. Rather, in recent years, the use of explosives has been more evenly distributed across violent extremist actors, including proponents of anarchist violent extremism, nihilist violent extremism, and other extremist causes. Third, we find that the typical individual involved in these cases tends to be male and in their late 20s. However, the growing number of incidents involving radicalised teens and youths is concerning – and could lead to a decrease in the average perpetrator age. Fourth, the threat is widespread across the US homeland, neither confined to population-dense areas of the country nor specific regions. This underscores the importance of federal government engagement with state and local partners as well as key industry stakeholders. Finally, it can be expected that crowded spaces, critical infrastructure, and government buildings will remain popular targets, especially as the ability to infiltrate these spaces becomes easier through technology. Targets such as government buildings and places of worship that had not been the target of an IED plot or attack since 2021 and 2020, respectively, have recorded cases and have come back into the target landscape as areas for potential concern.

Core elements of the IED threat landscape are shifting. As one of the authors writes elsewhere, “A major contributor to—if not a key enabler of—the evolving IED threat is the sharing and dissemination of malign tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) through online platforms and communication channels.” For would-be attackers with minimal prior experience or knowledge, disseminating best practices and novel solutions lowers barriers of entry to building a functional IED. Relatedly, the rising availability of emerging technology and the wide accessibility of precursor and bomb-making materials for purchase have brought additional concerns to light.²⁴ A 2024 IED plot developed by a juvenile in Arizona was foiled when police discovered the 17-year-old intended to make acetone peroxide (TATP), affix it to a remote-control car, and attack the 2024 Arizona Pride parade in support of the Islamic State.²⁵ While the method has been employed for years in foreign battlefields -- e.g., Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Myanmar -- the use of drones to facilitate explosive attacks in the US homeland is a growing concern²⁶. Former FBI Director Christopher Wray reported to a Congressional

committee in 2022 that the Bureau was “investigating, even as we speak, several instances within the US of attempts to weaponise drones with homemade IEDs. That is the future that is here now.”²⁷ In the next section, we conclude with an overview of implications for future academic inquiry.

Conclusion

As revealed in US federal charges and court documents, terrorist use of improvised explosive devices presents a sustained – even growing – threat to US homeland security. An analysis of the data demonstrates that these tools remain a weapon of choice for terrorists and violent extremists, with ideologically motivated IED incidents reaching a five-year annual high in 2024. We find that US-based terrorists see value in using IEDs against a wide range of local targets, especially critical infrastructure and crowded spaces. Moreover, as a tactical instrument, the IED is appealing to would-be attackers across the violent extremist ecosystem. As a scope limitation, our analysis is based strictly on publicly available information on incidents that culminate in a federal charge and with clear attribution to individuals affiliated with a known terrorist organisation, movements, or network. This almost certainly lends itself to a conservative estimate.

This research note lays out the framework of a research agenda for future academic study. First, there is a dual nature to the terrorist IED threat, having both enduring and emerging elements. Some of these are rudimentary in nature, others highly sophisticated. The US Intelligence Community recently assessed, “...although most terrorist attacks will continue to use small arms and improvised explosives for the foreseeable future because these means are sufficient and reliable, terrorists will also seize any opportunity to develop new, more remote attack methods.”²⁸ Future research should aim to understand and explain how the known and basic elements of the terrorist IED threat may be further amplified by the adoption of novel and advanced methods, materials, and technologies²⁹. Second, the scope of this study has focused on what federal court documents can tell us about the terrorist IED threat in the United States. Yet certain elements of our analysis and findings will likely apply to other nations as well. How, for example, might this help efforts to mitigate explosives threats in other Western nations where similar terrorist ideological threats are present? Third, with the United States’ February 2025 designation of several international drug cartels as foreign terrorist organisations -- a set of threat actors well familiar with explosive attacks -- how does this potentially affect the future IED threat to US homeland security? Finally, there is a need to better understand the structural, organisational, and individual factors – including human, social, and technological conditions – which act to either enable or constrain the terrorist IED threat.

Improvised explosive devices and their use in terrorism related cases remain a concern for American communities. Altogether, we find evidence of a recent increase in the number of individuals involved in IED incidents, an expanding target surface on which attackers may focus their operations, and a variety of terrorist networks which use lethal explosives in attacks.

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necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the US Department of Homeland Security.

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RESEARCH NOTE

Power-Law Online Terrorism and Extremism

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Abstract

This Research Note draws attention to the ubiquity of heavy-tailed, power-law types of data distribution in all major dimensions of digital extremism and terrorism, and discusses the important implications stemming from this pattern as well as the mechanisms underpinning it. Highly unequal distributions with a very long lower tail and a sharply rising upper tail indeed characterize linguistic content, individual behaviours, and overarching structures of extremist/terrorist digital ecosystems – a striking feature that has largely escaped terrorism and extremism scholars' scrutiny as well as Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) and Counter-Terrorism (CT) practitioners, despite its scientific and practical significance.

Keywords

Online extremism; power-law; heavy-tailed distributions; terrorism.

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Introduction

In 1949, a singular book drew attention to what appeared to be a quasi-ubiquitous statistical regularity in human activity. In *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort*, George Zipf (1949) showed that plotted ranked distributions of seemingly *any* linguistic item in written and spoken language¹ displays the same pattern: a few occurrences have very high frequencies while most items are only found rarely (hence constituting a ‘heavy tail’ in the distribution graph), in contrast to normal bell-shaped distributions.² In other words, all these distributions resemble power-laws (where graphs follow the general form $y=cx^a$), revealing, according to the author, “a matter of fundamental regularity” surely emerging from “an underlying governing principle.” In the final section of his book, Zipf looked beyond linguistics, and revealed that this regularity holds in most domains of human activity, from the size of cities to income;³ dozens of almost identical graphs led him to claim that human societies invariably distributed power, capabilities, and prestige highly unequally. A staunch positivist, he presented his book as a demonstration that scientifically observing human interactions in the same, detached way we study objects and animals, similarly leads to the discovery of general laws governing the ‘human ecology.’

Seventy-five years after Zipf’s volume, power-law types of distributions have indeed been shown to characterise datasets pertaining to pretty much all domains of human – and even non-human – activity, from US or Chinese family names to Tour de France performances, and from moon craters to the evolution of species. As Reed and Hugues summarise, “distributions with power-law behaviour in one or both tails are ubiquitous in physics, biology, geography, economics, insurance, lexicography, internet ecology, etc.”⁴ Newman similarly writes that “one can, without stretching the interpretation of the data unreasonably, claim that power-law distributions have been observed in language, demography, commerce, information and computer sciences, geology, physics and astronomy, and this on its own is an extraordinary statement.”⁵

All this may seem quite removed from the considerations and preoccupations keeping awake counter violent extremism (CVE) and counter-terrorism (CT) scholars and practitioners. Yet as this Research Note seeks to show, heavy-tailed power-law types of distributions also abound in the realm of digital terrorism and extremism, and this observation has key implications when it comes to both understanding dynamics of radicalisation and violence and designing countermeasures. Indeed knowing that the distribution of a certain phenomenon is akin to a power-law (rather than, say, a bell-shaped) not only helps us specify the nature of this reality, but also unlocks sound strategies to address it. We will see, for example, that the vast majority of members in any given extremist forum barely contribute to discussions, and therefore that broad-brush strategies targeting (non-existent) posters with ‘average’ activity would prove inefficient.

As such, the present work highlights, builds on, and complements, both at once the literature on power-laws on the Internet and computer systems⁶ and the few analyses of conflict and terrorism studying heavy-tailed distributions.⁷ It does this by showing that power-law types of distributions are found across the three major dimensions of online terrorism/extremism: 1) the linguistic content of what is being said in extremist/terrorist online spaces, 2) the behaviour of the users within these spaces, and 3) the structures and hierarchies connecting these spaces (as well as their users) together.

I proceed in three steps. First, I put forward two methodological considerations that together frame how (not) to understand the present endeavour; second, I provide empirical evidence for heavy tailed, power-law type of distributions across the three key dimensions of online

extremism; third, I discuss three meanings and implications of this recurring pattern for knowledge about, and measures against, digital extremism and terrorism. It is hoped that this empirical snapshot and discussion will trigger a wider interest in a widespread yet still poorly understood phenomenon, and unlock new, innovative avenues for CT-CVE efforts.

Two methodological considerations: Datasets and fitness to power-law

Before delving into the data, two brief methodological considerations are warranted. First, the graphs presented below should not be understood as particularly exceptional or unique, cherry-picked instances of power-law types of distributions found in a single dataset. Rather, they are typical examples among many similar cases encountered throughout more than a decade of research on digital terrorism and extremism using large datasets and corpora.⁸ As such, the empirical section below merely displays the tip of the iceberg: it provides typical illustrations of original data systematically collected from niche to very popular digital spaces and communication channels used by terrorists and extremists (positioned across the ideological and linguistic spectrums). While the examples come from the far-right and incel digital ecosystems, similar data is found in other ideological online spaces such as jihadist forums.

Second, this research note does not claim that all presented distributions perfectly fit power-laws, which is why I write “heavy-tailed” or “power-law *types*” of distributions. Following Zipf’s practice, a long-lasting first wave of research has used count and rank distribution graphs to evidence cases of power-laws, usually replotted with logarithmic x and y axes to quickly evaluate closeness to power-law: in “log-log” graphs, power-law distributions indeed appear as straight lines, in contrast to other functions similarly displaying heavy tails (such as some exponential, Weibull, or polynomial variants). For instance, Reed and Hughes observe that when it comes to the frequency of US family names “the closeness of the points to a straight line (corresponding to power-law behavior) is impressive,” a pattern they find in a range of other contemporary phenomena.⁹ However, a more recent strand of research has lamented that the classic literature tends to “rely solely on qualitative inspection of a log-log plot to detect power-law behaviour”, which ‘is a not a reliable approach’¹⁰ as it is not discriminative enough to proclaim the existence of a genuine empirical power-law – and hence to clarify the exact dynamics generating phenomenon captured by the distribution. Some scholars have even shown that using “careful statistical tests to data that were reported to exhibit power-law relationships” results in ‘negligible’ evidence;¹¹ Clauset, Shalizi and Newman’s systematic testing demonstrated that “there is only one case – the distribution of the frequencies of occurrence of words in English text – in which the power law appears to be truly convincing.”¹² For Lima-Mendez and van Helden, who examined power-law claims in biological networks, this ‘lack of consistency between theoretical models and data’ mean that the ubiquity of power-law distributions is no more than a ‘myth’.¹³ However, this type of criticism has itself been toned down by scholars like Zhang and colleagues, who have suggested that sampling and measurement are important factors explaining imperfect fit with power-laws¹⁴ – a claim which raises profound epistemological and ontological issues (and which is itself derided by Lima-Mendez and van Helden).¹⁵

This paper sidesteps this debate by taking a pragmatic stance. I contend that the extent to which the data presented below fits a power law is irrelevant for the mainly propaedeutic purpose of this Research Note, which merely seeks to raise awareness of a phenomenon and trigger reflections about its implications. At this stage, we simply aim at displaying a striking regularity in online extremism and terrorism datasets (that they resemble power-law distributions), and

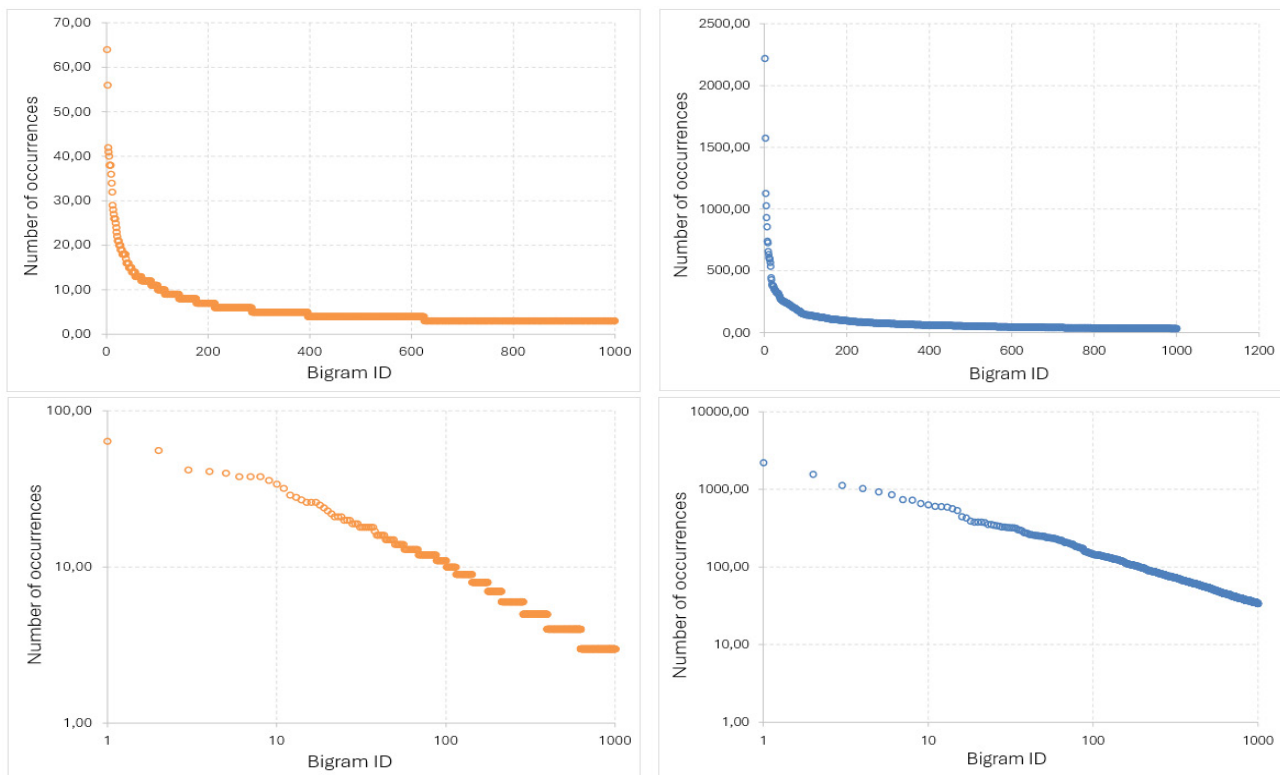
to infer, at a descriptive level only, insights about why and how these distributions matter. It is therefore hoped that this Research Note will trigger more thorough articles studying with more depth and accuracy the complex dynamics causing the distributions displayed here (for example, with fitness tests against power-law and other types of heavy-tailed distributions). At the level of the present study, what Stumpf and Porter wrote is therefore applicable: “knowledge of whether or not a distribution is heavy-tailed is far more important than whether it can be fit using a power law.”¹⁶ I, therefore, stick to the field’s older common rule of thumb that “a candidate power law should exhibit an approximately linear relationship on a log-log plot over at least two orders of magnitude.”¹⁷ At this Research Note stage, this level of analysis is already sufficient to highlight important dynamics and situations characterising digital extremism and terrorism.

Empirical evidence

Language in extremist and terrorist online spaces

To perpetuate Zipf’s lineage, I first investigate the linguistic content of extremist digital spaces linked to terrorist activity. Extracting and plotting words or n-grams frequencies within a range of extremist forums, blogs, websites, and social media accounts (on both mainstream platforms like Facebook and “alt-tech” ones like Telegram or Gab), as well as within entire coherent groupings of such spaces (for example, the “incelosphere”,¹⁸ or the constellation of French extreme-right websites), typically reveals power-law types of exponent graph lines with extremely long low tails, regardless of ideology or language. For example, Figure 1 below plots side-by-side the 1,000 most frequently occurring bi-grams in original posts made to the infamous “political” (i.e., white supremacist) chatroom of the *8chan* image-board,¹⁹ on the one hand, and in the content scraped from the website of the banned French far-right movement *Les Identitaires*, on the other hand.²⁰ Despite differences in language and size (the first corpus contains more than 8 million words, against approximately 150,000 for the second), the two panels are remarkably similar and clearly resemble power-law types of distributions (especially in their log-log variant). Notice how the three most frequent bigrams on *8chan* (‘United States’, ‘Donald Trump’, and ‘social media’) and *Les Identitaires* (‘France’, ‘même’, and ‘Français’) occupy very similar positions on their respective graphs despite occurring at widely different counts and having different meaning. Comparable graphs are obtained with a variety of other corpora, in line with the original literature on power-laws in language (including Zipf’s book).

Figure 1. Distribution of most frequently occurring bigrams on the Les Identitaires website (left, range) and the 8chan/pol image-board (right, blue)

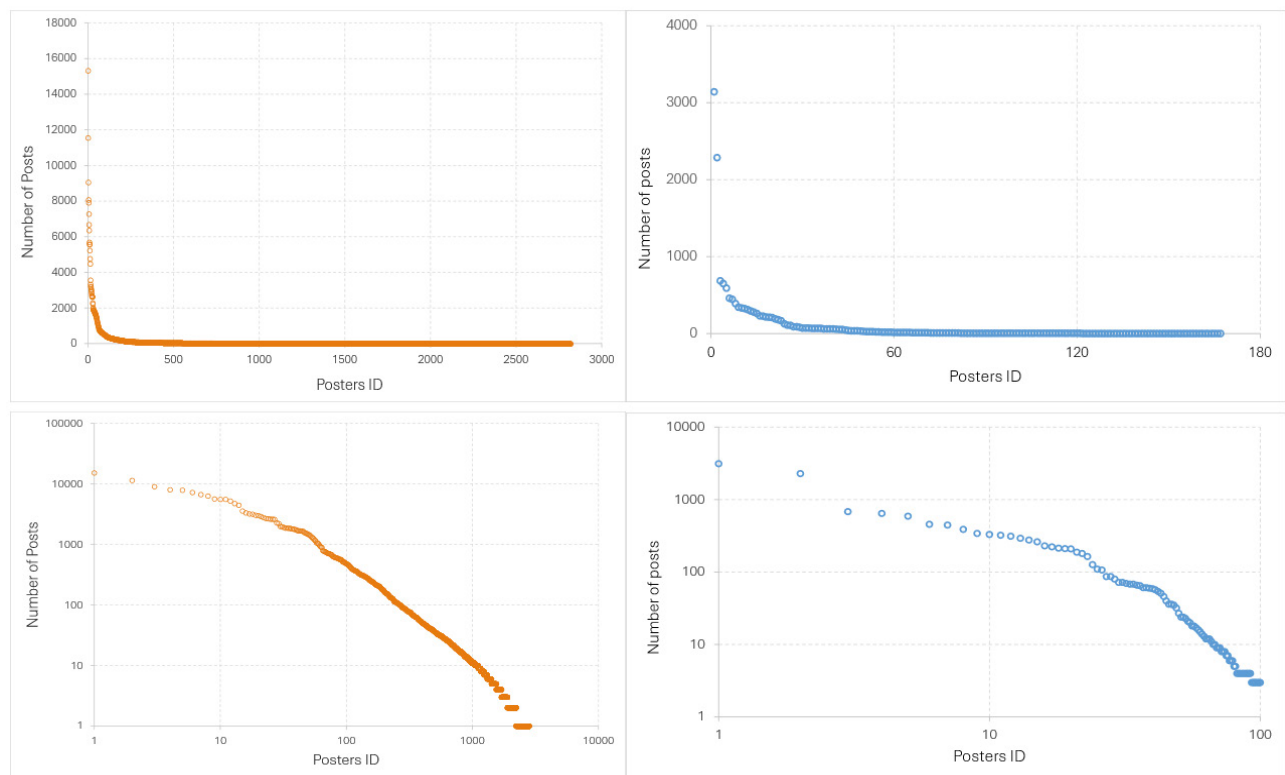


Users' behaviour in extremist online spaces

I now turn to the behaviour of users within these spaces, such as individual posting volume or propensity to outlink or react (for example, like, share, reply) to others' contributions. Initial evidence for heavy-tailed distributions for extremist digital behaviours already exists. In a recent paper coalescing anecdotal observations on the 'super-posters' phenomenon,²¹ Baele and colleagues' application of the Jenkins-Fisher algorithm to individual posting volume data from seventeen extremist forums (including jihadist, far-right, and incel ones) produced invariable results. All of them were mathematically characterised by a 4-categories structure of posting activity topped by a small clique of "hyper-posters" 'responsible for a disproportionate number of the interactions'.²² Plotting this activity in rankings, the authors incidentally remarked, in passing, that 'posting in all the forums follows a power-type curve where the most active members occupy the extreme end of a continuum', an observation that 'holds in a remarkably stable way across all forums'.²³ Here we highlight this contribution and confirm its observations.

Figure 2 below displays two illustrative examples of posting activity from two extremist forums of different sizes and expressing dissimilar ideologies linked to acts of terrorism. The left panel ranks members of the *Incels.net* forum²⁴ according to their posting volumes; one person posted no less than 15,325 times and the second most active member posted 11,547 times; the heavy tail is populated by 598 individuals who have posted only once and 324 twice. The right panel represents users' posting volumes on the small white supremacist *Chimpout.com* forum; only 167 members were active during data collection, with one individual posting 3,141 times and the second most active person 2,287 times; at the other end, 46 people posted only once and sixteen twice. While slightly curved lines on the log-log plots suggest that other functions than power-laws might better fit these distributions, these graphs nonetheless demonstrate strikingly similar appearances with two far outliers followed by a less engaged minority and a lethargic mass of users.

Figure 2. Posting behaviour on Incels.net (left, orange) and Chimpout.com (right, blue)



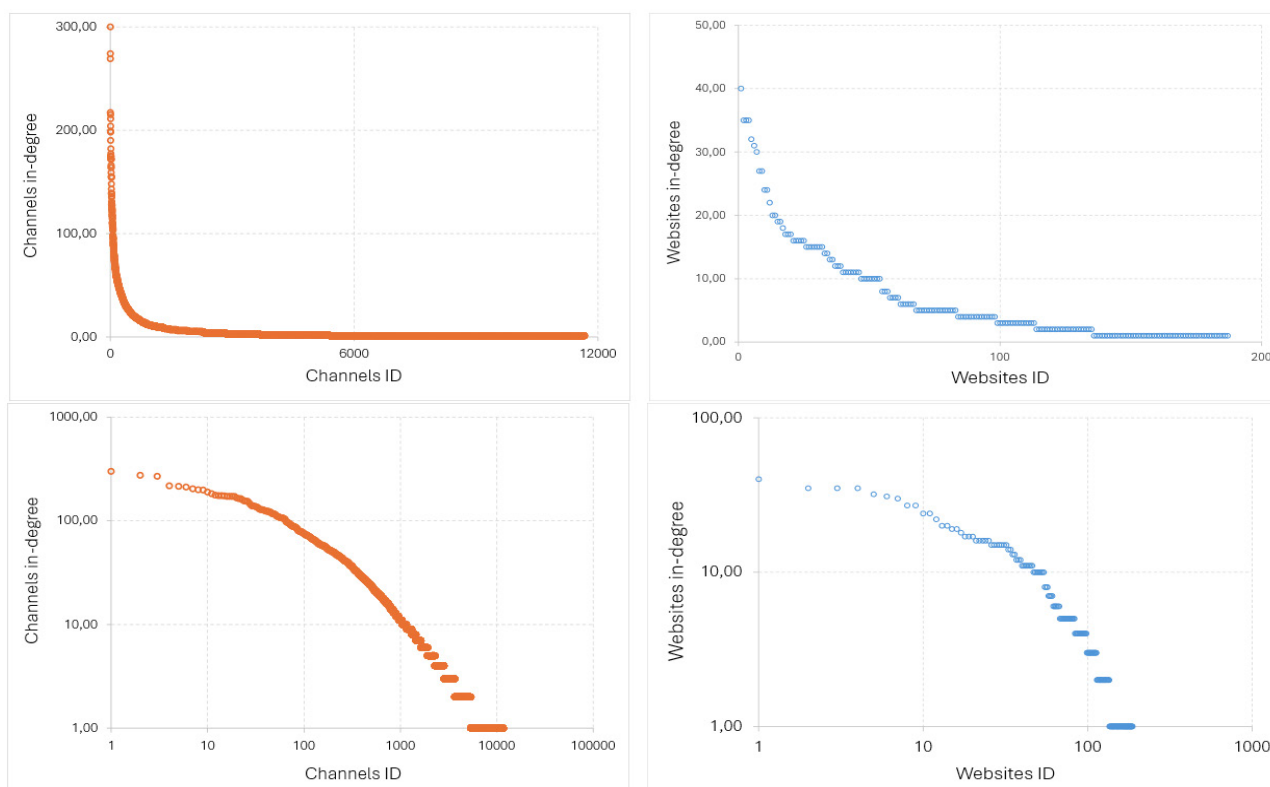
Influence and hierarchy in extremist digital ecosystems

Finally, I turn to the last key dimension of online terrorism and extremism: the structures and hierarchies within, and across, these spaces. Typically, the literature approximates the importance, status, or influence of an online space or user (for example, an Instagram account, a blog, a member of a forum) with simple network statistics such as in-degree (number of incoming connections), centrality, or algorithms like PageRank or HITS. These statistics, which help identify and rank the most popular or strategic nodes within a broader interconnected ecosystem, can be computed at several levels (plotting the connections between multiple *online spaces* and even *communities*, as in Bovet and Grindrod’s network of British far-right Telegram channels;²⁵ or analysing interactions between *individual users* within a single group/channel/forum as in Baele and colleagues’ aforementioned study of “hyper-posters”),²⁶ and can be complemented by direct popularity measures (for example, number of visits to a website, average number of ‘likes’ and other reactions to an account or poster’s interventions).

Regardless of these measurement choices, datasets tend to render similarly heavy-tailed distributions. Figure 3 below offers a good example, showing in-degree rankings for all nodes contained in two totally unrelated networks. The left panel displays data from a vast network representing the German far-right Telegram ecosystem (11,643 nodes, each corresponding to an individual channel) where the three most influential channels have in-degrees of 300, 274, and 269 respectively (at the other end, no less than 2,687 channels have an in-degree of 1, and 1,711 of 2). The right panel plots numbers from the much smaller network of French far-right websites (286 nodes, each corresponding to an extremist website) where the top three sites have in-degrees of 40, 35, and 35 respectively (the heavy tail comprises 52 sites having in-degrees of 1, and 21 of 2). Heavy-tailed distributions in online extremist networks mean that these are highly unequal ecosystems whereby a small number of major sites/individuals

dominate large numbers of unpopular or less active sites/individuals. Open-source data from other researchers brings about comparable graphs representing a similarly hierarchical reality. For instance, plotting the numbers contained in Tables 6 and 7 from Bovet and Grindrod's abovementioned study results in heavy-tailed distributions for the most outlinked domains in UK far-right Telegram communities,²⁷ and Conway and colleagues recently claimed that digital platforms most used by terrorist groups at different points in time resemble power-laws.²⁸ This pattern is somewhat unsurprising given that power-law types of phenomena have been highlighted and studied with particular intensity within network science and digital network analysis;²⁹ Zhang and colleagues for example claim that power-law structures directly reflect 'universal behaviours in the evolution of real-world networks'.³⁰ In line with Lima-Mendez and van Helden's critique of such claims as over-simplifying 'myths' (see methods section above), we nonetheless see that the end of the heavy tails of the above distributions depart from the straight line characterising the other end – a sign that the mechanisms underpinning the emergence of these networks are probably not those behind power-laws and thus warrant further examination.

Figure 3. *Network influence (as approximated by nodes' in-degree) of online spaces in the German far-right Telegram (left, orange) and the French far-right websites (right, blue) ecosystems*



Power-law digital terrorism and extremism: So what?

Having provided examples of the ubiquity of heavy-tailed, power-law types of distributions in extremist and terrorist digital ecosystems, this concluding section opens up a discussion on the scientific and practical implications of this phenomenon. There are numerous factors involved in the dynamics producing these distributions, which makes their accurate understanding a complex task; however, staying at the descriptive level allows us to put forward three insights – which could guide further in-depth studies – that are already critical for CT/CVE practitioners.

First, power-law distributions often reflect “Yule” processes, colloquially called “rich-get-richer”, whereby the bigger members of a growing system tend to attract increasingly more traction than their less initially endowed or latecomer counterparts.³¹ For example, “the probability of a city gaining a new member is proportional to the number already there; the probability of a paper getting a new citation is proportional to the number it already has.”³² This ‘preferential attachment’ mechanism characterises much of the web, where more connected sites are more likely to obtain even more connections in the future,³³ and is thus highly likely to underpin some of the heavy-tailed distributions put forward above. Extremist sites that initially enjoyed some success or were set up earlier within an emerging system (for example, a new social media platform, an emerging ideology) are more likely to be found and engaged with by newcomers, extremist influencers who reach a critical mass of followers at one particular point in the development of the broader ideological ecosystem surrounding them are likely to get even more, etc. In their study of the far-right online ecosystem, Baele, Brace and Coan argue that this type of evolution process occurs ‘organically’ but can also be strategically fuelled by practices such as fake followers or artificial webs of multiple and interconnected accounts/sites tactically created by individuals who are keenly aware of the competitive nature of online extremism and eager to reach the threshold leading to snowballing influence.³⁴ This echoes Zipf’s initial suggestion that power-laws are due to a fundamental law of ‘biosocial’ competition and cooperation in human societies, which results in highly unequal hierarchies.

Further research should therefore study the emergence and evolution of extremist ecosystems to test whether their development indeed presents Yule processes and truly follows a power-law logic. Recognising the reality of Yule processes in extremist ecosystems indeed offers pathways for clinical CVE interventions attuned to diachronic evolution dynamics, not only by pointing with accuracy (and as early as possible) to the most important and influential spaces or individuals who ought to be dealt with (with rippling effects on others), but also by offering direction (in terms of particular words to avoid or promote) for linguistic counter-narrative interventions aimed at changing discourse, themes, and hate levels within extremist spaces. Carthy and colleagues recently lamented that most empirical evaluations of counter-narratives effectiveness rested on weak evidence and pointed to small effects;³⁵ re-thinking counter-narratives programmes around statistical lexical data holds promise in designing more efficient messages. The aim of efficient CT/CVE operations cognizant of heavy-tailed distributions thus becomes to systematically target the rare yet ultra-important items, ideally *as they start to emerge as outliers*, for example by using power-law statistics as a forecasting element for identifying then stifling rising extremist accounts while monitoring the others to prevent them from reaching a critical threshold, or as a tool to guide more pertinent “inoculation” counter-narratives³⁶ based on increasingly popular discourses and words. These interventions have therefore a particularly important place in CT/CVE work on emerging ecosystems and new platforms, as they can help derail (for individuals or online spaces deemed problematic/dangerous), or promote (for those deemed more acceptable or less extreme) snowballing influence in early stages.

Second, some have argued that power-law distributions reflect efficiency equilibriums, i.e., systems where a few items (words, tasks, etc.) are used/done very often because they are comparatively more useful/important than most others, which are thus rarely used/done. Barabási for example argued that humans typically queue tasks based on perceived priority: typically, “most tasks [are] rapidly executed, whereas a few experience very long waiting times,” resulting in a power-law distribution of tasks performed across time.³⁷ This logic applies to the words we use (almost never, for the vast majority) or the acquaintances we spend time with.

Further study should investigate whether such process underpins unequal activity levels in extremist spaces; here the hypothesis would be, in line with classic work on involvement in terrorism and extremism,³⁸ that only a small minority of individuals sustain a high level of involvement in these spaces because, contrarily to most people, they think the gains (be it in terms of social, symbolic, or economic capital, or in psychological, emotional, and well-being terms) offset the costs (on the same dimensions). The goal would be here to empirically find whether this kind of “rational choice” logic is the most important mechanism producing highly unequal patterns of participation in extremist digital milieux (as opposed to, or in complement to, for example, increasing degrees of radicalisation translating into growing involvement). A similar process is probably at play behind some of the linguistic distributions shown above. Since Rosch’s work, cognitive science has indeed shown how basic-level categories dominate everyday language because they are the most efficient ones (not too specific, not too broad) to convey ideas.³⁹ Each milieu therefore has its own basic-level categories, which are the most useful ones geared at the tasks at hand (highly specialised words may well be basic-level categories in technical professional milieux such as hospitals or corporate financial law firms). The linguistic distributions put forward above may thus reflect the fact that the most frequent words and bigrams occur at such a high rate because they are the most useful, efficient, and direct ones to express, signal, and demonstrate belief in a given ideology or worldview (for example, “Donald Trump”, “social media”, “United States”, and “white race” for the *8chan* board). Again, these observations indicate clearer and more pertinent pathways for CT/CVE interventions than intuition-based programmes. For example, regularly posting large volumes of incoherent ‘garbage’ into an extremist forum content is a power-law inspired intervention that would make it less rewarding for the vast majority of its (less active, or newer) members, thereby lowering participation or even cutting the ‘heavy tail’ altogether. Another type of power-law inspired intervention would aim at gradually shifting the platform’s ideology, with multiple posts using moderately occurring words that are less extremist in themselves than the three or four most frequent ones (to keep the *8chan* example, trying to replace “white race” in the four most frequent terms with an open alternative like “human race”, while keeping the three others).

Finally, some of these distributions might more worryingly reflect an exponentially growing extremist ecosystem – as mentioned above, exponentially growing networks observed (“killed”) at one random point in time indeed display power-law distributions at one of their tails.⁴⁰ As such, the power-law appearance of data from an extremist ecosystem might evidence the exponential character of a particular stage of its development, with critical tipping points where stable systems become hugely more popular. Future research should study the chronology of particular extremist digital milieux with this hypothesis in mind, to locate exactly when – and if at all – an exponential growth (or stabilisation) happens. One such hypothesis, for alt-tech platforms, would be that the introduction of more restrictive terms of use by mainstream platforms or the takedown of a rival one triggered a moment of exponential growth. Such critical moments (for example, when *Parler* was shut down, or when the Islamic State’s Telegram activity was hit by a sustained Europol-coordinated effort)⁴¹ should concentrate CVE practitioners’ efforts so as to prevent the growth of new ecosystems or the rising popularity of particular online spaces and communication channels. Attuning to heavy-tailed distribution is therefore not only a tool for designing multidimensional intervention procedures that consider indirect implications of particular actions (for example, banning/jailing an influencer from a social media platform, changing the terms of use of a platform, etc.), but also potentially a *forecasting* method.

In sum, appraising digital terrorism and extremism from the perspective of heavy-tailed, power-law types of distribution not only sheds light on important underlying structures and dynamics, but also indicates original avenues for more effective CVE interventions and even potential

forecasting based on predictable statistical structures. Incidentally, it also leads us to replace the study of extremist and terrorist digital ecosystems within the broader social sciences, in the sense that most of the behaviours and developments found there are typical of all other realms of human activity. Extremism and terrorism studies tend to have a bias towards the search for highly unusual patterns, practices, ‘markers’ and indicators of radicalism, extremism and violence risk, whereas the key to a range of efficient counter-measures may well hold in precisely the opposite: non-specific, typical, commonly human patterns of “human behaviour” as Zipf would write.

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Endnotes

1 Examples given include the words written in literary works such as *Beowulf*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Homer's *Iliad*; but also articles length in American newspapers, frequency of German stem forms and Chinese characters, or progress in children's acquisition of language. To clarify the notions of power-law and normal distributions to readers unfamiliar with statistics, I offer an illustrative example in **Appendix 1**.

2 George Zipf, *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1949).

3 As Zipf himself noted, power-law distributions in economic systems (as, for instance, with income and wealth) are known since the end of the 19th Century with Pareto (power laws are therefore sometimes known as Pareto distributions)

4 William Reed and Barry Hughes, "From Gene Families and Genera to Incomes and Internet File Sizes: Why Power-Laws Are So Common in Nature." *Physical Review E* 66, no.6 Pt 2 (2002): 067103/1-067103/4.

5 Mark Newman, "Power Laws, Pareto Distributions and Zipf's Law." *Contemporary Physics* 46, no.5 (2005): 330.

6 Aniket Mahanti, Niklas Carlsson, Anirban Mahanti, Martin Arlitt, and Carey Williamson, "A Tale of the Tails: Power-Laws in Internet Measurements." *IEEE Network* 27, no.1 (2013): 59-64.

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8 See acknowledgements for information on the projects that yielded the data.

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12 Aaron Clauset, Cosma Shalizi, and Mark Newman, "Power-law Distributions in Empirical Data." *SIAM Review* 51 (2009): 661-703. The authors provide instructions for implementing these tests on empirical data in several computer programmes and coding languages; see <https://aaronclauset.github.io/powerlaws/>.

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15 Lima-Mendez and van Helden, "The Powerful Law", 1485.

16 Stumpf and Porter, "Critical Truths", 666.

17 Stumpf and Porter, "Critical Truths", 666.

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19 This is the chatroom where shooters like the 2019 Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant interacted and announced their actions. On the role of this board on Tarrant's shooting and subsequent attacks, read Stephane Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis Coan, "The 'Tarrant Effect': What Impact Did Far-right Attacks Have on the 8chan Forum?" *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 15 (2020): 1-23.

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38 See for example Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, “Measuring Political Mobilization: The Distinction Between Activism and Radicalism.” *Terrorism & Political Violence* 21, no.2 (2009): 239-260; James Khalil and Lorne Dawson, “Understanding Involvement in Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Theoretical Integration Through the ABC Model.” *Terrorism & Political Violence* 36, no.6 (2024): 757-772; or Arie Kruglanski, Ewa Szumowska, Catalina Kopetz, Robert Vallerand, and Antonio Pierro, “On the Psychology of Extremism: How Motivational Imbalance Breeds Intemperance.” *Psychological Review* 128, no.2 (2021): 264-289.

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40 Reed and Hughes, “From Gene Families and Genera to Income and Internet File Sizes”.

41 I take these particular examples because they have already been commented by experts. See for example , Saharsh Agarwal, Uttara Ananthakrishnan, and Catherine Tucker, “Content Moderation at the Infrastructure Layer.” *SSRN Preprint*, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4232871>; Amarnath Amarasingam, Shiraz Maher, and Charlie Winter, “How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration.” *CREST Reports* (2021), <https://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>.

Appendix

Among the distributions often (imperfectly) found in when plotting social data, one is regularly claimed to be particularly frequent: the normal, or Gaussian, “bell-shaped” distribution (as in standardized IQ testing for instance). Our Research Note emphasises another one: the heavy-tailed power-law distribution. To illustrate the differences between these two types of distributions to those not familiar with statistics, we present below two variants of a situation which, whilst hypothetical, will be familiar to many readers.

Imagine a university programme (say, a BA in terrorism studies) at a very large institution. This programme has a yearly enrolment cohort of 1,000 students. At the end of his/her first year, each of these students is given a mark between 0 and 100 (with 0 being the worst mark and 100 a perfect mark). Students ending their first year in 2024 have been ranked in Figure 1 below: we can see that the distribution of how many students obtain each mark resembles a bell and is therefore close to a “normal” distribution. Very few students obtain either very low or very high marks, whilst large numbers of students obtain marks around the high 50s / low 60s. Students ending their first year in 2025 have been ranked in Figure 2 below, and their performances present a very different distribution indeed, close to a power-law. It is characterized by a long tail made of very few students populating a wide marking range (from 0 to around 70) followed by increasing numbers of students as marks get higher, with the last two data points standing out (the opposite would have been possible too, with one or two students getting extremely high marks and the vast majority getting really poor grades).

We can quickly see that these two distributions evidence two starkly different realities – an average 2024 first-year cohort versus a brilliant 2025 one. But we also understand that evidencing these two realities should enable the programme director to design very different pedagogies and support strategies to best teach his/her students. The argument I make in the Research Note is similar: by documenting power-law types of distributions in the field of online terrorism and extremism, practitioners can design sound, data-driven counter-extremism/terrorism strategies that would have been different had they faced normal or other forms of distributions.

Figure 1. Students' marking ranks resembling a normal distribution

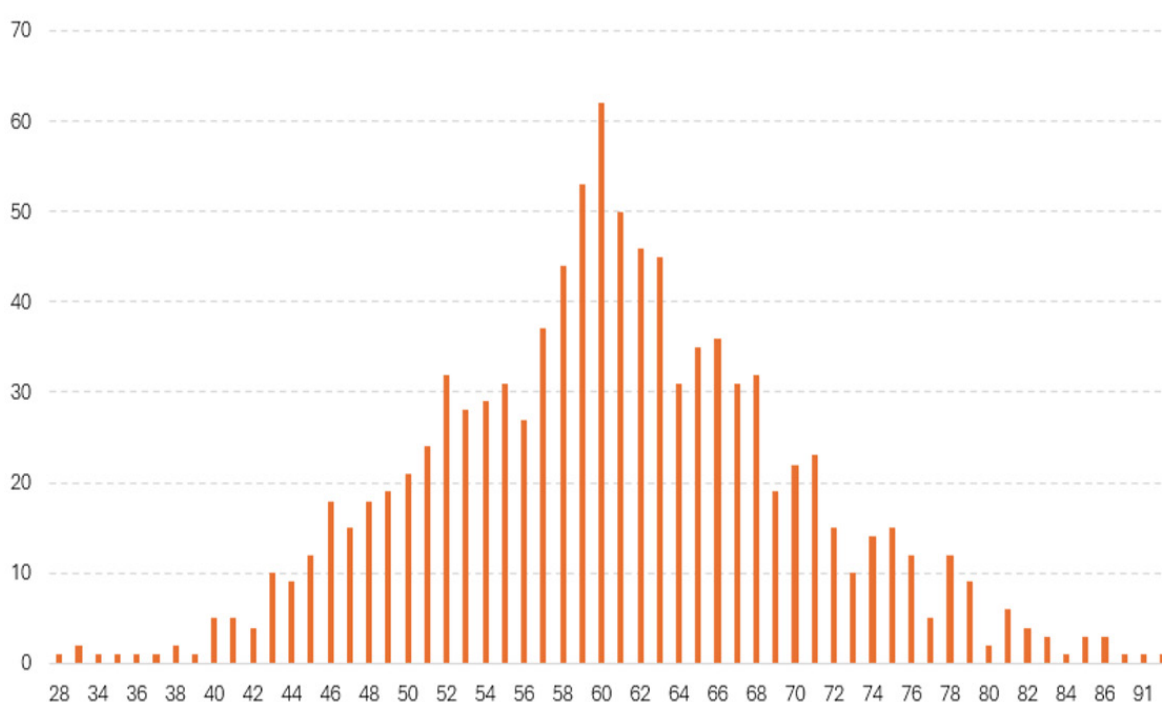
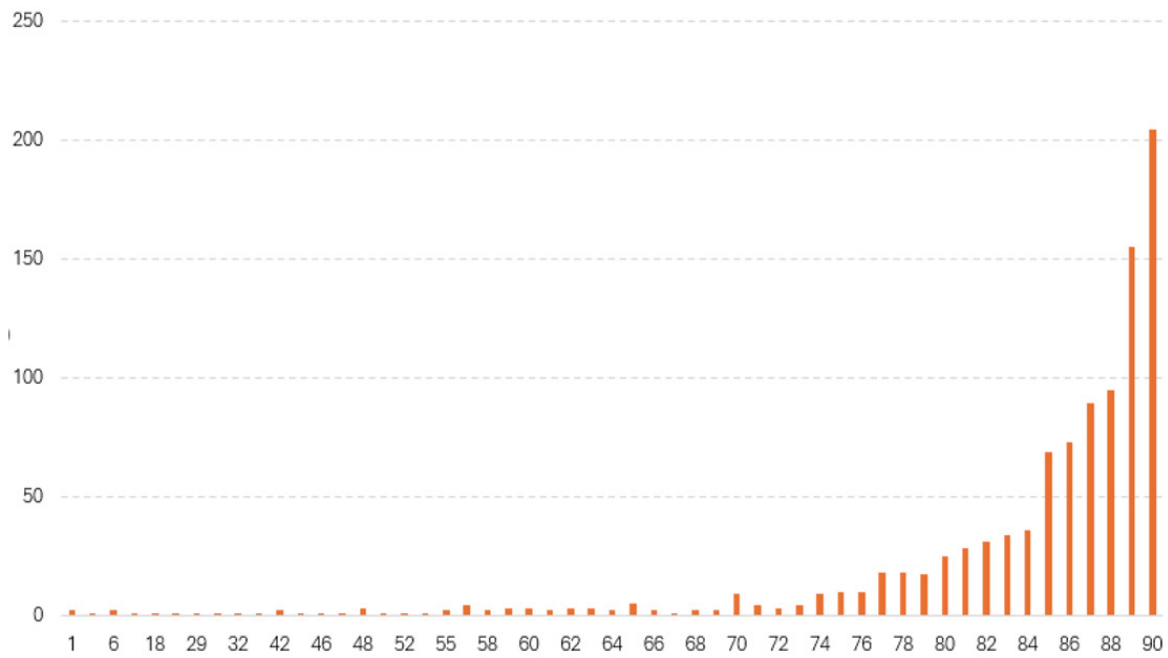


Figure 2. Students' marking ranks resembling a power-law distribution



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Bibliography: Counter-terrorism Cooperation

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Abstract

This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on counter-terrorism cooperation. It covers contributions on collaborative efforts of multiple actors in the field of countering terrorism and violent extremism on international, national, and regional level. The bibliography focuses on recent publications (up to May 2025) and should not be considered as being exhaustive. The literature has been retrieved by manually browsing more than 200 core and periphery sources in the field of Terrorism Studies. Additionally, full-text as well as reference retrieval systems have been employed to broaden the search.

Keywords: bibliography, resources, literature, counter-terrorism, CT/CVE/PVE, cooperation, collaboration, coordination, alliance, assistance, partnership

NB: All websites were last visited on 11.05.2025. For an inventory of previous bibliographies, see: <https://archive.org/details/terrorism-research-bibliographies-2>

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Bibliographies and other Resources

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BOOK REVIEW

Review Essay: Javier Argomaniz, *Resisting
Terror: Civil Action and Non-Violent Resistance
to Terrorism in Basque Country*

Reviewed by Kathryn Loosemore*

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Javier Argomaniz, *Resisting Terror: Civil Action and Non-Violent Resistance to Terrorism in Basque Country* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2025), 292 pp., US \$ 132.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 28.25 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-1900-7133-2.

It has been more than seven years since the Basque militant group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna) disarmed and disbanded following a bloody campaign that lasted almost 60 years. The complexity of ETA's campaign, and the factors that eventually brought their reign of terror in the Basque Country to an end, are the subject of *Resisting Terror: Civil Action and Non-Violent Resistance to Terrorism in Basque Country*. In this highly engaging and informative study, Javier Argomaniz explores multiple factors at play in ETA's demise, focused on the actions and impact of civil society organisations (CSOs). As he states early in the text, "I elaborate on the relationship between nonviolent action and the other major factors usually recognized by scholars as pivotal for ETA's defeat" (p. 32).

Argomaniz's extensive research draws on the literature in the field of terrorism, archives of the period, and also on personal interviews with actors on both sides of the conflict. This adds an authenticity to the work that transports the reader to the risks and brutality of life in the Basque Country during ETA's campaign. It also serves to create a balanced view of how CSOs played a role in both supporting and protesting terrorism. Despite the author's hypothesis that CSOs are a driving force in bringing terrorism to an end, he does explore events where actions and reactions reinforced the terrorist group's aims (if not their means). As he states in chapter 7: "So, even if our focus is on social efforts to dampen violence, it is important to precede the analysis by saying that civilian actors are not inherently peacebuilders" (p. 214).

This creates a balanced view of the impact of CSOs that is often overlooked. The author works chronologically through ETA's lifecycle, highlighting specific attacks and events that provoked civil action. He brings this to life in Chapter 4 with data on the 15 largest demonstrations against terrorism in the Basque region and their motivations (p. 133). Using public opinion data, as well as data related to protests and demonstrations, Argomaniz effectively shows the relationship between this kind of civil action and ETA's shifting power in the region. Exploring changes in attack velocity and type—as well as the profile of their targets—the author explores the associated reactions from citizens of the Basque Country and the actions subsequently taken by individuals and groups. The journey from individual fear to collective anger among the local population is described and documented carefully and with varied data from within and beyond the region. While the author focuses on CSOs, he is careful to point out that "social mobilisation should not be considered the most important factor in the end of the militants' campaign" (p. 209).

This enables Argomaniz to investigate other influencing factors, giving the reader a more rounded view of the complexities surrounding ETA's campaign and the group's eventual demise. However, readers looking for any real discussion relating to 9/11 or the influence of social media on ETA's campaign will be disappointed. These two subjects are only mentioned briefly in Argomaniz's work. Similarly, while the author presents the collaboration between French and Spanish governments as a key factor in ETA's (in)ability to function, there is little discussion of counter-terrorist policy more broadly. In Chapter 6, the author states that "Devolution and self-government, the security forces' counterterror efforts, Spanish-French bilateral cooperation, an increasingly difficult international context following the Good Friday Agreement, the 9/11 and 2004 Madrid attacks, the shift in the Izquierda Abertzale's internal dynamics – all these played a part in ETA's failure" (p. 209). Argomaniz only focuses on these other factors where CSOs also play a role, ensuring they are understood to be part of the complex matrix of factors at play in the demise of ETA.

The author's investigation into the organisations operating within the Basque Country to either demonstrate for peace and/or support ETA's victims is comprehensive and data-driven. Argomaniz again uses a range of sources to demonstrate their aims, tenacity, and impact in the region. In Chapter 6,

he lists the main CSOs at work in the region, with key data relating to their activity (p. 195). The author's conversations with individuals and members of pro- and anti- ETA groups allow a balanced view of the tension in the region at the time, and the scale of impact of ETA's actions on society at large.

While the topic of civil action (as it relates to ETA) is the book's anchor, Argomaniz spends the final two chapters expanding on the application of the lessons learned in the Basque Country, explaining how, "The focus has now shifted from reducing violence to the question of how to manage the consequences of (the) decades-long conflict" (p. 184).

While the author uses past conflicts to compare and contrast the actors and their actions in a range of terrorist incidents around the world, the most powerful part of this work is how it may be applied to future conflicts. Argomaniz spends an entire chapter examining the Northern Ireland conflict as a case study, which demonstrates how policy and public action can be applied to help bring an end to terrorism.

Researchers interested in civil action's impact on terrorism (and vice-versa) will find a mine of valuable information in Argomaniz's book. Similarly, those looking to study the rise and fall of CSOs within and beyond the Basque Country will find it captivating and useful. More broadly, those researching the decline of terrorism (and contributing factors) will be able to add data-driven evidence to their work using Argomaniz's work.

The main strengths of this book are the depth of Argomaniz's research and the variety of sources used. The author has created a rich tapestry of accounts, bound together with data from within and beyond the Basque Country to support his hypothesis regarding CSOs. The role of civil action and non-violent resistance in the ETA case has been firmly established in this text as a case study for bringing future terrorist groups to a swifter end, with the power of the people at the forefront of a way to secure peace.

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BOOK REVIEW

Review Essay: Simon James Copland, *The Male Complaint: The Manosphere and Misogyny Online*

Reviewed by Annabel Hoare*

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Simon James Copland, *The Male Complaint: The Manosphere and Misogyny Online* (Cambridge, England, UK: Polity Press, 2025) 208 pp., US \$ 64.95 [Hardcover], US \$ 22.95 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-5095-6257-2

Considering the rise of lone actor violence motivated by misogynistic extremism, Simon Copland's book *The Male Complaint* provides a timely analysis of the driving forces behind the growing popularity of extreme misogynist ideologies emanating from online communities known as the manosphere. Illustrating the significance of the threat was the lone actor crossbow attack against two young women in Leeds, England, in April 2025 by an adherent of the manosphere who posted his misogynistic manifesto online prior to the incident. In this book, Copland challenges the dominant discourse on the manosphere, arguing against the reductive emphasis on gender and instances of terrorism in existing public and academic discourse.

In the first half of this book, Copland constructs his argument through the role of grievances, identification with victimisation and community in building what he calls *The Male Complaint*, illustrating that manosphere men reframe the source of their grievances stemming from the neoliberal capitalist order to tangible objects of discontent, namely women, feminism and the state. In the second half of the book, Copland argues that the manosphere employs self-help narratives to reframe the community's inability to alleviate the complaint as a personal failure of manosphere men, resulting from an insufficient commitment to the community. Such a deficit, Copland asserts, feeds a nihilistic worldview that drives manosphere men towards self-harm, suicide, and violence towards women, including instances of mass violence that have been classed as terrorism.¹

Although Copland's grievance-centred approach to investigating the manosphere does not, in itself, provide a unique contribution to existing scholarship, it does offer a critical overview of existing scholarship on the manosphere. His sociopolitical perspective, although reminiscent of Oliver Roy's influential work countering ideology-driven accounts of radicalisation, provides a vital alternative lens to the dominant gendered interpretations of the manosphere.²

Nonetheless, utilising this lens, Copland provides a notable contribution to existing scholarship exploring grievances in the Manosphere and subsequently provides a critical framework for understanding digital extremism more generally. Through this exploration, Copland proposes a novel assertion about the manosphere: that it is sustained by a grievance-based feedback loop, which he labels 'cruel optimism'. He argues that these communities reinforce the unattainable standards, deepen the erosion of gendered social anchors, and intensify loneliness, encouraging men to conform to the very system that underlies their grievances. Moreover, Copland's grievance-based feedback loop offers a critical lens for understanding digital radicalisation within the Onlife³ condition, where grievances are continuously shaped across interconnected digital and embodied spaces. Thus, Copland's use of 'cruel optimism' should be considered a noteworthy contribution to Manosphere research.

In the penultimate chapter, Copland's exploration of the resultant nihilistic worldview held by many in these spaces provides a holistic overview of the diverse threats emanating from the manosphere. Through this understanding, Copland presents a compelling argument to expand scholarly and public attention beyond the threat of terrorism. His critical examination of Isla Vista attacker Elliot Rodger's manifesto and subsequent comparison to suicide notes posted on manosphere forums illustrated pertinent affective similarities while simultaneously distinguishing them by how they directed their violence. Through drawing these parallels, *The Male Complaint* provides a salient foundation for further exploration into the intersection between terrorist violence and less visible forms of harm.

Despite the salient contributions, there are some areas where this book falls short in its attempt to illustrate the manosphere. For example, despite his acknowledgement early in the book that these groups are often “extremely diverse across racial, socio-economic, age and other demographic lines” (p.5), his focus on the overlap between the far-right and white nationalist groups and neglect of its intersection with other fascist political movements risks neglecting the internal heterogeneity and ideological diversity across the manosphere. Subsequently, this limits the book’s ability to capture the complexity of this digital ecosystem fully.

Additionally, Copland’s evaluation of possible P/CVE approaches to the manosphere overlooks the nuances of the manosphere highlighted earlier in the book. In this final chapter, Copland argues against addressing the manosphere through state-led counter-terrorism strategies. In response to Laura Bates’ claim “that domestic terrorism laws ‘should be introduced or amended to ensure that these crimes can be treated with the same severity’” (p.143), Copland’s argument makes little reference to the manosphere. Instead, Copland utilises examples and frames his reasoning by highlighting the pitfalls of state-led P/CVE in countering jihadist and far-right extremist groups. Such a conflation risks inadequately evaluating appropriate counter-radicalisation strategies.

In sum, *The Male Complaint* provides a critical anthology of the manosphere from a novel perspective. Copland has made a significant contribution by not only applying classic political science theories commonly overlooked in this field but also by advancing scholarship in this area by uniting a diffuse set of existing literature through his concept of ‘cruel optimism’. Despite his conflation of the manosphere with other extremist communities, this book addresses numerous academic lacunas and provides a pertinent conceptualisation of the manosphere.

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Endnotes

1 From the online version of Simon James Copland's doctoral thesis, "Reddit the Manosphere and the Male Complaint", *PQDT - Global* (The Australian National University, 2022), chapter. 5. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2787196805/abstract/36CF64F53340497DPQ/1>.

2 Jytte Klausen, "Terror in the Terroir: The Roots of France's Jihadist Problem Reviews & Responses", *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (2017): 166–72.

3 For a description of the term "Onlife", see Luciano Floridi, ed., *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era* (Springer e-Book), online at: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-04093-6>; and Judith Simon and Charles Ess, "The ONLIFE Initiative—a Concept Reengineering Exercise." *Philosophy & Technology* 28, 157–162 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-015-0189-8>

BOOK REVIEW

Review Essay: A Representative Sampling of Textbooks, Handbooks and General Books on Terrorism and Counter-terrorism

Reviewed by Joshua Sinai*

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Since the 1960s, when the terrorism threat escalated worldwide during what is termed the third historical wave of modern terrorism (approximately 1950 to 1980)—and especially during the catastrophic fourth wave (1980 to 2020)—hundreds of books have been published about the nature of terrorism and the targeted governments' counterterrorism campaigns (whether successful or not) to mitigate the threat.¹ This review essay focuses on seventeen textbooks, handbooks and general books used in college and university courses on these subjects. The list of books is arranged alphabetically by the authors' last names, and they are concisely highlighted according to whether they are textbooks or handbooks, or comprehensive general accounts.

Edwin Bakker, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies: Comparing Theory and Practice* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2015), 238 pp., US \$ 39.50 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-9-0872-8221-9.

Erica Chenoweth and Pauline Moore, *The Politics of Terror* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 528 pp., US \$ 109.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-1997-9566-6.

Erica Chenoweth, Richard English, Andreas Gofas, and Stathis N. Kalyvas (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 824 pp., US \$ 166.49 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-1987-3291-4.

James J.F. Forest, *The Terrorism Lectures: A Comprehensive Collection for the Student of Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and National Security* [Third Edition] (Montgomery, AL: Nortia Press, 2019), 458 pp., US \$ 49.99 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-9405-0316-5.

Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* [Third Edition] (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), 528 pp., US \$100.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 26.95 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-2311-7477-0.

Richard Jackson and Daniela Pisoiu (Eds.), *Contemporary Debates on Terrorism* [Second Edition], 318 pp., US \$ 250.00 [Hardback], US \$ 56.99 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-1389-3136-7.

Matthew Lippman, *Terrorism & Counterterrorism: Theory, History, and Contemporary Challenges* (Cognella Academic Publishing, 2019), 374 pp., US \$ 83.80 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-5165-2370-2.

Gus Martin, *Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues* [Eighth Edition] (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2025), 696 pp., US \$ 196.99 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-0719-1993-4.

Diego Muro and Tim Wilson (Eds.), *Contemporary Terrorism Studies* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 617 pp., US \$ 88.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-1988-2956-0.

Briditte L. Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism* [Seventh Edition] (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 480 pp., US \$ 100.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-0322-6462-2.

Henry Prunckun and Troy Whitford, *Terrorism & Counterterrorism: A Comprehensive Introduction to Actors and Actions* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), 269 pp., US \$ 89.95 [Hardcover], US \$ 35.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-6263-7760-8.

Alex P. Schmid (Eds.), *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness* (The Hague, The Netherlands: International Centre for Counterterrorism, 2021), 1278 pp., US \$ No price [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-9-0903-3977-1. <https://icct.nl/handbook-terrorism-prevention-and-preparedness>

Andrew Silke, *Terrorism – All That Matters* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill Companies, Inc, 2014), 160 pp., US \$ 21.59 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-4441-6331-5.

Andrew Silke (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (New York,

NY: Routledge, 2019), 694 pp., US \$ 300.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-1388-1908-5.

Nicolas Stockhammer (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Terrorism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2024/2025), 584 pp., US \$ 300.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 63.99 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-0323-5320-3.

Charles Townsend, *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction [Third Edition]* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 192 pp., US \$ 12.99 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-1988-0909-8.

Leonard Weinberg, *Global Terrorism: A Beginner's Guide* (London, England, UK: One World, 2008), 192 pp., US \$ 14.95 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-8516-8608-7.

Overview

Of the seventeen books chosen for this review, nine are textbooks, four are handbooks, and three are general accounts. All are used as primary or secondary texts in undergraduate and graduate courses. For the purposes of this review, a textbook is defined as a book whose chapters contain comprehensive information about a subject that would be covered in a course. This generally includes learning objectives, case studies, discussion questions, key terms and concepts, and chapter summaries. Generally, a handbook is an edited volume that serves as a schematic guide and overview of the state of the discipline. General accounts cover the same topics as textbooks or handbooks, but in a less pedagogical way.

All the volumes cover similar subjects. These include defining terrorism, the history and evolution of terrorism (generally following David Rapoport's framework of the four historical waves of modern terrorism, which began in the early 1880s, to which we can add the fifth historical wave beginning around 2020); the root causes and grievances of terrorism; how terrorists radicalise and recruit new members (including the involvement of women in terrorism); the psychology of terrorism; the various organisational formations of terrorism (whether as hierarchically organised or loosely affiliated groups or as lone actors); the typology of terrorists' ideologies (e.g., secular or religious, right-wing or left-wing, etc.); profiles and case studies of significant terrorist groups and their leaders; terrorist tactics (including suicide attacks) and weapons (whether conventional or WMD); their selection of targets; terrorist-related activities in cyberspace (including social media); state sponsors of terrorism; the components of governments' counter-terrorism campaigns, ranging from military to conciliatory response measures; and future trends in terrorism.

Textbooks

All the listed textbooks are excellent in their different approaches. Some are written as traditional textbooks (Lippman, Martin, Muro and Wilson (eds.), and Nacos), and one is a series of lectures to structure a course in a comprehensive and integrated manner (Forest). Another applies a practitioner-based intelligence and risk management approach to examine these subjects (Prunckun and Whitford), while two textbooks provide an overview of the state of the discipline on terrorism and counter-terrorism, including assessing how terrorism ends (Chenoweth and Moore) and recommending future research directions in the study of terrorism and counter-terrorism (Bakker). The edited textbook by Jackson and Psoiu provides a debate between 'traditional' and 'critical' academics on topics such as how to define terrorism, the causes of—and the magnitude of—the terrorism threat, and how governments can effectively address this threat.

Handbooks

Although the price of edited handbooks might be prohibitively expensive as primary textbooks for academic courses, they are highly useful as secondary reference resources, especially given their breadth of topic coverage (often 600-1,200 pages) and case studies. Of the four volumes reviewed here, the handbook by Chenoweth, English, Gofas and Kalyvas most closely approximates a textbook. Numerous chapters examine the state of the discipline, each beginning with an introduction and ending with a summary or conclusion, including several that recommend directions for future research. The handbooks by Silke and by Stockhammer are similar in many ways, although Stockhammer's is more recent and focuses on future trends in terrorist warfare and government counter-terrorism campaigns. The massively comprehensive handbook by Schmid focuses on the spectrum of measures to prepare for and counter terrorism.

General Books

With the first edition published in 1998, Hoffman's third edition updates the author's comprehensive coverage of all aspects of terrorism, such as how terrorism is defined; the history and evolution of the internationalisation of terrorism (especially its religious variant); the tradecraft of terrorism; how terrorists exploit the media; and the threats posed by significant groups such as al-Qaida. Also used as course texts are two comparatively short books. Townshend's slim volume closely resembles Hoffman's lengthier book's coverage, as it provides a similar historical account of the evolution and current state of terrorism. Silke's short volume offers concise chapters on topics such as defining terrorism and understanding how it is caused; the psychology of terrorism; terrorism and weapons of mass destruction; countering terrorism; and future trends in terrorism. The Appendix includes capsule highlights of terrorism, such as key terrorist attacks, top terrorist leaders, etc.

Conclusion

This capsule-based overview of selected textbooks, handbooks, and general books about terrorism and counter-terrorism is intended to provide a representative snapshot of the vast published literature on these subjects. With the nature of the terrorist threat constantly evolving, such as the takeover of several countries by hybrid terrorist groups—such as Hamas in Gaza, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, and the Houthis in part of Yemen—and the pardoning of the violent assailants who attacked the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, many of the previously accepted analyses on these issues will likely be revised in the published literature to take account of these and other developments.

Joshua Sinai is the Book Reviews Editor of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

Notes

- 1 For a comprehensive account of the hundreds of books on terrorism and counter-terrorism, this reviewer's bibliographic handbook will be published by Routledge in late 2026.

Announcements

New Editor-in-Chief Appointed for Perspectives on Terrorism

After receiving several nominations for the position, I am pleased to announce that the Steering Board of *Perspectives on Terrorism* has selected **Professor Rashmi Singh** to be the new Editor-in-Chief of the journal.

Dr Singh is a Professor in the Department of International Relations at the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais, in Brazil. She also serves as Coordinator for the Research Laboratory and Projects in International Relations (LPPRI), and Co-Director of the Collaborative Research Network on Terrorism, Radicalisation and Organised Crime (TRAC). Prior to joining PUC Minas in early 2016, Dr. Singh was a Lecturer in Terrorism Studies at the Handa Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), University of St Andrews, Scotland (2008-2016). She was a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Terrorism (2013-2014), and also served as lead investigator on the START-funded project, *In the Eyes of the Beholder* which developed metrics of success and failure in the Global War on Terror and the Global Jihad.

Dr Singh has been an Associate Editor of *Perspectives on Terrorism* since 2018, and has extensive editorial board experience elsewhere, including with Terrorism and Political Violence, and the International Journal of Conflict and Violence. She is also the Series Editor for the New Directions in Terrorism Research publications by Manchester University Press.

Dr Singh holds a bachelor's degree in History from Delhi University (Delhi, India), a master's degree in History from Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi, India) and a doctorate in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science (UK). She is fluent in English and Hindi, is an advanced-level Portuguese speaker and fluent Urdu speaker, and has a working knowledge of Arabic. She has an extensive research and publication record, with expertise on nationalist extremism, transnational terrorist groups, counter-terrorism responses and related issues of national security. She is also an area specialist with regional expertise in both the Middle East and South Asia.

For a formal transition period, she has agreed to collaborate with the current Editor-in-Chief (Dr James Forest) as a Co-Editor for the September and December 2025 issues of the journal. She will then begin her tenure as Editor-in-Chief on 1 January 2026, supported by our ICCT team led by Managing Editor Anna-Maria Andreeva. Please join me in welcoming her to this new role at our journal.

Dr Thomas Renard
Director, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism
Chair, Steering Board for *Perspectives on Terrorism*

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