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About

Perspectives on Terrorism

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

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Editorial

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Words of Welcome

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to announce the release of Volume XX, Issue 1 (March 2026) 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 beginning its 20th 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.

This issue begins with a research article by Alessandro Bolpagni and Ali Fisher which provides a longitudinal analysis of outline sharing from the IS Rocket.Chat server, a Salafi-Jihadi digital safe haven where IS supporters can operate freely without the threat of removal. Thus, the researchers provide valuable insights into how the Salafi-Jihadi digital ecosystem operates when it is not facing disruption. Then Maxime Berube, François Gillardin, and Pier-Louis Dumont leverage a lexicon-based classification to distinguish violent jihadist discourses from non-violent Salafist discourses. On the basis of this distinction, the authors make a strong case against reductionist interpretations of ideological expression that uncritically categorise the mere presence of specific linguistic features, religious references, or ideological themes as evidence of violent intent or criminal behaviour. Next, Michaël Vande Velde and Benjamin Mine build upon their previous work to provide an updated quantitative analysis of terrorist recidivism in Belgium. Their article both explores patterns of recidivism and also identifies factors potentially associated with reoffending. Finally, Kristy Campion and Justin Bonest Phillips study constructions of white nationalism on 4chan's /pol/ board by examining nearly 92,000 posts on the topic from 2013-2024. Their work also contributes to the academic debate around distinctions in the definition of white supremacy versus white nationalism.

In our research notes section, Mohammad Waqas Sajjad and Ahmed Jawad provide a sharp analysis of the ideological and strategic evolution of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), effectively highlighting how these shifts represent a new iteration of the organisation that makes it not only more dangerous but also considerably more challenging to confront. Next, Max Taylor, Ethel Quayle, and John Horgan first outline the landscape of Com networks to then make an urgent case for not only a clearer conceptualisation of these decentralised online networks/communities but also cross-sector collaboration to effectively combat against the convergence of harms that characterises these networks. Finally, Peter R. Neumann argues for the transformation of contemporary terrorism in Europe where ideology-based frameworks can no longer explain key developments. Instead, he identifies the emergence of a "grey zone" of terrorism, which is characterised by six deeply interconnected trends and primarily driven by digital technologies.

Our resources section begins with an extensive bibliography on the Use of Drones in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism by Associate Editor, Judith Tinnes. Finally, our newly revamped Book Reviews section includes three in-depth review essays. The first, by Emma Leonard Boyle, reviews Samar al-Bulushi's *War-Making as Worldmaking: Kenya, the United States and the War on Terror*. Second, John Morrison reviews Arie W. Kruglanski and Sophia Moskalenko's *The Psychology of the Extreme*. Finally, Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Rohan Gunaratna review *Extremism, Terrorism, Radicalisation and Violence: Cause & Solution* by Para Wijayanto, the former Emir of the now-disbanded Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

This issue not only marks the beginning of twenty years of *Perspectives on Terrorism* but is also the first issue produced under my leadership of the Editorial Team. I'd like to thank the Steering Board of *Perspectives on Terrorism* for both the opportunity and their trust in me; the former Editor-in-Chief, Prof James Forest, for his gentle guidance over the transition period as he handed over the reins of the journal to me, and; the Managing Editor, Anna-Maria Andreeva, for her continued assistance and support. It is an amazing privilege to build upon the legacy of our former Editor/Editors-in-Chief and to collaborate with such a distinguished team of Co-Editors and Associate Editors. I am honoured to take on this role and look forward to continuing the excellent work that the journal has done over the last two decades. I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome Dr Michael J. Boyle, our new Book Reviews Editor, to the PT team.

This issue of the journal has been produced in collaboration between Rashmi Singh and Managing Editor, Anna-Maria Andreeva with considerable support from Huy Ha, for which we are very grateful.

Prof Rashmi Singh, Editor-in-Chief

PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Navigating Beyond the Digital Safe Haven’: Mapping the Course of pro-Islamic State Propaganda on Rocket.Chat through a URL Social Network Analysis

Alessandro Bolpagni* and Ali Fisher

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Abstract: In recent decades, Salafi-Jihadi groups have capitalised on the proliferation of social media to establish a persistent online presence. In that time, their activity has evolved into the so-called Multiplatform Communication Paradigm (MCP), a strategy to establish a presence on multiple online platforms instead of focusing on a single platform. Previous research has examined the digital ecosystem through outlinks from social media platforms such as Twitter and Telegram. On these platforms, Salafi-Jihadis face disruption and account removal. As distribution methods evolve to avoid detection, data collection is often based on availability at a given time. In contrast, this research is the first to present a longitudinal study, spanning almost six years of outline sharing from a Salafi-Jihadi digital safe haven, the IS Rocket.Chat server. Here, IS supporters are free to operate without removal, and thus, the research provides valuable insight into how the ecosystem operates when it is not facing disruption. The research provides an initial overview of the outlink data and demonstrates the continued importance of platforms fulfilling the roles of beacons, aggregators, and content stores within the digital ecosystem. It also emphasises the role of human choices in domain selection, as not all rooms share the same combinations of URL. This suggests a vital new, human-centred avenue for research into terrorist exploitation of the internet.

Keywords: Salafi-jihadi groups, Islamic State, Rocket.Chat, TechHaven, social network analysis

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Introduction

Salafi-Jihadi groups have long understood that their activity revolves around communicating with core supporters in the safe haven controlled by the mujahideen and the contested 'frontier' spaces where they seek to reach a wider audience. Today, within the Multiplatform Communication Paradigm (MCP) adopted by Salafi-Jihadi groups, al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) run Rocket.Chat servers, which function as self-hosted digital strongholds intended to be a safe haven for supporters and 'trusted brothers'. While Jihadi safe havens are not as popular a subject of study when compared to the fortunes of groups on the easily accessible digital frontier, the digital strongholds that underpinned the Swarmcast and MCP exhibit a modus operandi that traces back to the core tenets of Salafi-Jihadi online activity.

This research is the first to present a longitudinal study that spans almost six years (December 2018 to October 2024) of outlink sharing from a Salafi-Jihadi digital safe haven, namely the IS Rocket.Chat server TechHaven, within which IS supporters are free to operate without content removal or external moderation. The period chosen coincides with the date (5 December 2018) of the first sharing of a URL within TechHaven and with the date (1 October 2024) at which data collection was terminated. The study thus aims to map out the pro-IS propaganda stream specifically generated by the sharing of URLs inside the pro-IS server TechHaven on Rocket.Chat. Each URL analysed was considered an element of IS propaganda because it either led to a site containing IS propaganda material or to other social media (whether messaging platforms or social networks) where IS propaganda material could be acquired. Moreover, the research provides valuable insight into how the ecosystem operates when it is not facing disruption.

This is distinct from previous studies[1] that have assessed the Salafi-Jihadi ecosystem by analysing outlinks on social media where Salafi-Jihadis face disruption and account removal, such as Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.[2] This means their distribution propaganda methods evolve to avoid detection, and data collection is often based on availability at a given time. Despite its remarkable significance in spreading the Salafi-Jihadi propaganda online, Rocket.Chat has been rarely analysed to understand its role as a propaganda launchpad within the IS online ecosystem and, broadly speaking, the Salafi-Jihadi online information environment. This paper thus shows how and which URLs are shared by a Salafi-Jihadi group, in this case IS, to direct its propaganda stream when it is not seeking to avoid content removal. As such, we can begin to test some of the prior assumptions about URL sharing. For example, are the same domains used consistently when URL sharing occurs in a safe space, and do all channels in a safe space behave in the same way? Are there other explanations for the fluctuation in the use of specific domains, other than Western disruption efforts?

To examine these questions, the paper is divided into the following sections. It will initially discuss the role of the safe haven within Salafi-Jihadi online communication strategies. Afterwards, it will describe the evolution of the IS online ecosystem, which led to the emergence of Rocket.Chat as the IS digital safe haven and the operational utility of such a platform.

Once the communicative strategies and the online environment are outlined, the paper will present the methodology applied for monitoring these strategies and the IS online ecosystem and extracting all the URLs shared within TechHaven in a specific time frame. Data and findings will finally be discussed, representing almost six years of activity within one of the best-known Salafi-Jihadi digital safe havens.

Understanding the Safe Haven

In recent decades, major Salafi-Jihadi groups – AQ and IS – have capitalised on the proliferation of social media to establish a persistent and consistent online presence to conduct a media war in parallel to their military operations, performing *da'wa* (proselytism/missionary work) through sharing propaganda, and recruiting new supporters and operatives. What began with the recognition of the internet as a battlefield for jihad capable of breaking the 'media siege' on AQ has evolved from self-hosted safe spaces on forums to embrace social media and the multiplatform communication paradigm of today.[3] While the technology used for communication has changed over time, certain elements, frequently overlooked by researchers, have remained central elements of strategy. Specifically, the distinction between protected strongholds for mujahideen or core supporters and the contested frontier spaces where Salafi-Jihadi groups could reach wider audiences.

In the late 2000s, Salafi-Jihadi groups were well acquainted with the potential of the internet as a means of promoting jihad and disseminating propaganda material. In 2009, Anwar Al-Awlaki underlined how "The internet has become a great medium for spreading the call of Jihad and following the news of the mujahideen".[4] Following the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, in the Arabic manual *Methodology in Acquiring Media Experience*, AQ officially promoted the role of the "media soldier", or "media martyr", and shared guidelines on how to develop "media work" with any "brother stationed on the frontier of the media jihad," whose mission is "to form cells to call for jihad and incite jihad, and to facilitate the means for people to do so by providing them with information, guidance, and programs."[5] Moreover, on May 6th, 2011, in a statement[6] to mark the death of Osama bin Laden, AQ-affiliated al-Fajr Media argued that the "Internet is a battlefield for jihad, a place for missionary work, a field of confronting the enemies of God. It is upon any individual to consider himself as a media-mujahid, dedicating himself, his wealth, and his time for God."[7]

In 2011, Ansar al-Mujahideen created both Twitter and Facebook pages.[8] Early efforts would also be conducted on YouTube and Tumblr.[9] These early steps into social media and distribution of media guides were part of a tipping point towards wider social media engagement.[10] These steps by AQ came at the same time as the increased social media adoption within their primary target audience and the outbreak of the then-Syrian Civil War. This combination of factors created a crucial opportunity for Salafi-Jihadi groups to further evolve their information network and propaganda dissemination strategy. The Syrian conflict thus offered to Salafi-Jihadi groups, in particular the group that would become IS, the potential to expand militarily and territorially, as well as expand the digital frontier of their online ecosystem.[11] This, however, is not a moment where groups abandoned one element in favour of another, but of the evolving relationship between the digital strongholds and contested frontier spaces.

Twitter became the primary tool to disseminate propaganda material, while the content and archives were still stored on 'safe spaces' such as forums and websites.[12] At that time, Twitter was the primary method used by non-violent Syrian activists to expose the atrocities and war crimes committed by the Bashar al-Assad regime. At that time, those who would become known as media mujahideen began to adopt content created by civil society activists into their narrative, exploiting their discontent to promote the Salafi-jihadist perspective and legitimise their presence and actions.[13] Consequently, by focusing on grievances and injustice, Salafi-Jihadi groups exploited the Syrian Civil War to mobilise potential supporters against the al-Assad regime and Western powers involved in the conflict. In the early period of Twitter adoption, authority within these networks was still conferred by connection to specific forums, with links

to longer-form content still directing users to these forums.[14] This followed from earlier practice where forums would rely on distribution through al-Fajr Media to prove the authenticity of the communications shared on their platforms.[15]

Therefore, within the Salafi-Jihadi communications, there was a clear relationship between the safe-haven provided by digital strongholds and the contested media frontier. This was rooted in how Salafi-Jihadi groups understood the use of the internet as a tool to disseminate their theological doctrine to galvanise core supporters, the Mujahid vanguard, and engage in *da'wa* to mobilise a mass movement.[16]

As stated by Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2013 in *General Guidelines for Jihad*, the Salafi-Jihadi groups have to pursue a twofold strategy in what he described as the "propagational field", one of the "two aspects" of jihad alongside the "military."[17] According to al-Zawahiri, on the one hand, Salafi-Jihadi groups have to "educate and cultivate the Mujahid vanguard, which shoulders […] the responsibility of confronting the Crusaders and their proxies."[18] On the other hand, Salafi-Jihadi groups have to "create awareness within the masses, inciting them, and exerting efforts to mobilise them so that they revolt against their rulers and join the side of Islam."[19] This twofold strategy was aimed at shaping a Mujahid vanguard that, according to al-Zawahiri's words, followed the principles of "support, participation, and guidance" to conduct "the revolution of the oppressed against the oppressors," as much in the online dimension as in the physical one.[20] While the mujahideen may receive material on the digital frontier, the continued existence of safe havens in digital strongholds has remained an important part of the strategy, allowing individuals to fall back and regroup when frontier networks are disrupted.

The twofold purpose of propagational activity outlined by Zawahiri emphasised the continued importance of the safe haven provided by digital strongholds. This is where the group could galvanise supporters if other communication channels were disrupted. This has long been an important undercurrent within Salafi-Jihadi media, despite the tendency for research to focus on the contested frontier spaces. For more than a decade, the Salafi-Jihadi movement has been conscious that they would "remain on social media sites as mere guests" and "would always be competing with the owners of the site."[21] Abu Saad al-Amili warned in *Apathy in Jihadist Forums: Causes and Solutions*, that "there must come a day when they will close their doors in our faces."[22] As such, al-Amili argued in 2013 that media mujahideen should "consider these sites to be arenas for spreading our seeds, then we will return to our safe, fortified and original bases, which are these networks [forums] that our brothers created specifically for us, to spread the truth without restrictions, and [where] we practice our duties without restriction, condition or fear of tyrants."[23] In other words, al-Amili was exhorting these earlier media mujahideen not to move permanently to social media platforms with their activity, but to recognise the continued importance of their safe havens that (at that time) were jihadist-administered forums.

Jihadi online activity has expanded from the early experiments with Twitter to the fully fledged Multiplatform Communication Paradigm (MCP).[24] Across the MCP, Salafi-Jihadi groups have forged a stable and doctrinally cohesive presence online to disseminate propaganda aimed at attracting new fighters, fundraising, and encouraging attacks against the far and the near enemy.[25] Since the early 2010s, the activity of media mujahideen – and munasirin, individuals actively engaged in sharing Salafi-Jihadi propaganda online – have been in a state of constant evolution as their multiplatform *zeitgeist* has continued to reconfigure.[26] The ability to reconfigure has relied on a Swarmcast mentality (discussed further below) on the frontier, underpinned by access to the safe haven provided by digital strongholds.[27]

While some of the early jihadist forums have continued to exist online, Rocket.Chat has emerged as the new, self-hosted safe haven of choice for both IS and AQ. As will be discussed later in the paper, Rocket.Chat is a platform that allows Salafi-Jihadi groups to create their own self-managed server, giving them the opportunity to create their own virtual space with forum-like management.

The Evolution of Jihadi Communication Environment

Over more than twenty years, Salafi-Jihadi groups have undertaken a remarkable evolution in their communicative methods and propaganda-sharing strategies in the digital dimension. Moving from the 1990s Web 1.0[28] online forums to use encrypted messaging platforms and decentralised Web 3.0 technology,[29] Salafi-Jihadi groups have developed a remarkable online resilience and a constantly evolving capacity to adapt to new circumstances and technologies.

Among the communication models adopted in the last two decades, one of the most successful in creating a consistent, resilient, and persistent presence online was the creation of a multiplatform propaganda structure always able to adapt itself to disruption attacks, bans, and content removal from law enforcement agencies. Since the early 2010s, Salafi-Jihadi groups started to configure their online presence according to the MCP: rather than focusing on individual platforms, the Salafi-Jihadi online movement has developed next-generation approaches to online disruption and content removal.[30] The MCP has thus created a network of remarkable resilience, far surpassing that which existed during the period when the Salafi-Jihadi online movement was heavily dependent on Twitter (now X) or the initial adoption of Telegram in 2015. Specifically, the adoption of the MCP has produced many levels of redundancy in the network and ensured a persistent presence for the Salafi-Jihadi online movement.[31] Consequently, this approach has made the jihadist network more resilient and has enabled users to reconnect quickly when the network suffers from online disruption attacks. Within the MCP, social media platforms, archive websites, and cloud storage services act respectively as beacons, aggregators, and specific content stores, through which the Salafi-Jihadi online movement can regroup in the event of a break in its activity on a single specific platform.[32] Firstly, beacons provide the 'always on' stream of communication through which information can be rapidly disseminated; content aggregators are sites or social networks that gather a range of jihadist materials and provide users with a collection of links to locations where a specific propaganda material can be downloaded; and content stores are locations where content is uploaded for users to access with a link supplied by content aggregators or beacons.[33]

In the early 2010s, the recognition and approval of the media mujahideen, the decision to engage via social media, and the mediatic exploitation of the increasing violence of the then-active civil war in Syria provided an opportunity for Salafi-Jihadi groups to evolve their online strategies, which became increasingly aligned with the concepts of netwar.[34] Netwar was defined by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt as an emerging mode of lower-intensity conflicts at societal levels wherein the protagonists consist of dispersed organisations, small groups, and individuals who communicate, coordinate, and conduct their campaigns in an 'internetted' manner, often without a precise central command.[35] What distinguishes netwar as a form of conflict is the networked organisational structure of its practitioners – with many groups being leaderless – and the suppleness in their ability to come together quickly in swarming attacks.[36] This emphasis on the strategic use of information, irregularisation, alternate operational structures, the connection between physical battlefield and information-based (or digital) forms of conflict, and the adoption of swarming attacks makes netwar an important conceptual tool for the understanding of jihadist social media described through the concept of the Swarmcast model.[37]

Inspired by swarm behaviour observed in nature, the Swarmcast model is a netwar-inspired concept to demonstrate the persistence of Salafi-Jihadi propaganda material online.[38] It embodied the transformation of Salafi-Jihadi communication online from a mass communication model – usually referred to as 'one-to-many' – to a new, dispersed, and resilient communication network – commonly referred to as 'peer-to-peer'.[39] Furthermore, the communication structure inside the Swarmcast model led to an unclear division between the audience and the content producer; therefore, once the content is created, it is disseminated by the media mujahideen rather than by the original producer.[40] In doing so, media mujahideen connected to form a dispersed network based on loose affiliations, within which users disseminate propaganda content, constantly reconfiguring and reorganising in mid-flight like a swarm of bees or a flock of birds.[41] The Swarmcast model is based on three main features. The first is resilience, namely the ability to overcome takedowns and bans. Since jihadist groups have moved from broadcasting propaganda from a few official media houses to a dispersed network of media mujahideen, they needed a solid and long-lasting presence online.[42] The second feature is speed, to wit, the ability to transfer content inside the whole digital network. In other words, even once the initial wave of propaganda content has been removed from one specific social media platform, media mujahideen have already downloaded it and are ready to disseminate it faster and on a variety of other digital platforms.[43] Finally, agility, namely the ability to move from one digital platform to another and even adopt new technologies for short periods before moving to other digital platforms. The value of agility in establishing a constant online presence is that data released on several different platforms takes time to be localised.[44]

The Swarmcast model can be applied to describe the Salafi-Jihadi information ecosystem during the era of Web 2.0.[45] In the early 2000s, Web 2.0 was coined as a term to differentiate the post-dotcom World Wide Web (WWW) from that which came before, giving emphasis to social networking, content generated by users, and cloud computing.[46] In Web 2.0, jihadist groups have been able to maintain a persistent online presence by sharing content through a broad network, which has become one of the clearest incarnations of netwar since it was first envisaged.[47] However, the advent of Web 3.0[48] enabled the evolution of the Swarmcast model to Swarmcast model 2.0. The Swarmcast model 2.0 is much more dynamic, secure, encrypted, decentralised, and resilient than the original version.[49] Web 3.0 can be described as a vision of the future of the internet in which people operate on decentralised, quasi-anonymous platforms rather than depending on tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Twitter.[50] Contrary to the centralisation of Web 2.0, Web 3.0 refers to a decentralised online ecosystem based on the blockchain, wherein platforms and apps are not owned by a central gatekeeper but rather by users, who will earn their ownership stake by helping to develop and maintain those services.[51] While the Swarmcast model was enabled largely by the increasing access to mobile technology, the Swarmcast model 2.0 operates with the emergence of alternative distribution modalities, including the growth in Web 3.0 technologies, approaches, and ethos.[52] Therefore, the media mujahideen act according to a multiplatform *zeitgeist* hyper-distributed and massively replicated on multiple servers simultaneously, which combines decentralised network forms on specific platforms with decentralised peer-to-peer networks.

Throughout the period when the Salafi-Jihadi movement has exploited social media, they have also been aware that they were operating in an environment controlled by 'the enemy' and that they would always need a digital safe haven. By recalling al-Amili's words, media mujahideen will always "remain on social media sites as mere guests."[53] Nevertheless, in late 2019, following a series of network disruption interventions led by Europol, Salafi-Jihadi groups managed to find in Rocket.Chat a new digital safe haven to reorganise their online presence and their *da'wa* operations.

From Telegram to Rocket.Chat: the advent of a new digital safe haven

Since 2016, Telegram has been one of the Salafi-Jihadi online movement's core platforms for communication and the dissemination of propaganda material.[54] Between 2015 and 2019, private groups within Telegram also functioned as a form of digital safe haven thanks to encryption, limited disruption efforts, and vetting of users seeking to access particularly well-protected groups. In 2015, the Salafi-Jihadi movement began to move from the heavy emphasis on Twitter, which at the time had a greater user base and presence on mobile devices, to using Telegram for communication within the core of the movement, and Twitter and other social media for outreach.[55] For several years subsequently, Telegram was the core media platform of Salafi-Jihadi online movements. Yet, between 21-22 November 2019, the 16th Referral Action Day coordinated by the European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) – a team inside the European Union (EU)'s law enforcement agency, Europol – took place at Europol's headquarters in The Hague, which transformed and resized the Salafi-Jihadi's online movement presence. The online propaganda items targeted by Europol included propaganda videos, publications, and social media accounts that supported terrorism and violent extremism. Specifically, an official of the EU IRU reported that the operation was coordinated to conduct a "serious disruption campaign" against IS's online channels and groups, especially directing the efforts towards IS-branded and produced propaganda material.[56] Overall, the initiative led to the flagging or removal of over 26,000 pieces of IS propaganda content, dealing what Europol officials have called a "major blow" to IS's online presence.[57] The 16th Referral Action Day took on a much broader scope than previous ones, with Europol and partner agencies aiming to remove "everything related to Daesh propaganda" across multiple platforms.[58] In particular, Telegram was notably in the spotlight, as many IS and pro-IS channels and chats operated primarily on that platform, since it was their digital safe haven at the time.[59] Alongside Telegram, other tech companies were engaged through the flagging process. According to Europol, partners included Google (for example, YouTube), Twitter, and Facebook services (particularly Instagram), among others.[60] As a result of these concerted efforts, authorities removed a considerable number of key actors associated with IS and, broadly speaking, with the Salafi-Jihadi online movement network from Telegram, briefly disrupting its ability to spread extremist content on the platform. Following the 16th Referral Action Day, Salafi-Jihadi groups have intensified their diversification efforts on various platforms, including Rocket.Chat, which has subsequently functioned as their digital safe haven.

As al-Aza'im Media Foundation outlined to supporters in its magazine Voice of Khorasan (issue 43):

> *Rocket.Chat is an open-source messaging platform often used by organizations for team collaboration. Its privacy policies can differ significantly based on how it is hosted. Organizations that choose to self-host Rocket.Chat have the option to determine their level of logging and data retention, which may include IP addresses and other identifying information. (Voice of Khorasan, Issue 43, p. 47, 2025)*

An earlier guide to the IS Rocket.Chat server, published by pro-IS Qimam Electronic Foundation (QEF) in 2020, promoted TechHaven server as having "All official and supporters' channels of the Islamic State."[61] Moreover, QEF stated that there had been (within TechHaven) "[n]o censorship since December 2018."[62] Apart from a few days for maintenance and a hacking attack, the IS server TechHaven has been online almost continuously since then until the time of writing in August 2025.

The migration towards Rocket.Chat was not a replacement for other platforms, but a necessary diversification to create new digital safe havens, particularly one that was self-administered. By applying the security-efficiency trade-off, it is easy to observe how Salafi-Jihadi groups understood that Rocket.Chat focuses on users' security and anonymisation over its broadcasting capabilities, prioritising security over efficiency. By day-to-day monitoring, authors were able to observe how Rocket.Chat lacks, for instance, Telegram's public broadcast capabilities, a shortcoming visible through TechHaven users' complaints about the functioning of Rocket.Chat. According to C. Morselli, C. Giguère, and K. Petit,[63] a consistent trade-off facing participants in any criminal or terrorist network is that, between organising for efficiency or security, participants collectively pursue an objective while keeping the actions leading to that goal concealed. Which side of the trade-off is prioritised depends on the objective that is pursued by the criminal group or the terrorist organisation. According to C. Morselli *et al.*, on the one hand, since the time-to-task is shorter in money-driven criminal organisations, they therefore prioritise efficiency over security. In other words, criminal organisations focus on efficiency because their actions have a reasonably short time frame and they expect a pay-off for their involvement in the network. On the other hand, since ideologically driven terrorist groups have longer horizons, security is prioritised over the execution of any single attack.[64] Contrary to criminal groups, terrorist organisations pursue common ideological objectives over monetary return, and thus the network objectives influence the incidence of actions by extending the time-to-task.

In the spirit of Web 3.0, Rocket.Chat thus offers users the full capabilities of a mature communication platform without the centralised administration found in Web 2.0 platforms like Telegram, Facebook or Twitter, which often suspend or remove accounts when flagged by users or governments.[65] On Rocket.Chat, the Salafi-Jihadi online movement has thus maintained access through its self-managed installations. Furthermore, the authors observed significant aspects of Rocket.Chat's technical configuration based on the security-efficiency trade-off, specifically impacting its accessibility and attractiveness to the pro-IS ecosystem and, broadly speaking, the Salafi-Jihadi online movement. Firstly, the platform is relatively hard to reach. This is due to several factors, such as the difficulty of finding links to the digital platform, stringent access controls, the need for moderate technical knowledge to join and participate, as well as the limited availability of resources and support for new users. Such barriers reduce the platform's accessibility, making it less appealing for activities intended to reach less invested individuals or mobilise the mass movement. Yet, this could be considered a deliberate tactic by the administrators of the TechHaven server and, broadly speaking, the Salafi-Jihadi movement. They have adopted a high level of security, thus raising their resilience in an environment where they can communicate with existing supporters, namely the Mujahid vanguard.

Secondly, Rocket.Chat was found to have relatively low-level user-friendliness compared to some other platforms. This means that inexperienced users, especially those who may not be technologically savvy, might find it more difficult to navigate the platform, understand its features, or utilise it effectively for communication, content sharing, and coordination purposes. Moreover, since the server is intended to be a 'walled garden' for members, it is hard to broadcast content via links onto other platforms. Overall, Rocket.Chat has thus become one of the main platforms among MCP's beacons and one of the main pillars of the Swarmcast model 2.0, given its role and centrality as the digital safe haven for IS, and broadly speaking, for the Salafi-Jihadi propaganda machine. Within the broad Salafi-Jihadi movement online ecosystem, it is therefore a place primarily for the Mujahid vanguard, with other platforms, such as Telegram, fulfilling the role of outreach.

As a result, since late 2018, the Mujahid vanguard has used Rocket.Chat not only as a safe space for sharing propaganda material but also as the primary launchpad for campaigns to target other digital platforms. These platforms, including Telegram, other messaging applications, and various websites, have become the prime targets of botnets and online recruitment campaigns, highlighting the significant role of Rocket.Chat in the broader digital strategy of the Salafi-Jihadi online movement. For these reasons, Rocket.Chat has turned into the Salafi-Jihadi movement's digital safe haven or 'fortified citadel' thanks to its security features and independence provided by hosting their own self-managed server.

Methodology – Mining Rocket.Chat

The study was developed through the application of intelligence techniques elaborated by the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies (ITSTIME) and data collection tools developed by Human Cognition. Specifically, the authors employed Digital Human Intelligence (Digital HUMINT) methodologies to monitor day by day the active members within the pro-IS server TechHaven. Despite not being directly addressed in this research, the principles at the basis of the Digital HUMINT will be described in this section because they represent fundamental intelligence techniques that allowed the acquisition of the pro-IS server TechHaven in 2018 and were crucial in observing the evolution of the interaction within the servers in the last seven years.

To gather comprehensive insights, the research employed a covert non-participant observation method through the application of Digital Human Intelligence (Digital HUMINT) techniques. Designed by the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies (ITSTIME), the Digital HUMINT is an intelligence method that combines the Human Intelligence (HUMINT) practice and the new-type approach related to the new social media sources.[66] It encompasses a series of socio-anthropological approaches and mimesis tactics to observe and, if necessary, interact within extremist online ecosystems. Digital HUMINT is primarily based on digital ethnography, namely the application of socio-anthropological models to the online dimension. The latter can be described as a contemporary form of ethnography that considers online social environments following the developments in data transmission technology.[67] The ethnological approach appears to be polyvalent, since it encompasses both the socio-anthropological study and the data collection instrument.[68] In the first case, the socio-anthropological study responds to the necessity of observing the digital environment to grasp and understand all the social and relational dynamics happening in the virtual communities.[69] Complementarily, the data collection focuses on the exchange of content and information within a virtual environment.[70] In other words, the second approach represents the 'participative observation' which configures itself as an effective tool for the recollection of data and information useful for future analyses.[71] Overall, these intelligence techniques allowed the researchers to observe the platform's functionalities and user interactions without influencing the behaviour of the pro-IS TechHaven community.

The research thus seeks to delve into how the pro-IS ecosystem has developed on Rocket.Chat and how users are directed to resources outside the digital safe haven, such as other messaging platforms and archive websites. To accomplish this objective, the authors employed covert non-participant observation approaches through the application of Digital HUMINT techniques and digital ethnography to develop deeper insights into the structure of the MCP from Rocket.Chat outwards.[72] The study identified the URLs shared in each channel/group on Rocket.Chat. To accomplish this, the study used a Python script written by Human Cognition to download data from the self-hosted pro-IS server TechHaven on Rocket.Chat. The data scraper extracted every

post from each room available as of 1 October 2024, and extracted any URL present in the post text. URLs from each room are hosted on the Rocket.Chat server TechHaven by systematically sorting the URLs into various categories based on the distinct purposes each link serves.

Following the data collection and classification phase, the authors employed Social Network Analysis (SNA) to systematically map and interpret the relationships between URLs shared inside the pro-IS TechHaven server. SNA is a research perspective used within Terrorism Studies that enables researchers to visualise and analyse the social structural patterns within networks by examining nodes (in this case, URLs) and the connections (edges) between them.[73] From a methodological point of view, through the creation of graphs based on statistical and mathematical calculations, it can measure and analyse features of nodes as well as of their connections.[74]

By applying SNA to the collected data, the authors aim to uncover the underlying network structure formed by these URLs within the pro-IS server TechHaven on Rocket.Chat. This involves identifying central nodes, clusters, and key linkages that facilitate and show the direction of the stream of information. Specifically, the analysis seeks to highlight the significance of specific URLs in terms of their connectivity and influence within the network. Central URLs, which serve as major hubs, can play a crucial role in disseminating content and maintaining the cohesion of the network. The goal of this comprehensive analytical approach is to gain a deeper understanding of how the pro-IS propaganda ecosystem moves outside Rocket.Chat's digital safe haven. By mapping the network of shared URLs, the research intends to reveal the extent to which Rocket.Chat acts as a pivotal digital platform in the broader information ecosystem of pro-IS online content dissemination. This includes assessing how and whether URLs have changed over time and towards where they have been directed, thus outlining the behaviour of the pro-IS online movement.

The findings from the SNA will contribute to the academic discourse on digital extremism by providing empirical evidence on the functionality and significance of Rocket.Chat within the pro-IS digital landscape.

SNA of the URLs stream inside the pro-IS server TechHaven on Rocket.Chat

On Rocket.Chat, the pro-IS digital ecosystem has its own server titled TechHaven. The server consists of rooms which, depending on the settings chosen by the room administrator or administrators, can take the form of a channel (where only certain users can share messages and material) or a chat (where anyone can share messages and material). Specifically, the TechHaven server has a main 'general room discussion' and rooms which focus on news, institutional propaganda, Ansar Production media houses, content arranged by specific themes or geography, and technological issues.[75] While the server has not had a continuously active room for IS's branded media or consistent news channels (akin to the *nashir* channels active on other platforms), the many Ansar Production media houses have their own rooms. The most active are the 'general discussion' room and those dealing with content translated into languages relevant to specific regions (namely IS's *wilayat* locations), with Arabic and English being most common over the almost six-year period. On the date when the data collection process was completed (1 October 2024), there were a total of 430 rooms on the TechHaven server. Yet, analysis showed that messages containing URLs were shared in 290 rooms by 678 users. For security reasons and in order to avoid indirectly disseminating IS or pro-IS propaganda content, the full names of the rooms have been anonymised in all images included in the paper, as well

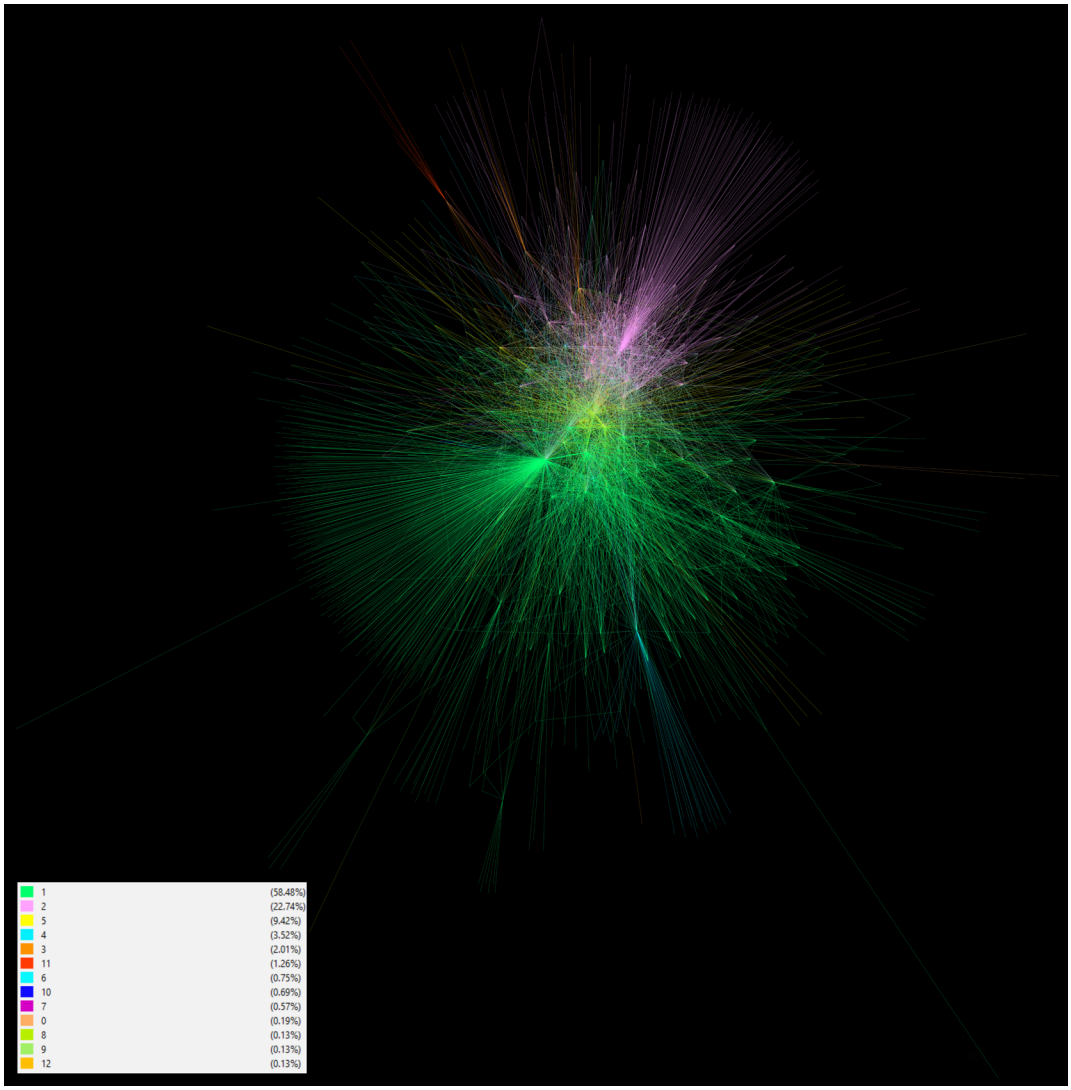
as the URLs, which have been modified from their original form, usually with abbreviations that do not refer back to the reference site.

The following section will present the SNA that examines the stream of propaganda inside the TechHaven server and outlinks to other platforms. Specifically, the SNA aims to map out all the URLs shared (just under ninety thousand) in the message text of the aforementioned 290 rooms of the TechHaven server from 5 December 2018, to 1 October 2024. As mentioned above, the start date of the data collection (5 December 2018) is the day on which the first URL was shared on TechHaven, while the end date of the data collection is the date on which the authors chose to conclude the process. The SNA presents a visual representation of the connections between the domain name (modified) of each URL and the rooms in which they were shared on the TechHaven server. The total number of nodes in the network is 1,592, which are made up of 290 rooms - namely, channels and chats - and 1,302 unique domains and subdomains, which have been shared a total of 89,991 times within TechHaven. Furthermore, 678 users were active in sharing all the URLs through message texts. The representation of the network was developed using the ForceAtlas2 algorithm implemented in Gephi. Specifically, ForceAtlas2 is a force-directed layout: it simulates a physical system to spatialise a network, wherein nodes repulse each other like charged particles while edges attract their nodes like springs, creating a movement that converges to a balanced state.[76]

At the whole network level, it is significant to analyse the density of the network. This metric indicates the overall level of connectivity between the nodes among all its constituent nodes. Moreover, it is obtained by dividing the sum of existing connections by the maximum number of possible connections, namely the ratio of the sum of connections to the maximum possible number of connections. The value obtained ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 represents the absence of connections, and 1 indicates that all possible connections are present within the network. In the SNA shown in Figure 1, the density is 0.002, which indicates a low density of interconnectivity. This means that the rooms on the server do not all share URLs to the same platforms, if they had the density would be much higher. As underlined before, the pro-IS digital ecosystem on Rocket.Chat prioritises security over efficiency by minimising connections and being multi-lingual, not all URLs are relevant to all users. In addition, the almost six-year time period may influence the availability of some services and preferences for specific services amongst the Media Mujahideen and could account for some variation in platform selection.

In subgroup-level analysis, the modularity class identifies the communities or clusters which exist within the network as a whole. In this analysis, thirteen communities were identified, and the modularity score was 0.418 (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Higher modularity scores indicate that the network has clearly distinct clusters. In the case under analysis, the modularity metric does not suggest that the network has a well-defined and distinct community structure,[77] but does show that clusters of rooms sharing URLs on Techhaven tend to have some similar URL sharing patterns. Employing the modularity score shows the size of the groups that adopt similar URL-sharing patterns. The distribution of these communities is shown below in Table 1.

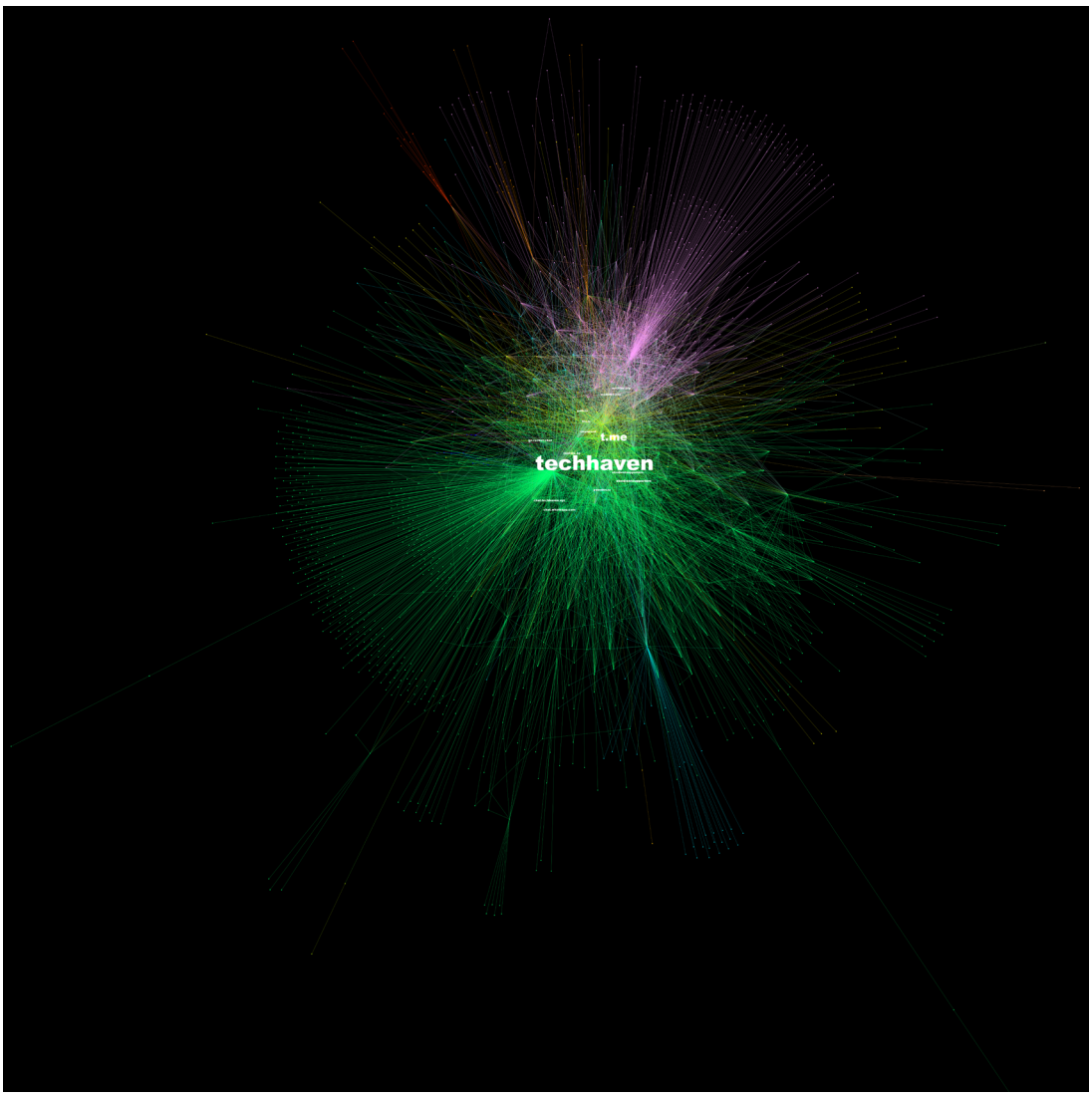
Table 1: Modularity Class

Community number	**Share of nodes**
1	58.48%
2	22.74%
5	9.42%
4	3.52%
3	2.01%
11	1.26%
6	0.75%
10	0.69%
7,0,8,9,12	< 0.60%

Community 1 shares 58.48 percent of the nodes in the network, meaning that more than half of all the nodes in the network are in Community 1. Different communities can be identified in Figure 1 by looking at the legend in the bottom-left corner. For ease of interpretation, the Community number column in Table 1 provides a reference system to identify the position of each community within the network depicted in the SNA in Figure 1, using the colour legend supplied.

At the node level, PageRank is considered (Figure 2). PageRank is a variation of eigenvector-based centrality that measures the influence of a node in a network. PageRank refers to the probability distribution for nodes in a network. In other words, it is a measure of how likely a user is to reach a specific node from other nodes in a network.[78] It is adopted in directed networks because it uses the in-degree – incoming relations – as a metric to estimate the level of influence.

Figure 2



The four domains with the highest PageRank (Table 2) are techhaven (0.033189), t.me (0.016735), matrix.to (0.003609), and obidientsupporters (0.003271).

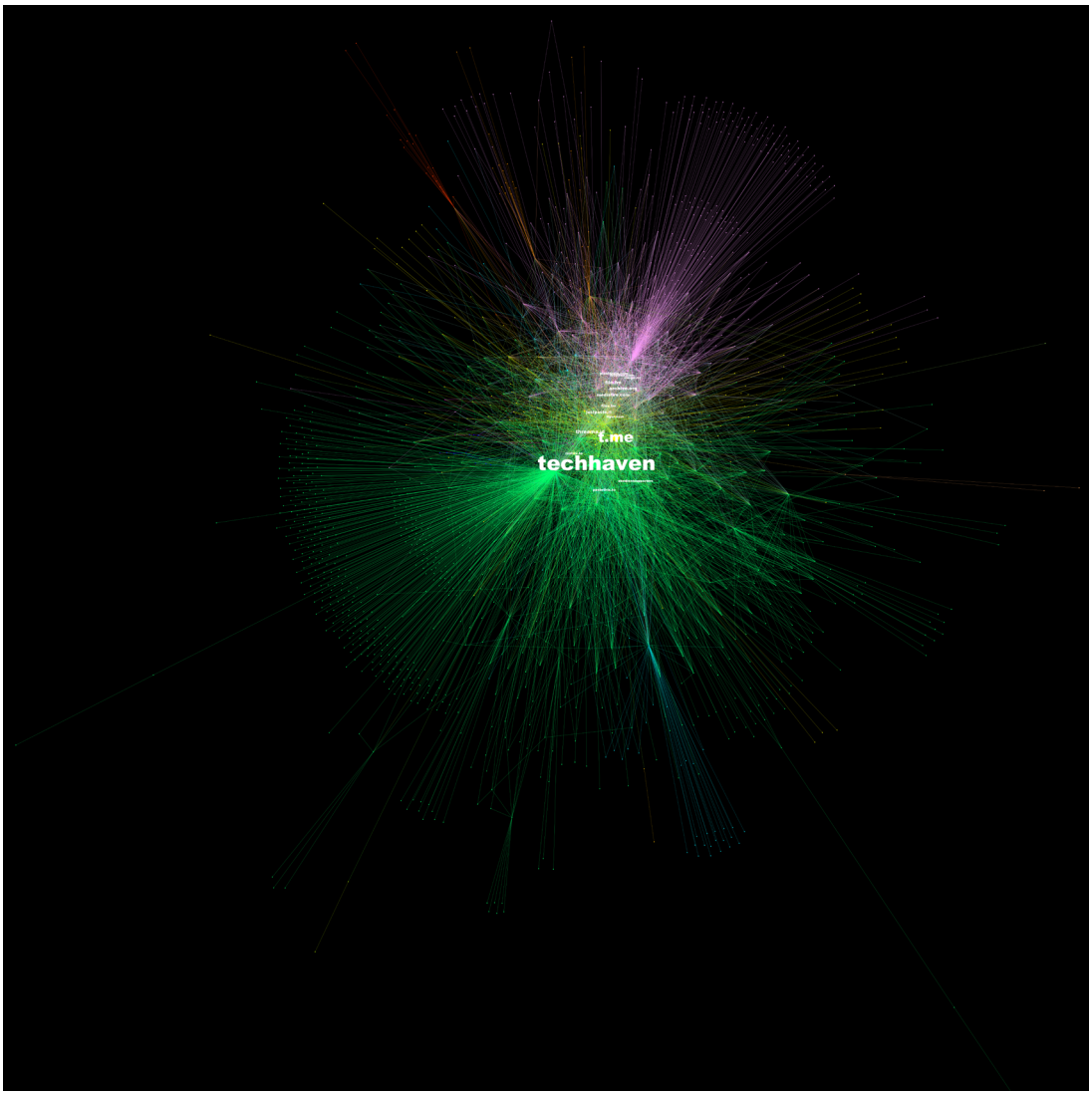
Table 2: PageRank

Domains	PageRank
techhaven	0.033189
t.me	0.016735
matrix.to	0.003609
obidientsupporters	0.003271
archive.org	0.002899
chat.whatsapp.com	0.002825
hoop.page.link	0.002775
obedientsupporters.	0.002746
go.rocket.chat	0.002695
techhaven.xyz	0.002138
file.io	0.002350
pastethis.to	0.002181
threema.id	0.002138
mediafire.com	0.002109
gofile.io	0.001956

These results reflect the structure of the Swarmcast model 2.0. Within it, Rocket.Chat, Telegram, and Matrix are the main pillars, as well as beacons, which supply users with links to direct them to domains where propaganda content is uploaded, namely content stores, such as Obedient Supporters.[79] Moreover, it is noteworthy to underline that, by following the analysis of the PageRank classification, there are several other URLs for archive websites, file-sharing websites, cloud store websites, and messaging platforms.

Moreover, at the node level, centrality metrics investigate the role of each node within a network and attempt to determine whether a node is important in the network. For the present research, degree centrality and betweenness centrality have been considered. Degree centrality is the number of nodes adjacent to a given node and represents the number of direct contacts each node has.[80] Yet, it is important to underscore that a high degree centrality score does not necessarily imply leadership status but rather indicates that the node under consideration has a large number of direct connections with other nodes. By going deeper into analysing degree centrality, it is more relevant to examine the in-degree centrality because the research is intended to identify which URLs are shared most frequently in the rooms of the TechHaven server. To do so, the weighted in-degree was examined, which represents the number of incoming relations of each node (Figure 3).

Figure 3



By looking at the weighted in-degree, the most-shared URLs inside the server TechHaven have been highlighted. Moreover, it can be observed that certain URLs were shared more in rooms belonging to specific modularity classes. For example, the URL techahven was shared more by rooms in modularity class number 2, t.me in modularity class 3 and several archive or cloud store sites in modularity class 1. Consequently, it can be asserted that the URLs of the so-called beacons belong to modularity class 2 and 3 and the content stores to modularity class 1. The URLs (Table 3) with values over 1,500 are techhaven (18,745), t.me (12,798), and threema.id (3,157), followed by several archive websites, file-sharing websites, cloud store websites, and messaging platforms.

Table 3: Weighted in-degree

Domains	Weighted in-degree
techhaven	18,745
t.me	12,798
threema.id	3,157
file.fm	3,022
archive.org	2,867
mediafire.com	2,544
justpaste.it	2,410
mega.nz	1,965
files.fm	1,897
pixeldrain.com	1,855
dropbox.com	1,810
matrix.to	1,778
pastethis.to	1,746
tlgur.com	1,674
obedientsupporters	1,615

Conclusions

The analysis of the SNA of the URLs shared inside the pro-IS server TechHaven has confirmed the centrality of Rocket.Chat and Telegram within the broader IS digital ecosystem. This approach, which maps and quantifies the stream of information within the IS propaganda network, has demonstrated that Rocket.Chat functions as a primary launchpad of the IS propaganda infrastructure online. In addition to providing a safe haven within which users can interact, it serves as a hub directing users to a multitude of pro-IS channels on other platforms, content repositories, and websites that function as aggregators of content, thereby facilitating the group's ability to maintain a resilient and adaptive digital presence.

By examining the URLs shared between December 2018 and October 2024, a clear pattern emerges: the IS online ecosystem has strategically developed and structured the so-called MCP. This model ensures a continuous and persistent presence online by leveraging two key mechanisms. Beacons function as central nodes that provide an always-on stream of information, thus guiding users towards a broader network of pro-IS channels across different platforms. In this case, when considering the stream of propaganda flowing centripetally and centrifugally within IS's digital safe haven, Rocket.Chat (namely the TechHaven server) and Telegram are the main beacons of IS's entire online ecosystem. Alongside content aggregators, they serve as digital waypoints, enabling IS supporters and operatives to navigate an otherwise fragmented online landscape. Content stores serve as digital archives where IS propaganda materials, including videos, magazines, and operational guides, are stored and systematically distributed. The duplication of these repositories ensures that propaganda material remains accessible despite frequent attempts to take down content by law enforcement and tech companies.

The application of SNA techniques in this context enables researchers and analysts to pinpoint the most influential messaging platforms and storage repositories utilised by IS operatives.

The findings highlight how Rocket.Chat and Telegram consistently serve as the main platforms for propaganda content dissemination. Rocket.Chat functions as the primary launchpad, orchestrating the distribution of IS-related material. It plays a pivotal role in directing users to various content repositories and messaging platforms, ensuring that IS propaganda remains accessible even as individual accounts and channels are banned. Alongside Rocket.Chat, Telegram remains the most employed platform for real-time communication and content sharing among IS supporters. Despite ongoing interventions to remove IS content and related users, which between August 2024 and June 2025 increased by around 240 percent,[81] Telegram remains a fundamental communication tool for IS, as underlined by al-Azaim Media Foundation in Voice of Khorasan (issue 43):

> *Even after its recent policy changes, Telegram continues to provide unique benefits that distinguish it from other messaging apps, particularly for users concerned about security and functionality (Voice of Khorasan, Issue 43, p. 53)*

Furthermore, over the almost six years, the domain selection is not uniform across Techhaven, with some rooms displaying the tendency to use different combinations of domains than others. This speaks to the human aspect of communication and fits with the day-by-day monitoring of these platforms, which has shown that IS operatives employ an adaptive approach to content dissemination, frequently rotating URLs and migrating to alternative platforms when faced with takedowns. That users in rooms switch to other domains makes it unlikely they will all make the same choice each time. Furthermore, as some rooms focus on specific geographic or linguistic audiences, their choices of domain may reflect differences in the familiarity with certain domains over others. This indicates that further analysis is warranted into the influence of human habits in propaganda distribution, alongside the presumed impact of content removal strategy as a rationale for changes to the platforms used to share content.

The analysis of the stream of URLs inside TechHaven reiterates the MCP approach of IS, strategically focused on decentralisation and redundancy to continuously increase the propaganda reach and mitigate the effects of counterterrorism measures. Overall, the SNA findings provide insights into how IS continues to exploit several digital platforms for propaganda dissemination. By understanding the structural role of Rocket.Chat and Telegram within this ecosystem, analysts can develop more effective countermeasures focusing on both the shifts in the platforms used to share content over time and a better understanding of the role of human habits in the distribution of terrorist content.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lexical Patterns in (Non-)Violent Extremist Content Online: A Linguistic Comparison of Jihadist and Salafist Discourse

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Abstract: In an age of rapid social and technological change, digital trace analysis is crucial for law enforcement and intelligence agencies. The massive volume, variety, and velocity of digital data pose a significant challenge in identifying relevant and unsuitable content. This study addresses these challenges by employing a lexicon-based classification to distinguish violent jihadist discourses from non-violent Salafist discourses. Using open-source transcriptions of jihadist and Salafist videos originally produced, translated or subtitled in English, the study identifies linguistic themes through the LIWC Grievance dictionary. Key findings indicate that Impostor, Soldier, and Weaponry themes are statistically discriminant for all violent jihadist discourses. Furthermore, group-specific markers emerged, such as Deadline for al-Qaeda, and Suicide, Surveillance, and Violence for the Islamic State. While these tools offer significant potential for large-scale data processing, the study emphasises the necessity of qualitative contextual analysis to mitigate algorithmic biases and false positives.

Keywords: online extremism, linguistic analysis, jihadist discourse, Salafist discourse, LIWC.

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Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving social and technological landscape, the nature of crime and its regulation are undergoing significant transformations. For security agencies, analysing digital traces has become crucial for investigation and intelligence purposes.[1] The digital space is filled with countless traces, making it essential to adapt current intelligence collection and processing methodologies to fully exploit this vast amount of information in the fight against crime. However, processing these massive data, commonly referred to as 'big data,' presents major challenges. [2] The volume, variety, and velocity of digital data limit the effectiveness of conventional analysis methods. At the same time, critical scholarship in terrorism and security studies has emphasised that in order to avoid technocratic or reductionist interpretations of ideological expression, analytical tools designed to process digital traces must be situated within broader political, social, and historical contexts.[3] When law enforcement agencies obtain digital traces from a suspect's activities through disclosure orders or search warrants, it is imperative to quickly identify relevant passages that can serve as evidence and are pertinent to the ongoing investigation. For instance, in a recent investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police that led to terrorism-related charges, investigators had to meticulously examine 8,277 pages of content extracted from the Facebook accounts of two accused individuals to detect suspicious activities and conversations.[4] Given the rapid pace at which new technologies are evolving and the increasing use of social media in daily life, the cost of processing such investigative files, in terms of time, resources, and efficiency, is only set to rise in the coming years.

One of the key challenges in this context is distinguishing relevant information from the massive quantities of data, particularly when it involves identifying specific discourses, such as jihadist or Salafist narratives. Importantly, the presence of particular linguistic features, religious references, or ideological themes should not be interpreted as direct evidence of violent intent or criminal behaviour. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that the relationship between radical beliefs, ideological expression, and engagement in violence is complex, contingent, and non-linear.[5] Accordingly, linguistic patterns may at most serve as indicators warranting further contextual interpretation, rather than as predictive markers of violent action. Addressing this challenge is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of investigations in the digital age, while avoiding reductionist or essentialist interpretations of religious or political expression.

In this study, to facilitate the identification of relevant content in a massive amount of textual data, we will employ a lexicon-based classification approach (linguistic/lexicon-based detection) that has been relatively underused so far to identify violent extremist content[6] but which has already shown very promising results in several related research areas such as spam detection and Internet harassment prevention.[7] Here, the objective is not to predict or infer future violent behaviour, but to support exploratory analysis and comparative pattern recognition within large datasets.

Considering the current interest in detecting and limiting hateful and violent content in the digital context, the development of technological tools is essential. Research and development in this regard have largely focused on discourses associated with far-right and jihadist movements.[8] By specifically focusing on violent jihadist discourses proposed by al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), this study aims to identify themes whose presence is significantly more prominent in these types of discourses. This analytical focus does not presuppose a homogeneous understanding of Islamist movements, nor does it imply that ideological discourse alone constitutes evidence of criminality. Unlike approaches relying on generic comparison lexicons such as randomly collected tweets[9] or texts on various subjects from platforms like Wikipedia,[10] our approach specifically targets the discursive themes that distinguish violent

jihadist discourse from Salafist discourse that does not advocate violence. The aim is to improve analytical specificity while minimising false positives arising from religious or ideological themes that may be shared across different forms of non-violent expression. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: Which linguistic themes distinguish online violent jihadist discourse from Salafist discourse that does not advocate violence?

This comparative approach seeks to allow more precise identification of Salafi-jihadist discourse and simultaneously minimise the number of false positives resulting from themes that may be addressed in all these discourses. For example, De Smedt and colleagues[11] argue that their approach can identify jihadist content with an accuracy of over 80 percent. However, this validation is based on detection tests in an "out-of-domain" corpus rather than among other discourses that may be considered similar, such as Salafist discourses.[12] To address this gap, we propose comparing the presence of specific themes in a corpus of AQ and IS videos with that in a sample of Salafist sermon videos on YouTube.

The Online Dissemination of Salafist and Jihadist Discourses

Typically, ideological discourses instrumentalised in constructing collective identity relate to group membership, relationships (notably concerning opponents, collaborators, and influential entities), activities, objectives, resources, and the normative system adopted by the group (including what is considered right/wrong).[13] Emphasis is placed on the successes and minimisation of the end group's failures, as well as the accentuation of the limits and weaknesses of the out-group. This approach constructs a positive representation of the collective identity while promoting a negative representation of the other.[14] Van Dijk observed this in the articulation of American political discourses, highlighting specific discourse structures, linguistic expressions, semantics, lexicon, and syntax that serve to construct collective identity and polarise a "we" and an "other". Discourse thus constitutes a valuable analytical entry point for examining how groups differentiate themselves from both closely related and more distant communities.[15] Before engaging more directly with the discourses examined in this study, it is necessary to clarify the analytical use of the terms *jihadist* and *Salafist*, both of which are contested within academic literature[16] and frequently shaped by political and security-oriented framings. Neither term refers to a homogeneous or fixed category, and both have been criticised for their potential to obscure internal diversity and to conflate religious expression with political violence.[17]

With regard to jihadism, the term "jihadist" is widely used in both scholarly and policy-oriented literature to describe actors and movements that explicitly legitimise violence through particular interpretations of jihad.[18] At the same time, numerous scholars have emphasised that jihad, as a religious concept, encompasses a wide range of meanings that cannot be reduced to armed violence.[19] In this study, the term "jihadist" is therefore used in a narrow, operational sense to refer specifically to discourses produced by organisations such as AQ and IS that explicitly promote or legitimise violence as a means of political action, rather than as a descriptor of Islamic belief or practice more broadly. Similarly, Salafism should not be understood as a singular movement, but as a heterogeneous constellation of religious orientations encompassing quietist, political, and jihadist tendencies.[20] Numerous studies have shown that non-violent Salafist currents often reject political violence while sharing theological references with jihadist groups. This internal diversity underscores the importance of avoiding securitised categorisations that conflate Salafist preaching with advocacy of violence.[21] For instance, Beutel and his colleagues argue that violent and non-violent Salafist groups often share similar religious references and socio-political objectives, differing primarily in the means through which these objectives are pursued: "despite the internal differences, violent and non-violent Salafis share many similarities. In

general, they agree on most points of religious belief and methodology as well as socio-political end goals […]. In terms of socio-political objectives, the differences between violent and non-violent Salafis lay not with the goals but the means to achieve them."[22] This internal diversity underscores the importance of avoiding securitised categorisations that conflate non-violent Salafist preaching with advocacy of violence.

Studies focusing on AQ and IS discourses have identified a range of recurring themes, including calls to arms, religious justification of violence, representations of enemies, territorial claims, and eschatological narratives.[23] El-Nashar and Nayef, for example, focused on the discourses of IS group and reveal that these discourses use metaphors to minimise the brutality of their members.[24] They also glorify group members by presenting them as "representatives of Islam," invoking their sanctity and immunity from criticism by various opponents identified as infidels, hypocrites, polytheists, and unbelievers.

Various themes or categories of violent jihadist discourses have been studied for both AQ and IS. For AQ, the themes include the call to arms, anti-Western narratives, religious aspects, and local concerns like regimes and conflicts in specific areas.[25] AQ discourses also promote violence.[26] For IS, recurrent themes include the call to arms, the establishment of a Caliphate, enemies, and religion.[27] Other categories have been observed, such as justice, redemption, hijra, jihad, or eschatological narratives.[28] Narrative similarities are observed between the two organisations, notably in territorial discourses.[29] Similarly, AQ tries to influence Western policies toward Muslims through large-scale terrorist attacks, while IS favours establishing a Caliphate and lone-wolf attacks.[30] While generalisations can be made, the themes addressed in these organisations' discourses vary depending on the context and regional concerns of their sub-groups.[31]

In the digital environment, Salafist discourses are disseminated through various platforms, among which YouTube has been particularly prominent due to its accessibility and global reach.[32] YouTube's structure allows creating, sharing, viewing, and downloading content of all kinds, making it a major component of global digital culture. The platform's interactivity fosters the development of a virtual community. According to a Pew Research Center report in 2023, YouTube ranks among the most widely used platforms for information among both adults and adolescents.[33] The platform offers an opportunity to interact with a community of individuals worldwide. This explains why YouTube has been chosen by many Islamic preachers as a means of spreading their message,[34] and why they are followed by a large number of subscribers.[35] Zakir Naik, Nouman Ali Khan, or Mufti Menk are examples of public figures that have attracted substantial followings on the platform.[36] It should be noted, however, that the classification of such figures as "Salafist" is often contested and may reflect external labelling rather than self-identification or doctrinal coherence.[37] Accordingly, the present study does not treat such labels as fixed identity markers, but as analytical categories used for comparative purposes within a clearly delimited empirical corpus, where Salafist-inspired content is part of a broader and internally diverse ecosystem on YouTube.[38] At the same time, TikTok has also been used strategically by jihadist organisations, such as AQ and IS, to disseminate propaganda, issue threats, and recruit supporters.[39] Considering the constant increase in the proportion of videos broadcast online and specifically on YouTube,[40] using this platform is a strategic means for Da'wah, the call to Islam.[41] This has helped overcome the hostility faced by Islam in traditional media or society at large and connect the Arab world to the diaspora.[42] However, although YouTube can foster positive information exchange and dissemination among users, the platform can also convey problematic content, such as videos promoting religious intolerance toward certain religious minorities.[43] YouTube was quickly instrumentalised by terrorist organisations like AQ and IS, who considered the platform an effective means of disseminating

propaganda, threats, and recruiting adherents.[44] From Hollywood-style content to guided tours of conquered territories, the content published on YouTube by jihadist organisations was also a way to be visible and communicate with international media.[45] This dual use of mainstream platforms illustrates the analytical difficulty of distinguishing between ideologically adjacent yet normatively distinct forms of religious discourse.

Finally, in response to the challenges posed by the scale of digital data, a range of analytical technologies have been developed to support the detection and analysis of content associated with violent extremism.[46] To do this, the approaches rely on various forensic processing technologies for digital traces, such as text mining, network analysis, object detection, facial recognition, and geolocation.[47] In the specific case of text mining, numerous linguistic studies have shown that efficiently identifying radical digital content is crucial for both preventing and repressing violent extremism.[48] While such methods offer valuable tools for organising and exploring large corpora, notably through word scores, sentiment analysis, and topic modelling, they must be applied with caution to avoid deterministic or decontextualised interpretations. This study contributes to this literature by proposing a comparative, lexicon-based approach that is explicitly framed as exploratory and interpretive rather than predictive.

Lexicon-Based Detection of Violent Extremist Content

In this research, we employ lexicon-based detection, which has been relatively underutilised so far for identifying violent extremist content. Rather than treating this approach as a predictive or diagnostic instrument, we use it as an exploratory analytical tool to examine whether specific thematic patterns are differentially distributed across corpora. This method facilitates the detection of specific content in massive amount of textual data. More precisely, it enables the systematic identification of predefined thematic markers within large textual datasets to raise questions regarding context, interpretation and relationships, without presuming that the presence of such markers indicates endorsement of violence. [49]

Lexicon-based detection is a natural language processing method that uses pre-established dictionaries or lexicons. These lexicons contain lists of words associated with specific information, such as their meaning, polarity (positive, negative, or neutral), or other linguistic characteristics. Importantly, the presence of a lexical item does not automatically determine its contextual meaning, as many terms may carry multiple interpretations depending on theological, political, or rhetorical usage.[50] Several studies have already attempted to apply this method to violent jihadist discourse.

For example, based on a sample of female supporters of IS on Twitter, Ghajar-Khosravi and his colleagues observed that the most prevalent linguistic themes included terms like *God*, *Islam*, *ISIS*, *violence*, *punishment*, *the West*, *non-believers*, *jihad*, and names of ISIS' enemies such as *Iran* or *Jordan*.[51] Similarly, Rowe and Saif detected signs of pro-IS behaviour among 727 users from a sample of 154,000 European Twitter users, both lexically and socially. The lexicon used in their study was based on SentiWordNet, and their sample included 13,000 profiles.[52] Concretely, these signals included the use of specific theological and administrative terms, such as *khilafah* (caliphate) or *wilayat* (province), a significant increase in emotional subjectivity detected via SentiWordNet, and a shift in social networking characterised by following known radical influencers while disconnecting from mainstream news outlets. They also observed that the terms *Allah* and *Islam* were the most recurrent, which aligns with the results of Bermingham and his colleagues in their analysis of YouTube video content.[53] However, the authors noted that the "lexicon used for the analysis is not specific to the studied theme and is therefore subject to issues of polysemy and synonymy".[54] This limitation is central in lexicon-based approaches, as

words associated with religion, identity, or conflict may appear in both violent and non-violent contexts. Since then, several other lexicons have been developed, and different studies have utilised them to analyse word usage with the help of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software.

LIWC is a tool that automates the process of extracting the psychological meaning of a text. More precisely, it estimates the relative frequency of words associated with predefined psychological or linguistic categories. It is designed to analyse textual documents based on words and typography. This involves comparing the words in a questioned document to a reference dictionary, categorising these words into predefined categories, and generating a proportional representation of each category identified in that document.[55] Indeed, LIWC allows for a more detailed observation of the motivations and emotions present in texts. However, it should be noted that such inferences remain probabilistic and aggregate in nature, rather than direct measurements of individual psychological states. This programme includes 80 categories, which cover language (i.e., articles, personal pronouns, and verbs) and psychological dimensions (e.g., affect, negative and positive emotions, social processes, and cognitive mechanisms).[56] This tool also covers *social* words that refer to *family*, *friends*, and *humans*, and includes labels for *inclusive* and *exclusive* formulations, indicating intergroup communication.[57] It can also be used on a variable amount of text (manifestos, journals, transcripts, or social media content).

Several studies have conducted analyses of corpora of extremist or hateful texts using LIWC. Pennebaker and Chung analysed the linguistic evolution of AQ leaders' speeches, which allowed them to identify a tonal shift, more focused on emotion and anger, following the US invasion of Iraq.[58] Vergani and Zuev applied LIWC to eleven issues of the Dabiq magazine. They observed that terms related to three themes were present in each analysed issue: achievement, affiliation, and power.[59] Other themes like anxiety and anger, and concerns related to death were also present but appeared more fluctuating from one issue to another, while the presence of emotional tone and rhetoric related to women increased in more recent issues. Another study on manifestos of ten lone wolf actors observed a recurrence in the use of third-person plural pronouns and a strong presence of six-letter or longer words.[60] In fact, it is important to note that such linguistic features do not in themselves establish causal pathways to violence, but rather highlight recurring discursive structures within specific textual genres.[61] Torregrosa and his colleagues attempted to identify language differences between pro-IS users and a random sample of users on Twitter.[62] They found that pro-IS users employed more terms related to death, anger, or a more negative tone than other users. In the same perspective, Ul Rehman and his colleagues suggested that the use of words from the violence lexicon, as well as insults, allows for the differentiation of "radical" users from random users.[63] However, they suggested that anti-IS groups use the same linguistic terms, necessitating further studies to better differentiate them.[64] This overlap further illustrates the difficulty of equating lexical presence with ideological endorsement, as oppositional and critical discourses may mobilise similar vocabulary.

LIWC has also been used to compare the discourses of different jihadist groups. Vergani and Bliuc compared the language of AQ's Inspire magazine with that of IS's Dabiq magazine.[65] They found that the terms used by IS were more authoritative and religious. Similarly, Baele highlighted that anger was one of the most present emotions in the lexicon used in lone wolves' manifestos compared to non-violent activists' statements.[66] Ebner and her colleagues compared fifteen manifestos of various ideologies (e.g., jihadist, anti-Semitic, and misogynist) and varying degrees of violence (e.g., self-sacrificial, moderate, and anti-racist).[67] They found that the lexicon related to group identity affiliation, the characterisation of a threat from others, and an inevitable war for survival was predominantly present in self-sacrificial and violent

texts. Finally, Mehran et al. compared text corpora from eight far-right websites and four online magazines of violent jihadist groups. The authors found that violent jihadist content relies more heavily on emotional and religious lexicons than far-right extremist material. Furthermore, they found that jihadist narratives are more focused on subjective perspectives and identity-driven rhetoric.[68]

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that lexicon-based tools can identify statistically observable differences across corpora. However, they also underscore the methodological need for contextual interpretation and caution against reducing complex ideological phenomena to isolated word frequencies. In the present study, lexicon-based detection is therefore employed as a comparative and heuristic method, designed to identify patterns of thematic prevalence rather than to attribute intent, predict behaviour, or establish causal relationships between discourse and violence.

Methods

This study draws upon several sources of open-source data, focusing on the comparison between a corpus of jihadist speeches and a reference corpus of Salafist speeches that are ideologically similar but do not incite violence. The objective of this comparative design is not to equate Salafism with jihadism, but rather to examine whether discursive differences can be observed between actors who explicitly endorse violence and actors who operate within non-violent religious preaching contexts. The jihadist corpus comprises 205 transcriptions of videos produced by the most explicitly violent organisations within the jihadist movement: AQ and IS. These two organisations were selected because of their well-documented and publicly articulated endorsement of armed struggle against civilian and military targets, which provides a clear benchmark for "violent" discourse within contemporary jihadism. This corpus will be compared to a reference corpus consisting of 130 video transcriptions shared on the YouTube channels of influential non-jihadist Salafist figures (primarily from quietist and reformist Salafist currents), such as Zakir Naik and Bilal Philips. These figures were selected due to their significant online visibility, theological proximity to certain Salafi doctrinal elements, and absence of direct operational involvement in violent activities during the period studied.

Jihadist Dataset (Corpus of Interest)

The jihadist corpus consists of transcriptions of videos originally produced, translated or subtitled in English by AQ and IS. It contains 121 AQ videos and 84 IS videos, totalling 205 videos.[69] These videos include propaganda sermons, interviews, and other staged formats such as tributes to deceased jihadists, hostage-taking, and combat training. Various media production houses associated with AQ, like al-Malahem Media and al-Basirah Foundation for Media Production, and with IS, like al-Hayat Media Center and al-Furqan Media, produced these videos. AQ videos average 29 minutes and 45 seconds, compared to 9 minutes and 49 seconds for IS videos, with an overall average duration of 21 minutes and 35 seconds. The longest AQ video is 1 hour and 37 minutes, while the shortest is 1 minute and 14 seconds. The longest IS video is 1 hour and 2 minutes, and the shortest is 53 seconds. These videos were disseminated between January 7, 2006, and November 26, 2016. This temporal frame corresponds to the peak media activity of both organisations; however, it does not fully overlap with the timeframe of the reference corpus, which is acknowledged as a limitation later.

Salafist Dataset (Reference Corpus)

Our comparison sample starts with 40 videos from five media-preaching YouTube personalities associated to varying degrees with these Salafist ideological branches: Zakir Naik (5), Mufti Menk (14), Bilal Philips (8), Yasir Qadhi (12), and Omar Suleiman (1).[70] In this context, it is

crucial to stress that Salafism constitutes a broad and internally diverse religious movement encompassing quietist, reformist, and activist currents, the majority of which do not advocate violence. [71]

Building upon this initial selection, this corpus also includes additional videos recommended by the YouTube algorithm, featured on channels such as Digital Mimbar, Yaqeen Institute, Habibiflo Dawah Produktion, and others, through a snowball effect. While this snowball sampling strategy increases ecological validity by approximating user exposure pathways, it may introduce algorithmic bias, as recommendation systems prioritise engagement rather than representativeness.

In total, a sizable reference corpus of 130 preaching videos has been compiled, with an average duration of 13 minutes and 18 seconds. The longest video is 1 hour and 57 minutes, and the shortest is 40 seconds. The videos span from 7 December 2006 to 28 August 2023.

Individual Profiles

The following profiles are presented for contextual purposes only and should not be interpreted as indicators of direct involvement in violent activity unless explicitly documented by legal authorities.

Bilal Philips: Originally from Jamaica, Bilal Philips studied Islam in Saudi Arabia and is now a lecturer.[72] He founded the Islamic Online University in 2007 to offer free lessons on Islam. His YouTube channel has over 150K subscribers, featuring various topics related to Islamic religion.

Yasir Qadhi: From Pakistan, Yasir Qadhi spent part of his life in Texas, where he studied chemical engineering before shifting to religious studies at the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, eventually earning a PhD in religious studies from Yale University.[73] Associated with the Salafist movement,[74] Yasir Qadhi's YouTube channel has over 600K subscribers, featuring videos on Islam.

Mufti Menk: From Zimbabwe, Ismail ibn Musa Menk studied Sharia and Islamic jurisprudence in Saudi Arabia and is now an Islamic theologian.[75] He has millions of followers across social media platforms (4.59 million on YouTube).[76]

Zakir Naik: From India, Zakir Abdul Karim Naik studied medicine before redirecting to Islamic and religious studies.[77] He founded the Islamic Research Foundation to educate the public about Islam. His YouTube channel has over 3 million subscribers.[78]

Omar Suleiman: A theologian, Omar Suleiman founded the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. He is not opposed to the Salafist movement but leans towards a more modernist approach, incorporating progressive ideas like support for the BLM movement.

LIWC Software

LIWC uses various lexicons for text corpus analysis, aligning with specific themes. For this study, we utilise the Grievance dictionary developed by Van Der Vegt and colleagues.[79] The selection of this dictionary reflects the study's focus on grievance-related narratives rather than an attempt to measure extremism per se. Its categories are constructed based on psycholinguistic theory: each category groups words that are theoretically associated with a particular type of concern, emotion, or social-cognitive construct (e.g., Soldier for combat-related references, Impostor for deception and betrayal, Weaponry for arms and violence). For transparency, key terms from

these categories include: Soldier (war, fight, Afghanistan, Pakistan), Impostor (lie, falsehood, sham), and Weaponry (arms, bombs, tanks). Terms can appear in multiple categories.[80]

LIWC operates on the notion that everyday language reflects our emotions and cognitive processes.[81] It evaluates word frequency and specific categories in a given text, identified by psychological research as indicators of particular emotions or cognitive processes. A higher frequency of certain words and categories indicates increased salience of the associated emotion or process. This should be interpreted as thematic prominence within discourse rather than as evidence of motivational or behavioural causation. LIWC also calculates indices based on the intensive or limited use of personal pronouns, words with four or more syllables, specific adjectives, and nouns to assess the emotional tone and underlying cognitive dynamics of a text.

After obtaining word scores for the 22 themes from the texts' LIWC analysis, classical statistical hypothesis tests were conducted using the RStudio platform (RStudio 2023.06.1+524). The objective was to compare non-violent Salafist texts with AQ and IS jihadist group texts, starting with a MANOVA test using the Stats library in RStudio. This test was performed to evaluate differences between text corpora from the studied groups, conducted three times to compare non-violent Salafist texts with AQ and IS texts, as well as combined AQ and IS texts. To identify variables significantly influencing these comparisons, an independent *t*-test was conducted across all themes for the three comparisons. The null hypothesis for these tests is the absence of statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences between the two analysed groups.

It should also be noted that this study relies on written transcriptions of video materials, and a portion of the jihadist corpus consists of content that was originally produced, translated or subtitled in English by AQ or IS. Even if they were originals, both transcription and translation constitute interpretive processes that may affect lexical choice, emphasis, and semantic nuance. Certain religious, political, or culturally embedded terms may carry layered meanings that are not fully captured in English renderings. As a result, the analysis reflects patterns present in the English-language versions of these materials rather than the full linguistic complexity of the original discourse. These limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting lexicon-based findings.

Results

The statistical analysis of the Grievance Dictionary categories allowed us to identify the most discriminating elements between the corpus of interest, subdividing the speeches of AQ and IS, and the comparison corpus. Table 1 presents the obtained results, and the statistically significant discriminating categories are described in the following paragraphs.

Table 1: Results of the Welch two-sample t-tests. Prevalence of each category relative to the comparison corpus.

	AQ corpora (t)	IS corpora (t)	AQ+IS corpora (t)
Category			
Deadline	**-2.860****	-1.568	**-2.635****
Desperation	4.237***	1.742	3.330**
Fixation	5.433***	3.213**	4.755***
Frustration	1.675	2.529*	2.215*
God	0.758	3.564***	2.092*
Grievance	0.765	3.221**	2.022*
Hate	2.259*	0.435	1.540
Help	2.191*	2.488*	2.621**
Honour	-0.004	0.663	0.355
Impostor	**-3.021****	**-3.283****	**-4.103*****
Jealousy	1.216	0.987	1.230
Loneliness	1.693	1.107	1.620
Murder	1.701	-0.124	0.902
Paranoia	-1.473	-0.668	-1.285
Planning	3.918***	2.382*	3.745***
Relationship	-0.100	1.225	0.586
Soldier	**-5.105*****	**-2.580***	**-4.520*****
Suicide	-1.499	**-2.329***	**-2.379***
Surveillance	2.257*	**-4.979*****	**-2.687****
Threat	-0.229	-0.701	-0.493
Violence	-1.734	**-2.458***	**-2.384***
Weaponry	**-2.931****	**-4.300*****	**-4.206*****

***p < 0,001; **p < 0,01; *p < 0,05.

The statistically significant discriminating categories are as follows: Deadline, Impostor, Soldier, and Weaponry for the AQ corpus; Impostor, Soldier, Suicide, Surveillance, Weaponry, and Violence for the IS corpus; and for the combined jihadist corpus: Deadline, Impostor, Soldier, Suicide, Surveillance, Weaponry, and Violence. These results reveal a shared thematic core, specifically Impostor, Soldier, and Weaponry, which distinguishes violent jihadist discourse from the comparison corpus but does not differentiate between AQ and IS. In contrast, group-specific markers emerge, where the AQ corpus is uniquely characterised by the Deadline category, while the IS corpus is distinguished by Suicide, Surveillance, and Violence. By examining the contexts in which the lexical occurrences appear, we can better understand these distinctions and determine their analytical validity.

Al-Qaeda Corpus

In the Impostor category (*n* = 554), the most frequent words are crime (*n* = 82), falsehood (*n* = 67), and lie (*n* = 57). The terms crime and falsehood often refer to actions by the United States, which are of particular interest to AQ. For example:

> *The pages of history are stained by American crimes and are witnesses against her in Vietnam, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. And the events of Afghanistan and Iraq are not far from us. [AM2012122401]*

This rhetoric of Western, especially American, oppression is common in AQ's discourse.[82] This is further confirmed by statements suggesting Islam is effectively at war with Americans:

> *And the whole world has discovered the extent of American falsehood and desperation and the extent of its barbarity in waging war on Islam and Muslims.[AS2006013001]*

While terms like falsehood are central to this anti-Western rhetoric, other lexical choices such as lie function differently, often appearing outside the context of geopolitical imposture. To better understand how AQ constructs its narrative of American responsibility, it is necessary to examine the specific geographical and military terms found in the Soldier category.

In the Soldier category (*n* = 5738), the most frequent terms are Afghanistan (*n* = 763), war (*n* = 585), and Pakistan (*n* = 507). These words usually refer to combat zones and are often associated with American responsibility. For instance:

> *The goal of the American administration was to completely isolate democracy; making Afghanistan and places like Iraq regions out of combat zones. [AM2014032101]*

> *America and its allies also use missiles containing depleted uranium. 320 tons of it were fired at Iraq in the first Gulf war. God alone knows how much of it was used in Afghanistan and the second Gulf war. [AS2009040601]*

> *Obama also states that he will increase the size of American forces in Afghanistan, in order to spill more innocent blood there and in Pakistan. [AS2009040601]*

This category is relevant, as literature on the subject confirms the frequent mention of countries like Afghanistan or Pakistan in AQ's discourse, which envisions a caliphate on territories they control temporarily and where conflicts occur.[83] In our corpus, American troops' presence is a direct target when referring to these countries, explaining the frequent use of war, often in historical conflict contexts.

For the Weaponry category (*n* = 5128), the most frequent terms are Iraq (*n* = 803), American (*n* = 793), and war (*n* = 585). These terms denote combat zones and the fight against the enemy. Examples include:

> *Bush raved in his latest speech, and among his latest ravings was that he will be sending 20,000 of his troops to Iraq. [AS2007012401]*

> *The American people pay the taxes that pay for the planes which bomb us in Afghanistan, the tanks that demolish our houses over our heads in Palestine, the armies which occupy us on the Arabian Peninsula, and the navies that surround our children in Iraq, taxes that go to Israel so that it can continue to attack us and confiscate more of our land. [AS2006010701]*

The planes, bombs, and tanks mentioned correspond to the military arsenal used by the United States in these countries. These numerous references to Americans reflect AQ's major concern about the enemy's presence on Muslim territories.[84] This rhetoric related to the enemy's power has intensified at the expense of ideological discourse, particularly during Al-Zawahiri's rise to power.[85]

Lastly, Deadline (*n* = 4119) is the category that stands out as unique to AQ in our corpus. The most frequent terms in this category are must (*n* = 612), time (*n* = 506), and make (*n* = 414). Must and time are often linked to temporality or history:

> *One week to go. Time is flying. It's early in the morning. It's the first time we see the village up close. Except for a selected few, no one knows about this mission. The plans must be conducted in total secrecy. [MB2015111401]*

The term make is very vague and can be used in a wide variety of situations. Although relevant extracts with this term can be found, they are specific occurrences that do not indicate a general trend and do not clearly explain how its presence distinguishes AQ speeches.

Islamic State Corpus

In the Impostor category (*n* = 150), the most frequent words are sham (*n* = 90), falsehood (*n* = 14), and deceit (*n* = 8). The word sham refers to the historical territory of Greater Syria, often invoked in IS writings. This term supports the idea of building a caliphate, a regular theme in IS speeches,[86] as seen in our corpus:

> *Yes, I had to face hardships and difficulties, I even slept on the ground in one of the farms, and I forgot all those inconveniences as soon as I reached the land of khilafah. Before I reached Sham, some people told me to join some specific groups, they said, the nations of kufr have gathered against the Islamic State. [WH2015060301]*

The words falsehood and deceit refer more to the history and actions of their enemies. Similar to AQ, IS projects a rhetoric of fighting against evil, where American oppression and injustice are highlighted.[87] In this context, falsehood and deceit emphasise lying and treachery:

> *They conducted a number of fake battles in the desert and claimed they had taken control of Islamic State locations, but the falsehood of their claims quickly became apparent. [WR2015110501]*

> *The flames in Iraq, meanwhile, continued their crawl, growing stronger, leaving the Americans in bewilderment. Pondering what strategy to adopt in fighting IS. The reply from the White House was deceitful, as Obama was forced to respond to the rapid rise of the Islamic State. [AH2014091901]*

In the Soldier category (*n* = 1108), the most frequent terms are war (*n* = 153), fight (*n* = 141), and kill (*n* = 65). These terms often refer to battles with the enemy (mainly the United States), military equipment, and strikes against Muslim populations. This topic is central to IS's war-themed speeches,[88] as shown in our corpus:

> *The Islamic State knew without doubt that establishing the religion and ruling by the law of the Lord of creation is the loftiest goal from the goals of jihad. Allah (ta'ala) said: 'Fight them until there is no [more] fitnah and [until] the religion is completely for Allah.' [AF2015061701]*

> *Its land today serves as a launch pad and a pen for the Crusader coalition's bombers, which kill Muslims and destroy homes on top of their inhabitants in the land of the Khilafah. [WR2015110501]*

IS also frames battles with the West as an extension of the historical conflict between crusaders and Muslims,[89] confirmed in our corpus with historical terms:

> *Verily the enemies of the creed and religion of truth; The Spiteful Crusaders, The Rafidah (deviant Shi'a sect), the apostates, remain tarrying with the true followers of true monotheism. And they wage war in all places upon all those who stand under the banner of The Mujahideen.*

> *So therefore, don't be astonished when they prepare for their crusader plot with the use of the latest technology available and all types of weapons. And the head of this technology is The Air Force, which is considered to be the most destructive in weaponry. [AF2007091301]*

The term Mujahideen, meaning fighter for the faith, corresponds to the image of the soldier used by jihadist terrorist organisations to define their members.[90] However, this term is relevant but not included in the grievance dictionary.

Then, Weaponry category (*n* = 1096) includes the terms Iraq (*n* = 167), war (*n* = 153), and fight (*n* = 141). As in the previous category, war and fight refer to battles and American strikes, while Iraq denotes the territories where IS has established itself:

> *No one will ever stand between the mujahideen and their people in Iraq after this day, with Allah's permission. The Islamic State has been established by the jihad of the pious. [AF2014060101]*

Like AQ, IS frequently mentions the territorial dimension of establishing a caliphate in its speeches.[91] Iraq was one of the territories where IS was most entrenched, specifically between 2014 and 2019. However, mentions of weaponry or weapons used by IS are more limited and may be more prevalent in Arabic texts rather than English ones.[92]

The Suicide category (*n* = 738) includes the terms life (*n* = 116), blood (*n* = 108), and take (*n* = 77). Life and blood mainly refer to the notion of sacrifice for Allah and the concept of jihad. IS speeches promote the idea of total Sharia and participation in jihad,[93] as evidenced in our results:

> *Oh you who have believed, answer the call of Allah and his Messenger when he calls you to what gives you life. (8:24) Imam al-Qurtubi says that what gives you life is jihad, and know by Allah that this is the land of jihad and the land of life. [AH2014061901]*

> *The aims which the muwahhidin desire to attain are defiant, but it becomes a practical reality so that the people of Islam may enjoy the Shari'ah of Allah and its rulings, and a trust which its carriers become convinced that there is no way to enforce except by the flow of blood and the sacrifice of souls. This was an agreement from a long time. And the heat of the battle becomes more severe and fiery. [AF2015061701*]

The term take does not show significant trends in the associated passages, as it can be used in various situations.

In the Surveillance category (*n* = 1150), the most frequent words are state (*n* = 578), see (*n* = 120), and look (*n* = 55). The term state intrinsically refers to IS, influencing its high frequency:

> *The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. The land of the living. The land of jihad. For it is jihad that gives life. And establishes the command of Allah. [AI2014010601]*

> *Now we see security fully. We say it truthfully, by Allah, we are truthful about this. We see complete safety. We are thankful for this. We go and come freely. [AF2015041901]*

This representation is not representative of all occurrences of this term, given its generality and the various situations it can describe. However, the term look often relates to awareness of lies and weaknesses some Muslims show towards the religion, which does not fully align with the surveillance category:

> *Look at their lie while they are in Ramadan! And look at their weakness, cowardice, and feebleness! How they lie! How they left their religion and abandoned their creed! In fear of the fangs of the lions of the Islamic State and in fear of death! So look at how they left their religion and creed! Yes, we kill you because you seek help from other than Allah! [WS2015071101]*

Lastly, the Violence category (n = 1066) includes the primary terms war (n = 153), fight (n = 141), and blood (n = 108). These terms have already been analysed, with war and fight appearing in the Soldier and Weaponry categories and blood in the Suicide category. Kaati and his colleagues suggest that the theme of violence is a risk indicator for individuals preparing to commit violent acts.[94]

Combined Jihadist Corpus

The combined analysis of AQ and IS jihadist speeches reveals the same categories as the previous comparative analyses. Therefore, combining the AQ and IS corpora helps understand the commonalities and differences in jihadist speeches. The shared categories show a common rhetoric, while distinct categories reveal group-specific focuses. For example, the Violence category, distinctive in the combined corpus analysis, is only discriminative for IS speeches. IS speeches have often been categorised as promoting a strategy of triumphalist violence, far surpassing the violent nature of AQ speeches.[95] This analysis underscores the importance of considering both similarities and differences for a nuanced understanding of violent jihadist discourse.

Discussion & conclusion

This study highlights that the categories Impostor, Soldier, and Weaponry from the LIWC's Grievance Dictionary are the most significant in differentiating between violent jihadist discourse and non-violent Salafist discourse. This suggests that while both share a common theological vocabulary, jihadist actors uniquely mobilise these specific lexical clusters to transition from religious preaching to the advocacy of armed conflict. While these markers establish a clear boundary between violent and non-violent discourse, they also manifest differently within the jihadist movement itself. AQ's distinctiveness is further characterised by the category *Deadline*, whereas IS emphasises *Suicide*, *Surveillance*, and *Violence*. However, a deeper qualitative analysis of the linguistic markers associated with these categories suggests that their discriminative power is not always as robust as statistical results might initially suggest, underscoring the need for context-aware interpretation.[96] In practice, this means distinguishing between words that function as thematic indicators and those that appear as mere linguistic noise, such as the term "state" inflating the Surveillance category regardless of its actual usage.

For AQ, the relevance of Impostor, Soldier, and Weaponry is well-supported, as these categories frequently align with references to enemies, primarily the United States, and conflict zones such as Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, which are portrayed as key battlegrounds for the establishment of the Caliphate.[97] The organisation's discourse is replete with discussions of geopolitical struggles,[98] reinforcing its framing of jihad as a necessary response to perceived Western aggression.[99] Nonetheless, the category Deadline appears less relevant upon closer examination, as terms such as *must*, *time*, or *make* are highly context-dependent and do not necessarily indicate a structured timeline for action. Similarly, within the Impostor category, words like *lie* often co-occur with terms such as *believe* or *allies*, making interpretation more ambiguous. Despite these nuances, the consistent presence of military and conflict-related terms in AQ's material remains a primary differentiator from non-violent Salafist texts, which typically prioritise internal community ethics over geopolitical mobilisation.

In the IS corpus, Impostor, Soldier, and Weaponry also play a central role. Unlike non-violent Salafist discourse, which focuses on individual piety, IS utilises these categories to construct a mandatory collective obligation for territorial defence and expansion. Consistent with existing literature,[100] IS discourse embeds historical-religious elements, such as the Crusades, to justify ideological positions.[101] The Suicide category aligns with notions of martyrdom and sacrifice for Allah, often justified through Sharia-based arguments.[102] However, terms like *take* appear in multiple contexts, which complicates automated categorisation. Likewise, the *Surveillance* category proves to be problematic, as its most cited term, *state*, is used in *Islamic State*, which inflates the counts without necessarily reflecting actual surveillance-related content. Words like and *look* similarly demonstrate interpretive ambiguity.

Beyond these specific findings it is crucial to contextualise the distinctions between AQ and IS discourse within their political, social, and historical frameworks.[103] AQ's rhetoric is generally more politically and religiously oriented, positioning itself within broader ideological debates, while IS employs a highly polarising narrative that heavily demonises adversaries.[104] These insights contribute to the broader objective of identifying linguistic themes that distinguish violent jihadist discourse from non-violent Salafist discourse, with potential applications for online content detection and counter-terrorism strategies. Specifically, the results demonstrate that the Grievance Dictionary successfully captures the *call to action* and *militant grievances* that are absent in non-violent religious contexts, even when both use similar theological references.

However, despite the strengths of the methodology, this study underscores several limitations of the LIWC Grievance Dictionary. A primary concern is the potential for false positives, as previously identified in Wadham et al.'s research.[105] The dictionary struggles to account for contextual meaning, amplifying the significance of certain words that, in context, may not carry the weight attributed to them statistically. Additionally, the overlap of key terms across multiple categories leads to co-occurrence biases, inadvertently reinforcing the prominence of some categories over others. Refining the dictionary by narrowing term lists or incorporating weighted scoring mechanisms could improve category differentiation. Another limitation is the absence of key jihadist terminology from the Grievance Dictionary. Terms such as *mujahideen* and *jihad*, which are frequently used in jihadist rhetoric, are missing.

To address these challenges, future research should focus on developing a lexicon specifically tailored to violent jihadist discourse. A more context-aware dictionary could mitigate biases inherent in current lexicon-based classification methods. For example, as seen with the Surveillance category, words may carry vastly different meanings across groups or discourse types. Lexicon-based detection should therefore be complemented by qualitative interpretive analysis to avoid over-reliance on frequency counts and to prevent essentialist or reductionist interpretations.[106]

In conclusion, this study highlights both the potential and the limitations of lexicon-based analysis for differentiating between jihadist and non-violent Salafist discourse. While the LIWC Grievance Dictionary provides useful insights, its effective use depends on careful qualitative interpretation, awareness of context, and attention to the contested nature of key terminology (e.g., *jihadi*, *Salafi*). Future research should refine existing linguistic tools by incorporating context, tailored lexicons, and critical engagement with political, historical, and religious dimensions, thereby providing more nuanced and responsible approaches to online extremist content analysis.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Recidivism After Terrorism Convictions in Belgium: Insights from Survival Analysis

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Abstract: Quantitative research on terrorist recidivism remains surprisingly limited, despite heightened concern among policymakers, practitioners, and the general public. Several factors contribute to this situation, including restricted access to sensitive data and the difficulty of assembling samples large enough to support robust statistical analyses, given the inherent rarity of terrorist offending. In Belgium, more than 650 individuals were convicted of terrorism-related offences between 2006 and 2024. Drawing on Belgium's Central Criminal Record, this study examines post-conviction trajectories of this population. Building on a first wave of research published in 2025, it benefits from an extended observation period (2006–2024) and a larger, more homogeneous analytical sample. The study pursues two objectives: first, to provide a detailed description of recidivism patterns—prevalence, timing, and offence types—within this population, and; second, to identify factors associated with reoffending using survival analysis and Cox proportional hazards models. Findings show that terrorist recidivism is exceedingly rare (2.5%; n = 10), whereas general recidivism (18.7%) predominantly concerns common criminal offences (e.g., traffic violations). Survival analysis indicates that the instantaneous risk of recidivism peaks within the first five years after conviction, followed by a sharp decline. Factors associated with recidivism include both classic criminological factors (e.g., prior convictions, gender) and variables specific to terrorism-related offenders (e.g., organisational affiliation and role). Criminal career duration also emerges as a key determinant of recidivism. The article concludes by discussing the study's methodological limitations and the implications of the findings for prevention, risk assessment, and policy development.

Keywords: terrorism, recidivism, survival analysis, criminal careers, Belgium.

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Introduction

The use of quantitative data in research on terrorist recidivism remains paradoxically limited, despite the considerable concern the issue generates both among the general public and within security and intelligence agencies. Such data—most often drawn from judicial case files or official databases (e.g., criminal records, penitentiary databases)—are typically difficult for researchers to access due to their sensitivity and the ethical and legal constraints surrounding them.[1] Moreover, terrorism constitutes a statistically rare phenomenon, even in countries most affected by it, which complicates the construction of samples large enough to enable robust quantitative analyses. To date, only a small number of studies, conducted primarily in the United States, Western Europe, and Israel, have relied on quantitative data.[2] These relatively recent studies display considerable variation in their operational definitions of recidivism (e.g., new offence, reconviction, reincarceration, or "reengagement"[3] in terrorist activity), in the composition of the samples examined (e.g., prosecuted individuals, convicted offenders, or released prisoners), and in the duration of the follow-up periods during which recidivism is observed. Such heterogeneity complicates cross-national comparisons, especially when one also considers the differing socio-political contexts, legal frameworks, and the variable nature and quality of the data employed.

Despite these disparities, a common finding nonetheless appears to emerge: recidivism among individuals convicted of terrorist offences remains relatively infrequent. Rates of "specific" recidivism (i.e., a new terrorist offence following an initial conviction for such an act) generally range between 1% and 5%.[4] A few exceptions reporting markedly higher rates are generally attributable to methodological particularities—such as the use of autobiographical sources[5] or the inclusion of broader categories of acts classified as terrorism in certain conflict settings.[6] While recidivism rates remain especially low when considering *specific* recidivism, several studies have observed that they tend to increase when *general* recidivism is taken into account, though still at moderate levels overall.[7]

In light of these findings, the literature generally points to a potential neutralisation of recidivism resulting from the combined effects of long prison sentences, restrictive judicial measures, and heightened surveillance.[8] However, few authors draw attention to the possible underestimation of observed rates, due to short follow-up periods, incomplete information on post-conviction trajectories (including death, emigration, individuals still incarcerated or deported, or continued terrorist activity abroad beyond the reach of domestic authorities), deficiencies in the data sources used, and, more broadly, the "dark figure" inherent to all criminological research—that is, offences that go undetected or unprosecuted.[9]

Despite these challenges, several studies have nonetheless sought to identify the factors associated with terrorist recidivism. Their findings suggest that reoffending is shaped by a complex interplay of individual, social, and institutional influences, with results that are sometimes convergent and at other times contradictory. At the individual level, findings on age are mixed: while Altier et al. report a negative relationship between age and the likelihood of reengagement—suggesting that older individuals are less prone to reoffend[10]—Thijssen et al. find no such association, emphasising the need to interpret these results in light of specific samples and methodological approaches.[11] In contrast with traditional criminological assumptions, sociodemographic variables such as gender, marital status, parenthood, or employment generally do not emerge as strong protective factors.[12] Ideological and relational dimensions, however, appear to exert a clearer influence. Strong adherence to radical beliefs and the maintenance of ties with terrorist networks have been consistently associated with higher risks of reengagement, particularly in contexts of violent radicalisation.[13] These findings underscore the continuing impact of ideological commitment and social environments in

shaping post-release trajectories. Evidence regarding prior criminal history is less consistent. Some analyses suggests that previous convictions have little or no predictive power for terrorist reoffending[14] — contrary to what is often observed in the broader criminological literature[15] — whereas Mine et al. find that each additional conviction increases the hazard of reoffending by approximately nine percent.[16] Finally, from a methodological standpoint, Fahey highlights the importance of time since release, noting that longer follow-up periods are naturally associated with higher probabilities of reoffending.[17] This "criminological truism," as she puts it, calls for analytical approaches that adequately account for variations in observation periods across individuals.

Against this backdrop, a recent study conducted in Belgium on the entire population of individuals convicted of terrorism confirmed the rarity of observed terrorist reoffending cases (1.1% and 9.9% for terrorist and general recidivism respectively).[18] This first wave of data collection and analysis, based on the Belgian Central Criminal Record (2006–2020), was specifically designed to address the challenge posed by heterogeneous follow-up periods by applying survival analysis. This method estimates the probability of reoffending before a given time *t* (or, conversely, of not reoffending—that is, of "surviving") while accounting for varying follow-up times across individuals and for censored cases (those who had not reoffended at the time of data extraction). The results of the survival analysis identified several factors influencing both the risk and timing of recidivism. As stated hereinabove, the number of prior convictions increased the likelihood of reoffending. Interestingly, the analysis also suggested that recidivism was influenced by the *nature* of prior criminal activity and by the individual's role within the terrorist organisation. For example, previous convictions related to drug offences and occupying a leadership position appeared to exert a protective effect. Finally, in line with Thijssen et al.,[19] no significant effect was observed for age or gender.

While this first study provided valuable insights, the identification of robust predictors remained partly constrained by the limited sample size and the nature of available data. Despite its methodological advances—particularly in addressing variability in follow-up periods—it faced several limitations. First, the follow-up period was relatively short for a substantial portion of the sample, especially for individuals convicted from 2015 onward. Because data collection ended in October 2020, many of these cases were administratively censored, likely leading to an underestimation of recidivism.[20] Sample heterogeneity posed an additional challenge: individuals convicted *in absentia*—whose post-conviction status is often uncertain (e.g., presumed deceased or emigrated)—may have biased recidivism estimates and reduced analytical precision. Finally, given the overall modest sample size, some subgroups (e.g., drug-related offenders) were too small to yield sufficient statistical power for multivariate analyses.

To overcome some of these limitations and strengthen the robustness of the findings—particularly in light of some unexpected results in the literature (e.g., the lack of effect of gender or prior criminal history on reoffending)—the present study undertakes a new analysis of individuals convicted of terrorism in Belgium. It constitutes a second wave of data collection and analysis based on records from the Belgian Central Criminal Record, extending the observation period to 2006–2024. Compared to the first wave, this dataset includes 33% more convicted individuals and additional recidivism cases. The analytical sample is also refined through the exclusion of individuals convicted *in absentia*, resulting in a more homogeneous population. The analysis focuses primarily on criminal history variables (e.g., type and frequency of prior offences) and basic socio-biographical characteristics (e.g., sex, country of birth, age). Other life-course dimensions—such as employment status, mental health, or substance use—cannot be examined, as they are not systematically recorded in this database. Likewise, the Central Criminal Record does not include information on the execution of sentences, which prevents

accounting for the actual time at risk of reoffending. Overall, this second wave provides a broader and more consistent empirical basis for estimating the prevalence, timing, and determinants of recidivism among terrorism offenders in Belgium. By contrasting its results with those of the first wave, it offers a more consolidated perspective on post-conviction trajectories, contributing valuable insights for reintegration and risk management policies.

Following a detailed description of the methodology and the adjustments applied in this second-wave analysis, the main results are presented and discussed, highlighting their implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.

Method

The present study constitutes the second wave of data collection and analysis on individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences, as recorded in the Belgian Central Criminal Record (data extracted on 14 November 2024). These records contain information on final judgments issued by Belgian jurisdictions, as well as judgments rendered by foreign jurisdictions against Belgian nationals. Available data include demographic characteristics of the offenders (e.g., sex, country of birth, date of birth, date of death), basic offence information (e.g., type of offence, date, location), judicial features (e.g., judgment date, jurisdiction type and country), and sentencing outcomes (e.g., nature and severity of penalties or measures). The database, however, does not provide information on sentences execution, making it impossible to determine if, when, or how sentences were served.

According to the database, 657 individuals aged sixteen and over were convicted of terrorism-related offences between 2006 and 2024.[21] We excluded eight individuals due to missing information on the date of the terrorism offence (i.e. the reference offence). For the remaining 649 individuals, we retrieved data on all offences for which they were convicted throughout their criminal careers. This allowed us to characterise their potential criminal history prior to the reference offence and to identify possible instances of recidivism following it. Offences lacking reliably recorded dates (4.1% of all offences across all subjects) were discarded, as it was not possible to determine with confidence whether they occurred before or after the reference offence. To ensure sufficient data quality for analysis, and following the criterion used in the initial study,[22] individuals for whom 30% or more of their offences had to be discarded were excluded (n=34), resulting in a subsample of 615 individuals.[23] Notably, and in contrast to the previous study, we applied an additional exclusion criterion: individuals convicted *in absentia* were excluded. This decision reflects the specific challenges posed by such cases in terrorism research. Indeed, post-conviction trajectories of such individuals are often difficult to monitor due to factors such as emigration or unreported deaths, which make their potential reoffending behaviour—or death—less observable compared to individuals convicted in person. Including them could introduce bias into both recidivism figures[24] and survival model estimates. Applying this criterion led to the exclusion of 208 individuals (33.8% of the sample), yielding a final sample of 407 individuals convicted of terrorism.

Descriptive statistics were computed to characterise the demographic profiles, criminal histories, and recidivism outcomes of the sample. Recidivism was defined here as a reconviction for an offence initiated after the date of the reference conviction. Time to recidivism was measured as the number of weeks between the reference conviction and the earliest known offence date leading to a new conviction. Individuals were censored if no such offence occurred by the date of data extraction or if they were officially recorded as deceased.

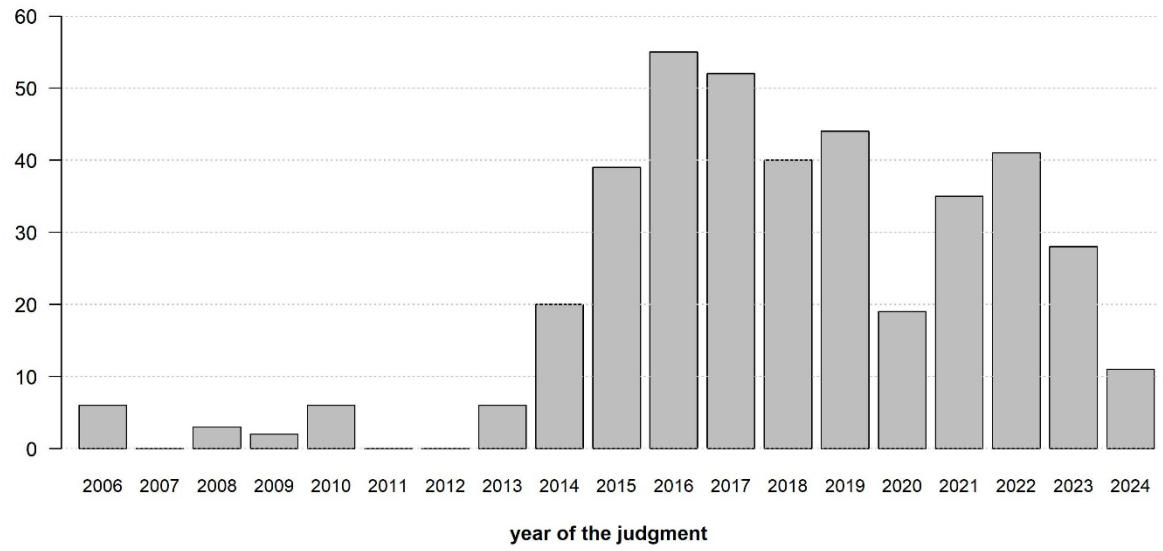
To examine predictors of—time to—recidivism, we employed Cox proportional hazards models. This semi-parametric approach estimates the hazard function—the instantaneous risk of reoffending at a given point in time among those not yet reconvicted. Cox models assess how risk changes over time since the reference conviction and how it is influenced by different covariates. These models are well suited to our context because they handle right-censored data and yield interpretable hazard ratios, assuming that the effect of covariates remain constant over time. In practical terms, a series of Cox proportional hazards models were estimated in R using the *survival* package (version 3.8-3). Due to the low number of specific recidivism cases, all analyses focused on *general recidivism*. These models differed according to the predictors (i.e., the independent variables or covariates) included. Predictors included demographic factors (e.g., gender, country of birth, age at reference offence); criminal history indicators (e.g., onset age, prior convictions,[25] crime mix index,[26] binary indicators of prior offence types[27]); characteristics related to the reference offence (e.g., individual's role:[28] terrorism group leader, member - but not leader - or provider of material assistance; and the delay between criminal career onset and reference offence); other offence types included in the same judgment as the reference conviction (e.g., violent crime, public order offences); and year of the reference conviction.[29] To determine the best-fitting model, we employed both forward and backward stepwise selection based on the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), which balances model fit and parsimony. In forward selection, predictors were added sequentially to the null model; in backward selection, variables were removed from the full model. The final model retained was the one with the lowest AIC across both procedures and across all series of models.[30] For each predictor with a significant effect in this model, we report the hazard ratio and the p-value obtained from a likelihood ratio test (LRT). We conducted several diagnostic checks to evaluate model validity and robustness. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIFs), and the proportional hazards assumption was tested via Schoenfeld residuals. We also examined martingale residuals to assess the functional form of continuous covariates. Sensitivity analyses were performed using dfbeta values, re-estimating models after excluding individuals identified as influential for specific predictors. Finally, the model discriminative ability was evaluated using the concordance index (C-index).

Results

Description of the sample

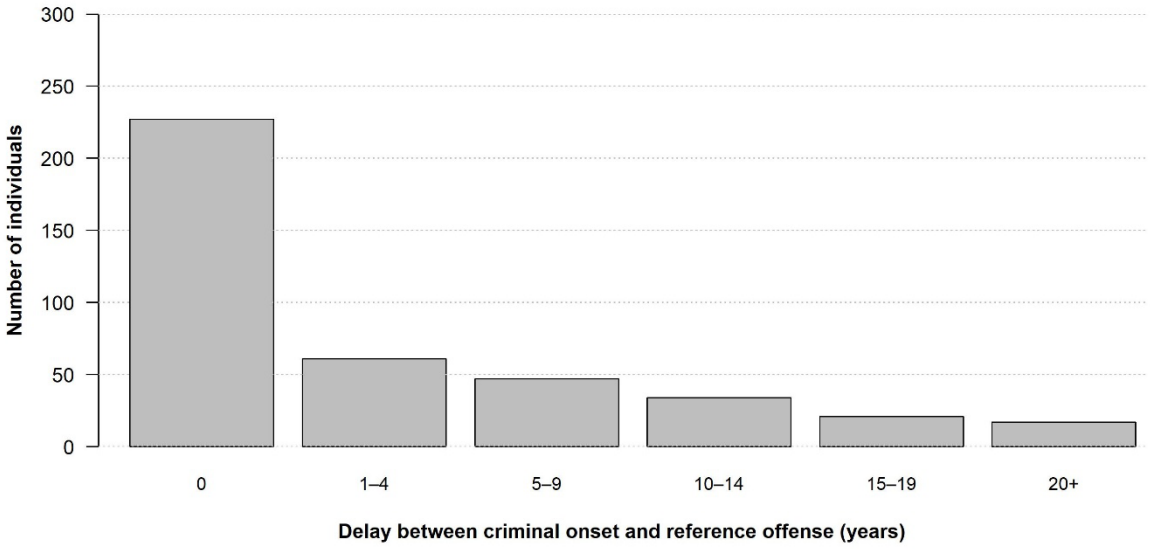
Most of the offenders were male (78.9%), with a median age of 25 at the time of the reference offence (range: 16-72; interquartile interval Q1-Q3: 22-33). The majority were born in Belgium (58%). The terrorist offences occurred between 1997 and 2023, while the corresponding judgments were issued between 2006 and 2024. Most of these judgments were pronounced after 2014 (see Figure 1). Based on the legal classification recorded in the Central Criminal Record, the vast majority of the offenders (82.8%, *n*= 337) were convicted as members of a terrorist group, either as leaders (8.8%, *n*=36) or as active members (74%, *n*=301). A smaller share (5.9%, *n*=24) were convicted for providing material support only. In a minority of cases, additional types of offences were included in the same judgment as the reference conviction. These were primarily public order offences (14.7%), offences categorised as 'other' (13.5%), property offences without violence (9.1%), and violent crimes (6.6%).

Figure 1. Number of individuals convicted for terrorism for the first time, by year of judgment



Regarding criminal history, nearly half of the sample (46.2%) had at least one conviction for an offence committed prior to the reference offence. Among these individuals, the median age at first offence (i.e., onset age) was 20 (range: 9-59; Q1-Q3: 18–23). Across the full sample, the delay between the onset and the reference offence averaged 4 years but varied widely (range: 0-41 years; Q1-Q3: 0-6), as shown in Figure 2. The mean number of prior convictions was 2.5, although the distribution was highly skewed (range: 0-42; Q1-Q3: 0-3). Specifically, 53.8% of individuals had no prior convictions, 27.5% had between 1 and 4, 11.5% had between 5 and 10, and 7.1% had more than 10 prior convictions. The average crime mix index was 1.2 (range: 0-8; Q1-Q3: 0-2), suggesting a low diversity[31] of offences committed prior to the reference offence. The most common category of prior offence was road traffic violations (32.9%), followed by property without violence (e.g., simple theft, shoplifting) (19.2%), violent crimes against persons (e.g., assault, homicide) (16.2%), and public order offences (16%). At the other end of the spectrum, less than 2% were convicted for a sexual offence (1.7%) and fewer than 10% had a drug-related conviction (8.6%).

Figure 2. Time elapsed between criminal onset and reference offence



Recidivism among terrorist offenders

The prevalence of general recidivism, defined as the proportion of individuals convicted for an offence committed after the reference judgment, was 18.7% (n=76), across all offence categories. This represents a substantial increase compared to the rate observed in the first wave of data collection (9.9%).[32] Two main factors explain this difference. First, the observation window was extended by four additional years, providing more time for new offences to occur and for these to result in convictions. Among the 286 individuals from our sample who were already included in the original cohort, 32 new cases of recidivism were identified, bringing the total to 73 cases compared to 43 in the initial study (from which two individuals have since been acquitted). This also highlights the role of the year of judgment, as only 3 out of the 121 newly included individuals—all judged from 2018 onward—had reoffended by the end of the observation period. Second, the final sample here—as opposed to the initial study—excluded individuals judged *in absentia*, for whom detecting recidivism is more difficult. These cases were disproportionately less likely to result in observable reconviction (see endnote 23), which contributed to the lower recidivism rate reported in Mine et al.[33]

The median time interval between the reference judgment and the recidivism offence was 93 weeks (range: 0.1–367 weeks; Q1-Q3: 41–170 weeks). Road traffic violations[34] were by far the most frequent type of recidivism, accounting for 52.6% of first reoffences. Over the entire period following the reference judgment, 60.5% of recidivists were convicted of at least one road traffic violation. As first new offenses, 13.2% of recidivists were convicted of violent crimes against persons and 10.5% of public order offenses (24% when considering such any offense during the follow-up period). Notably, 9.2% of recidivists were reconvicted for a terrorism-related offense as their first new offense, while 13% were convicted of such an offense at any point during follow-up. This corresponds to a prevalence of specific recidivism – defined as reconviction for a terrorism offence – of 2.5% (*n*=10).[35]

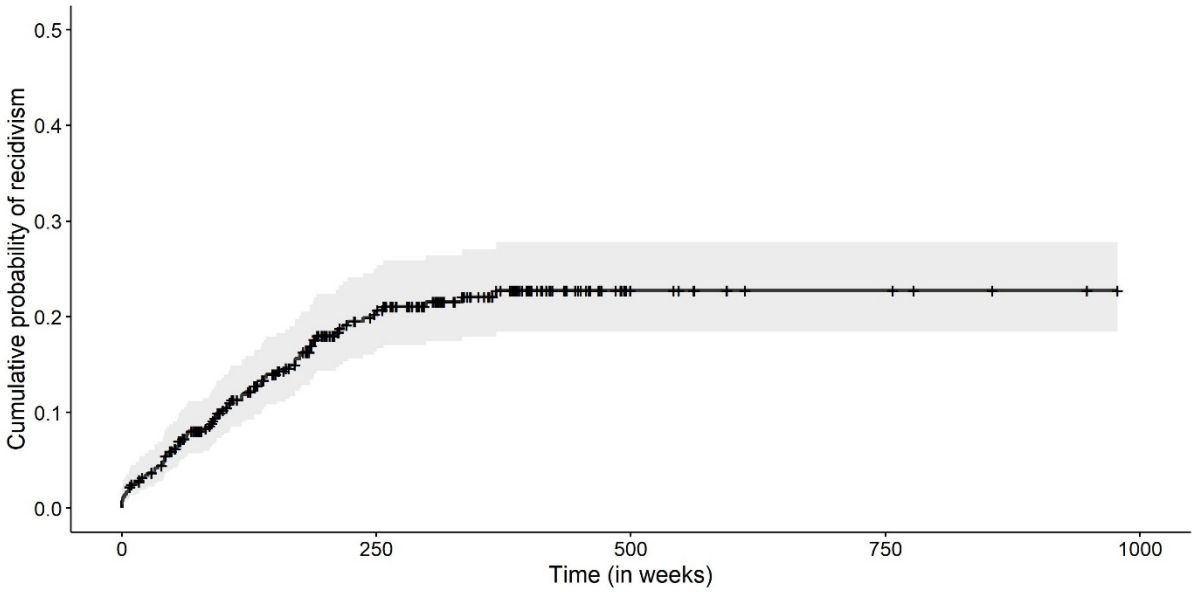
The recidivism figures reported above do not account for the variability in follow-up periods across individuals. To account for this variation and to estimate the probability of recidivism over time, we used the Kaplan-Meier estimation. For each person, follow-up began at the date

of their first terrorism conviction and ended at either their next offence, death, or the date of data extraction – whichever came first. Cases of death or the end of follow-up without a new conviction were treated as censored. Figure 3 shows the cumulative probability of recidivism as a function of time since the reference conviction, with shaded areas indicating the 95% confidence interval and plus signs marking censored cases. The Kaplan-Meier curve suggests that the risk of reoffending remains relatively steady during the first five years after the reference conviction, resulting in a probability of slightly more that 20% of having reoffended after five years (260 weeks). After this point, the curve flattens, suggesting that the risk for those who have not reoffended by then diminishes severely.

Importantly, this curve models the cumulative probability of recidivism following the first conviction, rather than the propensity of reoffending upon release. This distinction is essential, as the model does not directly incorporate information on sentence length or actual time served.[36] Given the incapacitation effect associated with imprisonment—assuming sentences were effectively served in detention—the early portion of the curve is therefore likely to reflect recidivism primarily among individuals convicted of less serious terrorism-related offenses (i.e., those receiving shorter custodial sentences, if any). This interpretation is supported by the distribution of recidivism across sentence length categories (see Table 1 in the Appendix), which indicates substantially lower recidivism among individuals sentenced to more than five years of imprisonment.

A limitation of the Kaplan-Meier estimation is that it does not adjust for differences between individuals. To address this, and to identify factors influencing time to recidivism, we applied Cox proportional hazards models.

Figure 3. Cumulative probability of recidivism over time for first-time convicted terrorism offenders.



+: Censored data. Grey: 95% CI

Factors influencing the risk of recidivism: The survival analysis

Our modelling strategy (see Method) produced a best-fitting model with ten predictors, among which eight[37] were significantly associated with the instantaneous risk of recidivism (i.e. the hazard function): *gender*, *country of birth, year of the conviction, number of prior convictions,*

prior conviction for violent property offence, onset age and *age at the offence,* and *terrorist group status*. This implies that the other variables were not considered to influence the risk of (or time to) recidivism. Model validity, robustness and predictive accuracy were supported by additional diagnostic checks.[38]

Before examining the effect of each factor in detail, it is important to note that the estimates should be interpreted primarily in terms of *direction of influence*—that is, whether a predictor functions as a risk factor or as a protective factor[39]—rather than focusing on the exact hazard ratio values reported. This is because some estimates are less precise, with wide confidence intervals for predictors represented by small subgroups (e.g., female offenders, those with prior violent property convictions). In addition, certain predictors—especially *onset age* and *age at the offence*—showed suppression effects, meaning their estimated impact shifted noticeably depending on which other variables were included in the model.

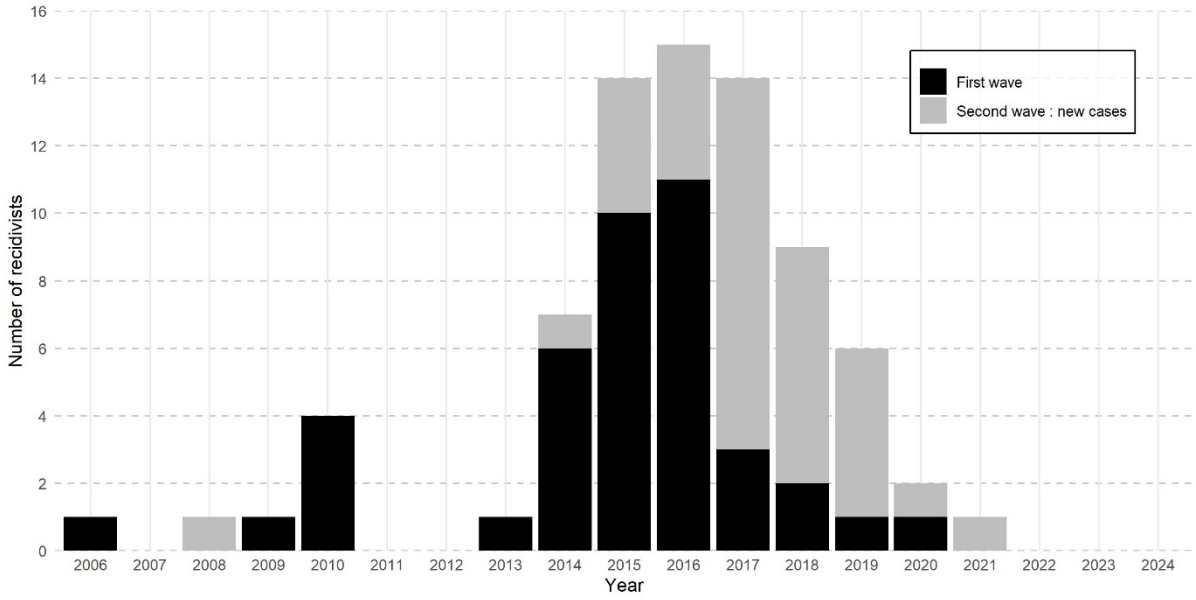
Gender was significantly associated with the risk of recidivism: male offenders had an instantaneous risk of recidivism more than 2.5 times higher than that of female offenders (HR:2.53; 95% CI:1.04-6.14; p =.024). This result mirrors the prevalence rates observed in our sample, where 21.8% of men reoffended compared to 7.1% of women. Such findings are consistent with the broader literature on recidivism, which regularly reports higher reoffending rates among men. However, this gender effect has not been observed in previous research on terrorist offenders' recidivism[40] or in our earlier study.[41] A likely explanation is the longer follow-up in the present study, which made the persistently low recidivism among women more apparent, resulting in a significant gender effect.

According to the model, *country of birth*[42] had a significant effect on the risk of recidivism. Controlling for all other factors, the instantaneous risk of reoffending among foreign-born individuals was 55% lower than among those born in Belgium (HR:0.45; 95% CI:0.26-0.79; p =.004). This result is consistent with the prevalence rates observed in our sample, where 22.8% of Belgian-born offenders reoffended compared to 13.2% of those born abroad. *Country of birth* had also emerged as a predictor in the best-fitting model of the first-wave study,[43] although it did not reach statistical significance there, likely due to limited statistical power. The higher risk for Belgian-born offenders compared to foreign-born individuals may be explained by several factors not captured in the data, such as the (threat of) deportation for non-citizens, differing levels of scrutiny, or distinct social support networks that may buffer against reoffending.

The *year of the conviction* had a significant effect on the instantaneous risk of recidivism (p < .001): according to the model, more recent convictions were associated with a lower instantaneous risk of reoffending. This pattern is largely driven by the complete absence of observed recidivism among individuals convicted in 2022 and later (0 out of 80), as well as by systematically lower prevalence rates in the immediately preceding years (2021: 2.9%; 2020: 10.5%; 2019: 13.6%), compared to the overall sample prevalence. At first sight, one might expect this effect to reflect the reduced time at risk for those convicted more recently. However, this explanation is insufficient, since such differences in exposure time are already accounted for through censoring in the survival model. Instead, as argued in Mine et al.,[44] we interpret this association as a methodological artefact related to the operational definition of recidivism. Specifically, for a re-offence to be registered as recidivism, it must not only be committed but also adjudicated and entered into the Central Criminal Record. The delays inherent in judicial proceedings[45] and subsequent data encoding likely caused many of the more recent re-offences to remain unrecorded, leading to an artificially low estimated risk for recent cohorts. Figure 4 provides additional support for this interpretation, by displaying the number of recidivists

by year of the reference judgment and distinguishing between cases identified in the first wave (black) and those detected only in the present study (grey). As the figure illustrates, the dramatic drop observed for the 2017 cohort in the first wave study has now been substantially corrected by the new data. Furthermore, additional models provide no statistical evidence of temporal changes in the sentencing pattern.[46] In sum, the observed effect of conviction year should not be interpreted as a substantive reduction in recidivism risk, but rather as evidence of underestimation arising from delays in judicial processing and record-keeping.

Figure 4. Number of recidivists by year of judgment for the reference offence.

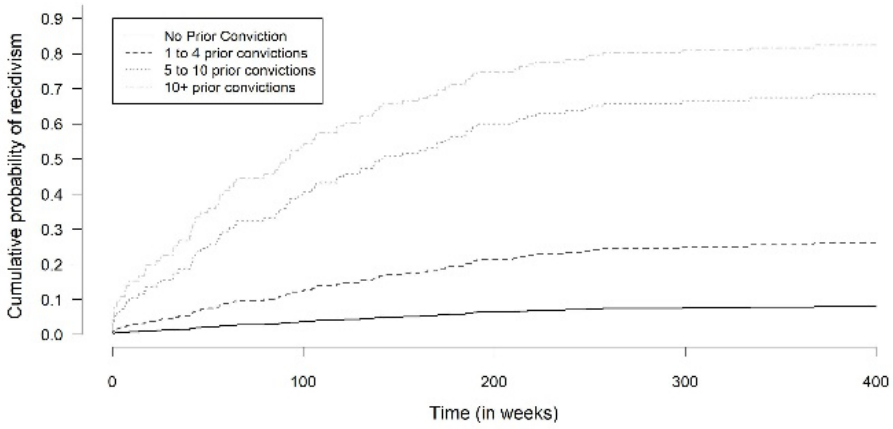


**Black bars represent recidivism cases identified in Mine et al. (2025), while grey bars indicate additional cases identified in the present study.*

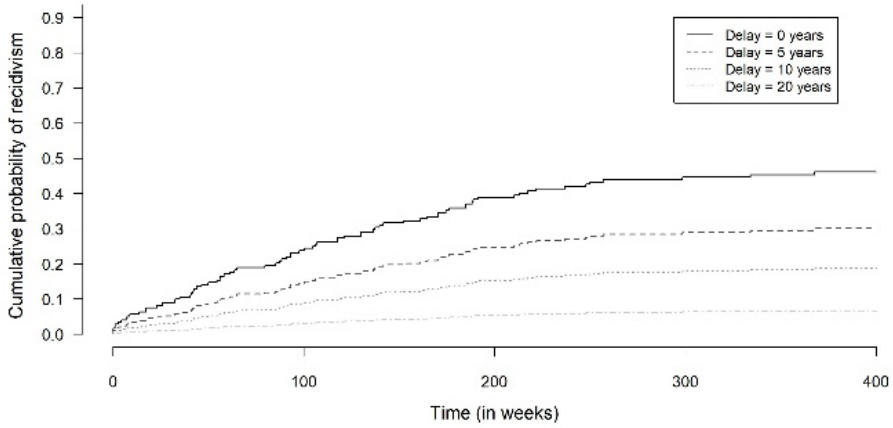
The *number of prior convictions* was strongly associated with the risk of recidivism ($p < .001$). Compared to individuals with no prior convictions, those with 1 to 4 convictions had more than three times the instantaneous risk of reoffending (HR = 3.63; 95% CI: 1.97–6.70). The risk increased dramatically for those with 5 to 10 prior convictions (HR = 13.84; 95% CI: 5.35–35.79) and for those with more than 10 convictions (HR = 20.88; 95% CI: 5.06–86.1). Figure 5a illustrates the substantial impact of these hazard ratios on the cumulative probability of recidivism: after 100 weeks, more than half of the individuals with over 10 prior convictions are expected to have reoffended, compared to just above 10% of those with 1 to 4 convictions. Although confidence intervals are wide, even their lower bounds suggest a very strong effect. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on general recidivism, where criminal history is one of the most robust predictors, and it echoes—while also amplifying—the result observed in the first-wave study.[47]

Figures 5a and 5b. Predicted cumulative probability of recidivism among individuals convicted of terrorism.

Panel (a): ***By number of prior convictions:*** *no prior conviction, 1-4, 5-10 or more than 10 prior convictions*



Panel (b): ***By delay between criminal career onset and reference terrorist offence:*** *0, 5, 10, or 20 years*



All predictions were computed using the final Cox proportional hazards model, holding other covariates at reference values: judgment year = 2018, born in Belgium, male, onset age = 20 years, member (but not leader) of a terrorist group, no prior violent property or concomitant offence. For panel (a), age at the reference offence = 25 years. For panel (b), the number of prior convictions = 1-4.

The Central Criminal Record specify the role attributed to each individual in a terrorist offence. This *terrorist group status* was significantly associated with the risk of recidivism (p = .037). Interestingly, being a leader (HR: 0.27, 95% CI: 0.09–0.83) and, to a lesser extent, being a member of a group (HR: 0.58, 95% CI: 0.31–1.05) appeared to reduce the risk of reoffending compared to providers of material assistance. While this finding may seem counterintuitive, it is consistent with our earlier study in which leadership status was also associated with lower recidivism risk.[48] However, this association is more plausibly interpreted as an artefact of sentencing differences than as evidence of a genuine protective mechanism. Leaders and group members typically received substantially longer prison sentences than providers of material assistance, suggesting a potential incapacitation effect.[49] Under this interpretation, the reduced hazard does not reflect lower underlying propensity to reoffend, but rather reduced opportunity to do so. Nevertheless, this interpretation remains tentative, as our data only record the length of sentences imposed, not the actual time served.

Having a *prior conviction for a violent property offence* was associated with a lower risk of recidivism: their instantaneous risk of reoffending was less than half that of individuals without such a conviction (p = .037; HR: 0.41, 95% CI: 0.17–0.99). As with the effect of terrorist group status, this finding may be explained by longer prison sentences served,[50] although we were unable to directly test this hypothesis given the limitations of our data.

The criminal career *onset age* and the *age at the reference offence* both significantly influenced the instantaneous risk of reoffending, but in opposite directions. Each additional year of age at onset increased the hazard by 17%[51] (p < 0.001; HR: 1.17, 95% CI: 1.08–1.27), whereas each additional year of age at the reference offence decreased it by 12% (p < 0.001; HR: 0.88, 95% CI: 0.81–0.95). These coefficients should be interpreted with caution and not in isolation: removing either variable from the model led to substantial changes in the estimate of the other, suggesting a suppression effect (i.e., that the apparent impact of one predictor depends on whether the other is included). Such effects are not unusual when predictors are moderately correlated, as here (r=0.76, VIF: 2.86). Accordingly, the reported coefficients represent conditional effects, valid only when both variables are included in the model. For the majority of our sample – those whose criminal career began with the reference offence (53.8%) – we can fairly consider that the opposing effects effectively cancel each other out.[52] Thus, for primo-criminals, the age at the terrorist offence does not seem to influence the risk of recidivism, which is in line with the findings of Thijssen et al.[53]

As the delay between criminal career onset and the reference offence is central to interpreting these variables, we estimated an alternative model identical to the best-fitting model except that we replaced age at the reference offence with *the delay* (in years) *between onset and the reference offence*. This new model had a nearly identical AIC (806.1 vs. 805.6), indicating that both models fit the data equally well.[54] In this specification, onset age was no longer significant (p = 0.19), while the delay emerged as a significant protective factor (p = 0.004; HR: 0.90, 95% CI: 0.84–0.96). This suggests that the apparent effects of onset age and age at the reference offence are largely explained by the interval between these two events: each additional year of delay lowered the instantaneous risk of reoffending by about 10%[55] (Figure 5b). In other words, for a given onset age, the later an individual commits a terrorist offence, the lower their instantaneous risk of reoffending, meaning that recidivism—if it occurs—tends to happen more slowly. This finding echoes Altier et al.,[56] who reported lower reengagement rates among older offenders; however, in our case, the effect holds only for those with a prior criminal history before their terrorist offence.

Discussion

This study provides an updated and more comprehensive picture of recidivism among individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences in Belgium, shedding light on their criminal trajectories, reoffending patterns, and the factors shaping them. In the following discussion, we interpret these findings in relation to existing research.

The demographic profile of the cohort—predominantly young, male, and Belgian-born—mirrors patterns widely reported in the literature, which indicates that individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences are most often young males[57] radicalised domestically.[58] Notably, more than half of the sample (53,8%) began their 'official' criminal careers with a terrorism-related conviction, having no prior record. Beyond the distinction between individuals with or without a prior criminal record, our results reveal significant heterogeneity among those who do have one, both in the extent and the nature of their offending. While many had few prior

convictions, a smaller subgroup exhibited extensive criminal histories. Consistent with findings by Thijs et al., these antecedents largely involved relatively "common" offences—such as road-traffic violations, theft, or public-order breaches—rather than serious or organised-crime-related acts.[59] This pattern suggests that prior offending among terrorism convicts is generally neither severe nor ideologically motivated, reinforcing Rodermond and Thijs's argument that there is generally no clear progression from ordinary criminality to terrorism through "criminal skills" or exposure to violence.[60] This finding, corroborated by other international findings,[61] highlights the challenges of early detection and underscores the need for prevention strategies grounded in a multi-agency framework. This approach aims to identify, at an early stage and in an effective manner, individuals who may be at risk of engaging in violent radicalisation by fostering inter-service cooperation, improving information sharing, encouraging joint decision-making, and ensuring coordinated actions.[62]

The specific recidivism rate (i.e., new convictions for terrorism) remains exceptionally low — 2.5% (n = 10) — despite the extended observation period. This finding aligns with the 1%-5% range generally reported in the international literature (see Introduction). The general recidivism rate is significantly higher (18.7%) but the nature of reoffending remains predominantly ordinary (i.e., mainly traffic violations and public order offences). This pattern suggests that subsequent criminal behaviour largely mirrors that of the general offender population. From the perspective of recorded crime, they appear more prone to conventional reoffending than to renewed involvement in terrorist activities, although the latter is more difficult to establish due to its clandestine nature. Strikingly, the Kaplan-Meier curve indicates that the instantaneous risk of recidivism peaks within the first five years following conviction before declining sharply thereafter. This pattern is counterintuitive: given that the median prison sentence for terrorism-related offences in Belgium is around five years,[63] one would expect the incapacitation effect of imprisonment to diminish reoffending during this period, at least at the sample level. Yet, most recidivism still occurs within these early years. It is likely that the early portion of the Kaplan-Meier curve primarily captures reoffending among individuals convicted of less serious terrorism-related offences, who typically received shorter sentences. By contrast, individuals convicted of more serious offences likely remain incarcerated during much of this high-risk window. As a result, the observed recidivism trajectory may therefore partly underestimate of the true reoffending propensity of the full population. Even so, the pattern suggests that the underlying propensity to reoffend is particularly pronounced in the years immediately following conviction, which is consistent with international literature.[64] Beyond this aspect, the model predicts an asymptotic general recidivism rate slightly above 20%, a figure broadly consistent with that observed in the first wave.

The Cox proportional hazards model reveals a complex set of factors that influence the risk of reoffending, with some findings aligning with established criminological principles and others presenting counterintuitive results that demand deeper interpretation. The identification of these factors is essential for designing evidence-based interventions that effectively reduce the risk of further offending.[65] The results indicate that prior criminal convictions remain the strongest predictor of recidivism, while being male and being born in Belgium also increase risk; conversely, a terrorist leadership role and severe prior offences (i.e. violent property crime) appear to lower risk, likely due to longer incapacitating sentences rather than genuine protective effects.

The interplay between onset age and age at the reference offence is complex. The analysis identifies that the key variable is the *delay* between the two events, in other words, the length of the criminal career at the time of the reference conviction. A longer period between the start of a criminal career and the commission of a terrorist offence is associated with a lower

risk of recidivism. This suggests that individuals with a prolonged, criminal history who only later turn to terrorism may have in this case a "greater capacity" for apparent desistance compared to those who rapidly escalate to terrorism. An explanatory hypothesis could be that the terrorist offence is, in a way, the culmination of their criminal career and marks the possibly end or at least the decline of the person's criminal activity. The lower propensity to reoffend among these individuals could be interpreted through a rational reading of criminal behaviour related to maturity or as the result of a set of mechanisms, whose dynamics remain to be determined, involving push (i.e., negative aspects that drive individuals away) and pull (i.e., positive incentives that attract individuals toward desistance) factors. [66] The combination of push and pull factors at individual (e.g., disillusionment, desire for a stable family life, longing for a peaceful existence outside of terrorism), contextual (e.g., social ties, stigmatisation and others consequences related to repression), and organisational (e.g., conflicts with leaders or members) level may encourage a form of pragmatic desistance, based not necessarily and systematically on ideological change, but on adaptive cost-benefit rationality. That would be in line with desistance theories that emphasise cognitive transformations[67] and life-course transitions as crucial elements in moving away from terrorism and more broadly from crime.[68] According to Cherney and Koehler, "[…] sustained disengagement requires agentic change, a point also made in the criminological desistance literature, which is embedded in the dynamic of cognitive transformation (i.e., it requires shifts in choices, values, goals and motivations)".[69]

Limitations

While this study demonstrates the added value of applying survival analysis to an enriched dataset—offering longer follow-up periods for recent cohorts, more complete identification of recidivism events, and a more homogeneous sample—the interpretation of the findings requires caution. Several limitations may affect the patterns observed and their generalisability.

Because judicial proceedings and the encoding of convictions in the Central Criminal Record involve substantial delays, many reoffending events occurring late in the observation window are unlikely to have been captured under our operational definition of recidivism. This issue is particularly relevant for individuals convicted in 2019 or later, who make up a substantial portion of the sample and were heavily administratively censored within the first five years of follow-up. Consequently, the observed prevalence and the modelled probability of recidivism should be interpreted as conservative lower bounds. The pattern observed—an early peak in reoffending followed by an asymptotic stabilisation of the survival curve around 20–25%—would benefit from further validation through continued longitudinal monitoring. It is likely that the asymptotic value would be somewhat higher with a more extended follow-up period.

The model also yields some counterintuitive findings: individuals identified as leaders of terrorist groups or those with prior convictions for violent property crimes appear to exhibit a lower risk of recidivism. These patterns should not be interpreted as inherently protective. Rather, they almost certainly reflect the incapacitating impact of longer prison sentences, as such individuals typically receive substantially harsher penalties, which physically prevent them from reoffending in the community for extended periods. However, the actual enforcement and modalities of these sentences cannot be verified, because this information is not recorded in the Central Criminal Record.

Importantly, the study focuses on *general* recidivism among individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences, rather than on specific recidivism, despite the latter often attracting greater scholarly and policy interest. The extremely small number of observed specific recidivists precludes robust analyses regarding potential risk or protective factors specific to terrorism-related reoffending at this stage. Moreover, modelling recidivism through reconviction offers

no insight into reengagement in terrorist activities or the processes of deradicalisation—dimensions that are critical for understanding post-conviction trajectories.

These limitations also inform how the types of offences observed among recidivists should be interpreted. Approximately half of first reoffences are road traffic violations. While these are legitimately recorded in the Central Criminal Record and may entail non-trivial risks, they differ substantially in nature and gravity from terrorist acts or violent offences against persons. Their prominence reflects the rarity of serious reoffending within this cohort, rather than a substantive shift in post-conviction trajectories. Accordingly, the predictors identified in the Cox models should be understood as variables associated with *general* reconviction risk, an outcome substantially shaped by road traffic offences, rather than as predictors of terrorism-specific relapse.

The analysis is also limited to individual-level characteristics and does not account for relational or broader social dimensions. In particular, the study cannot account for ideological commitment or ties to violent extremist networks—dimensions that prior research identifies as important risk factors for terrorist re-engagement and recidivism. The Central Criminal Record provides formal criminal history but cannot measure the persistence or evolution of ideological beliefs, organisational affiliations in clandestine networks, or relational factors that may influence post-conviction trajectories. This limitation is substantial, as evidence suggests that ideological variables may be more predictive of terrorist recidivism than general criminological factors.[70]

More generally, the Central Criminal Record lacks information on housing, employment, substance use, mental health, and other socio-economic or psychosocial factors commonly associated with general criminal recidivism. The absence of these dimensions limits the explanatory power of the models. Ideally, our findings should be interpreted within a broader framework that integrate qualitative methods and additional data sources to incorporate such dimensions and provide a more comprehensive understanding of post-conviction trajectories.

Finally, this study was conducted in Belgium on a sample predominantly composed of individuals convicted for Islamist-inspired terrorism. Whether the patterns identified here generalise to other ideological contexts, judicial systems, or countries remains an open question.

Conclusion

The results presented in this paper corroborate those observed in the literature regarding the prevalence of recidivism, the nature of prior convictions, and several socio-biographical characteristics of individuals convicted of terrorism. Notably, this contribution helps reconcile contradictory findings concerning the role of age, by demonstrating that the key factor is not age *per se*, but rather the delay between the onset of the criminal career and the terrorist offence. This finding calls for further investigation into the duration of the criminal careers of individuals convicted of terrorism, as well as the other dimensions that characterise them—such as desistance and persistence, escalation and de-escalation, severity, specificity versus versatility, and acceleration or deceleration. Despite its relevance, research on the criminal careers of individuals involved in terrorism remains markedly underdeveloped and warrants greater scholarly attention. Furthermore, revisiting established criminological frameworks—such as Moffitt's taxonomy distinguishing adolescence-limited from life-course-persistent offenders[71]—through terrorism contexts could provide a theoretically robust foundation for differentiated deradicalisation and reintegration programmes. Such approaches would allow policymakers to allocate resources more efficiently by targeting interventions toward individuals most likely to persist in criminal or extremist behaviour.

Methodologically, several improvements could strengthen the assessment of recidivism and enhance its policy relevance. Redefining follow-up periods to begin at release rather than conviction would yield a more accurate picture of post-custodial behaviour. Incorporating complementary measures[72]—such as rearrest, new prosecutions, and reincarceration—alongside socio-biographical and dynamic variables (employment, housing, mental health) would also allow for a more refined understanding of risk factors and intervention needs. Harmonising operational definitions of recidivism, for example by excluding traffic offences, would help avoid distortions that may misguide resource allocation or programme design. These developments would pave the way for evaluating the effectiveness of imposed sentences and measures, as well as rehabilitation programmes.

Finally, the observed stabilisation of recidivism rates and the persistent bias affecting recent cohorts underscore the need for extended longitudinal research that integrates individual, relational and contextual dimensions. Such evidence would not only refine theoretical models but also support the development of evidence-based policies aimed at reducing reoffending and enhancing reintegration outcomes, thereby contributing to broader public safety and counterterrorism objectives.

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19 Thijssen et al., "Understanding Violent Extremism: Socio-Demographic, Criminal and

Psychopathological Background Characteristics of Detainees Residing in Dutch Terrorism Wings".

20 This bias stems from the operational definition of reoffending based on reconviction: when the observation period is short, some reoffences may not yet have resulted in a recorded conviction due to the length of judicial proceedings.

21 In comparison, the previous study (2006-2020) identified 482 individuals, of whom 463 were retained in the final sample after applying exclusion criteria. It is interesting to note that the number of convictions for terrorism has remained relatively high in recent years (i.e., 31 in 2020, 69 in 2021, 57 in 2022, 32 in 2023 and 13 in 2024), even though the trend appears to be slowly declining.

22 Mine et al., "Recidivism Among People Convicted of Terrorism: A Survival Analysis Based on the Belgian Central Criminal Record, Terrorism and Political Violence".

23 Of the 34 individuals excluded due to substantial missing offense date information, only one was reconvicted of a terrorist offense. This individual would nevertheless have been excluded from the analytical sample, as the index conviction was adjudicated *in absentia*.

24 The prevalence of general recidivism is 2.4% (5/208) in the individuals convicted in absentia vs 18.7% (76/407) in our final sample.

25 This variable was used in three versions: as binary variable (i.e., had a prior conviction or not), as a continuous variable (i.e., the number of prior convictions) or as a categorical variable (4 levels: 0,1-4,5-10, +10 convictions).

26 The number of distinct offence categories that led to a conviction prior to the reference offence, with a maximum score of eight.

27 The seven categories were: drugs, property offence without violence, public order, traffic, violent crime, violent property crime and other. The category "sex offence" was not included as a predictor in the model, as it was too rare in the sample (1.7 % of the sample).

28 This refers to the variable *Terrorist group status* in the model.

29 This variable was included to capture potential temporal effects, either reflecting changes in jurisprudence across years or methodological biases introduced by the time required to complete judicial procedures for the reference offence or potential recidivism offence. We tested different specifications (linear term; splines with 3, 4, and 5 knots) and retained the 4-knot spline as providing the best model fit.

30 The rationale for estimating separate series of models was twofold: first, to account for the conceptual and statistical overlap between certain predictors—for example, we did not include both the crime mix index and the binary indicators of offence categories in the same model—and second, to allow flexibility in the mathematical specification of variables, such as testing different codings of prior convictions (e.g., binary, continuous, or categorical).

31 We have categorised the prior offences into eight distinct categories: drugs, other, property without violence, property with violence, public order, sex crime, road traffic, violent crime. The crime mix index corresponds to the number of different categories of offences for which an individual had been convicted before the reference offence. Its value therefore ranges from 0 to 8.

32 Mine et al., "Recidivism Among People Convicted of Terrorism: A Survival Analysis Based on the Belgian Central Criminal Record, Terrorism and Political Violence".

33 Ibid.

34 These traffic offences recorded in the Criminal Record involve criminal prosecution before a court. In other words, they are legally considered as serious and dangerous violations in terms of public safety.

35 This represents five additional cases compared to the first wave of data collection.

36 Custodial sentences vary considerably within the sample: 65.8% of individuals received prison terms of five years or less, 15.0% were sentenced to more than five years, and 19.4% received no custodial sentence. This disparity is likely even greater when considering time actually served, as full or partial suspension is substantially less common among sentences exceeding five years (7%) compared with shorter sentences (69%).

37 The predictors *Prior public order conviction* (p=0.14) and *Convicted for an offence of category 'Other' in the reference judgment* (p=0.09), while improving the predictive power of the model, failed to reach significance, probably due to a lack of power.

38 The model demonstrated good discriminative ability, with a concordance index (C) of 0.796, indicating that approximately 80% of the time, the model correctly ranked individuals in terms of their risk of being reconvicted.

39 To be more precise, these are putative risk and protective factors in the sense that "there is evidence to suggest that they play a role, through correlational data operating in the theorised direction, but for which the evidence does not meet the established criteria for classifying them as risk or causal risk factors." Michael Wolfowicz, Yael Litmanovitz, David Weisburd, and Badi Hasisi, "A field-wide systematic review and meta-analysis of putative risk and protective factors for radicalization outcomes", *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 36, (2020): 408. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-019-09439-4.

40 Thijssen et al., "Understanding Violent Extremism"; Fahey, "Predictors of Release from Guantánamo

Bay and Detainee Recidivism".
41 Mine et al., "Recidivism Among People Convicted of Terrorism: A Survival Analysis Based on the Belgian Central Criminal Record, Terrorism and Political Violence".
42 The variable *Country of birth* was used as a binary variable in our analyses, distinguishing those born in Belgium versus those born in a foreign country.
43 Mine et al., "Recidivism Among People Convicted of Terrorism: A Survival Analysis Based on the Belgian Central Criminal Record, Terrorism and Political Violence".
44 Ibid.
45 In our sample, the mean interval between the recidivism offence and its corresponding conviction was 1.6 years (*SD*=1.5). This interval exceeded one year in 63.2% of cases, two years in 22.4%, and three years in 11.9%. No information was available on the additional time required for data entry into the Central Criminal Record.
46 According to a logistic model predicting the probability of being sentenced to prison, as well as linear and partial proportional odds model of sentence length, the year of judgment has no statistically significant effect on sentencing outcome.
47 Based on the estimates from the study of Mine et al. (2025), hazard ratios of approximately 1.4, 2.4, and 5.6 would be expected for individuals with 4, 10, and 20 prior convictions, respectively, compared to those with no prior convictions. The stronger effects observed in the present study likely reflect differences in model specification: here, prior convictions were treated as a categorical variable with four levels, which provided a markedly better fit to the data (AIC = 805.6) than a model using a continuous predictor (AIC = 820.6).
48 Ibid.
49 In our sample, 69% of leaders were sentenced to more than 5 years (90% to more than 3 years). Among group members, 50% received sentences longer than 3 years (11% longer than 5 years). By contrast, fewer than 29% of providers of material assistance were sentenced to more than 3 years.
50 31.8% of individuals with a prior conviction for a violent property offence were sentenced to more than 5 years in prison, compared to 13.1% of individuals without such a conviction.
51 For example, an individual who began his criminal career at age 25 has about 87% higher risk than someone beginning at 21 (calculated as 1.17 × 1.17 × 1.17 × 1.17 = 1.87).
52 Because the HR for onset age (1.17) falls within the inverted confidence interval for age at reference offence [1.05–1.23].
53 Thijssen et al., "Understanding Violent Extremism: Socio-Demographic, Criminal and Psychopathological Background Characteristics of Detainees Residing in Dutch Terrorism Wings".
54 According to Burnham and Anderson, AIC differences below 2 are generally considered negligible, meaning that competing models provide equivalent empirical support. Kenneth P. Burnham and David R. Anderson, *Model Selection and Multimodel Inference: A Practical Information-Theoretic Approach*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer, 2002).
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56 Altier et al., "Returning to the Fight: An Empirical Analysis of Terrorist Reengagement and Recidivism".
57 Elanie Rodermond, "Het leven na een terroristisch misdrijf. Recidive en re-integratie van extremistische ex-gedetineerden," *Justitiële Verkenningen* 48, no. 3, (2022): 68-85. However, Klaussen et al. observe that American Islamist terrorist offenders are generally older — and in some cases, much older — than perpetrators of non-political violent crimes and commit violent crimes across a much wider age range. The median age of this population is approximately 25 years old. More specifically, they observe that the pattern of violent Islamist crime in the United States departs from the standard age-crime curve in significant ways. Violent action among terrorist offenders peaks at a later age and occurs across a broader age range than is the case for ordinary violent crimes. Jytte Klaussen, Tyler Morrill, and Rosanne Libretti, "The terrorist age-crime curve: An analysis of American Islamist terrorist offenders and age-specific propensity for participation in violent and nonviolent incidents", *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 1, (2016): 19–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12249.
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Appendix

Overall recidivism by length of prison sentence

	No prison	0-1 year	1-3 years	3-5 years	5-10 years	10+ years	Unknown[1]
Recidivists	11	7	26	26	4	1	1
Not reconvicted	67	21	67	117	28	28	3
Total	78	28	93	143	32	29	4
Recidivism rate (%[2])	14.1	25.0	28.0	18.2	12.5	3.4	25.0

Timing of first re-offence (frequency)

Timing[3] since conviction	No prison	0-1 year	1-3 years	3-5 years	5-10 years	10+ years	Unknown
During the first year	3	3	9	9	1	0	0
Between year 1 and 2	3	2	7	3	1	0	0
Between year 2 and 3	2	0	7	4	0	0	0
Between year 3 and 4	3	2	1	5	0	0	0
Between year 4 and 5	0	0	1	3	2	1	1
After 5 years	0	0	1	2	0	0	0

Notes:

1. "Unknown" indicates individuals for whom sentence length could not be retrieved from the judicial record.
2. Percentages represent the proportion of individuals in each sentence-length category who were reconvicted at least once during follow-up.
3. Timing refers to time elapsed since reference conviction, not time since release.

PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"What is White Nationalism Anyway?" Understanding How 4chan Posters Construct and Define White Nationalism on the /pol/ Board

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Abstract: White nationalism has been subject to considerable debate by academic and online communities alike. We contribute to this body of scholarship by investigating constructions of white nationalism by (presumably) white nationalists online. To accomplish this, we extract and examine 92,000 posts on the topic between 2013-2024 from 4chan's well-known /pol/ board. Using a mixed methods approach, we combine soft clustering of large language modelling embeddings with qualitative thematic analysis. Our results identify discursive constructions of an ethnic, gendered, and religious identity on 4chan, supposedly denied self-determination. By synthesising scholarly definitions with 4chan expressions of white nationalism, we also aim to detangle these constructions from white supremacy to advance an academic definition. We suggest white nationalism broadly describes the belief that humanity is naturally divided into nations, with a white nation that possesses distinct ethnic, political, territorial, and sovereign claims. Specifically, white nationalism as expressed on /pol/ is a form of ethnonationalism which champions an imagined (white) political and territorial community, whose idea of meaningful sovereignty is contingent upon the free exercise of white political will to shape their collective destiny.

Keywords: white nationalism, white supremacy, definition, debate, ideology

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Introduction

White nationalism is frequently discussed in the contemporary security discourse, and yet the meaning of white nationalism has been subject to infrequent scrutiny. Some studies suggest that white nationalism is indistinct from white supremacy, used to create rhetorical distance from the negative connotations of white supremacy – including as a strategy among ideological adherents. Others suggest that there are substantial differences between the two terms. To add further confusion, a recent study by Rigney and Holmes argues that white nationalism is not nationalism at all.[1] Some of this also ignores, of course, genuine and ingenuine uses of the term: for example, as a slur, or as a mark of pride and community in other cases. This inconsistency has a marked impact on how white nationalism is identified and understood, both internally (as a self-defined community) and academically. By examining white nationalist constructions on 4chan's notorious right wing Politically Incorrect (/pol/) board from 2013-2024, we examine constructions of white nationalism to further inform the contemporary debate but also illuminate a new definition of white nationalism. This requires us to detail online constructions of white nationalism and ascertain how these (self) constructions might inform the definitions of white nationalism as either indistinct, or separate from, white supremacy. We suggest that white nationalism may generally be defined as the belief that humanity is naturally divided into nations, with white nations that possess distinct ethnic, political, territorial, and sovereign claims. White supremacy, on the other hand, describes the belief that an ethnically-defined white in-group is naturally superior to other inferior, ethnically-defined parts of society, and that this white in-group should control, rule or dominate these inferior peoples regardless of territorial boundaries.

To this end, we follow a well-trodden methodological path, using online data to identify constructions of white nationalism. The longest-serving white nationalist forum Stormfront has provided much of this online data for academic analysis, informing numerous studies.[2] By contrast, our study uses data from 4chan, an image-based bulletin board, acknowledging the platform has also been subject to prior study for other purposes.[3] Our study draws on the /pol/ 4pleb archive from 2013 to 2024, allowing us to examine over a decade's worth of explicit white nationalism discourse. This data was subject to initial quantitative analysis using language model embeddings alongside machine learning algorithms to identify a statistically representative topic model. The model was then subject to qualitative thematic analysis, in association with definitions of nationalism and white nationalism.

We found that constructions of white nationalism on 4chan are routinely expressed, and subject to a great deal of debate on the platform, with some users correlating white nationalism directly with white supremacy, whilst others argue that there are distinctions. We identify these distinctions as a) based on the goal of controlling and using a territory for white people; b) based on nationalist rather than supremacist notions; and c) based on self-determination and sovereignty in opposition to (various types of) fascist authoritarianism(s). We argue that such constructions of white nationalism can inform the scholarly debate on definitions, by providing a glimpse into how white nationalists perceive, express, and negotiate their own beliefs. Specifically, we use the 4chan posts to define white nationalism as follows:

> *White nationalism is a form of ethnonationalism which advances the interests of an imagined political community, with distinct and ascertainable white characteristics; it champions the control and use of territory by the white community; where meaningful sovereignty is contingent upon the free exercise of white political will to shape their collective destiny.*

We also reveal the ebbs and flows of interest in white nationalism (and its components) on /pol/, showing that such discussions are common but irregular on the platform, with contemporary events potentially influencing posting frequency and energising debate. In our estimation, the findings also reveal that much is still to be learned here, and that more research is required. Before proceeding, readers are advised that this study contains language that may be offensive to some, including content of a racist, homophobic, antisemitic, or coarse nature.

Definitions and debates

To foreground this paper, we must consider the definitional debate over white nationalism. White nationalism has been subject to inconsistent definition over the years, and in contemporary usage, has occasionally been considered synonymous with white supremacy.[4] The Southern Poverty Law Center, by way of example, defines white nationalist groups as those which "espouse white supremacist or white separatist ideologies, often focusing on the alleged inferiority of people of color".[5] It is not uncommon to see white nationalism perceived as a more anodyne term for the less-palatable white supremacy. Hartzell details the "rhetorical distance between white nationalism and white supremacy", in which labels like white supremacy, white nationalism, identitarian, racial realism, and alt-right are used variably by followers and activists alike.[6] Drawing on Charles Mills *The Racial Contract*, Hartzell suggests that white supremacy may be understood as a "racialized system of discursive power", and that any distinction with white nationalism is stylistic and/or strategic. Accordingly, he concludes that "white nationalism is inseparable from white supremacy".[7] Others have defined white nationalism in terms almost synonymous with supremacy, such as "an unquestioning belief in the superiority of one's nation",[8] and the notion that "[w]hite nationalists are white supremacists who understand 'race' as a knowable fact and understand 'nation' as the social structure of a racial group."[9]

More detailed definitions can be found. Gardiner defines white nationalism as a political and secular ideology predicated on perspectives on the innate linkages of race, hierarchy, and nation, with engagement in identity politics.[10] Hawley suggests that white nationalism is a form of racial protectionism, focusing on whites in a broader sense than typical racist or white supremacist movements, owing in part to the ethnic "melting pot" of the United States whereupon citizens may identify a number of European ethnicities in their lineage.[11] Accordingly, such a view expresses "the belief that the white race is imperiled, and it is the duty of every white man and woman to do what they must to protect it from biological extinction".[12] Hawley elsewhere distinguishes white nationalism as an ideology that supports the separation of different races into different states, and where white nationalists themselves often disavow notions of superiority and inferiority – which may be insincere and part of a strategy to broaden their appeal.[13] By contrast, white supremacist ideology prescribes a society where different ethnicities live in the same state, but where the superior (white) group are dominant over supposedly inferior ethnic groups. Kulig et al. have an expansive definition with five elements: 1) white nationalists believe being white is a distinct social identity; 2) they favour white European traditions; 3) they believe this white population is marginalised or under attack; 4) they seek to achieve or maintain white majority populations; and 5) they are not inherently motivated by racial prejudice.[14] Jardina argues more simply that white nationalists "generally endorse efforts to protect the white race", and elsewhere details the ideology as "white, masculine, and patriarchal."[15]

Rigney and Holmes, however, suggest that white nationalism falls short of the criteria of nationalism (being bounded by territory, population, and cultural/symbolic content).[16] They argue that white nationalism's concepts of territory and population are incoherent and fraught, whilst its notions of cultural/symbolic content are fractured. This exposes a potential flaw in

the academic examination of white nationalism, especially in relation to white supremacy: it is often being researched in isolation to, rather than as an extension of, nationalism studies. This isolation is therefore – quite frankly – bizarre, as half a century worth of research has extensively defined and debated the meaning(s) of nationalism. Kedourie established early foundations, defining nationalism as a trio of beliefs in which: 1) humanity may be naturally divided into nations; 2) that nations possess certain ascertainable characteristics; and 3) that national self-government is the only legitimate form of national government.[17] Anderson's oft-cited *Imagined Communities* expands such concepts, suggesting nations constitute imagined political communities, sovereign in scope, and limited in nature.[18]

Adams, while noting that nationalism is one of the simplest and yet most successful ideologies in history, defines it as the belief in the natural division of humanity into nations, that all nations have the right to self-government, and that all nations have the right to determine their own destiny.[19] What is natural is therefore seen as right. Calhoun's seminal work on the matter, cited extensively, notes the contestability of definitions regarding both nationalism and the nation, attributed to their ability to affect perspectives of national legitimacy.[20] Building on Anderson, Calhoun asserts nationalism is also a discourse which relies on internal and external frames of reference. Subsequently, Heywood noted that nationalism (from *nasci*, meaning "to be born") in its original use referred to people united by birthplace or birth.[21] Accordingly, Heywood defined nationalism as "the belief that the nation is the central principle of political organization," founded on two beliefs: that humankind is naturally divided into nations, and that the nation is the most legitimate form of political rule.[22] Synthesising prior scholarship, Heywood further argues that the core themes of nationalism include constructions of the nation, the organic community, national self-determination, and identity politics. There exist tensions within nationalist constructs as well, ranging from civic nationalism vs ethnocultural nationalism, and subsequently, between ethnic nationalism and cultural nationalism. Ethnic nationalism, according to Heywood, is defined as "a form of nationalism that is primarily fuelled by a keen sense of ethnic distinctiveness and the desire to preserve it."[23] Nationalism studies, as noted by Kaufmann, developed during periods of limited ethnic fluctuation, but the impacts of globalisation have hastened demographic change.[24] Such changes have influenced the rise of ethnic and ethno-traditional nationalism, where majority populations construct the *natios*[25] often in ethnic or traditional symbolic terms, as argued by Kaufmann, "such as physical appearance, religion, language and surname."[26] We seek to further inform this debate using 4chan data.

Methodology

This study aims to support the scholarly debate about definitions of white nationalism through undertaking a novel examination of online discussion posts. Its objectives are to: a) understand how white nationalism is constructed on 4chan via topic modelling;[27] b) assess those constructions in relation to notions of white supremacy; c) consider the outcomes in line with peer reviewed academic scholarship, and; d) develop a definition of white nationalism as constructed by posters on 4chan. In line with other studies, we do not assume that nationalism is static.[28] Fardan and Thorleifsson note, "nations are continuously re-imagined, re-invented, and routinely re- produced in everyday life."[29] We accept this position, and acknowledge that the nationalist project, whether state-led, sub-state, or non-state, may evolve and change within and beyond specific sociopolitical contexts. This sits alongside complexity theory, which accepts variation in content and national identity constructs, emphasising peer to peer networks, more so than elite-diffusion models of nationalism.[30] We seek to augment this further by answering the following research questions:

1. *How are users on 4chan engaging with, and discursively constructing, white nationalism?*
2. *How can 4chan constructions of white nationalism inform the definitional contest that interlinks white nationalism and white supremacy?*

We chose to conduct this study on 4chan for a couple of reasons. First, as highlighted by Bael et al, 4chan receives a prolific number of posts, far exceeding that of 8kun, Endchan, and other platforms.[31] Secondly, Rieger et al. establish the far-right nature of the posts on the board with specific relevance to in-groups, out-groups, and hate speech, indicating to us that it would be a useful site to explore notions of white nationalism.[32] These two considerations, in addition to the availability of the 4chan data, drove our selection of this platform. It is not, of course, the only platform which shares far-right ideas, projects, and concepts; it does, however, provide large language data which can be built upon using other platforms or data sources.

To address our research questions, we use both quantitative and qualitative methods. To better understand how white nationalism is conceptualised on 4chan quantitatively, we leverage the power of large language model embeddings alongside machine learning algorithms to categorise white nationalism discourses on /pol/ for further qualitative analysis. Namely, we extracted all (case-insensitive) references to white nationalism from /pol/ via the 4plebs archive. The search produced over 87 thousand unique sentences from /pol/ between late 2013 until early 2024. The sentences were then embedded using a large language model, dimensionally reduced, and categorised via a soft clustering algorithm. For those technically interested, we offer more details on this state-of-the-art topic modelling method (i.e. BERTopic) to automatically categorise these sentences in our work elsewhere.[33] All code used in our study can be found in an Open Science Framework repository.

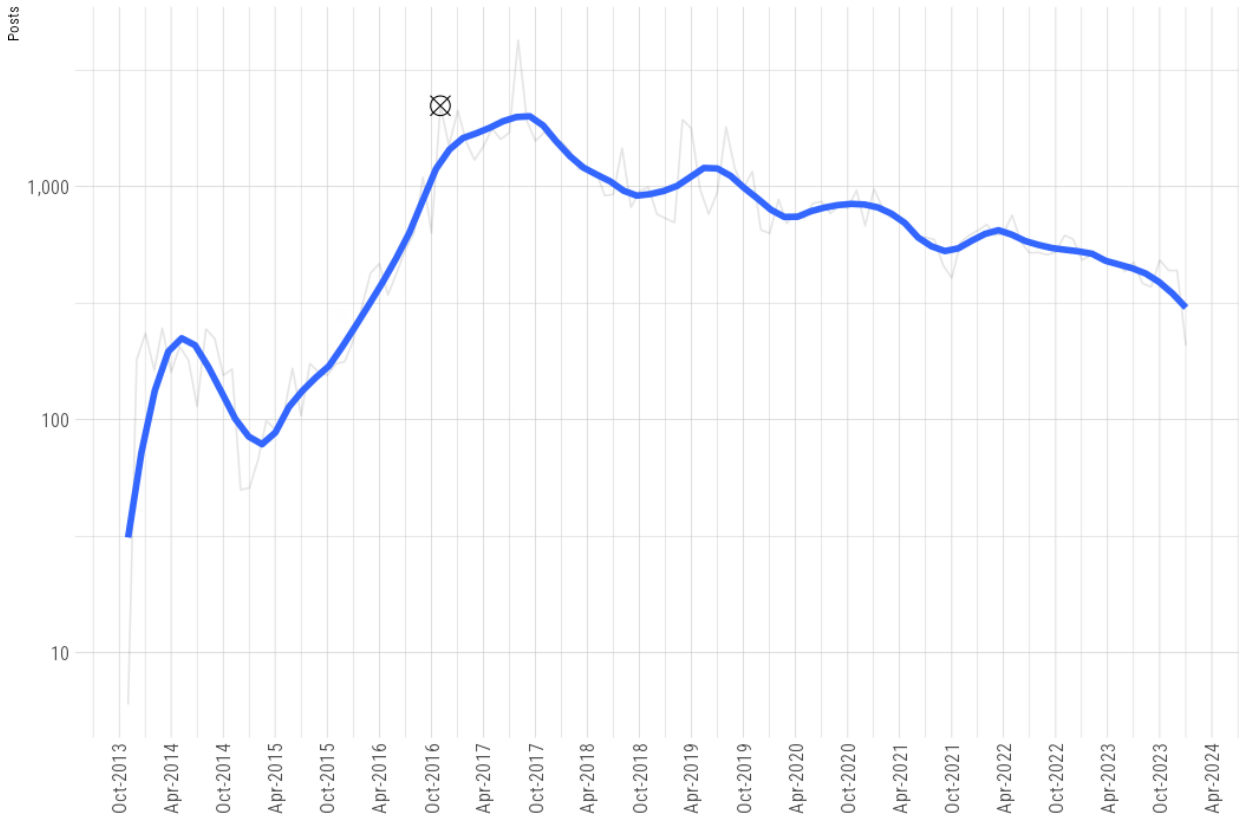
To further interrogate the data, our qualitative aspect of the project is informed by Clarke and Braun's approach to thematic analysis.[34] This method supports the identification, analysis, interpretation, and reporting of patterns in the data, and a variety of theoretical approaches, including complexity theory. This was chosen for its theoretical flexibility across sample size and datasets and utility in the identification and elaboration of themes from the data as dictated by the research question. The researchers identified quantitatively significant themes from the language model in Table 1. These were constitutively organised under grouped themes (later demonstrated in Table 2). Not every abbreviated topic model of sentences was found to be relevant to the research questions, or able to be constitutively organised, as noted later. From there, the model's representative data (found in the Online Supplement) was examined within the parameters set by the grouped themes, where the material expressly discussing white nationalism was subject to in-depth content analysis. This allowed us to gain insight into peer-to-peer constructions of white nationalism within the 4chan archive. Before we turn to the results, as a final note, this study received ethical approval from the authors' university before research commenced (see Ethics Statement).

There are clear limitations to this approach. The posts on 4chan are reflective of 4chan views only: it may not be applicable or generalisable to every online/digital white nationalist context. Further, it is constrained by the dates of the posting, and the post content may change or trend in a different direction after the publication of this work. With the well-established breadth and diversity of online ecosystems, across the likes of Reddit, 8chan, Neinchan, Gab, Kiwifarms, Stormfront, Ironmarch, Telegram, Discord and so on, our findings exclusively reflect the constructions of 4chan posters.

Results and analysis

Figure 1 gives an initial overview of the frequency of white nationalism discussion on /pol/. As the figure suggests, monthly discussion of white nationalism sees an initial oscillation before growing steadily from early 2015 to peaking late 2017. The crossed circle in the figure represents a Bayesian estimated change point for the data, which denotes an important period where the timeseries altered because of an abrupt change. With a 97 percent probability, the results indicate that November of 2016 represent a changepoint in the model. In other words, white nationalism discussion increased substantially ahead of that date, and then slowly declined. Modelling with various other parameters (e.g. season, trend, outlier detection, etc.) point to other potential change points on either side of November 2016, but that particular month featured continuously throughout our analysis.

Figure 1: Monthly 'white nationalism' posts on /pol/



Note: crossed circles represent Bayesian estimated change points with a probability greater than 90%

According to our topic modelling results, 73 topics best represent the spread of white nationalism-focused discussion among users on 4chan's /pol/ board. Table 1 shows an abbreviated version of the model (i.e. 35 topics), focusing on topics that represented at least 1 percent of all sentences in our dataset. The Online Supplement contains a full account of our topic model results, including statistically representative sentences, words, and the posts from which they originated. That data informed the names we developed for each topic, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Abbreviated topic model of sentences discussing white nationalism (WN) on 4chan

Topic name	Size	Topic name	Size
A: Defining WN vs Nazism	2.46%	S: WN bad, wrong, evil	1.26%
B: European nationalism	2.04%	T: (De)identifying	1.24%
C: Resistance to WN	2.04%	U: Performing WN	1.17%
D: Christianity and WN	1.94%	V: Threats and WN	1.1%
E: Gender, sexuality and WN	1.82%	W: F*** WN	1.09%
F: Labelling	1.68%	X: White supremacy v. WN	1.07%
G: The future of WN	1.67%	Y: WN 3 letter org conspiracies	1.07%
H: Name-calling	1.64%	Z: Debating Jewish support for WN	1.06%
I: Male WNs	1.6%	AA: 'shilling' WN[35]	1.05%
J: Alt-right and WN	1.58%	BB: Needing WN	1.04%
K: WN on social media	1.57%	CC: Left v. right WN	1.04%
L: American WN	1.53%	DD: 'R*****ed' WN	1.04%
M: Richard Spencer	1.48%	EE: Specific Jewish/ Zionist entities and WN	1.02%
N: Jewish nationalism and WN	1.45%	FF: Russia, Ukraine, and WN	1.02%
O: Nazism and WN	1.44%	GG: 'He' WN	1.01%
P: Female WNs	1.34%	HH: F***** WN	1%
Q: Hitler and WN	1.33%	II: Rising WN	1%
R: Memes	1.26%		

A thematic analysis of Table 1 led to the development of four major grouped themes of interlinking concepts. Minor or disparate topic names which did not align with major grouped themes were subsequently left out, with analysis focusing on the topics with greater representation.

Table 2: Grouped Themes

Grouped Theme	Constitutive Sub-Themes
Contesting white nationalism	• What is white nationalism? • European Nationalism • White Supremacy Debates • Fascism, Nazism and Adolf Hitler
Delineating ethnic, gendered and religious identities	• Ethnic/Racial Identity • Gender and Identity • Religious/Spiritual Identity
A community destiny	• Sovereign Territoriality • The Future of White Nationalism (positive and negative) • Justifications for White Nationalism
The threat of enemies	• Enemies of White Nationalism (outgroups)

These grouped themes will be detailed briefly before we consider the research questions.

1. *Contesting white nationalism*

First, the /pol/ community on 4chan is actively engaged with debating the definition of white nationalism, as either synonymous with *or* separate from Nazism. This is represented by A: defining WN vs Nazism (2.46 percent), C: Resistance to WN (2.04 percent), O: Nazism and WN (1.44 percent), Q: Hitler and WN (1.33 percent), and X: White supremacy v WN (1.07 percent). Nazism (formally National Socialism) is the German school of fascism that emerged in the interwar period and subsequently became state policy under the Third Reich. Fascism refers to a "difficult" ideology which centralises the notion of struggle and natural selection as an inevitable and desired element of human existence, opposition to rationalist and Enlightenment positions, support for elitism and the rejection of equality, racial (rather than class) collectivism, and ultranationalism.[36] Nazism exhibited these authentic fascist positions, but its elaboration on race theory, antisemitism, and Social Darwinism within a broader theory of history represent some distinctions in its beliefs.[37] As a consequence, while Nazism is a form of fascism, it is also a form of white supremacy given the Nazi pre-occupation with racial superiority and purity (as evidenced by the *Herrensvolk, Lebensborn,* and *Lebensraum* projects).[38] This matters because it demonstrates that white nationalists, much like academics, are interested in (re)defining and (re)imagining the nationalist project. This contest between white nationalism and white supremacy is further informed by constructions we detail later.

2. *Delineating ethnic, gendered, and religious identities*

Second, white nationalism posts discussed an ethnic religious and gendered identity, as represented by B: European Nationalism (2.04 percent); J: Alt-right and WN (1.58 percent), L: American WN (1.53 percent), and U: Performing WN (1.17 percent). Also supporting this were topic models on gender: E: Gender and sexuality (1.82 percent), I: Male WN (1.6 percent), and P: Female WN (1.34 percent). And finally, the D: Christianity and White Nationalism (1.94 percent) topic identifies the religious-specific discussion that also emerge in these contexts. However, religious themes emerge in other categories of lesser weight, with some disagreeing with Christianity, and others preferring paganism. These examples indicated a white, gendered, religious/spiritual order in white nationalist constructs. The various gendered categories also demonstrate the continued significance of gender in white nationalism.[39] Interestingly, language was not a prominent finding within the existing topic model, potentially because 4chan's /pol/ board is primarily in English.

3. A community destiny

Third, the /pol/ community engaged with notions of a white community with territory, and a white future or destiny for this community. Posts regarding the need for white nationalism, and a future for a white community, was represented by G: The future of WN, Y: WN 3 letter org conspiracies (1.07 percent). BB Needing WN (1.04 percent), and II: Rising WN (1 percent). This future was often rife with contestations about the death of white nationalism and the genocide of white people due to powerful, conspiratorial enemies.

4. The threat of enemies

Finally, the users on 4chan demonstrated considerable bifurcation by explicitly constructing outgroups. Outgroups were represented by H: Name-calling (1.64 percent), N: Jews and WN (1.45 percent), V: Threats and WN (1.1 percent), CC: left v right WN (1.05 percent), and EE: Jews and WN (1.02 percent). The primary outgroup was Jewish peoples and associated with this outgroup, Jewish nationalism. Other outgroups included Muslim peoples, or conspiratorial enemies within government.

With this brief detail, we now direct these findings, along with a deeper content analysis of representative posts (found in the Online Supplement), to address the research questions.

RQ 1: How are users on 4chan engaging with, and discursively constructing, white nationalism?

In answering RQ1, we have highlighted four grouped themes through which white nationalism is discursively constructed, that is, contesting white nationalism; establishing an ethnic, religious, and gendered identity; a community destiny; and articulating the threat of enemies. We discuss these now in turn, at times providing deeper context by drawing from the full posts from which these representative sentences originate.

Contesting white nationalism

First, while it is evident that white nationalism is routinely constructed on the platform, its precise nature is heavily contested. The platform provides a forum where users can learn about white nationalism and contribute towards white nationalist discourse. Questions such as "what is white nationalism"? and "Why is white nationalism a problem?" abound on the forum, as a starting example. As one poster says, "I get when people are angry at white supremacy stuff, but white nationalism isn't threatening to any other group of people..." There is discourse on the platform that suggests the feeling of being a persecuted group, whereupon nationalism is acceptable for other nations, but condemned when exhibited by white communities. These feelings (and hypocrisy) are often attributed to enemies such as Jews or the media. This also feeds into constructions of self-government and white (un)freedom.

Second, posters engage with notions of white supremacy and/or Fascism or Nazism being distinct from white nationalism while others oppose the notion, arguing that the concepts are indistinct, as an example: "White Nationalism is Nazism." But by contrast, other posters claim, "Fascism =/= white nationalism"; "An ethno state is not a fascist goal. white nationalism is not fascism"; "Nazism is not the same as white nationalism"; and "White Nationalism =/= White Supremacy". In more detail, a poster argues:

> *after doing deep reading into Nazi Germany and white nationalism. There is no Nazi Germany AND White Nationalism. It is Nazism OR White Nationalism. Nazis were for German supremacy over all Europeans. They killed millions of Europeans to try and establish their supremacy. The tying of NS Germany with pro-White politics is intentional divide and conquer; the logical extension of Hitler's purpose - to divide Europe against itself and allow it to be conquered by Communism and Jewish mafias.*

This either/or notion is further articulated in another post, where the user argues that white supremacy and Nazism related to a specific group, whereas the white community is more expansive: for example, "We are not interested in progressing only the German people but the whole of the White race." In another instance, a poster details exactly why they believe this:

> *Nazis are totalitarian. Free white people should not want some fascist leader or elite dictating how they eat, what art they can imbibe, what they do sexually speaking, etc...*

This is a significant representation, because it demonstrates a view of white nationalism which attempts to distinguish itself from white supremacy based on values.

Third, some believe white nationalism to be part of a government conspiracy, fomented by the CIA or FBI as a honey pot or psychological operation. For example, "white nationalism is an FBI psyop. Congratulations. You fell for an astroturfed glowie movement", and "white nationalism is a CIA thing." Such expressions represent the distrust some posters hold of White Nationalism, despite seeing its potential. As one poster articulates:

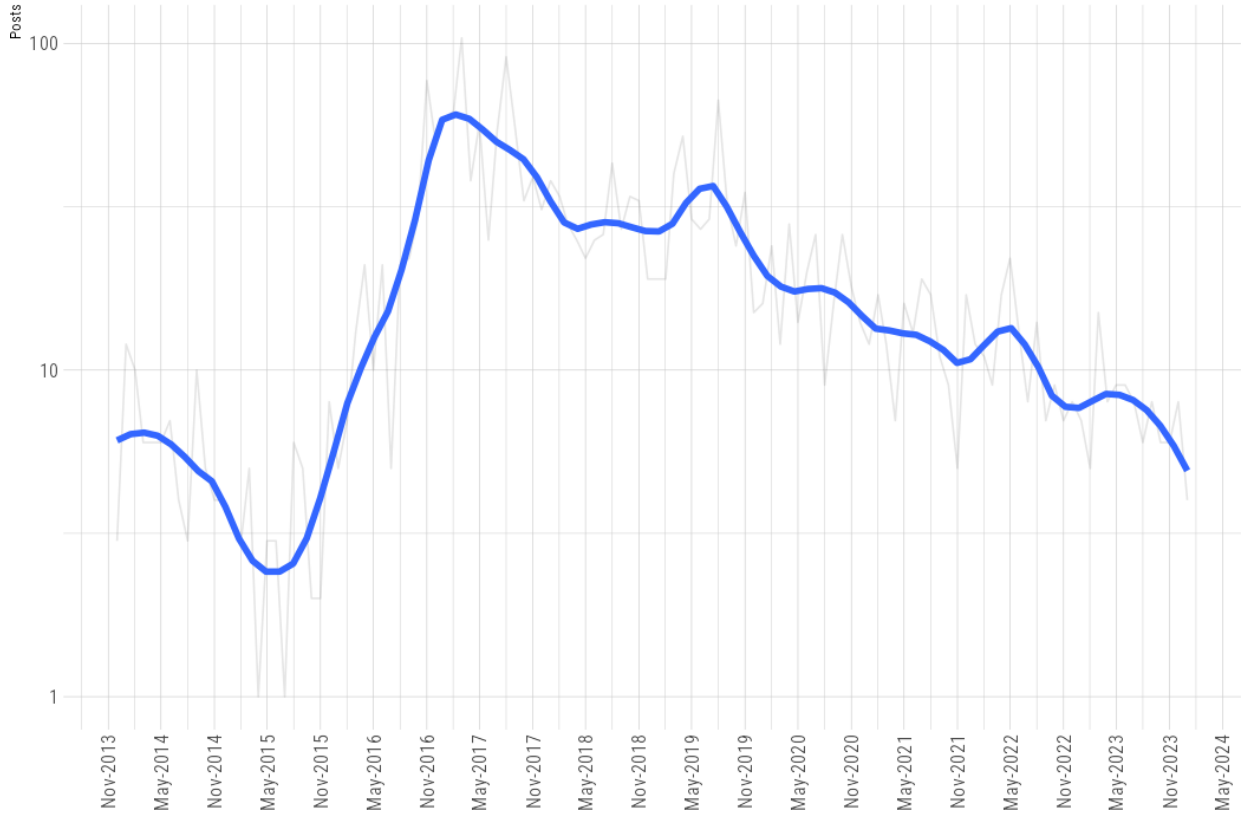
> *It is safe to assume that anyone that is publicly a Nazi at any future event is a plant. Any retard knows that it is bad for our image and will prevent us from the only cause that matters: the 14 words. Dont fall for the media re white nationalism though, they are trying hard to equate white nationalism with white supremacy with Nazism so we need to make a stand on that. Otherwise you will forever be on the retreat. They successfully made the alt right evil and it is just a term for non neocon right wingers. I dont know if it is a good idea to retreat any further, just stick with WN...*

The paradox posed by this post lies in the fourteen words in David Lane's *88 Precepts* ("We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children").[40] While Lane (and indeed the use of 88 being shorthand for Heil Hitler) was a white supremacist, the omission of 88 may be indicative of the poster's belief in the distinction between white nationalism and Nazism/white supremacy. Conversely, the poster may simply be unaware of the fourteen words deriving from the *88 Precepts*. Ambiguity does present across some posts.

Fourth, white nationalism certainly has its detractors on the platform as well. The dataset therefore provides insight into opposition to white nationalism on 4chan, as represented by S: WN bad, wrong, evil (1.26 percent), W: F*** WN (1.09 percent), AA: 'shilling' WN (1.05 percent), and DD: 'R*****ed' WN (1.04 percent). Individual posts further articulated this opposition to white nationalism on several fronts. First, some posters suggested that white nationalism was part of a Jewish conspiracy to control white people (e.g. "White Nationalism = K*k* Nationalism"). Posts that simply state "white nationalism is gay" are not uncommon, and others argue that "white nationalism is white supremacy." Others take issue with the homogenisation of ethnicity indicated by the concept of a white nation, as evidenced by posts such as: "Also, there is no such thing as white nationalism, f*****s. There is no white nation. Stop ruining actual cultures," and "White nationalism is r*****ed because not all white people are the same;" and "White nationalism is gay as f***. White is no ethnicity..."

These expressions, whether genuine, sarcastic or insincere, nevertheless outline the debate around white nationalism as consistent on the platform. Though the concept has received varying attention over the past eleven years, as Figure 1 demonstrates, Figure 2 indicates that attempts to define the concept (i.e. the largest topic, A: defining white nationalism) sees similar movement over time. As political scientists, we look at the November 2016 US election, or the March 2019 Christchurch white supremacist terrorist attack, as potential explanations where events have impacted discourse.

Figure 2: 'Defining white nationalism' topic over time



Delineating an ethnic, gendered and religious identity

The data reveals constructions of white identity on the platform, and views of a white community. The white nationalist project on 4chan's /pol/ emphasises a white, heteronormative, and gendered identity. As one poster remarks:

> *What is white nationalism though? you'd have to break it down and the definition applied to the system would depend on who is defining it." "patriotism" "ethnic group admiration" both plusses "wanting to get rid of n*****s" also a plus. i guess it would get you free first class train tickets.*

This post captures some of the key constructs of white nationalism as a form of nationalism with an inherent value system, an ethnic ingroup, and an outgroup. Other posters, such as one who suggested white nationalism is "white people who agree", indicate ideological conformity is a virtue and a key component of white nationalism's value system on the platform. People who are white, but do not "act white" (such as by observing Islam) are not considered to be white nationalists, demonstrating prescriptive behavioural norms. This, and other posts, imply that whiteness is not just an ethnicity, but a culture and form of behaviour commensurate with the broader ideology. Such posters emphasis the symbiosis of whiteness, culture, and normative behaviour (often informed by prescriptive moral codes of conduct). Whiteness is thus intrinsic to their concept of the nation, with imagined white values. Some posters suggest that racism and hate does not align with white values, but rather, that:

> *white nationalism is about love. Hate is for false flaggers and brainlets baited by (((them))).*
> *White Nationalism is about loving your own people first and foremost.*

The triple parenthesis is far-right shorthand for "Jewish". While this post may seem discordant, it is not an isolated construct on /pol/, with another poster stating: "White nationalism is love

for your own people. It has nothing to do with hate for other people. Rebuild the White man" and "White nationalism is about love for your own race." This speaks to an imagined community: one identified and limited by whiteness and associated normative behaviours, culture, and values. Clearly evident within this construct, however, is the sustained antisemitism and hostility towards out-groups – regardless of professions of simply loving one's "own race."

It also highlights the gendered element. One poster simply states that "White nationalism is for White men and women", while others say "white nationalism is for white men," or alternatively that "there is more white nationalism in women than you think." Other posters are less detailed, as evidenced by "White nationalism is Chad Nationalism".[41] Chad, on /pol/ is internet shorthand for a white, fit, heterosexual, dominant male. This is further suggestive of gendered as well as ethnic identities. Another poster emphasises bioessentialism, stating:

> *There is literally nothing to be done about female nature because it is biological. You can't have a prosperous with [sic] nation without white women and a harmonious relationship between white men and white women...*

This refers implicitly to reproduction, and a "future for white children" to abridge Lane's (1990) 14 Words. These quotes echo points in academic research specifically. For example, Mattheis, and Ingram and Campion, both indicate the construction of a binary, complementary gendered order within the nationalist project.[42]

The data also clearly show that this identity is also religious, but the nature of that religion is heavily contested. Some users on the platform, especially those geo-tagged to the United States, consider Christianity to be a fitting "white" religion. Accordingly, some posters state, "White Nationalism and Christianity. The best recipe for success, love, and prosperity the world has ever seen," and "white nationalism is christianity." Others hedge the matter: "Christianity is almost white nationalism." Interestingly, however, some posters from around the world, including the United States, believe that white nationalism and ancestor worship is their religion. Accordingly, "the only religion is white nationalism. Everything else is just fairy tales," and "White Nationalism is my religion. I worship my ancestors." Others argue that other religions serve a disruptive purpose, trying to prevent unity among the white community, with some attributing this disruption to Jews or "shills." White nationalism on /pol/, far from simply being a political position, can for others contribute to social norms and values via spiritual/religious traditions.

These constructions of an in-group – one which is defined by ethnicity, by gendered behaviour and conduct, and by a "white" spirituality, is telling. The creation and celebration of a defined nation/s, in the digital environment, speaks to an entitative group, or in Anderson's words: an imagined community.

A community destiny

White nationalists on 4chan have constructed a community identity based in their ideation of white nation/s, with specific appearance, values, behaviours, beliefs, and traditions. Like many nationalisms, this community is "both sovereign and limited" and this is seen across the /pol/ posts with respect to sovereign territory. This highlights the limitations of nationalism, where a given community – often bounded by common ancestry, language and culture – claim a geographically-bounded space. As one author suggests

> *We aren't slaves for foreigners but we are currently acting like it. We either demand respect and boundaries or we die.*

This mention of boundaries echoes in other posts, which highlight the territoriality and sovereignty of white nationalism, as "just wanting your own place." Elsewhere this was described as "White nationalism is about establishing a homeland for whites. Nothing more, nothing less." In another post:

> *why is it that white nationalism is a problem? if thats the case is black nationalism a problem? or jews wanting their own unique homeland?*

The logic of this justification and defence of an identifiable white community with exclusive use to territory appears elsewhere in the dataset:

> *Supremacy implies ruling over others while white nationalism simply means having the right to your own homeland without others stepping on you.*

Indeed, this "right of homeland" is essential to the territorial project, but also to white self-governance and sovereignty. White nationalism on 4chan is therefore geographically bounded, ethnically bounded, religiously bounded, and characterised by prescriptive values and behaviours. While some may interpret this as a form of enclavism, the segregation of peoples based on ethnically-loaded views, generally constitutes a form of separatism. Separatism has diverse forms, but for white nationalists, this generally means control of an existing, geographically bounded state, and political domination over non-conforming (out-group) citizens. The posters deny that this is a form of supremacy, however, justifying it as wanting their own territory rather than desiring the domination of others.

The destiny of the imagined community is tied to this point. Posts proclaim, "White Nationalism is the future," "The future is White nationalism.," and "White people need white nationalism. We need to be upfront about it. Diversity is killing us." As detailed more expansively (and showing an implicit belief in a white community bounded by ethnicity and culture):

> *I wanna live in my country with MY people. Not some Jihadi r****** s*******. My people, my culture. White nationalism on the rise.*

Of course, this belief in rising white nationalism is not universal: there are many posts lamenting the death of white nationalism or querying whether it was a "dead-end". This was, on some occasions, directly attributed to the threat posed by enemies.

The threat of enemies

The primary enemy of white nationalism, as constructed on 4chan's /pol/ are Jews and Jewish nationalism. Numerous topic models contained antisemitic content, or Islamophobia. There is also an undercurrent belief in a conspiracy engineered to prevent white nationalism. To unpack such conspiracies further, it was very common to see comments about Jews seeking to kill, undermine, or subvert white nationalism. This was evident across posts such as "The k***s dont want white nationalism," and "he is trying to make white nationalism Jewish." This feeds into antisemitic views on Jewish peoples undermining white strength and freedoms. Numerous posts express a similar conspiratorial belief that the white community is being bred into "one universal slave race without any type of culture or ethnic identity." At times, this was further tied to economic conspiracy theories. For example:

> *There's something you clearly don't understand about Jews, my squinty-eyed bugman friend. They LOVE nationalism for EVERYONE, except whites. Chinese nationalism? Jews fund it. African nationalism? Jews fund it. Jewish nationalism? Jews fund it. Arab nationalism? Jews fund it. Jews are only against white nationalism. Once you realize this, your entire argument collapses, because it's based on the idea that national socialism or fascism is inherently anti-Jewish. Indeed, there are more pro-Jewish examples of fascism in world history than there are examples of antisemitic fascism.*

These (and other) antisemitic conspiracy theories abound on the platform as a justification for the failure of white nationalism and are used as instruments of mobilisation. Victimhood and grievance narratives on 4chan suggest conspiratorial forces at play, as white nationalism is "not allowed to happen. Muslim rape gangs are allowed to happen. But not white nationalism. Why is that?"[43] These conspiratorial beliefs are generally vague in nature, suggestive of a greater or conspiratorial power – both within or beyond the formal government – that seeks to divide, conquer and subjugate an imagined white community, deprive it of self-sovereignty and determination, claim its territory, and erase its ethnic, cultural, and traditional distinctions. These discursive constructions on 4chan are important because they express the common belief among white nationalists that they do not have legitimate self-government, nor can they exercise free political will, due to these enemies. This, in addition to the other outcomes of RQ1, inform our consideration of RQ2.

RQ2: How can 4chan constructions of white nationalism inform the definitional contest that interlinks white nationalism and white supremacy?

What is white nationalism? Academia does not have ownership of pedantic debate. As discussed previously, some scholars suggest that white nationalism in inseparable from white supremacy and/or fascism. First, it is important to note that the 4chan community is not exclusively white nationalist: there are also white supremacists on the platform who stridently argue in favour of white supremacism because "white nationalism is gay as f***." Some on 4chan support the view that white supremacy and white nationalism are inseparable (e.g. "White Nationalism is Nazism"). This is not often associated with detailed posts explaining *why,* at least within the representative sentence topic modelling used here.

However, some relevant posts make detailed arguments in opposition to the "inseparable" argument (e.g. "I am all about white nationalism but not Nazism" and Nazism is not the same as white nationalism."). The arguments that oppose the "inseparable" view tend to relate to community destiny and governance. Some white nationalists on 4chan explicitly reject forms of fascism or authoritarian governance. Take the following post mentioned earlier: "free white people should not want some fascist leader or elite dictating how they eat, what art they can imbibe, what they do sexually speaking." Free speech is also of considerable interest on the platform as well, which would logically contradict support for an authoritarian regime. Posts do not often detail the mechanics of an idealised government for white self-determination, only an endorsement of its exclusive legitimacy as a form of government. Some, in supporting white nationalism, suggest simply "Its white people advocating for our own interests, for policies that benefit us first and foremost." As elaborated elsewhere:

> *I don't think people know what white nationalism IS but if they think it's national socialism they're stupid and wrong. They do know what white nationalism is. It is a country for whites only*

4chan posters in support of white nationalism show opposition to the overlaying of white nationalism with white supremacy. Indeed, some criticise Hitler for "destroying" white nationalism. There is little content captured via our topic modelling which would support a specific Nationalist Socialist or supremacist agenda, such as Nazi-style military expansionism or expansionist nationalism. The content on the platform is racist and belittling to other peoples, but in contrast to National Socialism, it generally does not support the master-slave (superior/inferior) project of white supremacists and National Socialists. A white supremacist or Nazi may abide by the presence of so-called inferior races as a slave or servant class to the racially pure *Herrenvolk,* or superior peoples. The white nationalist project would not support this, but champions instead (white) self-sovereignty, identified as control and use of sovereign

territory for an imagined white community, in which that community can exercise free political will. Again, points about sincerity and strategically sanitised expressions are to be considered. However, we believe the anonymous nature of the forum offers some grounds to take these white nationalism discussions at face value.

In turn, the 4chan data often frames white nationalism through ethnic identity with shared culture, traditions, values, and behaviours. While some posters believe they need to develop a greater "white consciousness" among the public, it is nevertheless evident that white consciousness exists within the online 4chan community. This community identifies its *natios* within an ethnic, gendered, and religious order. This *natios* is bounded by traditions, by behaviors (i.e., "acting white"), but also by broad brush beliefs: for example, "To be a White nationalist you just have to oppose genociding and replacing White people in White countries." Others go so far as to claim that white nationalism is not left or right. Rather, it is framed as an ethnic, cultural, and traditional membership – the broad horizontal fraternity of nationalism proper, in the legacy of Benedict Anderson's definitional work. It should be noted that ethnicity is not subject to special mandates (for example, 'tests' about who is white enough to be part of the ingroup), as posters suggest: "We are not interested in progressing only the German people but the whole of the White race." In other words,

> *Being white nationalist says nothing about your worldview. It says that race is fundamental to my worldview, i.e., that society is biologically constructed. That entails a great many other assumed facts and views on numerous other subjects, including social cohesion, individual actualization, social actualization, etc. "most liberals a few hundred years ago were white racialists" Most PEOPLE 100 years ago were racialists. It says a great deal about everything we concern ourselves with, as racialists, and about you, that you dismiss this as insignificant...*

This supports and informs definitions of white nationalism, its (de)legitimacy, and greater project.

The data generally supports the notion that white nationalism is a form of nationalism. The quote above, by way of example, implies the belief that humankind is naturally divided into nations, a core criterion expressed by many early seminal studies on nationalism. Rather than adopting the pseudo-Darwinist or biological determinist views of white supremacists, who hold strict notions of racial purity as an in-group mandate, white nationalists take a broader view of the nation. They have constructed "whiteness" as a common identity, separate from eugenic specificities, as exemplified by the quote below:

> *That is how I see White Nationalism being. All white ethnicities joined together for a common cause, freeing our people from the International Jew. I know a Russian is different from a German and a German is different than a Spaniard. But we all have a common enemy and goal.*

This belief in a common enemy and goal is common across white nationalist legitimations on 4chan.

It also dovetails with other aspects of white nationalist discourse on 4chan: a) white people constituting an entitative community, and b) with ascertainable characteristics associated with an ethnic (imagined) white identity inherent to the *natios*. This commonality canvasses physical appearance (whiteness) and gender, but also language, behaviours and beliefs, culture, and traditions. Such discourses create an imagined political and ethnic community, identifiable by a broad criterion of traits, via peer-to-peer discourse and networks. This imagined community is limited – limited by its traits – but also limited by its claims on territory. As mentioned earlier, there is insufficient evidence to support an expansionist agenda, rather the nationalist agenda

is "a country for whites only" where they can achieve legitimate self-government through the free exercise of political will.

From this we can conclude that 4chan constructions of white nationalism inform the definitional contest interlinking white nationalism and white supremacy. It does this by exposing the way in which white nationalism is contested, but also how it is understood by the white nationalist community. By interrogating their definitional contest, we can better understand the ways that white nationalists distinguish themselves from white supremacists and fascists, in a manner that suggests genuine belief in that distinction, rather than the anodyne phrasing or rhetorical distance noted elsewhere.

Discussion and Conclusion

As our data suggests, there is no single white nationalism, but many white nationalisms constructed and discussed in digital spaces. The diverse contestations on 4chan elucidate the multiplicity of beliefs with peer-to-peer nationalist constructions. Much like other discourse on 4chan, such beliefs are subject to ideological negotiation and debate.[44] It is through such debate that sense-making and meaning-making can occur, with noted supporters, detractors, and conspiracists augmenting the discourse. We assert that users on 4chan are engaging with, and discursively constructing, white nationalism. These constructions arguably meet the criterion to be considered a form of nationalism, as distinct from the oft repeated claim that it is inseparable from white supremacy. White nationalist posters argue that they are not supremacists, who pursue a greater project for the expansion of their race and subjugation of others into their service, nor Nazi, with concepts of racial purity and superiority. Instead, they often pursue an ethnopluralist agenda, professing to seek homeland/s where "whites" can exercise their political will and self-sovereignty. White people are seen to constitute a political community with identifiable traits that meet the criterion for a *natios*. This imagined community is territorially and ethnically limited, in which sovereign self-rule is seen to be the only legitimate form of government. In contrast to fascists, they do not generally seek an authoritarian or dictatorial style of government. We argue that these details distinguish white nationalism as a form of nationalism, and as distinct from both white supremacy and fascisms, including Nazism. In doing so, we contend that 4chan constructions on white nationalism can, and do, inform broader definitions on white nationalism – albeit with the limitations described earlier.

Despite this debate, the very existence of white nationalism is under academic contest with the works of Rigney and Holmes. Nationalism is no stranger to debate, with many definitions and distinctions. By contrast to elite-driven nationalism associated with national policy, white nationalism emerges from the horizontal comradery of the imagined political community, often in connection with digital environments. As a result, individual interpretations of the ideology may defy specific definition, with variance across its following. In attempting to define white nationalism based on 4chan posts, we note the central axiom of nationalism appears to be the belief that humanity is naturally or organically divided into nations, and that these nations have political, territorial, and self-governmental attributes, exclusions, and limitations. Ethnonationalism expands this further, with ethnic distinction. Fundamental to ethnonationalism is identity politics. At the heart of /pol/ discourse supporting white nationalism is the fundamental belief in distinct white communities and identities, denied meaningful and legitimate self-government, which becomes anchor point of their political mobilisation. This white identity, white nationalists believe, requires sovereign territory for its preservation – much like other ethnonationalist movements. The components of this are unpacked further in Table 3, with our suggested definition of white nationalism.

Table 3: Defining White Nationalism

Central axiom		Criterion	Characterised by	White Nationalism typically includes beliefs about:
Organic or natural division of humanity into nations	*Which forms the basis of*	Ethnic beliefs	Ascertainable characteristics, ethnic distinction, identity, physical appearance, language, ethnic preservation.	White characteristics, such as appearance, but also whiteness as a behaviour, white culture, and collectiveness
		Political beliefs	An imagined horizontal community, a political entity with shared fate and will, fraternal.	A horizontal, entitative white community with shared fate and political will
		Territorial beliefs	A geographically bounded territory, limited, constructions of specific space and place for a nation/division of people	The control and use of territory by white people
		Sovereign beliefs	Legitimacy of governance contingent upon self-determination, self-governance, sovereign will, sovereign community	The exercise of political will by white people
General Definition	Generally, white nationalism describes the belief that humanity is naturally divided into nations, with white nations that possess distinct ethnic, political, territorial, and sovereign claims.			
Specific Definition	Specifically, white nationalism is a form of ethnonationalism which advances the interests of an imagined political community, with distinct and ascertainable white characteristics; that champions the control and use of territory by the white community; and where meaningful sovereignty is contingent upon the free exercise of white political will to shape their collective destiny.			

Omitted from the table above is religion. This is because of how religion was discussed and constructed in the available data. For example, some posters said the "white nationalism is a religion" and "the only religion is white nationalism", supported Christianity as a supporting religion for white nationalism, or conversely, supported paganism. Because of this variability, we have not included it in the minimal definition while still acknowledging it can play a part. In sum, we argue that white nationalism constitutes a form of nationalism, and nationalism can provide a framework through which white nationalism on 4chan can be defined and understood. It exists in the consciousness of its believers however it may appear to others. As suggested by Plamentaz, ideologies can be "peculiar to one person" or reflective of society or a section thereof.[45]

In our estimation, 4chan's /pol/ provides a viable means through which online discursive constructions of white nationalism could be understood, and a rich source of data we would urge others to draw upon. We found evidence that 4channers are actively contesting meanings and understandings of white nationalism. This contest continues. Nevertheless, across 92,000 posts, we identified the construction of ethnic (white), gendered, and religious identity, a

collective desire for exclusive use of territory, a belief in a collective destiny, and the threat of enemies who actively seek to subjugate or erase this identity and interfere with its legitimate self-government. Such constructions informed our second finding: that white nationalism, as constructed on the board, can and does inform the academic definitional contest on white nationalism. As a result, we argue that white nationalism constitutes a form of ethnonationalism proper amongst supporters. Beyond assessments of the impact of contemporary politics on digital white nationalist communities, though, we believe these (self) expressions of white nationalism offer the potential for considerable academic insights in the future, and our hope is that this study prompts future research into online extremism that draws from the expansive field of nationalism studies, instead of overlooking it.

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Endnotes

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PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH NOTE

The Evolution of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): Ideology, Strategy, and Aspirations

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Abstract: The re-emergence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan has caught the state off guard. This research note details the evolution of the threat posed by TTP given the shift in the terrorist organisation's ideology, strategy, and modus operandi, and highlights the differences between the present and previous waves of terrorism in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. In doing so, it also brings to fore the much less explored role women often play in financing, facilitating, and – at times – carrying out terrorist activities. The new TTP leadership under Noor Wali Mehsud, as well as a different political context with the Afghan Taliban in power in Afghanistan since August 2021, once more make it imperative to focus on the twin subjects of extremism and terrorism in Pakistan. In its new iteration, the revitalised TTP needs to be reviewed in a different light. In this research note, these shifts are explored in detail, including its connection with the Afghan Taliban, a new leadership and the subsequent changes in ideology, tactical evolution, willingness to form new alliances, involvement of women, and an enhanced administrative structure make the current wave of TTP extremely dangerous.

Keywords: Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), militancy, terrorism in Pakistan, women in militancy, Afghan Taliban

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Introduction

Pakistan has been facing the scourge of terrorism since the 1980s, but incidents of terrorist violence reached a peak in the last two decades, corresponding with the war on terror. With regular suicide attacks targeting state institutions and public spaces, as well as perennial concerns about the war in Afghanistan and its implications, Pakistan has been a primary site of terrorist activity. Estimates of casualties vary – some reports note that more than 48,000 civilians lost their lives in attacks until 2015,[1] while others count the loss of civilian life to around 16,000.[2] But beyond the statistics, it is the insecurity brought about by terrorism that has added to the long-term economic and social traumas afflicting the country.

Pakistan's counter-terrorism campaign has traditionally been led by its military which carried out multiple operations in the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the north-western province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in an attempt to rid the country of terrorist elements – most prominently the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). With the launch of the last major operation in 2017 – called *Radd-ul-Fasaad* – there began a gradual shift towards a phase of relative peace. However, there has since been a resurgence of terrorist activity, coinciding with the coming to power of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in August 2021.

This rise in terrorist incidents is due in part to the re-emergence of TTP in Swat – an area which had become central to the outfit's activities and had to undergo a major military operation for normalcy to return. The revival of TTP comes with revised ideological and operational approaches that threaten to make it a more dangerous entity than before. This raises questions about the level of preparedness in Pakistan for potentially a new age of terrorism in which TTP is rebranding itself as an alternative to the state, and in doing so, reaching out to new potential recruits, including women. This warrants further research on TTP that seeks to understand its evolved state. In this research note, the evolution of the TTP and its relationship to the Pakistani state in its post-2021 iteration will thus be explored. Using existing literature, interviews with security experts, and analysis of TTP's own literature and social media outreach, a revised understanding of the current phase of TTP will be examined – following a brief overview of the history of terrorism involving the outfit.

A History of Terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: 2002–2018

TTP was established in 2007 as an alliance of several militant groups in KP that shared an ideology and a set of objectives. These included waging a defensive *jihad* against the Pakistan military and enforcing a particularly conservative understanding of *sharia*.[3] Like its Afghan counterparts (the Taliban), this included strict gender segregation, prohibitions on cultural traditions and music, and regulating mosques, as well as economic policies, such as forbidding elections and interest-based banking. Emphasis on some aspect of *sharia* might change given the nature of the group or its leadership, but an overall restrictive and conservative interpretation was what gave them common ground.

This alliance under the TTP umbrella allowed militant groups to share resources, and project a force much greater than their individual capacities. But constituent groups still enjoyed vast operational autonomy and usually operated in different parts of KP. Therefore, the nature of the conflict differed from region to region. The threat was at its deadliest in the erstwhile FATA territories, which have since been merged into KP.[4]

Pakistan has traditionally pursued a two-pronged strategy to deal with terrorism in KP in the past. In addition to military operations against TTP-constituent groups – aimed at capturing and eliminating key individuals and clearing populated regions of terrorists – successive governments also pursued a policy of appeasement by negotiating peace deals. Several such agreements have been made (and broken) since 2001.

Military operations can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase, from 2002 to 2005, was before the formation of TTP. Called *Al-Meezan*, it included multiple land-based operations with airborne support, specifically FATA agencies. This resulted in a major blowback from militant outfits that retaliated by hitting civilian populations and urban centres across Pakistan. The country was unprepared to deal with the widespread terrorist activity, and the operation culminated in a peace deal that handed over control of Swat and surrounding territories to the militants.[5]

The second phase started in response to the Lal Masjid incident in Islamabad. Lal Masjid (or Red Mosque), a prominent mosque-*madrasa* complex, was led by two brothers who were sympathetic to the cause of extremists. In 2007, members of Lal Masjid took hostage some Chinese workers, and demanded the imposition of *sharia* in Pakistan in return for their release while also threatening violence.[6] The then President, General Pervez Musharraf, responded by launching a military operation that ended up killing one brother and capturing the other. It also resulted in the killing of a number of *madrasa* students who were either armed or being used as human shields by militants.[7] Militant outfits reacted to this operation, and the newly established TTP issued a *fatwa* against the Pakistan military, propelling a series of major acts of terror against the security forces including one on the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the army in 2009.[8] The second phase of operations was a response to a significant increase in attacks against military forces. Operations *Rah-e-Raast* and *Rah-e-Nijaat* targeted militants in Swat, as well as FATA agencies. The most important offensive was in South Waziristan, which had served as the stronghold of TTP and given refuge to its leader Baitullah Mehsud. While Mehsud eluded capture, the agency was declared cleansed of militant elements as this second phase ended in 2010.

On at least eleven different occasions between 2002 and 2010, the state negotiated peace treaties with militant outfits in KP, even allowing them to control significant territory. Every time, militant outfits seized the opportunity to regroup and strengthen before violating the terms of the peace deals and relaunching attacks.[9] At the conclusion of the second phase of military operations, violence spread across the country once again.

North Waziristan was considered the hotbed of terrorist activity and a safe haven for a host of militant outfits. But it was not targeted by the military initially; this hesitance resulted in unchecked violence for several years in multiple parts of the country. It was only after a change in military leadership that Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* was finally planned and launched in North Waziristan in 2014 as the third phase of military operations began. This also invited retaliation from TTP, most notoriously in the form of an attack on a school in Peshawar in which 144 children were killed.[10] This drew massive public outrage against TTP and pushed Pakistan to announce its National Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism. In late 2016, *Zarb-e-Azb* was declared successful. The Pakistani army has since engaged in Operation *Radd-ul-Fasaad* – a series of intelligence-based operations aimed at flushing the remnants of the TTP from Pakistan.[11] In 2019, Pakistan declared victory against TTP, claiming that the threat was neutralised. As the last few years have shown, this is far from the case.

Understanding the Revival of TTP

Following military operations, Pakistan enjoyed some years of relative peace. Several TTP leaders and fighters were killed or imprisoned in Pakistan and Afghanistan. But TTP began restructuring under new leadership, threatening to be more dangerous that before. It is now led by Noor Wali Mehsud who took over after Maulana Fazlullah was killed in a June 2018 drone strike in Afghanistan. Under Mehsud, TTP is emerging with more internal cohesion, a new ideological narrative, and a different operational and administrative plan.

The Afghan Taliban continue to be deeply analysed following their latest political setup in Afghanistan, but TTP remains relatively understudied. Anotnio Giustozzi for instance, explores TTP in the broader context of regional militancy and the Taliban's return, particularly in the way it engages with regional actors and ideologies, with even al-Qaeda aiming to influence it.[12] Giustozzi also notes that TTP's organisational dynamics are shaped by both internal and external factors, with its capacity enhanced due to support by the Taliban, greater autonomy of regional commanders, and the ability to operate more freely across the border. While not formally merging with global networks like al-Qaeda, this has reinforced TTP's independent course while maintaining ideological and operational ties with other militants.[13]

Abdul Basit, who has also worked extensively on terrorism in the region, traces TTP's trajectory through phases of rise, decline, and resurgence in 2021. He describes the group as reinventing itself, following the Taliban's insurgency model, revamping its communications and propaganda capabilities, and shifting from indiscriminate violence toward more strategic targeting, while forging alliances with other militant factions. Basit also emphasises that the Taliban significantly shape TTP's renewed strength, and while they are distinct entities with different objectives, the territorial sanctuaries provided by the former have empowered TTP. Basit points to short-lived treaties between Pakistan and TTP in 2021 and 2022 as failing because of TTP's ideological goals and refusal to accept Pakistan's constitutional framework.[14] He notes also that TTP has become "more lethal since its resurgence in 2020" and a "markedly different organization politically, strategically, and operationally," that has expanded its operations to Balochistan and Punjab within Pakistan, as it tries to transform its activism "from a tribal struggle into an urban insurgency."[15] As a result, as Naveed Hussain suggests, TTP's growth is a central security challenge for Pakistan and a core point of tension in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, with the Taliban's limited willingness or capacity to constrain TTP frustrating Islamabad, and contributing to cross-border violence and periodic military escalations between the two states.[16]

According to some estimates, the umbrella group has only around 2,000 to 3,000 fighters, though others suggest this figure could be as high as 6,000. But the number of active fighters becomes less important when one considers TTP's impact, the possibility of its increased recruitment, and its geographic spread. Between July and October 2020, over a hundred cross-border attacks were reported to have taken place.[17] In 2022, more than 150 attacks were launched by TTP across the country.[18] However, statistics vary widely as it is difficult to pinpoint the source of an attack, and whether it is directly linked to TTP. It is clear however that the ecosystem of terrorism in the country is revived when TTP gains strength. According to one study, there were 151 attacks in Pakistan in the first six months of 2022, followed by 228 from July to December. In the first half of 2023, 389 people were estimated to have been killed in 271 attacks across the country, with 174 of these attacks taking place in KP. This shows a rising trend in violence, and one that does not seem to be reversing even as 236 militants were reportedly killed in the first half of 2023.[19] This dangerous trend has continued since then – in 2024, Pakistan experienced 521 terrorist attacks, claiming 852 lives (primarily in KP and Balochistan),[20] with almost as many attacks in the first three quarters of 2025 alone.[21]

Compared to the previous waves of terrorist violence, TTP today represents a different challenge since the targets of attacks have changed. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), there were 809 terrorism-related incidents between 2002 and 2006, causing an estimated 3,531 casualties including over 43 percent citizens and almost 18 percent security personnel. From around 2007 until around 2018 – the period of TTP's activity – SATP records 14,048 attacks and 59,422 casualties. Of these, over 30 percent were citizens, 10 percent Pakistani security forces, and over 53 percent militants. In TTP violence since 2019 until August 2023 a total of 1,234 terrorism-related incidents had been recorded. And these led to 3,301 causalities – of which 28 percent were civilians, 38 percent were security forces, and 33 percent were militants.[22]

These numbers reveal two important trends. Firstly, there is a shift in the targets of attacks, with more focus now on security forces – this can be explained through the shifts in ideology, which is discussed in the next section. Secondly, militant deaths as a proportion of all casualties are much lower than those of security forces and civilians, demonstrating that the response has been inadequate given the new context.

As part of reforms initiated by Noor Wali Mehsud, TTP has followed an approach of mergers with other terrorist groups, support to the Taliban, reducing attacks against civilians, and bringing into its fold erstwhile opposing groups.[23] In the sections below, these aspects of the TTP are examined in order to understand how it has changed from the past, and subsequently, why the state needs to revise its policies as well.

The Afghan Taliban Connection

Since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, TTP has found a safe haven in Afghanistan. This is described as more than just an alliance, as there is patronage of TTP by the Taliban. TTP leaders and fighters have been released from prisons and believed to have "de-facto political asylum and freedom of movement." Moreover, Noor Wali Mehsud describes the Taliban as models to follow, and his organisation as a branch of the Taliban in Pakistan.[24]

In a statement on 17 August 2021, TTP became the first militant group to celebrate the takeover of Kabul, hailing it as a great victory. It renewed its declaration of allegiance, and Mehsud voiced his commitment to work for the stability and survival of the Taliban. There was an immediate strengthening of TTP, as hundreds its members and leaders were set free, and began addressing large gatherings where they publicly praised the Taliban and declared aims for a similar victory in Pakistan.[25]

This is a primary stumbling block in Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan, and the Taliban have consistently argued that they are not supporting TTP. However, it is evident that there are several ways in which TTP has benefitted from the Taliban's presence. There is a "permissive environment" for TTP, as reported to the UN Security Council by its Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team.[26] This is defined as a state of deliberate non-interference where militants enjoy de facto immunity, freedom of movement, and administrative travel passes. This support has evolved into a sophisticated symbiotic relationship where Afghan authorities provide not just sanctuary, but active logistical and kinetic backing. This includes granting access to NATO-calibre weaponry and night-vision equipment, while facilitating the establishment of new training infrastructure in provinces like Kunar and Nangarhar. Within these camps, al-Qaeda technical experts are believed to provide specialised training for suicide operations, often conducted under the front name Tehrik-e-Jihad Pakistan to grant the Taliban leadership

a layer of operational deniability. There is a strategic relocation policy where TTP cadres are moved into urban centres and military compounds to shield them from cross-border strikes from Pakistan. By providing monthly financial stipends and allowing the TTP to serve as a regional umbrella for other foreign fighters, the Taliban treat the group as an ideological cause rather than a liability, prioritising "regime unity" over international security obligations, as highlighted in the reports submitted to the Security Council.[27]

Leadership and Ideological Narrative

Under Noor Wali Mehsud, TTP has been given a new ideological narrative. Described as the "first thinking leader" of TTP by a security analyst and journalist interviewed for this study, his leadership has led to major shifts in TTP's strategy. For instance, rather than harbouring global ambitions, TTP appears to have a more explicit focus on Pakistan.[28] And there is a clearer strategy of targeting law enforcement agencies and avoiding civilian casualties. In order to gain more followers and recruits, TTP is developing a narrative of victimisation and subsequent struggle for independence. It does so by presenting the Pakistani state as un-Islamic, unjust, and illegitimate and then by presenting itself as an alternative.

Coupled with TTP's ideological shift is its enhanced communications strategy. It has invested in increased social media output and propaganda, producing texts and videos, and using multiple languages for greater outreach through its media wing.[29] TTP's online presence and social media messaging, much like those of the Taliban, are indications of the group's ability and desire to rebrand itself.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Noor Wali Mehsud's own text published in 2017. Provocatively titled *Inquilab-e-Mehsud: Firangi Raj se Amreeki Samraaj tak* (Mehsud's Revolution: From Foreign Rule to American Imperialism), the cover page of this highly evocative and widely distributed e-book reveals its intents. In addition to an image of Mehsud, there are four pictures: soldiers of the Pakistani army, a western (presumably American) army, a historical photograph of Sikh soldiers, and a military helicopter. Under this collage are the words: "History, lessons, and analysis: history is a teacher, and teaches from past mistakes in order to provide guidance in the future". The book is dedicated to martyrs of Islam who have faced the oppression of American, NATO, and "so-called Muslim countries" after 2001, defeated their armies, and sent thousands of their soldiers to hell. This sets the tone for Mehsud's ideological warfare.[30]

Mehsud's stated reason for writing the text is to counter propaganda and lies about TTP, and to reveal the true faces of the Pakistani military and state. After going through centuries of the history of the Mehsud tribe and its battles with outsiders, he gets to TTP's major aims today. TTP is fighting a defensive war, he declares, and wants to create a Caliphate of Islam. This requires avoiding conflicts with other religious organisations – thus opening doors for groups that may not be ideologically aligned with TTP. After all, he notes, the Pakistani army and the US have collaborated to oppress the tribal regions, and TTP is fighting its *jihad* in order to counter their nefarious goals. This is a defensive *jihad* of an oppressed tribe that was labelled a terrorist, and TTP's goals now are to create a Caliphate, destroy the democratic system, and carry out *jihad* to gain and preserve the independence of the tribes. Effectively, this is a war of independence from Pakistan.[31]

Tactical Evolution

In the new phase of TTP violence, the focus is on law enforcement and security agencies rather than public spaces or civilians. This shows the group's attempt to rebrand itself as a freedom movement in the eyes of Pakistanis.

This strategy was outlined in guidelines given by Noor Wali Mehsud in September 2018. As per TTP's official policy, its list of targets includes security forces (including the armed forces, intelligence agencies, paramilitary forces and police), government-allied militias, the ruling elite, and judiciary.[32] In one much publicised incident, TTP took security personnel hostages at a counter-terrorism centre in Bannu district of KP, with the military eventually killing all 33 terrorists in the operation that followed.[33] TTP has declared that the military is its primary target; in 2020 alone, as the group was beginning to reassemble, the army faced 110 attacks (73 percent of all TTP attacks), according to one estimate.[34]

Other state agencies such as the police have similarly faced violence – such as the January 2023 attack on a mosque that killed over a hundred people in Peshawar, including mostly police personnel.[35] As it is, according to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), there were some 150 attacks during 2022 by TTP and affiliate groups, resulting in more than 150 deaths, a majority of them belonging to law enforcement agencies.[36]

This also shows TTP's operational activity increasing since its revival every year since 2020. It has added more modern and sophisticated weaponry and equipment – with sniper rifles equipped with thermal scope particularly used against Pakistani security forces. And despite the increased attacks, civilian casualties have reduced significantly from the past.[37]

Alliances and Mergers

Another major change in this regard is the geographical spread of TTP's operations.[38] This is due to the many mergers that the group has completed across the country since July 2020, with influential commanders and erstwhile rival and breakaway groups, which has led to an increase in the number of claimed attacks. There were an estimated 149 attacks in 2020 of which only 48 occurred before 5 July, but as the merger process began, there were an additional 101 attacks by the end of the year.[39] Mergers also accelerated once the Taliban returned, and became part of the reform process undertaken by Mehsud.[40] From 2020 until June 2023, some 28 mergers were officially completed.[41]

Mergers allow TTP to enter into different regions in Pakistan. In southern Balochistan for instance, it actively sought alliances with separatist groups,[42] with two militant groups in Quetta and Kalat joining in April 2023.[43] This further strengthens the argument that TTP is rebranding itself as an insurgent group that opposes the Pakistani state, fights for independence, and presents itself as a political alternative. By allying with other disenfranchised or dissatisfied entities – with little in common geographically or in terms of the nature of grievances – it is announcing itself as more of a political force.

These alliances are a new aspect. As a prominent security analyst noted, TTP did not make any real efforts in this regard in the past, with only a desperate attempt by Baitullah Mehsud to strike a deal with al-Qaeda. There was also little functionality in an official alliance with the Punjabi Taliban. Now, with Mehsud at the helm, there are alliances with the Afghan Taliban and Baloch insurgent groups, among many others, as well as reports of possible alliances (or efforts of alliances) with the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan, though the latter's animosity with the Afghan Taliban make this a difficult prospect. There are also reports of possible mergers with al-Qaeda.[44]

While alliances make TTP a powerful force, they also come with challenges. The attack on a

Peshawar mosque in January 2023 that killed over a hundred people was initially claimed by a TTP-affiliate, but an official TTP spokesman later distanced his group from the attack since it was not in TTP's agenda to target mosques. It is not unlikely that groups now allied with TTP have their own approaches to expressing their intents and may not be entirely on board with Noor Wali Mehsud's directives and agenda, such as preventing civilian deaths.

Role of Women

In the context of Pakistan, and especially KP, female militants present a complex security problem due to their ability to bypass security check-posts usually manned by male police, as suicide jackets are easily disguisable under loose flowing fabric and modest religious clothing. There are perceptions of violence being a masculine domain, and men may be reluctant to verbally confront or conduct rigorous security checks when it comes to women. This can be exploited by militant groups as women can be employed as shields for transporting weapons, with cultural modesty norms granting them easier security clearance.

Former TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah also incorporated females suicide bombers in his organisation's ranks. Consider the case of two sisters who were assigned a suicide mission but were apprehended by security agencies in Swat in 2009.[45] Swat also became known for Mullah Fazlullah using the radio – and hence his popular moniker 'Radio Mullah' – to address women, which resulted in financial contributions to his organisation by women in addition to gaining their ideological support that then permeated into households.

This history can be extrapolated to the current context, with efforts focused on women – such as the launch of the magazine *Sunnat-e-Khaula* – meant to increase the appeal of TTP to women. Given the ideological and operational developments he has spearheaded, it is plausible that Noor Wali Mehsud will be more proactive in recruiting women. TTP has been reaching out to women through the English language *Sunnat-e-Khaula* that has since 2017 sought to appeal to educated and working-class Pakistani women. Contrary to patriarchal norms, it compels its readers to disobey male relatives in the name of righteous *jihad*. And while the text uses Pakistan's official historical and security narratives by presenting India and Pakistan as enemies, it also censures the Pakistan government and army for deceiving Afghan and Pakistani Muslims. In doing so, it declares the Taliban as Pakistan's last hope.

Conclusion: Pakistan and the TTP

With the revival of TTP, Pakistan initiated a policy of talks as the primary means of countering this re-emerged threat, with the Taliban touted as mediators. At the time, Pakistan offered general amnesty to militants if they laid down arms and returned to normal life in the country – an offer that was rejected by TTP.

Negotiations began in November 2021 despite TTP's reluctance, and a month-long ceasefire was announced in the first phase of talks. As meaningful progress did not take place, TTP began attacking Pakistani security forces once again by the end of the year. The next round of talks began in May 2022 and led to another temporary ceasefire. At the time, TTP compromised by limiting the demand of enforcing *sharia* to just the tribal districts rather than all of Pakistan, but insisted on making the erstwhile FATA a semi-autonomous region once again and demanded limited control of certain regions. The negotiation process ended with the killing of al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri on 31 July 2022, for which Pakistan was also blamed by TTP. A month later, attacks on Pakistan resumed with the ceasefire officially ending on 28 November 2022.[46]

Since then, Pakistan has categorically rejected any prospect of talks, leading to tremendous friction in the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship due to TTP violence.[47]

This has led to some of the worst border clashes in 2025, and Pakistan calling for "concrete, verifiable, and time-bound steps" from the Taliban to end TTP support.[48] There have also been targeted cross-border operations and air strikes against alleged TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan, further straining diplomatic relations.[49]

But this approach remains inadequate when it comes to addressing the challenge of TTP, which represents arguably the most immediate and serious concern for Pakistan. And as this research note has demonstrated, it is a concern that requires a new and multidimensional approach to the group. Noor Wali Mehsud represents a different kind of leader, keen on exploiting the state's narrative and failures when it comes to other parts of the country – such as Balochistan. In doing so, TTP adds new recruits, attempts to gain more followers, becomes more akin to an insurgency rather than just a terrorist outfit, and develops a political narrative in which it is a valid political actor against the Pakistani state. As a result, TTP's thinking leadership necessitates a serious re-examination of existing notions about the terrorist outfit – not just by the Pakistani state but the international community as well. After all, as history has shown us, terrorist outfits can evolve quickly – a more localised focus at one time does not mean that regional or global ambitions are precluded from any future iterations. And as Noor Wali Mehsud has shown, new narratives can be utilised to rebrand even a terrorist outfit.

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**The research and conclusions contained in this publication are attributable solely to the authors. They do not constitute the views of, nor should they be attributed to, any orgnisation with which the authors are affiliated.*

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH NOTE

Radicalisation in Coercive Online Communities: A Research Note

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Abstract: This research note calls attention to the urgent need for clearer conceptualisation and cross-sector collaboration in addressing the emergence of *Com networks*. These are decentralised online networks, or communities, that combine elements of sexual exploitation, misogyny, violence, and extremism. These communities, often operating across mainstream and encrypted platforms, facilitate the circulation of extreme, violent, and sexually abusive content. Participants, predominantly young males, pursue notoriety, control, and belonging, while algorithmic amplification fosters escalation and desensitisation. Com networks illustrate what has been termed by Marc-André Argentino and colleagues as the *hybridisation of harms*, where distinctions between sexual, criminal, and ideological motivations are increasingly blurred. The involvement of young people both as victims and coerced perpetrators highlights the need for trauma-informed, gender-aware, and developmentally sensitive approaches to prevention and disengagement. Traditional frameworks for understanding radicalisation and online sexual exploitation are insufficient for this complex and fluid threat landscape. This note argues that recognising and responding to Com networks requires interdisciplinary collaboration between law enforcement, clinicians, and researchers, and a shift toward integrated digital safety and public health strategies. Addressing this convergence of harms is critical for reducing risks of violence and radicalisation among vulnerable youth.

Keywords: Com networks, radicalisation, online harms, misogyny, trauma-informed prevention

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This research note highlights the need for a clearer and more comprehensive conceptualisation of recent developments in the processes leading to violent extremism, and extreme violence, related to *Com networks*. To understand the processes involved, the authors emphasise the need for cross-sector research collaboration, trauma-informed prevention, the need to make platforms safer, and exit intervention strategies targeted at communities where hybridised harms, blurred sexual and extremist motives and exploited youth come together through social media networks.

In a recent publication, the UK National Crime Agency's (NCA) National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2024–25[1] describes the rise of Com networks as a significant new threat in the online ecosystem. In this context, Com networks are loose decentralised online networks of individuals, usually operating on social media or instant messaging platforms, that routinely solicit, document, and share harmful, extreme, and misogynistic content. Participants can be characterised as sharing or producing progressively more extreme content (sexual, violent abuse, etc.), grooming victims, engaging in fraud, etc. aided by algorithmic intensification of material. Membership of these groups consists predominantly of young men (but young women may also be involved), who appear to be motivated by status, power, control, misogyny, sexual gratification, or a fascination with extreme content. Those most affected by Com groups in general are overwhelmingly children or young teenagers. Victims are most frequently young women, and particularly (but not exclusively) those from vulnerable communities where the specific behavioural and social conditions exploited by Com groups already exist. Of particular concern here is the fact that participation can foster a propensity for extreme violence, particularly among younger and, it seems largely male, individuals. They use platforms like Discord, Telegram, Snapchat, etc., as well as some gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms like Steam, and Roblox. The networks are essentially loose and informal which contain many features of gamification of engagement through competition for status/notoriety by increasing the severity of content or acts.[2]

Of concern with respect to radicalisation and terrorism, they are characterised by the routine circulation of harmful, extreme and, at times, violent content. This includes depictions of violence and gore, misogynistic rhetoric, but also (in striking contrast to more 'traditional' political extremist networks) includes child sexual abuse material (CSAM). This is potentially significant; the broader significance of processes like normalising sexual violence against women and children (which CSAM does) have been identified by Koch and Plant[3] and, consistent with this, the NCA highlights in particular how the CSAM material is not necessarily exchanged for sexual gratification, but plays a role in desensitising participants, normalising transgression, reinforcing membership within a community built around cruelty and notoriety, and gaining clout. Members are often motivated by status, power, misogyny, sexual gratification, or a broader fascination with extreme and violent content. The National Crime Agency warns that engagement with such material is almost certainly causing some individuals, especially younger males, to develop a dangerous propensity for extreme violence. In earlier days, this might have been limited to self-harm, but has recently increasingly emerged as targeted violence against schools and places of worship, for example.

Law enforcement and academic observers[4] have noted that Com networks cannot easily be categorised as either sexually motivated or ideologically extremist. Instead, they represent what Argentino et al. have described as the "hybridisation of harms",[5] where sexual exploitation, sadistic violence, extremist rhetoric, and cybercrime converge within a single space. Argentino identifies three main 'pillars' to the Com networks.[6]

Cyber Com

These networks are primarily involved in cyber-criminal activities such as SIM swapping, ransomware, swatting and various forms of social engineering data theft. He identifies recent popular cybercrime incidents linked to Cyber Com as Snowflake-related breaches, and Scattered Spider.

Sextortion Com

These networks relate to engagement in extortion/sextortion and involve attempts to induce vulnerable and at-risk minors into "self-harm, sending sexually explicit images, and spread illegal content like CSAM and extreme gore videos". Argentino identifies OSINT-based doxxing, social engineering and data dumping in efforts to create what are termed *lorebooks.* Lorebooks are significant steps in the processes of intimidation and entrapment. They are dedicated archives which contain information dumps of personally-identifiable information, as well as sexually explicit information about a specific individual, and are posted online for targeting the individual. Lorebooks preserve the trail of harm, becoming both currency for clout, and simultaneously a means of ensuring continued compliance by members should they waver in their commitment.[7]

Offline Com

Offline Com networks are focused on offline criminal activity. This is potentially the most significant element from a terrorism perspective, and embraces activities such as graffiti/vandalism, tire slashing, bricking, arson, random attack of strangers, stabbings, and even terrorism and bioterrorism. Groups like Maniacs Murder Cult, No Lives Matter, and some segment of 764 fall into this category, and may be characterised as accelerationist, occultic, and national socialist in nature. This form of engagement overlaps with the True Crime Community, with excessive attention to school shooting groups.

It is important to note that these categories are fluid: groups and individuals in these groups evolve rapidly, overlap, and often encompass elements of more than one type. It is also worth noting that for many participants sharing content is essentially a pragmatic action – sharing CSAM images, for example, does not necessarily indicate or relate to sexual interest in children. Individuals show many of the qualities Knorr-Cetina described as "complex global microstructures".[8] Complex global microstructures describe transnational, digitally mediated social formations where interaction and coordination occur without geographical proximity. These networks are bound by shared knowledge, technologies, and communication flows, creating intensified, real-time interconnectivity that transcends traditional spatial and institutional boundaries.

The context to this is the change in traditional threat profiles and extremist typologies that have recently emerged, which adds to the existing potential for violent extremism. Com networks challenge many of our conceptual assumptions about radicalisation processes and as a consequence call into question the capacity to predict and prevent acts of targeted violence for those engaged in this form of social media. This trend presents significant challenges for security planning and law enforcement, as the assumptions underpinning many conventional risk assessment frameworks no longer seem to adequately account for the diversity and

fluidity of these contemporary threat actors. The increasing prevalence of individuals whose behaviours and motivations fall outside established ideological categories highlights the need for revised conceptual models and analytic methodologies that can more accurately capture emergent patterns of risk.

However, this is a complex area of analysis, and we should note with caution that online extremist communities can also create their own internal restraints, moderating violent escalation. Glazzard and colleagues, for example, draw on subculture theory, affordance, and case studies of far-right and Islamist groups to argue that online spaces, as well as being criminogenic, may also often satisfy members' needs virtually, provide governance structures, and reduce as well as amplify real-world terrorist mobilisation.[9] This is a very important caution that merits further investigation. Furthermore, in the absence of reliable data on extent and levels of engagement it is also important not to overestimate both the novelty and significance of these networks, nor to underestimate the 'promiscuity' of engagement with social media.

Many researchers have noted that incidents of what might be characterised as violent extremism increasingly appear to lack a clear and consistent political or other ideological motive.[10] Such events create both complexity and interpretive uncertainty, which fuels public distrust and weakens the capacity of policymakers to build consensus around appropriate interventions. For practitioners, these dynamics signify an increasingly complex threat landscape, where lone-actor violence and online radicalisation may arise from unanticipated sources. This complexity, which has been growing over recent years, underscores the importance of adopting adaptive, evidence-informed approaches to threat detection, prevention, and resilience planning. To emphasise this further, Horgan and Taylor draw attention to the difficulty of understanding some contemporary terrorist motivation at psychological, ideological, social, and historical levels.[11] They urge clearer conceptualisation and interdisciplinary approaches, particularly noting ideological fluidity and blurred violence categories, and note "…the ideological promiscuity of today's terrorist actors' challenges whether we are well-equipped to answer motivation questions in a meaningful way…".[12]

Four areas of concern can be identified, representing challenges in understanding the processes of radicalisation, and in preventative policy responses.

1. *Hybridisation of Harms*

Unlike in most online communities sharing CSAM materials, in these spaces CSAM is not the only media available, is not necessarily of primary importance, and is not only shared for sexual gratification but serves as coercive leverage, social currency, and a marker of group belonging. This is not to say that these processes are new in online community activity (quite the reverse), but rather the range of material available, and the movement of people between different kinds of material, suggests additional, if not new, processes may be at work. In this potent mixture, what also seems to be distinctive is the introduction of explicitly political ideological influences.

2. *Community Dynamics*

Com networks are decentralised, often on mainstream platforms, and bind participants through shock content and cruelty. Membership is linked to status, notoriety, and power. Taylor explored how the Internet may possess criminogenic qualities that foster terrorism and other forms of online criminality through processes similar to those that characterise the functioning of Com networks.[13] He distinguishes between individual, social, and technological factors shaping

criminal behaviour and emphasised the Internet's role as an event factor creating affordances and opportunities. Drawing on complexity theory and Knorr-Cetina's concept of complex global microstructures, Taylor argues that qualities of these online spaces facilitate self-organising, adaptive networks that amplify risk and unpredictability.[14] Com networks seem to express these enhanced affordances and opportunities and similarly illustrate self-organising adaptive processes. This suggests that in this narrow context parallels can be drawn between terrorism, child abuse image trading, and other online harms, highlighting shared dynamics such as algorithmic enhancement, emotional engagement, online disinhibition, and transitions from online to offline harm.

3. Youth Involvement

Youth involvement in Com networks poses significant risks to participants as well as society: paradoxically adolescents engaged in these networks may be victims, coerced participants, or active facilitators of harm (and, as we see in many cases, all three; these roles are interchangeable, with migration between them). Vulnerable youth, including those with trauma histories, neurodiversity, bullying experiences, or social isolation, may be targeted through gaming platforms, gore forums, and social media. Grooming may escalate into sextortion, forced self-harm, animal abuse, and CSAM production, binding victims through humiliation and threats. These networks normalise misogyny, desensitise youth to violence, and can mobilise victims toward offline harm, including mass violence. Disengagement by victims is difficult due to coercion and status hierarchies, necessitating what probably needs to be characterised as trauma-informed prevention, protective platform design, and specialist exit interventions to break cycles of harm. Children, therefore, are not only victims but sometimes coerced perpetrators, essentially groomed, extorted, and trapped.

4. Misogyny and Extremism

Com networks reflect the misogyny of the manosphere and may act as incubators for grievance-based violence. Incel activity is evident in these communities and should be viewed within a wider ecosystem of harm where misogyny, sexual exploitation, and extremist content intersect. Com networks may use misogyny as an organising principle, often using humour as a tool, rewarding transgressive acts and reinforcing grievance-based worldviews that make vulnerable adolescents particularly at risk of recruitment and grooming.[15] The implications of this are that risk assessment should move beyond sexual deviance or political ideology alone, and consider a broad range of factors including misogyny, coercion, and online community participation. Prevention requires trauma-informed, gender-aware approaches, digital literacy, and safer platform design especially in relation to the functions of algorithms. Interventions must support disengagement and provide alternative spaces for belonging, while integrating mental health and grievance reduction strategies.

The extent of influence of Com networks needs additional investigation, and whilst as noted earlier it is important at this stage to not overemphasise their significance, some things are already clear. Traditional frameworks treat CSAM and extremism separately; but Com networks show overlapping motives (sexual interest, antisociality, grievance), and suggest a multi-agency and multi professional approach will be necessary. Law enforcement, clinicians, and policymakers will need to collaborate across domains (CSAM, cybercrime, extremism) to better understand the processes involved, and trauma-informed prevention and tailored exit interventions for adolescents will be critical. To both understand and address these problems, platform owners will need to acknowledge responsibilities. Orben and Matias argue that research on digital technology harms requires reform through stronger theory, open methods, and interdisciplinary collaboration.[16] They emphasise that platform owners must share data

responsibly and engage transparently with researchers to enable rigorous, independent investigations and produce credible, policy-relevant evidence on technology's social and psychological impacts.

Com networks illustrate a potential new and emergent threat where sexual exploitation, violent misogyny, and extremist culture converge. Addressing this convergence challenges traditional approaches to the study of radicalisation and terrorism, and requires interdisciplinary research, cross-sector collaboration, and innovative prevention and intervention strategies to both protect young people and mitigate against what may prove to be for some a new and powerful processes of radicalisation.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH NOTE

The New Grey Zone: How Terrorism in Europe Has Changed

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Abstract: This research note examines how terrorism in Europe has transformed over the past two decades, arguing that ideology-based frameworks no longer capture the most significant developments. The research note identifies six cross-cutting trends that have reshaped contemporary terrorism in Europe: the virtualisation of radicalisation and recruitment; the rise of lone-actor attacks; the growing salience of mental health vulnerabilities; ideological hybridisation; changing demographics, particularly the increasing involvement of minors; and increasingly compressed radicalisation trajectories. The research note contends that these trends are deeply interconnected and driven primarily by the expanding role of digital technologies. Together, they have produced a "grey zone" of terrorism, which is characterised by lone attackers who radicalise primarily online, defy clear ideological categorisation, and combine fragments of political ideas with psychological vulnerabilities, developmental issues, and deeply held personal grievances. This grey zone complicates detection, prevention, legal attribution, and public debate. Most fundamentally, the resulting violence sits uneasily with traditional definitions of terrorism, requiring a reassessment of prevailing concepts of radicalisation and terrorism in Europe today.

Keywords: Europe, Lone actors, internet, radicalisation, mental health, youth, technology, ideology

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, terrorism in Europe has profoundly changed. Yet, despite a vast and growing literature on the topic, there are surprisingly few studies that systematically explore the broader transformation that has taken place. Much of the scholarship remains focused on specific movements, ideologies, issues, or episodes. This research note attempts to close this gap by examining wider trends and developments, beginning roughly with the first major jihadist attacks on European soil — in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005 — which also marked the moment when the debate about so-called homegrown terrorism and radicalisation in Europe became both serious and sustained.

The research note begins by outlining what might be called the conventional view of how terrorism has evolved: an ideology-by-ideology account that charts the rise and decline of different forms of political violence. This perspective highlights, above all, the fluctuating trajectories of jihadist terrorism and right-wing terrorism — the two dominant forms of terrorism in Europe since the early 2000s. It also draws attention to two additional types of terrorism that many analysts expect to become more salient in the coming years: left-wing terrorism and terrorism instigated or enabled by hostile states, particularly Russia and Iran.

Yet, while this approach is instructive and remains analytically useful, it fails to capture some of the most significant changes. These only come into view when we focus on overarching trends that cut across movements and belief systems. Drawing on a review of the literature and interviews with security agency officials conducted for a recent book, the research note identifies six such trends for which — with one partial exception — there is strong empirical evidence. They are: (1) the virtualisation of recruitment and radicalisation; (2) the rise of lone-actor terrorism; (3) the increasing prevalence of mental health issues; (4) the hybridisation of terrorist ideologies; (5) changing terrorist demographics, especially the growing involvement of very young individuals; and (6) shorter, more compressed radicalisation trajectories, sometimes referred to as *turbo-radicalisation*.

The core argument is that these trends are not isolated or independent from each other, but strongly interrelated, and that the increasing role of technology – more specifically, the virtualisation of radicalisation and recruitment – is by far the single most important new element that has directly or indirectly shaped all the others. Moreover, these developments have facilitated the emergence of what will be termed a *grey zone*, which is characterised by lone attackers who radicalise primarily online, defy clear ideological categorisation, and combine fragments of political ideas with psychological vulnerabilities, developmental issues, and deeply held personal grievances. The resulting violence sits uneasily with traditional definitions of terrorism as ideologically motivated action designed to achieve political effects.

As will be shown, the rise of this grey zone has fundamentally complicated counter-terrorism practice, as well as public and political debates about terrorism. It makes detection and prevention more difficult for security agencies and renders discussions about radicalisation and terrorism more polarised. In light of these challenges, the note concludes by calling on scholars and practitioners to re-examine the conceptual foundations of how radicalisation and terrorism are understood in Europe today.

The Conventional View

Traditionally, terrorism analysis tends to disaggregate the phenomenon by ideology, that is, by separating different belief systems that inspire terrorist attacks, tracing their evolution over time, and assessing their respective rises and declines. This approach remains influential in both academic research and policy analysis because each type of terrorism is assumed to originate in distinct extremist movements, shaped by their own grievances, narratives, organisational dynamics, and strategies.

Based on this perspective, the most consequential terrorist threats in Europe over the past two decades have come from jihadism (or violent Islamism) and right-wing extremism, while more recently concerns have grown about left-wing extremism and terrorism instigated by hostile states. Tracing their evolution demonstrates that, although individual threat levels have varied, the range of actors and motivations has broadened.

Jihadism has been the single most lethal form of terrorism in Europe since the early 2000s. As Petter Nesser has demonstrated, jihadist terrorism in Europe has occurred in distinct waves, each shaped by specific international conflicts and mobilisation dynamics.[1] The first wave culminated in the mid-2000s with large-scale attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. These attacks were embedded in the broader context of the War on Terror launched by the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Particularly significant was the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which acted as a catalyst for jihadist mobilisation across Europe.[2]

The next jihadist wave emerged roughly a decade later, peaking in the mid-2010s. This period was defined by the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq and the declaration of its Caliphate in 2014. The Syrian civil war functioned as a gravitational centre for global jihadism, attracting tens of thousands of foreign fighters, including several thousand from European countries. This transnational mobilisation was accompanied by a sustained campaign of terrorism in Europe, including mass-casualty attacks in Paris, Brussels, London, Manchester, Berlin, Nice, Stockholm, and Barcelona, among others.[3]

Following the territorial defeat of the Caliphate in 2019, many governments believed the jihadist threat to be over.[4] However, the Hamas attacks against Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza may have triggered a new mobilisation. In nearly all European countries, security services report an increase in jihadist plots and attempted attacks.[5] Although, for the time being, these activities remain well below the levels observed in the mid-2010s and lack a strong organisational infrastructure, they indicate that jihadism continues to function as a potentially resurgent threat.

The second long-standing terrorist threat in Europe stems from right-wing extremism. For much of the 2000s, right-wing terrorism was perceived as secondary to jihadism, both in scale and strategic importance. But this perception changed dramatically in July 2011, when Anders Breivik killed 77 people in a terrorist attack in Norway.

Breivik's attack was not only the deadliest act of right-wing terrorism in recent European history, but also the first to articulate a new ideological framework centred on fears of cultural and/or racial "replacement".[6] According to this worldview, European populations and cultures are deliberately replaced by non-European — especially Muslim — immigrants, allegedly with the support of "self-hating" liberal elites. In the second half of the 2010s, right-wing terrorist attacks inspired by this narrative became more frequent, especially following the so-called migration

crisis in 2015/2016 and the simultaneous wave of ISIS-linked attacks, which — taken together — right-wing extremists interpreted as evidence of a Muslim "invasion." Ideologically similar attacks also took place in the United States and in New Zealand, underscoring the transnational nature of contemporary right-wing extremist milieus.[7]

Unlike jihadist terrorism, recent right-wing terrorism in Europe has not been underpinned by a single organisation or hierarchical structure. Moreover, since the early 2020s, the frequency of completed attacks appears to have declined, although security agencies across Europe continue to disrupt plots on a regular basis. The threat has therefore not disappeared, but it is currently assessed as lower in intensity than during its peak years in the late 2010s.

Beyond jihadism and right-wing extremism, two additional terrorist threats are increasingly discussed in European security assessments. The first concerns left-wing extremism. In parts of southern Europe — most notably Greece and Italy — left-wing and anarchist terrorism never fully disappeared and for long periods constituted the most significant terrorist challenge.[8] What seems new is the potential radicalisation of left-wing milieus in Central and Northern Europe. In these contexts, security agencies have noted a growing emphasis on violent action, reflected in a shift away from militant protests and low-level property damage towards arson attacks and violence against individuals.[9] While some interpret this development as a response to the electoral success of far-right parties, which left-wing extremists see as a resurgence of fascism,[10] others detect a new type of accelerationist anarchism, which wants to bring about the collapse of late modern capitalist societies.[11]

The other emerging threat comes from hostile states, particularly Russia and Iran. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, acts of sabotage and other violent activities against European countries supporting the Ukraine have increased markedly. While attribution remains complex, the number of such incidents has reportedly risen from fewer than ten in 2022 to more than fifty by 2025, with several cases displaying clear links to Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU.[12] These activities are widely interpreted as elements of Russia's broader strategy of hybrid warfare against the West, often carried out through "disposable" agents or criminal proxies recruited online.[13]

A similar modus operandi also characterises Iranian operations in Europe. Since 2018, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has been linked to at least eleven attempted or partially executed attacks on European soil, primarily targeting Iranian dissidents, Jewish communities, and Israeli embassies. This activity has intensified since October 2023, reflecting Iran's involvement in the wider regional conflict in the Middle East. Like Russia, Iran relies heavily on criminal intermediaries to maintain plausible deniability while pursuing its strategic objectives.[14]

Six Overarching Trends

Although the conventional approach remains useful, it has at least two major limitations. First, it tends to force terrorism into seemingly static ideological categories without sufficiently questioning their coherence or analytical validity. Are the various forms of terrorism we label as *jihadist*, *right-wing*, or *left-wing* really as internally consistent as these categories imply? And second, it reveals little about the context in which terrorism emerges. How have pathways and trajectories of radicalisation changed? And what does this imply for the kind of violence people engage in?

Examining the wider environments in which radicalisation and recruitment take place is, therefore, at least as important — if not more so — as focusing on ideological labels. As the following section shows, over the past two decades, there have been six major developments that cut across different ideologies and movements. These trends have reshaped how individuals become radicalised, how terrorist violence is planned and executed, and how these threats present themselves to European societies.

Virtualisation

The first, and possibly most significant, development has been the *virtualisation of radicalisation and recruitment.* At the time of the attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, it was still possible to reconstruct perpetrators' pathways into terrorism almost entirely without reference to online environments. Contemporary assessments of terrorist use of the internet focused largely on instrumental functions: accessing maps, scouting potential targets, communicating discreetly, or purchasing airline tickets.[15] The internet was understood as a logistical aid rather than as a space in which individuals became committed to violence.

Although right-wing extremist message boards such as Stormfront and a range of jihadist forums already existed and attracted sizeable audiences, their potential was seen as limited. Prominent scholars, such as Marc Sageman, dismissed the notion of online radicalisation as overblown, emphasising instead the primacy of face-to-face social networks, personal bonds, and offline group dynamics.[16] Radicalisation, in this view, was fundamentally a social process rooted in physical spaces such as neighbourhoods, friendship circles, prisons, or religious institutions.

A decade later, these assessments became more qualified. Rising bandwidths, the spread of smartphones, and — most importantly — the emergence of social media platforms enabled a far wider range of sustained social interactions online. Groups such as ISIS made unprecedented use of digital platforms to disseminate propaganda, glorify violence, and communicate directly with supporters.[17] While many scholars continued to stress that radicalisation was best understood as the result of interactions between online and offline spaces,[18] it became increasingly difficult to explain ISIS's rapid global reach without assigning a central role to the internet.

Today, the internet appears to have become a radicalisation environment in its own right. Both jihadist and right-wing radicalisation trajectories now increasingly play out entirely online, without any meaningful offline interaction with extremist networks or peers.[19] Because sustained counter-terrorism pressure has made the building of physical infrastructures and organisational networks in Europe more difficult,[20] online mobilisation has often become the only viable means of inspiring or enabling terrorist activity in Western countries.

In many respects, this transformation should not be surprising. The virtualisation of radicalisation mirrors broader shifts in late modern societies, in which socialisation, identity formation, and political engagement have increasingly migrated online. For younger generations who have grown up as digital natives, online interactions are neither inherently less authentic nor less trustworthy than offline ones. Issues of commitment, loyalty, and credibility are negotiated differently than in previous generations, lowering the threshold for forming intense social and ideological attachments in virtual spaces.[21] While important exceptions remain, it is increasingly plausible to argue that radicalisation has, to a significant extent, become virtualised.

Lone Actors

The second development is *the rise of lone actor terrorism.* Twenty years ago, terrorism was assumed to take place primarily in the context of groups. Both *becoming* a terrorist and *being* a terrorist were typically explained as social processes involving multiple people, in which group dynamics, peer pressure, "in-group love", and other mechanisms from social psychology played a central role.[22] Likewise, the execution of terrorist attacks was, in most cases, believed to be the work of multiple individuals, embedded in clandestine organisations, who collaborated by contributing distinct skills such as bomb-making, financing, reconnaissance, or target selection.[23] Although lone terrorists certainly existed – especially in right-wing terrorism, where "leaderless resistance" has a longer tradition[24] – they were not the norm and rarely treated as a phenomenon *sui generis.*

This picture has changed significantly. The fact that lone actors now represent a rising — and since the late 2010s, dominant — share of terrorist attacks in Europe is empirically robust and well documented across multiple, independent sources, such as Europol's annual TE-SAT reports and the data collected by RUSI and ICCT's Countering Lone Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project.[25] For several years in the 2020s, practically all major completed terrorist attacks in the European Union were executed by lone actors rather than organised cells. They were typically carried out using simple means — for example, knives or vehicles — and have tended, on average, to result in fewer fatalities than group-based attacks involving explosives or coordinated assaults.[26]

Explanations for this shift tend to fall into two – broadly complementary – categories. The first regards the rise of lone-actor terrorism as a response to counter-terrorism success. As mentioned above, the defeat of ISIS's territorial Caliphate and the sustained efforts of European security agencies to dismantle jihadist networks significantly increased the difficulty and risk associated with operating organised terrorist structures. Under these conditions, jihadist organisations — first al-Qaeda and later, more explicitly, ISIS — adapted their strategies to promote the figure of the "lone mujahid": an individual who acted without direct operational ties, detailed instructions, or logistical support, and who was celebrated in propaganda as a heroic and authentic expression of commitment.[27]

The second explanation emphasises the role of virtualisation. With the spread of the internet — especially encrypted messaging platforms and social media — it became increasingly unnecessary to join a physical group. Although not every lone actor necessarily radicalised either online or by themselves, all elements of the terrorist life cycle, from ideological indoctrination to operational guidance, became available in virtual spaces. Indeed, both jihadist and right-wing extremist movements actively facilitated this shift by producing vast quantities of online propaganda, promoting competition via game-like features, adjusting their doctrines to emphasise that prior authorisation is no longer required, and even offering online mentors who could provide advice and instruction.[28]

Mental Health

Another major development is the *increased salience of mental health issues.* Until the 2010s, the dominant scholarly consensus was that individual psychopathology played little role in explaining terrorist violence. In March 2005, a working group of leading psychologists studying political violence issued a widely cited consensus statement that argued forcefully against the relevance of mental illness. They maintained "that terrorists are psychologically 'normal' in the sense of not being clinically psychotic. They are neither depressed, severely emotionally

disturbed, nor are they crazed fanatics."[29] They also stated that "it is not individual psychology, but group, organizational and social psychology, that provides the greatest analytical power in understanding this complex phenomenon."[30]

Since the early 2010s, this position has become increasingly difficult to sustain — at least in the European context. Government agencies and practitioners across the continent have consistently reported a growing number of terrorist suspects who exhibit a wide range of mental health vulnerabilities. These include personality disorders and depression, but also more severe psychiatric conditions such as acute psychoses. Such observations have been echoed in official threat assessments and prevention frameworks, which frequently note that mental health issues often intersect with other risk factors, such as social isolation, unstable life circumstances, substance abuse, and digital dependency.[31] In response, many countries have gradually integrated mental health screening and assessment into broader counter-radicalisation and prevention efforts.

Crucially, both policy-oriented and academic analyses of this trend have been careful to avoid simplistic conclusions. They consistently emphasise that there is no direct or causal link between mental illness and terrorism, and that mental health vulnerabilities alone cannot explain political violence. Furthermore, they make it clear that the overwhelming majority of individuals suffering from mental disorders never engage in terrorism, and that framing mental illness as a primary driver risks both analytical error and social stigmatisation.[32]

At the same time, a substantial and growing body of empirical research points to a strong association between mental health issues and lone actor terrorism. A comprehensive review of the literature suggests that the prevalence of mental health disorders among lone actor terrorists is approximately 40 percent higher than among other terrorist populations.[33] Even more striking are the findings of a quantitative study by Emily Corner and Paul Gill. Drawing on a large database, they demonstrated that — regardless of ideological background — the likelihood of lone actors having identifiable mental health issues was more than thirteen times higher than that of individuals involved in group-based terrorism.[34]

The implications of this development are significant. On a practical level, it raises important questions about how radicalisation processes unfold and how prevention strategies should be designed. More profoundly, however, it complicates the attribution of terrorist incidents. While many suspects suffering from mental illnesses appear to be entirely rational in terms of motivation, planning, and execution, there is an increasing number of borderline cases. In these instances, it has become genuinely difficult to determine whether a violent act should still be understood as politically motivated terrorism or as violence driven mainly by illness — a challenge that goes to the heart of contemporary counter-terrorism analysis and practice.

Ideological Hybridisation

The *hybridisation of terrorist ideologies* constitutes the fourth major development. For a long time, the ideological underpinnings of terrorist violence were comparatively clear, stable, and analytically accessible. They could usually be deduced from the doctrines of the respective organisations in whose name attacks were carried out. These groups often — though not always — issued communiqués or statements that explained the rationale behind specific attacks, typically constructing an argument as to why particular targets were legitimate in light of the group's ideological objectives. Although ideological debates certainly existed within terrorist organisations, they could be followed, interpreted, and situated within an identifiable trajectory.

Today, this picture looks very different. While contemporary attackers still usually seek to explain their actions in political and/or ideological terms, they increasingly do so through self-authored manifestos or statements that contain a mixture of ideas drawn from different sources. These texts often combine elements that are broadly compatible with a particular worldview, but they can no longer be straightforwardly identified with the orthodoxy of any specific group. Scholars and policy practitioners have described this phenomenon using metaphors such as the "salad bar" or "pick and mix" approach to ideology.[35] More generally, it can be referred to as ideological hybridisation: the blending of disparate, and at times contradictory, belief systems into highly personalised justifications for violence.

As with some of the developments discussed above, this shift can largely be explained by two factors. The first is the rise of lone actor terrorism. Because many contemporary terrorists are no longer embedded in organisational hierarchies, there is effectively no authority capable of enforcing ideological discipline or coherence. Aspiring attackers are free to construct their own rationales for violence, drawing selectively on what they encounter — most notably previous attackers' manifestos[36] — as well as on their own interests, grievances, dislikes, and personal vulnerabilities. The result is that belief systems are frequently combined in ways that would have been unusual, if not impossible, within a group setting. Lone actors may, for example, blend elements from different jihadist groups, such as ISIS, al-Qaeda and Hamas, ignoring differences in strategy and ideology.[37]

The second factor is the virtualisation of radicalisation. Online environments enable potential terrorists to inhabit, traverse, and draw inspiration from multiple digital subcultures simultaneously. This phenomenon is not confined to any single ideological movement but seems particularly visible in right-wing extremism. Here, significant overlaps can be observed between traditional far-right forums and the so-called incel milieu, where deeply misogynistic worldviews are articulated — often on the same platforms or through interconnected networks.[38] Individuals can move fluidly between these spaces, selectively appropriating narratives that resonate with their personal grievances.

Hybridisation poses a profound challenge to the traditional ideology-by-ideology approach to analysing terrorism. While general orientations and broad families of belief remain relevant, the boundaries between them have become more porous and their content more unstable.

Changing Demographics

The fifth major development relates to *changing demographics among terrorist attackers.* Two decades ago, terrorism was widely seen as a phenomenon dominated by men in their twenties. While there were exceptions, this view was broadly supported by empirical research, including a 2006 study by Edwin Bakker, which analysed 242 jihadist terrorists in Europe and found that 98 percent were male, with an average age of 27 years.[39]

The first indications that this demographic profile was changing emerged during the 2010s. One of the most intensively studied phenomena in terrorism research became the involvement of women in the jihadist movement,[40] which had increased sharply over a relatively short period of time. This development was driven mainly by two factors. On the one hand, when ISIS declared its Caliphate in 2014 and embarked on a state-building project, it created new and more varied roles for women. The movement no longer sought only male fighters, but also nurses, teachers, and even doctors, thereby opening up new pathways through which women could participate. At several points in the mid-2010s, women accounted for up to 40 percent of those "migrating" from European countries to Syria and Iraq.[41]

On the other hand, online environments lowered barriers to entry for women in a movement traditionally characterised by strict gender segregation. Digital spaces made it possible to engage with jihadist propaganda, networks, and recruiters without attending in-person meetings where the presence of males would have been unavoidable. Indeed, journalists and researchers highlighted the prominent role of women in administering jihadist messaging forums as early as 2012.[42] As a consequence, although female terrorists continue to remain a minority, they should not be considered a rare exception.

The second – and more universal – demographic shift relates to the age of those becoming radicalised. This trend cuts across ideologies and, if anything, first became visible among right-wing terrorists. Individuals radicalised on anonymous or semi-anonymous messaging boards such as 4chan, 8chan, or Iron March in the late 2010s included a substantial number of teenagers aged between 13 and 19, some of whom attempted to carry out attacks.[43] Similar patterns also became apparent among jihadists. From the early 2020s, law enforcement agencies began highlighting the growing number of minors involved in supporting ISIS.[44] In recent years, this development has further intensified, and – in some countries – young people now constitute a majority of those arrested for attempted or completed attacks, with some suspects as young as 13 or 14.[45]

The principal explanation for this shift is, again, arguably the virtualisation of radicalisation. As terrorist groups have increasingly moved recruitment and socialisation into online spaces, it has become easier for very young individuals to engage with extremist communities that might otherwise exclude them because of their young age. Social media platforms are also typically shaped by algorithmic amplification, which young people are believed to be particularly susceptible to.[46] Some observers have labelled this phenomenon "TikTok terrorism," although encrypted platforms such as Telegram are equally, if not more important for networking, planning, and plotting attacks.[47]

The trend towards greater involvement of teenagers poses significant legal and policy challenges. In particular, it raises questions about how culpability ought to be determined, and how prevention strategies can be recalibrated to account for adolescent developmental issues, such as problems in identity formation, difficulties in managing emotions, excessive risk-taking, and the testing of legal and moral boundaries.[48]

Turbo-Radicalisation?

The final development discussed in this article is the *shortening of radicalisation trajectories.* Compared to the other trends, this development is the least empirically robust. Despite frequent – and often alarmist – reports about *turbo-radicalisation*,[49] there are still no sound longitudinal studies that systematically measure the duration of radicalisation processes, let alone assess how these may have changed over time.

Even so, based on the previously described developments, there are several reasons to believe that radicalisation trajectories have indeed shortened. The first is that virtualisation has altered temporal dynamics. Whereas engagement with extremist milieus used to depend on attending meetings once or twice a week, online environments enable continuous exposure to potentially radicalising content. In principle, individuals can now immerse themselves in extremist narratives around the clock, significantly accelerating the overall process.[50]

Second, the rise of lone actors has removed important social constraints. Acting alone or in loose online networks means that individuals are no longer bound by collective decision-making, internal hierarchies, or strategic considerations. Put simply, mobilisation is no longer contingent on approval from others or on organisational timelines; instead, individuals can act whenever they feel psychologically ready.[51]

And third, both of these dynamics are amplified by the above-mentioned demographic shifts, especially the declining age of terrorist suspects. Adolescents are generally more impulsive, less inhibited by risk calculations, and more prone to act on emotions such as anger or outrage, all of which may shorten the distance between radicalisation and action.[52]

There is, in fact, some qualitative evidence supporting these hypotheses. In research conducted for a recently published book, law enforcement and intelligence officers from six European countries independently described a marked compression of radicalisation pathways in their respective national contexts. In their views, processes that previously unfolded over many months now often take place within a matter of weeks, in particular when they take place online and the individuals involved are very young.[53]

A further factor mentioned by many interviewees is the growing centrality of violence as an end in itself. In earlier waves of jihadist mobilisation, individuals typically radicalised into Salafist ideology first, and only gradually embraced the idea of armed struggle. By contrast, especially among younger recruits today, radicalisation often appears to lead "straight into jihad," bypassing lengthy ideological gestation periods altogether.[54] Similar dynamics are evident in transnational right-wing extremist online environments, where a pronounced "cult of violence" accelerates engagement and swiftly directs individuals towards (violent) action.[55]

Taken together, these factors lend some support to the idea that the long-predicted shortening of radicalisation trajectories may now actually be taking place. If true, this would have profound implications — not only for how scholars conceptualise radicalisation and prevention, but also, very practically, for how much time law enforcement and intelligence agencies have to detect, disrupt, and intervene before violence occurs.

The Centrality of Technology

As should be clear by now, the overarching trends and developments discussed in this article are interconnected. The virtualisation of radicalisation and recruitment has facilitated the rise of lone actors, which – in turn – is linked to the increased salience of mental health issues. Ideological hybridisation is associated with lone-actor dynamics and virtualisation, while the rise of new demographics can – again – be linked to virtualisation. Turbo-radicalisation, on the other hand, may be related to lone actors, virtualisation, and/or the growing involvement of younger individuals. In short, none of these developments have occurred independently of one another but should be understood as elements of a broader transformation.

That said, not all the elements of this transformation are equal. Some developments — such as the increased salience of mental health vulnerabilities or ideological hybridisation — are better understood as downstream effects. Others, most notably the rise of lone actor terrorism and virtualisation, function as drivers of change. Even among these drivers, however, there is a hierarchy. By far the most consequential development, which has shaped all the others, is the virtualisation of radicalisation and recruitment — more specifically, the growing role and sophistication of digital technologies within extremist mobilisation processes.

As mentioned previously, the centrality of technology should not be surprising. Over the past two decades, the digital revolution has transformed almost every aspect of life in late modern Western societies, including how people work, travel, study, communicate, and consume information. As numerous studies have demonstrated, these changes had far-reaching consequences for social interaction, personal relationships, self-perception, and identity formation.[56] It would be remarkable if such profound and wide-ranging transformations had not also affected how individuals become radicalised and mobilised into terrorism.

Indeed, there are strong reasons to believe that radicalisation has been particularly susceptible to technological change. Because of its perceived anonymity, low entry barriers, and global reach, the internet is especially conducive to facilitating high-risk activities.[57] Radicalisation, which often involves transgression, secrecy, and the exploration of taboo ideas, is therefore likely to be among the most obvious domains to be affected. Consistent with this expectation, extremist and terrorist movements have repeatedly been early adopters of digital technologies. As early as the 1990s, leading figures within both right-wing extremist and jihadist milieus were already writing about the potential of computer networks to disseminate propaganda, connect like-minded individuals, and bypass state control.[58]

Since then, these ideas have been translated into practice through successive waves of technological adoption: the use of websites and online forums, the production of increasingly professional audio-visual propaganda, the embrace of social media platforms, the exploitation of smartphones, and, more recently, the widespread use of encrypted messaging services. As the academic literature shows, each of these technological shifts has had consequences for the social dynamics of radicalisation.[59]

The logical implication is that extremist and terrorist actors will continue to be at the forefront of emerging technological developments, and that such innovations are likely to further transform the ways in which terrorism and radicalisation play out. In this respect, it will be important to consider how artificial intelligence — arguably, the latest technology – might be used not only to produce more sophisticated propaganda, but also to facilitate radicalisation, social interaction, and community-building.

The New Grey Zone

Taken together, all of these changes imply that many of the traditional assumptions underlying terrorism analysis have become difficult to sustain. A growing proportion of terrorist attacks in Europe are carried out by lone actors whose radicalisation has taken place substantially online. The resulting pathways differ noticeably from the group-based trajectories that dominated earlier waves of terrorism. Rather than being socialised into coherent ideological frameworks through organisations, peer groups, or face-to-face networks, many attackers assemble their motivations in fragmented, highly individualised ways. This has given rise to forms of violence that challenge traditional – and in some cases legal – understandings of terrorism as the deliberate use of violence to advance political or religious ideologies. Although these forms of violence continue to meet conventional criteria for terrorism in terms of target selection, method, symbolism, and public impact, they are increasingly driven by other, often highly idiosyncratic issues.

The existence of individualised factors does not, in itself, invalidate the classification of these acts as terrorism. Political violence has always been intertwined with personal motives, emotions, and biographies, and the presence of individual grievances does not necessarily render an act

less political. However, for all of the reasons mentioned above, the overlap between these factors on the one hand, and established ideologies on the other, has become wider and increasingly tilted towards the former. In some cases, the ideological dimension appears so attenuated that its role in motivating violence becomes difficult to substantiate, or at least subject to serious doubt.

What has emerged is a *grey zone* between clearly politically motivated terrorism and forms of terrorist-type violence that are driven primarily by psychological vulnerabilities, developmental issues, and deeply held personal grievances. Classifying incidents within this grey zone is often challenging, time-consuming, and rarely definitive. Decisions about attribution can be contested among investigators, courts, scholars, and political actors, and may remain disputed long after an attack has taken place. Such ambiguities are not incidental but have become a defining feature of contemporary European terrorism.

Conclusion

In recent years, a range of scholars and analysts have sought to capture the phenomenon described in this research note through labels such as "nihilistic terrorism" or "terrorism without ideology."[60] While these terms are intuitively appealing, they are also misleading. If terrorism is defined — as it is in the majority of legal and academic definitions — as politically or ideologically motivated violence, then it cannot, at the same time, be nihilistic or non-ideological.

Moreover, these labels are also factually imprecise. Grey zone terrorism is not, in all cases, entirely apolitical or devoid of political meaning. Rather, what distinguishes it is the way in which political content is articulated. Instead of subscribing to coherent, established ideologies, attackers typically draw on fragments of political ideas, slogans, symbols, or narratives, often encountered online. These elements are then combined with personal grievances or other developmental or psychological vulnerabilities into highly idiosyncratic worldviews that do not map neatly onto conventional ideological categories. The issue, therefore, is not the absence of ideology, but its fragmentation and individualisation, as well as the conflation with psychological vulnerabilities and developmental issues.

These developments fundamentally challenge long-standing understandings of terrorism. Concepts of terrorism and radicalisation will either need to be broadened to accommodate them, or scholars will have to develop new terms or frameworks capable of capturing the dynamics of grey zone actors and activities.

Either way, the tasks facing counter-terrorism and prevention practitioners have already become more demanding. Contemporary attackers can no longer be identified through peer-to-peer networks, as they may not belong to any; they are harder to detect because their activities unfold in encrypted online spaces; their belief systems are more difficult to interpret, as they appear fragmented, idiosyncratic, or even irrational; and their pathways into violence seem increasingly opaque, because they are shaped by very young age, psychological vulnerabilities, or both. In some cases, radicalisation trajectories unfold so rapidly that traditional warning signs are easily missed.

Not least, the grey zone also poses a challenge for public discourse. Because such attacks are terroristic in method and public impact, there is strong pressure to label them as terrorism at an early stage, particularly where political interests are at play. Yet establishing motive, intent,

and culpability often requires time – time that public debate and (social) media cycles rarely allow. Alongside new definitions and operational approaches, there is therefore a pressing need for communication strategies that provide reassurance while making sense of the ambiguity that defines the grey zone.

None of this will be easy. Twenty years on, terrorism in Europe may not necessarily have increased in scale, but it has unquestionably become more complex.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

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Bibliography: Use of Drones in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

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Abstract
This bibliography contains journal articles, book chapters, books, edited volumes, theses, grey literature, bibliographies and other resources on the use of drones in terrorism and counter-terrorism. It covers a wide range of aspects, including military, strategic, political, technological, legal and ethical contexts. The bibliography focuses on recent publications (up to February 2026) 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, drones, drone strikes, UAVs, counter-terrorism, targeted killing, remote warfare, ethics, terrorist weaponisation.

NB: All websites were last visited on 07.02.2026. For an inventory of previous bibliographies, see: https://archive.org/details/terrorism-research-bibliographies-2

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

BOOK REVIEW

Review Essay: *War-Making as Worldmaking: Kenya, the United States, and the War on Terror by Samar al-Bulushi*

Reviewed by Emma Leonard Boyle*

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Samar Al-Bulushi, *War-Making as Worldmaking: Kenya, the United States, and the War on Terror* (California: Stanford University Press, 2024) 274 pp., US $ 110 [Hardcover], US $ 28 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-5036-3974-4

It has been almost 25 years since the beginning of the War on Terror and this significant milestone will inevitably bring opportunities to reflect on the events and impacts of this period of time. While there will be much written on how the War on Terror shaped the US, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, al-Bulushi in this book asks us to go beyond geopolitics in our analysis and demonstrates the very human impact the War on Terror had on individuals in Kenya. She centers Kenya in this book not only as a recipient of American aid and attention but also as a political actor with agency in its own right, and reveals what impact this had on individual Kenyans who came into contact with the state's counter-terrorism apparatus.

Al-Bulushi draws on critical theory to examine "how life is lived in a place that is not understood to be a site of war, yet is often experienced as such by its targets" (p. 4). Many such places existed in the gray zone of 'not a war zone but also not at peace' during the War on Terror. Looking only at north eastern coast of Africa, almost every country was drawn into the War on Terror. Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia became key US allies, and Djibouti hosted a US military base. Somalia became a target for US sanctions and drone strikes. And yet, this region was not an official theater of war for the United States. Al-Bulushi makes a value contribution to our understanding of how everyday life was impacted by the War on Terror in these "gray zone" countries.

Drawing on fifteen months of fieldwork in Kenya, this book explores the meaning of security in the wake of the War on Terror, asking who is defining 'security', who the security is for, and who is a threat to this security. In her argument that "knowledge making is a form of world making" (p. 61) we see al-Bulushi take an explicitly Constructivist approach to her narrative. She highlights the impacts of race, gender, and religion on how the War on Terror is conceived of and experienced in Kenya.

Al-Bulushi emphasises how various official entities in the country have also attempted to shape perceptions, and therefore reality, in Kenya. This has centred on projecting an image of Kenya to the outside world as a country that is safe and stable, with the military and police on top of any kind of extremist activity. She goes on to argue that in the aftermath of the 2007 election violence the focus of the government was on protecting 'Brand Kenya' rather than fostering true reconciliation (p. 14). As part of this image projection, Muslims have been construed as foreigners and outsiders, despite the fact that Islam first came to the Kenyan coast as early as the 10th century. Despite this, Muslims are portrayed as threatening and their cities as unknowable. There are clear echoes here of the portrayal of Muslims in European countries and in the claims of the Western right-wing commentators that Muslim areas of European cities are 'no-go' zones.

Driving home the personal aspect of the War on Terror, al-Bulushi includes a chapter on the 'home as thoroughfare'. This chapter looks at how the home is increasingly becoming a contested site in the War on Terror, and is turning a space that had been "previously coded as 'private' or 'feminine'—women, non-combatant men, and the spaces of 'home'—into a battlefield" (p. 112). With agents of the state visiting the homes of those deemed to be radical, the home can become a place of suspicion and a place to avoid rather than a place of refuge.

This book will be of interest to researchers seeking to learn more about the human impact of the War on Terror, how governments construct and project images of security, and how individuals

interact with global geopolitics. Al-Bulushi succeeds in shining a light on how the War on Terror has played out in Kenya, demonstrating the agency of the Kenyan Government and of individual activists in this. Through her extensive fieldwork, she has draws out the human costs behind the headlines of attacks and arrests. In addition to this, it is also abundantly clear how much of this book can be translated to other settings. The 'othering' of citizens who have been a part of the population of the country for centuries tells us a lot about how easy it is for this process to take place in countries where families have more recent immigration histories.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: *The Psychology of the Extreme by Arie W. Kruglanski and Sophia Moskalenko*

Reviewed by John Morrison*

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Arie W. Kruglanski and Sophia Moskalenko, *The Psychology of the Extreme* (Routledge, 2025) 175 pp., EUR €14.39 [Paperback], ISBN: 9781032751191.

It can often be an understandable starting point to look at what differentiates terrorists or extremists from others. This can even be comforting or reassuring. It allows us to portray them as 'evil' and that to understand their psychology is to understand an extreme outlier. However, some of the most fruitful avenues of research are when we are open to identifying and acknowledging similarities as well differences. This has most clearly been illustrated with the identification of the psychological 'normality' of terrorist organisational members in comparison to the general population. This has revolutionised how we consider them, not just in comparison to the general population but also in relation to lone actor terrorists.

The Psychology of the Extreme sees two of the most influential researchers on the psychology of terrorism, Arie Kruglanski and Sophia Moskalenko, challenging us to reconsider preconceived ideas about who are the extremists. Across this book they are asking us to consider the similarities, rather than the differences, between those malevolent actors and many historical and contemporary figures who epitomise the best of culture, humanity, innovation, and politics. These comparisons are similarly extended to those of us demonstrating obsessive behaviours and/or intense dedication to our hobbies. They provocatively begin the book by asking us to consider the similarities between Vincent Van Gogh, Mother Teresa, a foreign terrorist fighter, and the videogame obsessive. The answer to this opening question is the heart of the book. We are told that they each exhibit as a single track mind. Each pursues a single motivation with a dedication to the exclusion of all other concerns. Any means can be justified in the quest for their singular pursuit.

Across the book, the authors successfully walk us through how this one tracked mindedness is not novel in nature. They even present themselves as having displayed extremist behaviours. Theirs is not a comparison with the general population. Instead they are continually emphasising the heterogeneous nature of extremism. From Osama Bin Laden to Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus Christ to Steve Jobs the readers are provided with a multitude of historical and contemporary figures who the authors present as extremists. Alongside (in)famous figures from both the past and present, the extremist is also presented as those who will never gain public notoriety or esteem. While one will be unsurprised to find the violent acts of individuals such as Brenton Tarrant and Elliot Rodger presented as extremist in nature, it may be more unexpected to see radical dieting and behaviours linked to being similarly presented as extreme. These comparisons and examples are designed to repeatedly emphasise that there are many forms of extremist behaviour presented as being similarly extreme.

This book is designed to be accessible to all, which is certainly achieved. One could feasibly read this book cover to cover in one sitting. It does not require any prior knowledge of the psychology of terrorism or extremism to fully grasp the core points being proposed. However, for those of us researching and working in this area it also serves as a welcome reminder to not always seek what differentiates extremists or terrorists from others. On the contrary, as Kruglanski and Moskalenko clearly demonstrate, it is often more fruitful to learn from analogous case studies to see what these different forms of extremism actually have in common.

While this book is a welcome addition to the ever-growing literature on the psychology of extremism some readers may be left wanting more depth of analysis. The book, by design, continuously returns to the impact of the one tracked mind of the extremist. At times it could have expanded beyond this to critically address this and other factors relating to the extremists'

psychology. However, in doing so while the authors may have succeeded in satiating those with pre-existing expertise they may have, in parallel, reduced the broader accessibility of the text. As it stands this books provides the scope for opening this research up to a new audience, while also providing a healthy perspective for those already immersed in this area.

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PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: *Extremism, Terrorism, Radicalisation and Violence: Cause & Solution by Para Wijayanto*

Reviewed by Muhammad Haniff Hassan* and Rohan Gunaratna

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Al Muhandis Para Wijayanto, *At Tathorruf (Ekstremisme, Terorisme, Radikalisme dan Kekerasan) Penyebab & Solusi (Extremism, Terrorism, Radicalism and Violence: Cause & Solution)* (Indonesia: Self-publication, 2025) 834 pp., [In Indonesian]

At Tathorruf (Ekstremisme, Terorisme, Radikalisme dan Kekerasan) Penyebab & Solusi (Extremism, Terrorism, Radicalism and Violence: Cause & Solution), authored by Para Wijayanto - who uses the self-designation *Al Muhandis* (The Engineer) - provides a timely and insightful contribution to the discourse on combating violent extremism in Indonesia. Self-published in early 2025 and available in limited print runs, the book delves into the ideological and strategic shifts of Jemaah Islamiyah, commonly known as JI, which can serve as both a critical case study and a strategic guide in counter-terrorism studies, practices, and policies.

Notably, the book lacks an introductory chapter, omitting a direct exposition of its rationale, objectives, research questions, methodology, or intended readership. This absence of contextual framing necessitates an external introduction to situate the work for readers.

Para Wijayanto, the author, formerly served as the Emir (Head) of the now-disbanded Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the largest jihadist organisation in Southeast Asia and a central actor in the region's violent extremist landscape. The aftermath of the first Bali bombing in 2002 saw intensified efforts by the Indonesian security agencies to dismantle JI's networks, the impact of which compelled JI leadership to reevaluate the group's strategic direction. As a result, on 30 June 2024, the author and other JI key figures issued a pronouncement to disband JI, recognise the legitimate state of the Republic of Indonesia, uphold the state constitution, review its ideology away from extremism, and form a committee to reform all its education institutions' curriculum and materials. However, JI's dissolution in 2024 was the result of a long process rather than a response to the 2002 Bali bombing. The two-decade interval can be explained mainly by two developments: changes in JI's leadership orientation and shifts in Indonesia's counter-terrorism legal framework. First, an important turning point occurred when Para Wijayanto assumed the position of JI's emir in 2008. Under his leadership, the organisation gradually recalibrated its strategic direction. Rather than prioritising immediate militant operations, he emphasised consolidation, organisational discipline, and the expansion of social, educational, and economic activities. These initiatives were initially intended to rebuild the movement after years of arrests and disruption, but they also opened space for internal discussions about the strategic costs and sustainability of violent jihad.[1] Second, the enactment of a strengthened anti-terrorism law - Indonesian Counterterrorism Law No. 5 of 2018, also known as the 2018 Amendment to Terrorism Law - significantly altered the environment in which JI operated. The law broadened terrorism-related offences and allowed earlier intervention against recruitment, training, and organisational support activities, reducing the operational space for clandestine networks and reinforcing internal reassessments within JI regarding the viability of continuing militant activities.[2]

In the wake of the pronouncement to disband JI, its leadership, with the help of the authorities, toured the country to meet with JI members and explain the basis of the pronouncement. Within this context *At Tathorruf* was written to provide answers to the questions arising from JI members. In the process, the book offers insights into extremism problems in JI, explains the causes and offers solutions to it, from the perspective of its own leaders.

The book is structured into six chapters, each addressing a distinct facet of the problem of extremism and its solutions in the context of JI. The first chapter explains the book's title, *At Tathorruf*, elucidating the author's use as a term encompassing four phenomena - extremism, terrorism, radicalism, and violence. The chapter then describes fifty-one different manifestations of extremism, before proceeding with analysis of the roots of extremism in JI.

Drawing an analogy from the medical sciences, the author suggests that solving the root causes of extremism is like treating a disease and proposes two models. The first model involves symptomatic relief, post-disease recovery, overcoming root causes of illness, and prevention of its contributory factors. The second model involves preventive, curative and eliminative measures. The chapter then emphasises the importance of right knowledge to overcome the lack of understanding of truth and offers eight attitudinal changes and highlights three success factors for this effort.

The second chapter describes the first solution to JI extremism which is to return to the Sunni tradition in understanding Islam. While the chapter recognises the richness of Sunni intellectual tradition as the source to address the problem, it highlights the resonance of Ibn Taimiyah's works, that they are highly revered and respected by JI members – an important factor to influence the ideological transformation in JI. The chapter articulates the right conception of *iman* (faith) as the foundation for addressing the issue of *takfir* (the act of declaring another Muslim as an infidel). To ensure the correct application of Sunni intellectual traditions in addressing the problem, the chapter highlights four important Islamic sciences - 1) *`Ulum al-Hadith* (*hadith* sciences), 2) *Usul al-Fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), 3) *al-Qawa`id al-Fiqhiyah* (Islamic legal maxims), 4) *al-Maqasid al-Shar`iyah* (high objectives of the *shari`ah*) - suggesting that all ideological changes that will be presented in the subsequent chapters are based on them.

The third chapter offers a second solution to the extremism problem – addressing the issue of extremism in *takfir* and the right approach to it in accordance with Sunni traditions. The chapter recognises *takfir* as a key theological aberration within JI, thus necessitating a critical reassessment and corrective measures. The chapter then systematically explains various topics on *takfir* before laying down fourteen guiding principles for a legitimate *takfir* and points out why the practice of *takfir* towards general Muslims outside JI, political leaders of the country, civil servants, and personnels of police and armed forces ruling them as *thagut* (an object that is obeyed besides Allah) is erroneous.

The fourth chapter provides theological justification for recognising and embracing *Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia* (Unitary State of Indonesian Republic, NKRI). The chapter provides theological argument for NKRI as a political entity for Indonesian Muslims, in contrast to JI's old vision of *Darul Islam* (Islamic State). The chapter calls upon JI members to view the issue from the lens of past local *ulama* and Muslim political parties involved in the process of establishing NKRI and urges them to consider the post-colonial historical factors: negotiating external threats from the Dutch re-occupation of Indonesia after the surrender of the Japanese imperial army in 1945, the need to preserve the national unity of NKRI amidst diverse faiths, cultures, and ideologies. Then that NKRI was in serious risk of failure which would cause greater harm if a clear stipulation to implement Islamic *shari`ah* was included in its constitution, as non-Muslim Indonesians would not willingly be part of NKRI under such terms. Furthermore, territories dominated by non-Muslims would break away from NKRI which could trigger conflicts and facilitate Dutch intervention. The chapter highlights theological support to such consideration in Sunni traditions and many elements of NKRI that are, in fact, consistent with the *shari`ah*, although not explicitly labelled so.

The fifth chapter further substantiates the theological legitimacy of NKRI from the lens of *Siyasah Shar`iyah* (Islamic public administration and policy making doctrine). After introducing the readers to *Siyasah Shar`iyah* as a study within Islamic jurisprudence discipline, it presents thirty-six points supporting the necessity of upholding, preserving, and defending NKRI.

The sixth and final chapter offers the summary and conclusion of the book. The shortest of all chapters, it summarises and concludes all points that justifies JI's disbandment, and the new theological direction raised in the previous chapters. The chapter contains an admission of the existence of the extremist problem within JI, the involvement of JI members in specific terrorism acts. The chapter highlights that while extremism, terrorism, and violence are the problems of a minority of their members, the author admits that they have a grave impact on the whole group. In the chapter, the author concedes that that radicalism is an embedded problem within JI, as it transpires from *Pedoman Umum Perjuangan Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah* (General Guide for the Struggle of Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah, PUPJI), the organisation's manifesto and constitution,[3] which views NKRI as a *thagut* entity. The author asserts that JI's continued existence poses a grave harm which necessitates its disbandment in accordance with the *shari`ah* principle of eliminating harm. The disbandment may cause some negative effects, but it is legitimised with the argument that Islam allows committing lesser harm for the sake of avoiding a greater one or for the purpose of gaining greater benefits. The chapter, then, concludes with forty-two points that justifies the pronouncement to embrace NKRI and its constitution and calls upon JI members to be constructive and responsible Muslim citizens.

Other than the lack of introductory chapter as mentioned above, the book has several shortcomings in its poor presentation and writing style, which undermines its readability. Foremost among these is its heavy reliance on lengthy quotes drawn directly from Arabic sources, each accompanied by an Indonesian translation. Many quotes are frequently repetitive across the different chapters contributing to the book's considerable length of 834 pages and rendering the reading experience a tedious endeavour. It is probable that the author took this approach to lend credibility to his points, creating an impression that they are soundly supported by Sunni intellectual traditions, rather than presenting them as his personal opinions. Also, the interspersion of extensive quotations and translations further complicates the reader's ability to identify the provenance of ideas, blurring the boundary between the author's voice and that of his sources. The lack of consistency in the presentation of arguments detracts from the overall coherence and rigour. Notably, the fourth chapter adopts a Socratic dialogue format, featuring an exchange between the author and a JI member pertaining to the legitimacy of NKRI from a *shari`ah* standpoint, whereas the remaining chapters deploy a conventional writing style. This inconsistency may disrupt readers' engagement with the book.

Similar to the books published by leaders of Egyptian Islamic Group and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, who made ideological revision in 2003 and 2008 respectively, *At Tathorruf* offers rare insights to JI's past and its future evolution from within, which potentially adds to the corpus of knowledge in the counterterrorism field for scholars, researchers, policy makers, and national security practitioners. A critical analysis of the book will follow from the reviewers, and it is hoped that this book review will attract the attention of other researchers to embark on the same path. The current language may limit its accessibility to a broader audience. Thus, translating the work into other languages, or at the very least into English, would be a worthwhile initiative to facilitate further study, foster informed debate, and contribute to countering violent extremism in Southeast Asia.

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Endnotes

1 Sentot Prasetyo (2024), *JI The Untold Story – Perjalanan Kisah Jemaah Islamiyah*, Jakarta: Kompas-Gramedia, chapter 4, 8, 10, pp. 391-400; Solahudin (2025), *JI Sampai NKRI: Deradikalisasi Kolektif Jemaah Islamiyah*, Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, chapter 3-6, pp. 224-9.

2 Aliff Satria (2022), "Two Decades of Counterterrorism in Indonesia: Successful Developments and Future Challenges", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 14(5), September 2022, pp. 7-16; Solahudin (2025), 191-3.

3 Jemaah Islamiyah, *PUPJI-General Guides for the Struggle*, (1996): 14, available at https://archive.org/details/Pupji-GeneralGuidelinesForTheStruggleOfJamaahIslamiyah (accessed on March 17, 2026).

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