PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

RESEARCH NOTE

The New Grey Zone: How Terrorism in Europe Has Changed

Peter R. Neumann*

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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

* *Corresponding author: Peter R. Neumann, King's College London. Email: peter.neumann@kcl.ac.uk*

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.

Peter R. Neumann is a professor of Security Studies at the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and associate member of the Department of Sociology, Oxford University. He founded the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), and directed the centre between 2008 and 2018. In 2017, he also served as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Special Representatives on Countering Violent Extremism.

Endnotes

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About

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Contact

E: pt.editor@icct.nl
W: pt.icct.nl

Universiteit Leiden

HANDA CSTPV