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RESEARCH STUDY

Nicolas Stockhammer (ed.)

EICTP VIENNA RESEARCH PAPERS ON TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM:

EVOLVING TRAJECTORIES OF EXTREMISM: THE CONFLICT-TERROR NEXUS AND ITS IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY TERRORIST THREAT LANDSCAPES

VOLUME VII

February 2025

E·I·C·T·P

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VOLUME VII

Published by the European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention
February 2025

IMPRINT

The European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention (EICTP) is a research association operating worldwide and with its headquarters in Vienna, Austria. As a non-profit institution the focus of EICTP is on key topics around security policy-related issues. It carries out projects with renowned partners in Austria and abroad, maintains close relationships with high-level research organizations and a network of prominent experts and scholars, offers profound sets of actions, consultations and strategies related to counter-terrorism, hybrid conflicts, and de-radicalization measures and aims at creating policy-related recommendations based on research and expert assessments for decision-makers.

Address:
European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention (EICTP)
Esslinggasse 17/5, AT-1010 Vienna
www.eictp.eu

Media owner, editor, producer: EICTP

Place of publication: Esslinggasse 17/5, 1010 Vienna

Proof-reading and formal editing: EICTP

Graphic Design: Citypress GmbH

Print: Citypress GmbH

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THE CONFLICT-TERROR NEXUS

TRANSNATIONAL JIHADIST VIOLENCE AND ITS ROOTS IN GEOPOLITICAL INTERDEPENDENCIES. THE RECENT EXAMPLE OF IS-KP INTER ALIA.

Nicolas Stockhammer

Terrorist violence has in the beginning of the 21st century significantly evolved into a transnational threat.[1] This refers to terrorist operations across national borders executed by international organizations, network structures, single actors, and supporters. Such a threat is characterized by their ability to coordinate and conduct attacks, recruit members, raise funds, and acquire resources across different countries or regions.[2] Transnational terrorism often involves collaboration between individuals or groups from diverse backgrounds and locations, making them difficult to detect and counter effectively. In the sphere of terrorist networks, the term "transnational" encapsulates the capacity of these organizations to transcend geographical boundaries and consolidate resources in pursuit of a shared extremist agenda.[3] By engaging in transnational networking, jihadist groups can tap into a diverse array of resources, spanning from financial backing and weaponry to human recruits and logistical support.[4] Transnational terrorist threats can range from large-scale, coordinated attacks on major cities to smaller, decentralized acts of violence carried out by lone actors or small cells. The globalization of communication and transportation has facilitated the spread of transnational terrorism, allowing extremist ideologies and tactics to transcend geographic boundaries and reach a global audience. As a result, addressing transnational terrorist threats requires more than ever international cooperation, sharing intelligence, and coordinated efforts to disrupt terrorist networks and prevent future attacks. The smallest entity of transnational terrorist collaboration is micro-cell units.

THE SUDDEN EMERGENCE OF IS-KP?

Just before Christmas 2023, it was revealed that a small cell of Islamists from Central Asia, residing in and around Germany at the time, had planned terrorist attacks on symbolic Catholic churches in at least three European metropolises during the Advent season.[5] The suspected targets of terrorism allegedly included the Cologne Cathedral, the St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, and unspecified churches in Madrid.[6]

Intensive police investigations also indicate that the tactical and logistical preparations for the attacks were well underway. Threats like these before Christmas or other Christian holidays have occurred repeatedly in recent years; however, what deviates from the well-known tactics and *modi operandi* is the declared affiliation of the transnationally networked terrorism suspects, among them some with Tajik background who have since been arrested: they are said to belong to or have formed a transnational cell of IS-KP (Islamic State Khorasan Province, often also referred to as "IS-PK" or "ISIS-K") in Austria and Germany.

The IS-KP has also become a relevant terrorist menace for Europe and even for a small state like Austria. The three major "plots" in Vienna in 2023, which were fortunately thwarted in time all illustrate a more or less firm connection to IS-KP.[7] Firstly in the run-up to the Pride parade, when a group of local jihadis planned an attack, then a "Lone Wolf" random assault aimed at stabbing passers-by with a cut-and thrust weapon at Vienna Central Train Station, and finally the above mentioned transnationally active jihadist cell around the New Year's Eve, which plotted "major" attacks at St. Stephen's and Cologne Cathedrals suggest that also Austria is in the attack focus of IS-KP.

IS-KP is a significant offshoot of the "Islamic State", active in extensive areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia. Since the central organization of Daesh, at least the terrorist militia, was essentially considered as militarily defeated in Syria and Iraq by 2018/2019, IS-KP has gained increasing strength particularly since 2021. Currently, the regional affiliate is considered by some observers as the allegedly "world's most effective" jihadist group, with a membership estimated to be in the range of several thousand (latest estimates indicate over 10,000).[8] While the IS-KP may be an enemy of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, it shares a similar political goal with al-Qaeda: the establishment of a pan-Islamic caliphate. Until mid-2021, IS-KP had been significantly weakened due to aggressive anti-terrorism operations (by the US "War on Terror") in Afghanistan, offensives by the Taliban, and internal divisions.[9] However, the political and military withdrawal of the Western coalition has provided the terrorist group with the opportunity to regenerate sustainably.[10] Since the withdrawal of US military forces in August 2021 and the takeover by radical Islamic Taliban in Afghanistan, there has been ongoing enmity between them and the IS-KP terrorist group.[11] The jihadists believe that there can only be one Islamic state and one legitimate caliphate, and consequently, the Taliban should "submit" to IS. However, the "*de facto rulers*" of Afghanistan show no intention of complying with this, from their perspective, grotesque demand. IS-KP has been able to carry out a series of small-scale attacks in Afghanistan in the recent past.[12]

However, the IS-KP achieved its biggest "coup" in August 2021 with a devastating terrorist attack at Kabul airport.[13] More than 180 people (including 13 US soldiers) were killed and almost as many injured in a suicide bomb attack. Despite specific intelligence warnings in advance, the IS-KP was able to carry out this large-scale terrorist scenario before the eyes of the world.[14] Due to several high-profile attacks in the recent past – such as earlier this year in Kerman, Iran, during a funeral service for the Iranian General Suleimani, who was killed in a US drone strike with tight security, IS-KP fighters managed to kill almost 90 people in a suicide bomb attack.[15] Shortly afterwards, in January 2024, Central Asian IS-KP terrorists targeted a church in Istanbul.[16] One man was killed. Following Quran burnings in the Netherlands and Sweden, the IS-KP has also announced attacks in these countries.[17]

The most recent devastating terrorist attack in Moscow on March 22, 2024, with its shocking brutality, showed the whole world that the IS-KP is capable of carrying out a meticulously planned and staged terror scenario with several perpetrators. The synchronized attack in Crocus City Hall is strikingly reminiscent of the Paris Bataclan attack in November 2015 and indicates a terrorist attack that was meticulously orchestrated in advance and carried out with great tactical discipline. An interesting detail in passing, terrorists with a Central Asian background – predominantly Tajiks – are suspected of having played a leading role in most of these attacks. Tajikistan is said to be a preferred recruiting location for the IS-KP.[18]

The Moscow court ordered that the four suspects – aged 19, 25, 30 and 32, all from Tajikistan – remain in custody until the trial, where they face a life sentence if convicted. The health condition of the suspected perpetrators is also remarkable: Dalerdzhon Mirzoyev, Shamsidin Fariduni and Saidakrami Rachabalizoda appeared to be in a reasonably stable condition despite visible signs of torture, while Muhammadsobir Fayzov, who was seriously injured during his arrest and interrogation, appeared in the courtroom in a wheelchair, initially refusing to plead guilty.[19] The dissemination of video footage and images showing torture of the detained men – including electric shocks, severe beatings and, in one case, the severing of an ear – raises serious ethical and legal questions. The use of such images for internal use suggests that the Russian security services may be seeking to achieve a deterrent effect by demonstrating toughness and intransigence in dealing with terrorism, while at the same time positively influencing public opinion. Many observers have asked the question- why Russia- falsely conceived as a non-typical jihadist target. The most recent IS-KP focus on Russia might go well beyond sheer ideological or geographical reasons and could be based rather on military considerations and strategic aspects. Russia has in the past taken a central role in the fight against IS and other terrorist groups through its military

actions in Syria and its diplomatic approach in Central Asia as well as in the Greater Middle East. Actively supporting the Assad regime and fighting jihadist groups in Syria has made Russia a direct target.[20]

The intervention in Syria and building up good- or at least pragmatic relations with the Taliban in Afghanistan may be part of a larger strategy by Moscow to secure and expand its influence in geopolitically important regions.[21] Other voices claim that this was rather "*symbolism*" than a strategy.[22] Without doubt, Russia's (strategic) positioning vis-à-vis the Taliban in Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul and the Western withdrawal have further complicated relations between IS and Russia. Russia's past focus on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and its repeated military interventions in Syria, as well as its increasing influence in Africa (e.g., through the Wagner mercenary group), have consequently attracted the attention and hostility of IS. We should not underestimate the role of narratives: That could be old resentments against Russia due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 which may be just as important as more recent military operations by the Kremlin against Islamic "allies" or like-minded people. Also, the Chechnyan War is more of a "*lieu de mémoire*" for Islamists in Central Asia. Moreover, Russia's power ambitions in Central Asia are a thorn in the side of the terrorist organization.[23]

WHAT'S NEXT WITH IS-KP?

All these IS-KP terrorist attacks together- carried out or thwarted- have contributed to the local IS-affiliate in the Hindukush gaining a reputation in the jihadist spectrum as an effective organization and being able to gain followers worldwide.[24] Since then, IS-KP has apparently consolidated underground and been able to expand its operational strength personnel and structurally.

It can be assumed that IS-KP will increasingly appear as the patron or "entrepreneur" of major Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe at least in medium term. This is due, on the one hand, to the real operational capabilities of a continuously growing terrorist organization, but much more so to its ideological appeal.[25] IS-KP is perceived in jihadist circles as a "winner" against Western occupiers in Afghanistan, even though the Taliban have contributed the lion's share to this and, as far as their takeover of power in the country is concerned, are obviously the direct beneficiaries of the withdrawal of coalition troops. Undoubtedly, IS-KP is seen as a fresh, unspent force that adds an entirely new dynamic to the somewhat worn-out IS narrative. Since the pandemic, IS has gradually lost credibility as a potent Islamist terrorist organization among its traditional target groups. In addition, since the terrorist attack in Vienna, there have been no major, notable IS-led terrorist attacks with significant international attention, especially in Europe. IS-KP, as Asfandyar Mir, a senior expert at the United States Institute of Peace has put it, seeks to "*outperform rival jihadis by carrying out more audacious attacks to distinguish its jihadi brand and assert leadership of the global jihadi vanguard*".[26]

THE CONFLICT-TERROR NEXUS

The current example of the rise of the IS-KP group vividly illustrates that geopolitically relevant security situations and conflicts can have a direct impact on transnational terrorism and the relevant terrorist threat elsewhere, specifically in Europe. This contextuality can be referred to as "conflict-terror nexus".[27] What does this term mean? A jihadist self-justification in relevant propaganda relates to a perceived or constructed connection between geopolitically relevant regional conflicts, predominantly in the Middle East, and Islamist terrorism, especially in the West. Islamist proponents try to exploit these precarious situations to advance their ideological agenda.[28] Jihadist groups instrumentalize such conflicts to generate followers and recruit terrorists by claiming to fight for the "defense of Muslims" or "true Islam" and against oppression and unlawful occupation.[29] Another aspect is the propagandistic distortion produced by jihadist groups to spread

their extremist view of conflicts accordingly. Through this manipulative ideological charge, they try to gain further supporters, emphasizing mainly the religious aspects of the respective conflict and presenting it as a "defensive struggle" between Muslims and "infidels".[30] Through revenge and injustice narratives, they try to gain broader support in the Islamic world and increase their followership by also targeting moderate Muslims. The regular recourse of jihadist attackers in the West to "revenge" for invasion[31], occupation, or war in their home countries or those of their families illustrates this pattern of instrumentalization and ideological manipulation.[32]

The underlying narrative of "revenge for the humiliation of Muslims" or "defense against the aggression of the West" is regularly taken up by Islamist terrorists in their manifestoes or in connection with their terror acts.[33] At first glance, it seems plausible that such transnational jihadist propaganda and terrorism are the result of military and political interventions or crisis situations in the Middle East or Islamic world, respectively.[34] Therefore, it is not surprising that there has been a debate for years in the Western security discourse about – whether or not – a direct connection between geopolitical conflicts and Islamist terrorism can be established. Some experts argue that Western military interventions (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, etc.) have created an increased threat situation in Europe by contributing to the radicalization of Muslims and thereby indirectly promoting jihadist terrorist activities. Others oppose this perspective, emphasizing that military interventions and crisis situations are not necessarily the root cause of Islamist terrorism but rather act as an amplifier or multiplier of already existing tensions or problems within Western societies. Moreover, there are also those who reject the conflict-terror nexus entirely, arguing that jihadism and Islamist terrorism are primarily ideologically motivated phenomena that cannot be adequately explained by geopolitical conflicts.

Nevertheless, there is a stable consensus among many terrorism researchers and security experts that geopolitical developments and interdependencies can significantly influence the international terrorist threat situation, including that in Europe. The dynamics of international terrorism, especially jihadist terrorism, are not isolated from geopolitical events but are closely interwoven with them. Therefore, the concept of a "conflict-terror nexus" is useful for understanding the complex relationship between geopolitical conflicts and Islamist terrorism.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GEOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

To understand the significance of geopolitical developments in Islamist terrorism, it's essential to consider the broader context in which these groups operate. Geopolitical developments such as military interventions, regime changes, and regional conflicts can create fertile ground for the emergence and growth of jihadist movements.[35] These movements often exploit grievances stemming from perceived injustices, oppression, and marginalization of Muslim communities to recruit members and justify their violent actions.[36]

One notable example is the aftermath of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. These military interventions destabilized the region, leading to power vacuums, sectarian violence, and the emergence of jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and later, the Islamic State (IS).[37] The subsequent occupation and perceived occupation by Western forces provided jihadist groups with a narrative of resistance against foreign aggression, which resonated with disaffected individuals and communities across the Muslim world.

Similarly, the Arab Spring uprisings and their aftermaths created opportunities for jihadist groups to exploit political instability and social unrest. In countries like Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the breakdown of central authority allowed jihadist organizations to establish footholds, recruit fighters, and launch attacks. The Syrian civil war drew foreign fighters from around the world to join jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) and IS, further internationalizing the conflict and spreading the ideology of global jihad.[38]

Geopolitical developments also shape the alliances and rivalries between jihadist groups themselves. For example, the rivalry between al-Qaeda and IS for leadership of the global jihadist movement has influenced their strategies, tactics, and targeting priorities. The competition for resources, territory, and followers has led to intra-jihadist conflicts and shifting alliances, complicating efforts to combat terrorism effectively.

THE IMPACT ON EUROPE

The interconnectedness of geopolitical developments and Islamist terrorism has direct implications for Europe's security. The continent has been a target for jihadist attacks, both large-scale atrocities like the Paris and Brussels attacks and smaller-scale incidents carried out by lone wolves or small cells. European countries have also faced the challenge of dealing with returning foreign fighters from conflict zones like Syria and Iraq, who pose a significant threat upon their return home.

The conflict-terror nexus manifests in various ways in Europe. For example, jihadist propaganda often frames attacks in Europe as retaliation for Western military interventions or perceived injustices against Muslims.[39] The rise of IS-KP in Afghanistan and its conflict with the Taliban could inspire attacks in Europe by sympathizers or affiliates seeking to demonstrate their allegiance to the jihadist cause.[40]

Moreover, the flow of refugees and migrants from conflict-affected regions into Europe has raised concerns about potential security risks and the infiltration of jihadist elements among migrant populations.[41] While the vast majority of refugees are fleeing violence and persecution and have no connection to terrorism, European governments have grappled with the challenge of balancing humanitarian obligations with security imperatives.

In response to these challenges, European countries have implemented various counterterrorism measures, including enhanced intelligence sharing, border controls, surveillance, and counter-radicalization programs. However, the complex nature of the conflict-terror nexus requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the root causes of radicalization, strengthens resilience within communities, and tackles the drivers of geopolitical instability.

INSTABILITY AND FRAGILITY IN CRISIS REGIONS AS ACCELERATORS OF ISLAMIST VIOLENCE

Political instability in crisis regions creates security vacuums that terrorist organizations are eager to exploit.[42] The incapacity or collapse of certain governments in the Muslim world, along with a potential accompanying civil war, could offer jihadist groups several opportunities to regain strength after years of setbacks.[43] Of course, not all civil wars necessarily lead to international terrorism. However, civil wars in Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen over the past decades have shown that they provide fertile ground for terrorist groups. Conflicts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and other countries have also generated or exacerbated terrorism. Even more limited internal unrest that produces ungovernable spaces in part of a country, as is the case today in the Sinai region, can exacerbate terrorism. The Sinai Peninsula continues to pose a security problem after ten years of local conflict, which played a significant role as early as the summer of 2013 when President Mohammed Mursi was ousted by General al-Sisi.[44] The Egyptian army feared that Mursi might allow the Sinai to become a link between his Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Hamas.[45] Although Mursi has since passed away and the local influence of the MB is now relatively low, there has been a partly hot, partly latent Islamist uprising in parts of Sinai since then, manifested in regularly recurring terrorist actions by violent Islamists. Egypt has only kept this under control through decisive, repressive action against the local population, which, however,

creates new enemies in a vicious circle. Also, the most recent Gaza war with its border has in many aspects a great impact on Egyptian stability and security.[46]

Civil wars in Muslim-dominated countries usually have significant and dangerous effects on the development of Islamist terrorist organizations. Firstly, the collapse of a government offers smaller terrorist groups the opportunity to expand their activities without or with only minimal interference. Libya largely defeated jihadist groups in the country before Gaddafi was overthrown and the civil war broke out in 2011. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was on the verge of collapse in 2011 when the neighboring civil war in Syria began. In these and other cases, small terrorist groups found a welcome refuge as the local government was too weak and too focused on immediate threats from the civil war there to vigorously oppose terrorism. Secondly, a regional conflict itself can be both an inspiration and a magnet for jihadist fighters. Societies involved in local disputes may possibly view the terrorist group as an ally and protector against the government, an occupying power, or a competing community. Even if they do not initially feel this way, the attacks of the terrorist group and the community could ultimately bring them closer together. Internationally, some such conflicts become attractions that attract tens of thousands of volunteers who want to fight.

The war in Syria, coupled with the IS's call to establish a cross-border caliphate, attracted about 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters from around the world. Similarly, conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and other countries have attracted thousands of foreign recruits. These foreign fighters are hardened in the war zone, trained in the use of weapons, and radicalized. In the medium term, the growing number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) returning from or still returning to the war zones in Syria and Iraq poses an obvious threat to European security.[47] Some of these returnees have military skills and could potentially plan, orchestrate, or carry out terrorist attacks. As early as 2016, then-U.S. National Intelligence Director James R. Clapper warned of the danger that these returnees could use their skills acquired in Iraq and Syria for attacks in the West.[48] Most of these fighters, born and raised in Europe, hold EU passports, and join extremist groups in conflict regions. The return of some of them caused considerable concern in European capitals, especially after terrorist attacks in various cities (e.g., Paris in November 2015 or Brussels in March 2016) in which some of these returnees were involved.[49] Jihadists with knowledge of weapons and combat experience can cause significant damage, especially when operating in well-trained groups with tactical know-how. Therefore, when developing comprehensive counterterrorism strategies, it is crucial to consider cross-border spillover effects from current or past conflict zones such as Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan.[50] According to reports, at least 15,000 people were able to escape the self-proclaimed IS "caliphate" before it eroded under pressure from the international anti-IS coalition. Of these, about 7,500 returned to their home countries, with only half being detained or actively monitored.[51] According to a recent UN Security Council report from February 2023 the security problem posed by returning FTFs who can penetrate the EU via the "Balkan route" is substantial.[52] The controlled, legal repatriation of these returnees poses a major challenge for European governments, as they must reconcile the requirements of public security with the postulate of protecting human rights and the rule of law.[53]

Against this background, it appears necessary to create a system of support and rehabilitation opportunities for radicalized returnees to prevent re-recruitment or radicalization.[54] The logistics of these returnees with combat experience, access to weapons, and infrastructure resemble the principle of guerrilla warfare underground and underpin the currently prevailing tactical low-level principle of easily accessible lone actor scenarios with easily obtainable agents.[55] Civil wars and military conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa make Western counterterrorism, especially in Europe, more complex. One of the most common and effective methods in the fight against international terrorism is to cooperate with allied intelligence services to limit the terrorist group's violent range of action. This cooperation is key to preemptive counterterrorism but by no means a panacea, as demonstrated by the surprising large-scale attack by the Islamist terrorist organization Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, in which over 1,200 Israelis were killed.[56] Intel information

must be condensed, analyzed, and correctly interpreted. Shortly thereafter, a failure of Israeli intelligence services was the most common explanation.[57] The current security situation related to the ongoing conflict in Gaza equally poses a huge challenge to European security authorities and could motivate Islamists across Europe to carry out new terrorist attacks in the name of Palestinian freedom.[58]

Based on a progressive polarization and rampant hatred of Israel ("*from the river to the sea*") as well as an almost socially acceptable anti-Semitism in substantial parts of the Muslim diaspora communities in Europe, it could prove to be a fertile breeding ground for a new Islamist threat, which jihadist actors could gratefully cultivate and extend.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AS A BREEDING GROUND FOR JIHADIST VIOLENCE

The precarious security situation characterized by instability in sub-Saharan Africa has not yet been sufficiently discussed although there is more scholarly focus on the issue in the past decade. Islamist terrorism has alarmingly increased in many parts of Africa.[59] The African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) of the African Union (AU) reports that the number of attacks in Africa has increased by 400 percent.[60] In 2023, Africa south of the Sahara is very likely to account for (at least) 48 % of worldwide terrorism-related deaths.[61] Attacks have spread beyond historical hotspots such as the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa to southern Africa and the coastal regions of West Africa. The Sahel region proves to be the epicenter of jihadist militancy.[62] Islamist violence in the Sahel region has increased over the past ten years and has risen by a whopping 140 percent since 2020.[63] Violence by militant Islamist groups against the civilian population in the Sahel region accounts for 60 percent of all such violence in Africa and has increased by more than 40 percent by 2022.[64] This escalation of violence has displaced more than 2.5 million people and killed more than 8,000 people in 2022.[65] Somalia remains in the grip of al-Shabaab militias, Boko Haram has become a significant force in the extremist landscape in Nigeria, and in Mozambique, the local IS branch remains a permanent threat.[66] Fragile statehood, failing democracy, and precarious economic conditions are globally a suitable breeding ground for extremist developments. Some of the violent extremist structures and terrorist organizations in the African crisis regions mentioned above have a broad base of potentially violent supporters in Europe.

CHINA AND THE UYGHUR ISSUE

Finally, a few remarks on the great power China in connection with the issue of Islamism. Historically, China has altogether not played a significant role in the discourse of the Islamic world. However negative reports of international relevance about incidents concerning Muslim minorities in China could possibly change this fairly quickly. China is sometimes referred to as the world's largest "prison warden"[67], incarcerating Muslims (the Chinese government has detained more than one million people since 2017[68] and subjected those who were not detained to intensified surveillance, religious restrictions, forced labor, and forced sterilizations). The local detention system is administered by an atheist and (nominally) communist government, that is increasingly assertive in the geopolitical context.[69] Each of these characteristics could theoretically bring Beijing into the sights of a jihadist movement.[70] Since its modern development after the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s, the jihadist movement has focused on allegedly apostate regimes in the Muslim world, sectarian rivalries with Shiite Muslims and their Iranian supporters, and non-Muslim powers such as Russia, Israel, India, and the United States. China could therefore easily come into the sights of violent Islamists next. In its own country, the Uyghur issue is increasingly coming into focus for the communist one-party dictatorship. In Xinjiang province, the local central government continues to pursue the goal of assimilating ethnic minorities and is carrying out a cultural genocide in the process. For years,

there have been mass detentions of Uyghurs in "re-education camps." The reports from these camps are shocking as they talk about sometimes inhumane conditions of detention, humiliations, torture, sexual violence, etc.[71] Such an increasingly drastic extent of China's mistreatment of the Muslim Uyghur minority has begun to attract the attention of jihadist terrorist organizations or attracted / created new fighters.[72] Some of these groups have dozens or more Uyghur comrades in their ranks as well as many others from Central Asia or other areas, in whose leadership circles China is increasingly present as an enemy. This constellation exemplifies that internal dynamics through a transnational component may equally intensify the terrorist menace internally. Also, for a great power like China.

CONCLUSION

The conflict-terror nexus emphasizes the intricate relationship between geopolitical dynamics and the phenomenon of (predominantly Islamist) terrorism, signaling the necessity for a thorough and nuanced comprehension of the drivers behind jihadist violence. While military interventions and regional conflicts undoubtedly contribute to the proliferation of radicalization and the emergence of jihadist entities, it's imperative to recognize the multifaceted nature of these influences. Factors such as social exclusion, political grievances, and religious extremism also exert significant influence, shaping the landscape within which extremist ideologies take root and thrive.

As the emergence of IS-KP and later advancement to a relevant Islamist player has blatantly demonstrated, the "propaganda of the deed" of major spectacular terrorist attacks is still a factor for "attractiveness" among their peers. IS-KP's outbidding strategy has quickly made the organization a leading force in global jihadism. The recent "success" of IS-KP is both a reconstitutive and a driving factor for the global jihadist ideology and local recruitment of fellow extremists. Western counter-terrorism (CT) ambitions must address this aspect properly.

Moreover, regional instability and governmental fragility in crisis regions are significant accelerators of Islamist violence in the regions affected but also abroad in the West. Failing statehood creates conflicts and terrorist violence. This applies equally for the MENA region and other places, where Muslim governments are at risk and civil wars could emerge. Returning terrorist fighters and an uncontrolled migration towards Europe, where violent extremist could undetectably mingle in the crowd of migrants remain a serious issue. In general, the African continent remains a crisis region when it comes to extremist violence. Having said this, in the entire Sahel-zone the dimension and intensity of terrorist violence have exploded in the past years. Not least the Chinese Uyghur issue may become a breeding ground for Islamist terrorism against the Peoples Republic of China and Chinese targets.

Tackling the challenge posed by regional conflict-driven transnational Islamist terrorism demands a holistic approach that integrates military, diplomatic, and socio-economic strategies. It is crucial to not only disrupt terrorist networks through military means but also to address the underlying conditions that breed radicalization.[73] This involves countering jihadist propaganda, fostering inclusive local governance structures, tackling socio-economic disparities, and amplifying moderate voices within Muslim communities locally and abroad. By tackling these root causes, both societies in conflict-prone areas as well as in the West can build resilience against the allure of extremist ideologies and prevent the radicalization of vulnerable individuals.

The conflict-terror nexus requires a multifaceted approach that beyond standardized measures also tackles the drivers of geopolitically infused or promoted regional instability. In essence, effective counterterrorism efforts must extend beyond traditional security and conventional P/CVE measures to encompass a comprehensive strategy that addresses the conflicts and their causes as well as the underlying grievances fueling terrorist activity.

For policymakers and practitioners, a clear understanding of the complex interplay between geopolitical factors, social dynamics, and terrorist behavior is needed. Only in such a purposeful manner they can develop more targeted and impactful interventions. Ultimately, by fostering peace, rule of law, welfare and resilience hence creating conditions conducive to long-term security and prosperity in conflict and crisis zones, the West can mitigate the appeal of extremist ideologies.

NOTES

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THE EXTREMIST LANDSCAPE AND ITS USE OF TECHNOLOGY. WHERE DO WE GO NOW?

Astrid Bötticher

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INTRODUCTION

They network on the Internet, meet and organise themselves in the darknet or in multiplayer games[1], influence the climate of opinion on social networks, or use fake news to polarise – today's extremism is mechanised, digitised, and with the strong spread of artificial intelligence, extremism will experience a further digitalization push that the authorities must be prepared for. Years ago, we saw how small programs (social bots) were used to automatically spread fake news or manipulate opinions and interfere with democratic elections. We saw in the 2010s the development of online-recruiting via social networks and other platforms, leading to an unprecedented increase of departures into war zones especially by the group of under twenty year olds. Attacks on critical infrastructure, organised hostage-taking of companies and even municipal institutions or universities with the extortion of Bitcoins or other digital currencies are no longer dystopias, but bitter reality.

This is not the end of the story, because extremists, organisations in rogue states, hackers and early adopters might be a dangerous combination for democratically and liberally organised constitutional states. Police, intelligence, and customs must be prepared for this and become enabled to be proactive rather than reactive.

The question I was asked to answer was "'The extremist landscape: what's next?" and I reinterpret this question: What does the ever-increasing technologisation mean for extremism and what do we need to prepare for as a result?

This is the question addressed in this article, which takes a cross-ideological look at the digital and post-digital opportunities that extremists have used or are using. In doing so, this article examines what could be next for the extremist landscape. To start with this, I will present and rely on the consensus definition of radicalism and extremism and radicalisation. Furthermore, I will explain why extremism and rogue states are possibly the two sides of the same coin and why it is necessary to combine these two forces into one analysis. As it is impossible to oversee all the recent developments in technology-evolvement, I tried to pick some that have lately sparked discussions and seem to be relevant enough to be considered a game changer: Social Platforms, Quantum Technology, and Digital Systems like communication networks, incorporating machine-to-machine communication.

Today's extremism is networked, rogue states have become ever more powerful and digital and well-organised. It is up to us to stop a dystopian reality in which technology is used to suppress or undergo liberal states and its societies. This article therefore concludes with theses that are intended to give the constitutional state a new capacity to act without compromising its fundamental values such as liberalism, democracy and freedom. How can the democratic, liberal constitutional state be made more resilient?

EXTREMISM – A DEFINITION

In Germany alone, there are over 50 definitions of extremism, some of which differ considerably, while others have nuanced distinctions. Similarly, in the Anglophone world, there is no single definition of extremism, but rather a multitude of sometimes more and sometimes less nuanced

terms. However, it is worth noting that the term 'extremism' is defined differently in various contexts, and there may not be a universally accepted definition. On the one hand, it could be argued that historical choices and traditions have played a role. In the English-speaking world, terrorism has been a greater concern for decades, and it could be said that the concept of free speech differs significantly as well. Moreover, there have been recent developments, such as the unclear concept of hate speech, which is occasionally used as a substitute term to circumvent the use of the word extremism, which always connotes the idea of a fragile democracy that is able to respond to emerging threats.[2] The application of the concept of extremism to ultra-liberal democracies, such as the USA, which have a broadly defined scope for civic action, can be challenging.[3] This relates to the possibility of organised anti-democratic counter-movements to exist within democracies. These counter-movements have a far greater scope for action and more potential to organise themselves in ultraliberal democracies than in those democracies that are familiar with the concept of democratic militancy.

In addition to hate speech, there is another category that is still vague and can perhaps rightly be described as anti-democratic and anti-freedom and can be criticised – especially from the perspective of ultra-liberal democracies. This is the concept of state hostility, which has been incorporated into the corpus of extremism research, particularly during the course of the COVID-19 crisis, and which is associated with a further constriction of civic agency and critical capacity.[4] It is worth noting that this critique is subjective and not universally accepted and a discussion will probably follow.

Nevertheless, this may play a role in partially explaining the significant variances in definitions between the English-speaking and German-speaking contexts, and while it clarifies some of the pronounced discrepancies – within each respective linguistic sphere, it does not fully account for them.

Therefore, it compels us to present a widely disseminated and broadly accepted definition that can serve as an objective starting point for the present inquiry into how extremism has evolved thus far and how it may consequently continue to evolve. It is important, particularly in engaging and exchanging with the Anglophone world, to emphasise that the concept of a resilient democracy itself has clear boundaries. Adjacent to the concept of extremism is always the concept of radicalism. Radicalism denotes those movements, groups, individuals, or parties that engage in deeply critical discourse about democracy, vehemently opposing certain societal actions or institutions (whether traditional or modern) without seeking to abolish democracy itself or deprive people of their democratic rights based on characteristics such as skin colour, sexuality, religion, or other attributes. It is also crucial to address a conceptual weakness that often leads to confusion and misunderstanding: radicalism and radicalization are two entirely distinct terms that have little in common beyond their appearance within the same conceptual field (alongside terms like terrorism, fascism, nationalism, ideology, theocracy, dictatorship, and numerous others).

"R*adicalism refers to a political doctrine embraced by socio-political movements that advocate for both individual and collective freedom, seeking emancipation from authoritarian regimes and hierarchically-structured societies. In this sense, radicalism, which advocates sweeping political change, represents a form of opposition against the existing status quo and its establishment. It often emerges among the sons and daughters of a bourgeois elite – young people who identify with and aim to improve the social conditions of broader segments of the population. Historically, radical political parties have played pivotal roles in advancing greater democracy in several states. As an ideological mindset, radicalism is highly critical of the current status quo and aims to restructure or overthrow outdated political structures. While opponents often portray radicals as violent, this is only partly true, as radicalism historically leans more towards progressive reformism than utopian extremism, which glorifies violence – something radicals reject.*" [5]

At this point, it becomes clear that we will not be dealing with radical forces here. They are irrelevant to the question of possible dangers to the democratic constitutional state. They are not a security threat.

On the other hand, radicalization refers to a process – amenable to social-psychological or educational interventions – whereby individuals or groups adopt increasingly extreme beliefs or behaviours.[6] Radicalization is a social process that can lead to extremism or even terrorism, but it does not necessarily do so. The reasons why individuals become radicalised into extremism or terrorism are not definitively understood today, and there are numerous discussed individual criteria where it remains unclear how they manifest within individuals and what exactly it takes to become an extremist or terrorist. Radicalization processes are typically rapid – from initial exposure to engagement in conflict in a war zone, only weeks may pass under certain circumstances. Others may take years or operate as extremists in safe havens, providing support to terrorist groups through recruitment or other forms of infrastructural assistance. Now that related terms have been clarified and the distinctions between radicalism and radicalization have been outlined, we can delve into the core of this section and address the question of what extremism is.

In 2017, a consensus definition was put forward, which this work will align with. It is important to note that this definition did not primarily evolve from Anglophone sources but emerged from the German-language context. Simultaneously, it incorporates insights from some theories in the Anglophone sphere: the definition has been influenced by the works of Manus Midlarsky[7] and Roger Griffin[8], who have developed robust concepts and are important pioneers of a holistic understanding of extremism. Additionally, significant contributions came from other scholars: Alex P. Schmid[9], Edwin Bakker[10], and Miroslav Mareš[11] played key roles in shaping this definition. It is important to differentiate this perspective from the works arising from the constitutional approach construct.

"*Extremism is a mental position borne by personal affect, expressed in concrete efforts and political structures. The personal affects range from inclination to personality, the concrete efforts range from methods to endeavour, the political structures range from state structures to political forces and movements. It is an uncompromising attitude in which violent acts are systematically carried out to achieve political goals. It is an understanding of Politics as struggle instead of competition, so compromises cannot be found and the deviant opposition is suppressed uncompromisingly, incorporating criminal acts and violent procedures. The identitarian view on society leads to the destruction of social diversity and to the rejection of multiplicity, plurality and tolerance aiming to initiate a comprehensive homogenization. The homogenization, which gets carried out with violence against society, is accompanied by emotionalizing myths. Extremism is at the periphery of society; it also wants to change existing conditions under massive use of force, in order to announce a new morning (within the framework of a palingenetic myth). Extremism establishes the dualism of friend and foe, of black and white. Extremism is a political non-culture and due to its fanaticism intolerably intolerant. At the societal level, extremism is authoritarian. Extremism indulges an anti-humanistically motivated social interventionism, which is anti-pluralist and anti-diversity. Extremism is an indoctrinatory ideology that leads to intolerance, unable to dialogue and glorifying violence, and is with subversive manner directed against the constitutional state, democracy, the value-plurality-oriented society with its state institutions, while criminal acts emanate from it.*"[12]

EXTREMISTS AND ROGUE STATES

Extremism and rogue states are often grouped together, as they are perceived to be related in theory, being part of violent politics.[13] Various areas of political science are addressed here. Their interests and areas of research often overlap. Research on the causes of war, research on violence and research on extremism are independent fields. However, research on the causes of war is concerned not only with state actors but also with non-state violent actors; research on violence looks for the causes of violence in individual behaviour and in institutional structures; and research on extremism is concerned not only with individual actors but also with state-supporting entities such as parties or even states such as rogue states. It is important to note that there are significant differences between rogue states and extremists as actors. Rogue states are defined as those whose actions violate or actively undermine international law. It should be noted that rogue states are not individual actors, groups, or political entities such as parties or movements within states, as is the

case with extremism. It is crucial to acknowledge these distinctions in order to better understand and address the challenges posed by these actors. Instead, they are states with a defined territory, population, government (executive, legislative and judicial branches), and sovereignty.

D.C. North has a profound understanding of system-changes, particularly in terms of power and governance.[14] There are various models for acquiring power. In the scenario where extremists gain control of institutions through democratic processes, it is predicted that the institutions will be altered to bring the democratic game to a halt in the future. This can be achieved in various ways, such as establishing a connection between the judiciary and the executive, limiting unrestricted competition between political parties, establishing a connection between the media and the executive, and other similar measures. The state is transformed in a manner that renders alternative ideas and competition virtually impossible. Often, governance models are instituted that revolve around a one-party state, wherein competitors can only participate at the risk of their lives or health, and face strong limitations such as being excluded from electoral processes altogether, effectively marking the end of the democratic game. Frequently, associated ideologies emphasise the acquisition of additional territories or the identification of ideological adversaries (e.g., all states where the democratic game is still played), implying a superiority of their own system and defining an external threat that poses a danger to the new authoritarian order. This often requires employing means of violence, attacking technological systems, or infiltrating technical infrastructure to destabilise the defined adversary and gain power and influence over technical systems, where such influence may not otherwise be achievable (such as through the use of military force).

It is important to look at the use of technology by both classes of actors in order to get a full picture and address possible futures.

CAPACITIES OF ADVERSARIES

First and foremost, we need to differentiate between the capabilities of extremist actors and rogue states, as the resources available for attacks on technical systems vary significantly. Extremists typically leverage existing technological capabilities that are tried and tested. For instance, social models or ideological content are often incorporated into pre-existing technical systems, such as social networks like TikTok or Facebook, as well as multiplayer games. These systems are infiltrated, or new gaming platforms are developed to create extremist spaces by and for extremists.

In addition, there are individual, smaller successes of extremists, such as the hijacking of television channels by ISIS, which demonstrates this. Often, individual user errors or insufficiently utilised technical capabilities of providers are cited, and there are numerous considerations to legally bind providers of all platforms so that extremist or terrorist content does not continue to spread by being quickly detected and deleted. The European Union has developed various legal means to address these issues surrounding extremist activities in the online world. To put it short: extremist behaviour typically involves the use of social bots to initiate processes of polarisation (a strategy also employed by rogue states), the establishment of their own digital worlds through interconnected websites, YouTube channels, or linked accounts on other social media platforms. Less commonly known is the targeting of technical infrastructure, for example, through malware programs or targeted attacks on technical systems or machine-to-machine communication, or the espionage of technical knowledge to gain technological superiority.

Rogue states and extremist actors differ notably due to their capacities. Rogue states, for example, have the ability to establish extensive hacker farms and maintain specialised military units dedicated to targeting technical infrastructure or large, system-critical enterprises. In contrast, extremist actors frequently lack the necessary technical resources and often encounter pressure from

security agencies in democratic nations, inhibiting their capacity to develop similar capabilities. This divergence in political power and capability has resulted in distinctly disparate approaches to attacking states that uphold democratic governance.

APPROACHES TO ATTACK

Technical infrastructure, including critical systems like power grids, communication networks, and financial institutions, or great-machines (devices like atomic energy sites, but also great systems like the aviation system that includes machine-to machine communication) have become a main target of rogue states against democratic players that have become more and more dependent on its technological devices for the organisation of societies. There are several ways to employ power over those systems: first, let us differentiate between cyber-attacks with the means of using technology-knowledge of today to detect and use vulnerabilities over some kind of technical infrastructure and then technological superiority with the means of gaining a superior knowledge of technology especially in the deep-tech sector like quantum computers or quantum sensors or Artificial Intelligence.

From a theoretical perspective, we can categorise various types of attacks that, while overlapping or combinable, are also distinctly identifiable and require different responses from democratic governance systems. Firstly, classical hacking attacks are worth noting. Among these, malware programs are at the forefront as potent tools for disrupting democratic societies. Malware is typically used to infiltrate communication systems to acquire new knowledge that can be leveraged politically or militarily. For example, there have been attacks on the various parliaments of democratic governance states, and executive government communications have been intercepted. Intercepting involves remaining undetected within systems and acquiring as much communication as possible to obtain structural knowledge, substantive knowledge, network, or personnel knowledge to exploit later on. Weaknesses in established technical (communication) infrastructure are exploited for this purpose.[15]

SIGNIFICANT TECHNICAL FACILITIES

Furthermore, there are attacks on significant technical installations, such as the organisation of power supply, water supply, submarine cables, satellite networks, or railway infrastructure. The acquired knowledge can be used, on the one hand, to generate the highest possible sum of illegal money (since attacks on infrastructure are now considered an important sector within a criminal market), for instance, by installing malware and persuading cities, municipalities, or hospital networks to transfer a substantial sum of money in untraceable digital currencies like Bitcoin to the perpetrators to release the software. However, it can also be employed in conflict scenarios to permanently destroy technical infrastructure and/or prevent its use to the detriment of democratic societies. Here, we can further differentiate between technical and physical attacks: central power distributors, whose locations may be known through the infiltration of technical systems, or the course of submarine cables, can also be destroyed through brute force.

GAINING TECHNOLOGICAL SOVEREIGNTY

In addition to existing technical infrastructures, emerging systems and developers of future technology are central and important targets for attackers. This can occur in several ways: first, by enhancing or improving one's own technical capabilities through the exploitation of scientific institutions, and secondly, by developing technical capabilities primarily within military establishments, where new knowledge may not serve a market that has already established itself as a foundation of democratic governance.

This includes technical capabilities such as attacking communication systems using advanced technology. An example is the quantum computer, which is not yet developed and has sparked a so-called race between democratic competitors and authoritarian systems. It is assumed that rogue states have no incentives to publish their developments or a potentially fully deployable, universal quantum computer. Instead, scenarios are often discussed in which such devices could be used to attack technical systems, such as the financial system, which primarily operates through algorithms, to create destabilization. In addition to the financial system, encompassing all forms of electronic money transfer, there are also traditional infrastructures, such as the railway network, that could be targeted, where the technical devices used for rail positioning could be attacked.

OUTDATED TECHNOLOGY

Another consideration arises here: the necessity of upgrading outdated technology to the latest (quantum-safe) standards entails a massive investment burden and long-term technological overhaul. For instance, implementing hash-based safeguards on devices with only 6 or 15 KB of available memory space requires substantial effort just to bring them up to date. This is, for example, a reality in the field of rail transportation that democratic governments urgently need to address.

While the quantum computer remains a futuristic concept, other highly advanced fields of knowledge within the quantum realm exist, particularly in the area of sensing technology. Quantum sensors are already available today, can be industrially manufactured, and represent highly potent technical devices. Like any form of deep technology, all devices are dual-use products. This applies to today's extensively used artificial intelligence systems as much as it does to all forms of quantum knowledge-based devices.

FUTURE TECHNOLOGIES

Attacks using advanced technology are typically reserved for rogue states that possess the economic and scientific potential to develop such types of devices. Naturally, there will be future discussions about legal frameworks and adherence to ethical models of use through international agreements, especially regarding the urgent dissemination of deep technology needed for economic reasons in democratic states. Yet: once widespread dissemination becomes feasible (which will likely pertain more to sensors or metrological devices in the field of quantum technology), extremist actors may potentially gain access to these technologies. The utility and application of such technologies cannot be fully described today, as their use requires extensive specialised knowledge that extremist actors typically do not possess. For these reasons, the development of control systems against sub-state actors is more of a medium- to long-term goal for securing peaceful interests.

However, this does not apply to technical deep technologies like Artificial Intelligence, for which no specialised expertise is needed for application today. Extremist actors transitioning into terrorism are indeed capable (due to the features that technology brings) of causing significant damage and systemic threats. For example, there have been cases where highly toxic chemical or biological weapons were developed using artificial intelligence. This necessitates high-level expertise within security agencies, which are more than ever required to develop units capable of interdisciplinary and even scientific work to detect such occurrences, prosecute perpetrators, and mitigate threats.

A political discussion on the dangers posed by AI has already taken place, but the political discourse on the much more potent quantum technology (in its various facets) has not yet matured. The systemic consequences for security agencies are immense and require an incredible investment in

capabilities. Particularly challenging is the legal framework surrounding data protection, which has significant implications: data protection often dominates legal discussions, while sociological and political science issues (such as in extremism research) are sidelined. As a result, voluntary sharing of private information, sharing of deep technology knowledge, or disclosing personal networks as contributions to the threat landscape are often not discussed.

LEGAL ACCESSION

Returning to the main topic, another form of attack on democratically organised governance can occur through the provision of infrastructure systems from rogue states. This includes the unregulated use of technical interfaces in communication systems, as exemplified by the 5G discussion (which can subsequently be exploited by rogue states) through legal sale. Another example is the use of drones developed in rogue states within security agencies. Additionally, technical devices in highly sensitive labs that are purchased on the world market and used without regulation can also be considered. It's important to note that the deployment of technology always accompanies an increase in power for the entity from which the devices are purchased, as the devices are always developed within the legal system in which they are built. If the development occurs in a rogue state, the device initially adheres to the political and legal development conditions established by these rogue states.

EXPLORATION OF SCIENCE

The acquisition of scientific information represents another significant focal point for rogue states, increasingly drawing the attention of security agencies and warranting further scrutiny. Scientists may be integrated into research contexts where the true purpose is obscured, such as when research institutions become entangled in the development of subsystems to the extent that their connection to military research is no longer apparent to scientists or scientific institutions. Alternatively, politically directed information exchanges may occur through scientists and junior researchers, with the latter clearly involved in political agendas and engaging in espionage for rogue states, all while remaining opaque to domestic scientists in their laboratories. For instance, we observe funding programs for junior researchers that initially appear apolitical but serve the purpose of channelling acquired knowledge back into domestic labs to the detriment of democratically organised societies.[16]

NEURALGIC POINTS OF DEMOCRACY

There is evidence today that extremist actors and rogue states alike influence democratic processes, thereby contributing to changes in election outcomes.[17] On one hand, we observe polarisation effects, widely discussed in extremism research and governments.[18] On the other hand, there is influence exerted directly on politicians themselves, altering the nature of policy making and pushing radical positions closer to the mainstream.[19] Particularly notable are parties often labelled as populist parties today. It is important to note that populist parties typically harbour an extremist core, whether it be racism, anti-feminism, hatred towards religious or ethnic minorities, or xenophobia. Recently, they have also adopted the tactic of simply refusing to accept the outcome of elections, thereby challenging the very process itself, which traditionally involves competition and typically results in a temporary winner.

These trends are often supported by the establishment of alternative platforms (be it TV-Stations, News-Outlets, Radio-Stations, Websites or Social Platforms) or the infiltration of existing commercial social platforms.[20] Undesired information is portrayed as fake, and alternative truths are disseminated. The term "alternative truth" is linked to a completely uncritical use of

constructivism.[21] A space is created where democratic features, such as the pursuit of consensus or the rejection of the idea of a "strongman," are devalued, and the impression of larger support is cultivated by exploiting phenomena like the homophily principle extensively discussed in network research. Today, we see these processes particularly exploited by two ideological strands: Islamism and right-wing extremism. However, the technology itself is not inherently tied to any ideology and could become relevant for other ideological strands in the future. The utilisation of a combination of social techniques and technical infrastructures for mass communication, including targeted audience engagement and voter profiling through technology using network analysis or semantic network analysis, is likely to become increasingly sophisticated and prevalent over time.

INTERCONNECTED OPERATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

In the realm of cyberspace, the overriding concern is critical infrastructure (CI), which represents the essential components necessary for the seamless functioning of society. This includes both physical assets and electronic systems and services that are critical to societal continuity. Critical infrastructure systems are a diverse set of dynamic, interactive and interconnected elements.[22]

The vulnerability of modern critical infrastructure stems from its complexity and reliance on interconnected operational technology (OT), great machines that encompass machine-to-machine-communication networks. Cybercriminals are exploiting vulnerabilities in the supply chain.[23] Governments are responding with regulatory frameworks and implement for instance zero-trust frameworks. Attacks on critical infrastructures are a daily phenomenon in Europe[24] and the United States.[25] The cyber-threat situation is very dynamic.[26]

The hackers employed by rogue states are strategically positioning themselves within the infrastructure to cause significant damage to citizens and communities when they decide to launch an attack.[27] In particular, rogue states have developed cyber capabilities designed to carry out various attack scenarios, such as those seen in cyber warfare, as well as operations that use criminal means or simply aim to cause disruption or probe critical systems and their interrelationships. It is important to emphasise that this area will become increasingly important and cost-effective. For example, AI can already generate malware and autonomously identify system vulnerabilities. At the same time, these capabilities and their infrastructures have become established, with hacker farms as real as attack organisations within state institutions. This type of threat will keep extremism researchers busy for years to come. Given the availability of support on the darknet today, there is potential for the threat to spread, although systems are becoming more resilient and infrastructure protection has become a critical focus for security agencies.

NEW TECHNOLOGY OF VIOLENCE

It has been observed by Schori Liang, that while AI development offers potential solutions to humanity's challenges, it also presents significant risks. It is possible for adversaries to exploit AI to amplify cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns without requiring advanced skills, by utilising existing AI systems for malicious purposes. It is important to acknowledge that deep tech or cyber systems are not the sole means of developing extremism or terrorism, nor are they the only tools employed by agents of rogue states. It is worth noting that both state and non-state actors have access to drones and can use them to target military and civilian objectives, including civilian populations and infrastructure. Drones have been increasingly used for reconnaissance and attacks by various groups, including insurgents and terrorists. The use of drones by non-state actors is a significant concern due to their affordability and ease of operation. It is important to note that the use of drones by non-state actors is a serious concern that requires attention from security agencies. These actors have increasingly employed drones to attack military installations, diplomatic sites, energy infrastructure, and civilian centres. It is worth acknowledging the growing

prevalence of drones among non-state actors and the rise in armed drone attacks. Coordinated attacks become more and more likely.[28]

State actors and non-state actors alike use technological means to coordinate themselves.[29]

COMBINING TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING

As it was stated earlier, the integration of social strategies and technological frameworks in mass communication, encompassing tailored audience engagement is expected to progressively evolve and proliferate. It has been revealed that the costs of recruitment can be significantly reduced, particularly through the use of digital media, which proves cost-effective while maintaining the effectiveness of personnel or time deployment. This includes personalised communications, such as the terrorist cybergrooming conducted by ISIS in their interactions with vulnerable female and male groups. Whether for the purpose of recruiting wives or female supporters for jihad or addressing vulnerable male groups to recruit fighters or provide social environments for terrorist or extremist units abroad or domestically.

This also includes the establishment and orchestration of movements that can also be efficiently leveraged in this manner. This signifies that the techniques are becoming more sophisticated and widely employed.[30]

Of particular concern is the utilisation and dissemination of extremist information.

An illustrative example is the quest for knowledge about Islam: the informational offerings of jihadist groups are constructed with as much depth and breadth as those presented by politically neutral actors. The information available on these platforms is often cost-effective yet professionally developed, allowing users to access it at their convenience and as frequently as desired. Most networks are designed to swiftly and effectively counter systematic deletions, or they introduce new, yet-to-be-standardized tags that enable users to locate content purposefully and swiftly.

In addition to straightforward foundational knowledge with extremist undertones, these platforms feature visual and video material designed to evoke emotions or stabilise a self-perception among followers aimed at reinforcing their own "altruism." Altruism, generally defined as selfless concern for the well-being of others, plays a crucial role in terrorist mindsets by framing acts of violence as morally justified and serving a greater cause. This self-perception is oriented toward justifying acts of violence internally or emotionally accompanying hate in a way that allows the individual to perceive their hatred as meaningful, justified, and ultimately altruistic action.

CONCLUSION

The future of security threats will be characterised by the escalating complexity and interconnectedness of cyberspace, interconnected systems that encompass machine-to-machine-communication, and our dependence on these systems necessitating adaptive policies and technologies to mitigate risks possibly posed by rogue states and extremist actors. A thorough understanding of the different technological infrastructures, our dependencies and possibilities of human interventions is a consequence that we may assume, as the future of rogue state interventions and extremist activities becomes more and more dependent on technical devices, and it becomes more likely that targeting technical devices becomes a frequently used method. As technologies like quantum computing and AI become more accessible, the convergence of technological advancements with extremist tactics will pose unprecedented challenges, requiring proactive strategies to anticipate and counter emerging threats effectively. This encompasses the idea of an interest-based understanding of technology, as the concept of technopolitics employs. Yet this is not limited to technopolitics

as a mindset regarding national interests, as this also encompasses the idea of diplomacy and interconnectedness. Security is always a networked security, putting diplomats at the front lines of a creation of a safe surrounding. It is important to proactively include the ethical issues and requirements of those states that are most affected by terrorism or external threats. They must – for the benefit of all – work on a roadmap for the dissemination of the technology as well as on regulatory constructs at the international level, so that the threat that could potentially arise from the use of the technology is contained as well as possible. In addition to agreements between diplomats on the development of international regulations, this requires the security authorities in particular to proactively develop security regimes for the future, which work out the potential of the technology in such a way that it can be used for peaceful and secure purposes wherever possible. However, this also means that the authorities must be equipped with technology and be able to test its benefits for security. It makes little sense, for example, to leave the use of artificial intelligence to those who never intended to adhere to data protection anyway. It is important that authorities not only become experienced in using the latest technologies but that their regular use to establish security is made possible. This is particularly essential if the symmetry of the initial situation and the symmetry of the technology application are superimposed.

Security policies can emphasise international collaboration and adherence to ethical guidelines in deploying advanced technologies, fostering cooperation to mitigate risks associated with the dissemination of deep technologies, and safeguarding global peace and security. Therefore technology diplomacy or deep-tech-diplomacy, as is envisaged in some of the foreign ministries is an important goal of the future, yet it also needs to incorporate security organisations. To develop an international tech-diplomacy strand is necessary as rogue states and extremist groups will increasingly target critical infrastructure, including power grids and communication networks, leveraging cyber-attacks and physical disruptions to destabilise democratic societies and advance political agendas. Furthermore, this will become increasingly important as proliferation of deep technologies like quantum sensors and AI presents dual-use risks, enabling both state-sponsored entities and extremist actors to exploit advanced capabilities for malicious purposes, underscoring the need for ethical governance frameworks and international collaboration. Security policies as international agendas of democratic nations must differentiate strategies for combating extremist actors and rogue states, considering the significant variance in resources, capabilities, and tactics employed by these distinct threats to democratic governance and critical infrastructure. This means that ethical considerations and international coordination will become more and more important regarding technology-enabled threats and possible answers based on regulation, international cooperation and the fruitful use of technology (be it network-development on combating extremist or state threats or be it the binding norm development regarding dual use technologies). Security policy frameworks should prioritise the protection against sophisticated cyber-attacks, the use of dual use products and physical threats orchestrated by rogue states and extremist groups aiming to disrupt societal organisation via its technical infrastructure. This means that security policies should adapt to rapid technological advancements, by establishing robust regulatory frameworks to prevent misuse and ensure democratic governance resilience against emerging threats. This also means to become more specific as effective security policies should adopt interdisciplinary approaches, integrating technical expertise with sociological, political science, and extremism research insights to combat evolving extremist tactics and state-sponsored threats to democratic systems.

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FROM THE KU KLUX KLAN TO COMBAT 18: PARADIGMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE HISTORY OF RIGHT-WING TERRORISM AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Tobias Hof

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INTRODUCTION

The global increase in right-wing terrorism has sparked renewed interest amongst scholars. However, despite a dynamic that can be seen in right-wing terrorism research, historical studies remain sparse. Today's right-wing terrorism is rarely contextualized within a broader time frame and most studies focus on national cases at the expense of a comparative transnational perspective. Consequently, national peculiarities of right-wing terrorism tend to be overrated.[1] Therefore, this article aims to give readers a concise history of right-wing terrorism since the 19th century using paradigmatic highlights to examine the development of key characteristics and their influence on today's phenomenon instead of providing a comprehensive global overview of a complex subject. These characteristics include the radicalization process, goals, targets, the use of technology, the relationship with state institutions and the existence and development of transnational networks. I argue that comparing these characteristics of past and present right-wing terrorism shows that while technology has changed, the dynamics of radicalization, transnational networks, and cooperation with security forces are not new characteristics, as many scholars claim today.[2]

But what is right-wing terrorism? For the purposes of this article, it is defined as a politically motivated tactic carried out by non-state actors predominately driven by a belief in their own superiority and the inherent inequality between people that involves the threat or use of force or violence in which publicity also plays a significant role. Critics have pointed out that the term terrorism should not be restricted to non-state actors, as states can also carry out terrorist acts, and that the concept of terrorism is not an objective category but one produced by social, historical, political, and cultural conditions to delegitimize one form of violence and legitimize another, usually the one used by the state.[3] Yet, focusing on non-state actors does not negate the fact that states can also carry out terrorist violence ("state terror"). Besides pragmatic reasons, there are other factors why it is crucial to distinguish these two forms: State actors usually have completely different resources at their disposal and aim at securing power, while non-state actors usually challenge a system of rule – yet, in the case of right-wing terrorism this distinction can sometimes be blurred.

THE BIRTH OF RIGHT-WING TERRORISM IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The birth of "modern" terrorism is often associated with the French Revolution and the Jacobin's "reign of terror". Not only was the neologism "terrorism" born, but the revolution gave rise to political ideologies that would be appropriated by future terrorists to justify their actions. However, the revolutionaries' calls for freedom, equality, and fraternity also met with resistance, empowering those who believed in authoritarianism, ultranationalism, and the inequality between people as a natural principle. These worldviews were both motivation and justification for right-wing terrorism, whose first real manifestation occurred during the Reconstruction Era (1865–1877) in the United States of America.

Inspired by Felice Orsini's assassination attempt on Napoleon III and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, John Wilkes Booth, an opponent of abolitionism, shot US-President Abraham

Lincoln in 1866.[4] Lincoln was the first victim of a new phase of reactionary, terrorist resistance to the Union's demand for equal rights for African Americans. In the same year veterans of the Confederate army founded the Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee. The Klan portrayed itself as the rightful defender of traditional values and morals against an allegedly corrupt Republican Party and African American emancipation. Using narratives of victimhood and self-defense the Klan justified the use of violence against everyone whom they considered a threat to white supremacy.[5]

Under its first Grand Wizard Nathan Bedford Forest the Klan pursued a clandestine terrorist campaign that peaked in 1868. Thereby, its members were often supported by large segments of the Southern population, some state officials, members of the Democratic Party, and armed vigilante groups like the White League. In the mid-1870s, the Klan slowly abandoned their clandestine terrorist strategy because white supremacy had been re-established in the Southern states in the form of a period of systematic racism often known as the Jim Crow era.

In 1915 William Joseph Simmons revived the Klan as a nativist organization that targeted African Americans and all groups that allegedly threatened white supremacy. This included Jews, the labor movement, communists, Catholics, and migrants from Asia and Eastern as well as Southern Europe. The Klan's clandestine terrorist violence, including lynching, peaked in the second half of the 1920s.

Simmons' rhetoric and racist worldview fell on fertile soil due to widespread xenophobia following the first "Red Scare," the fear that African Americans would demand equal rights for their service during World War I, and his widespread networks of supporters. In addition, books like *The Clansman* (Thomas Dixon; 1905) and the blockbuster movie *Birth of a Nation* (David Warck Griffith; 1915) changed how many Americans interpreted the Klan's atrocities during the Reconstruction Era. Such marketing strategies rebranded the Klan into a righteous organization and by 1925 the group had about six million members.

The Klan's history not only highlights the connection between state authorities and reactionary right-wing terrorists and the interplay between clandestine and public violence; it also shows how a once purely racist agenda blended over time with anti-communism and illustrates the role that culture can play in the radicalization and legitimization of right-wing terrorism.

Today, remembrance of the Klan is used by the American right as a weapon in their ongoing culture war. They castigate research into the Klan's violence as a betrayal of American history, ban academic books on the topic, and lambaste the removal of Confederate statues as "cancel culture." In this heated atmosphere the Klan – or rather the memory of it – is used to justify violence once more.

THE INTERWAR PERIOD: RIGHT-WING TERRORISM BECOMES GLOBAL

The Klan was not the only right-wing terrorist group active in the interwar period. In many Eastern European countries, a period of "white terrorism" occurred immediately after World War I, when numerous paramilitary units attacked Communists and Jews. During the civil wars in Russia (1917–1922) and Finland (1918) terrorist tactics were part of the "white guards" strategy against the "red" enemy. In the 1920s and 1930s Japan experienced a series of right-wing terrorist attacks against left-wing intellectuals and politicians, who were accused of undermining Japanese traditions with Western secular decadence.[6]

Another example of right-wing terrorism based on anti-democratic and anti-communist ideology with antisemitic undertones is the German *Organisation Consul*.[7] From its inception, the Weimar Republic faced various challenges from both the extreme left and right, such as the Spartacus

Uprising (1919) and the Kapp Putsch (1920). When the Versailles Peace Treaty forced the demobilization of the Freikorps – autonomous paramilitary units mostly comprised of young soldiers whose nationalistic worldview had been shaped by war-time experiences and war propaganda that dehumanized both internal and external enemies – Hermann Erhardt, leader of the Freikorps Marine Brigade Erhardt, formed the secret *Organisation Consul* (OC). Using terrorism, he envisaged triggering a leftist uprising that could then be used to justify the establishment of an authoritarian regime. During its existence, OC had approximately 5,000 members and was responsible for several terrorist acts, including the assassination of German Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau in 1922.

The German judiciary failed and/or was unwilling to hold the OC accountable, which meant many members received mild or no sentences at all or were able to flee abroad, where they connected with other right-wing terrorist groups such as the Hungarian White Guards. Thanks to the public outcry after Rathenau's murder and the work of journalists who exposed the OC's machinations, the organization was officially dismantled and banned. Yet, despite its short existence, the OC's strategy and its attempt to court the security apparatus and the judiciary became a model for later reactionary right-wing terrorists.

While the OC, the Klan, and various white guards believed in traditional authoritarianism, anti-Semitism, anti-Communism and white supremacy, the interwar period also saw the emergence of a new form of a far-right ideology: fascism. While conservative groups hoped to leverage fascists against the political left, fascists were revolutionary at their ideological core. They preached the violent destruction of the *status quo* to "purify" the nation, create the "new man" and enable the nation's utopian "mythical rebirth" (palingenesis).[8]

Street battles, coup attempts and assassinations, coupled with an alleged legalistic strategy, were part of the fascists' path to power. This dual strategy proved successful for both Italian fascists and German National Socialists. Once in power, they used every means at their disposal to retain it. State terror became the central instrument to control their own populations and eliminate opposition, while the state-sanctioned disinhibition of violence also resulted in terrorist acts that were carried out without the state's direct involvement, such as the murder of Giacomo Matteotti (1924).

Fascist ideology and its glorification of violence to achieve palingenesis was a transnational phenomenon. From the Romanian Iron Guard to the French *Cagoule* to the Argentine Civic Legion and the Indonesian Fascist Party, fascist groups – sometimes acting in collaboration with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany – were responsible for terrorist acts all over the world.[9]

THE COLD WAR: THE DIVERSIFICATION OF RIGHT-WING TERRORISM

After World War II, odds of an immediate revival of National Socialism and fascism seemed slim. Both ideologies had been delegitimized by their defeat, the associated war crimes, and the Holocaust. However, racism, anti-Semitism, ultra-nationalism, and anti-liberalism did not cease to exist; nor did the far right disappear. On the contrary: Many extremists quickly adapted to the new situation and, by reviving seemingly untarnished right-wing ideologies from the interwar period, they even attracted new followers. Such growth meant that it was not long before (neo-) fascism, too, reappeared. This heterogeneity within the far-right milieu resulted in various forms of terrorism that sometimes existed alongside each other, and sometimes in mutual competition.

Following the advent of the Cold War, the fear of Communism once again led to a fragile alliance between the far right and conservatives. The latter repeatedly argued that the political left was Moscow's puppet, sent to destroy the West. This trope, combined with racist undertones, quickly

became part of mainstream political discourse in Western countries. Consequently, most right-wing extremists felt neither marginalized within the new system nor threatened by it and adopted a legalistic approach, hoping to benefit from strong anti-communist sentiment. However, countries that experienced civil wars immediately after World War II, including Greece (1946–1949) and Taiwan (1927–1949), saw a resurgence in acts of "white terrorism" against the "reds".

As left-wing movements and parties gained more influence in politics and society in the 1960s and 1970s and the legalistic approach faltered, many right-wing extremists became nervous. Paramilitary units and clandestine organizations once again turned to – sometimes indiscriminate – terrorism, seeking to eliminate leftist enemies, overthrow the political system, and establish an authoritarian regime. This process can be observed in various countries, including Italy ("strategy of tension"), Japan (*Shield Society*) and Turkey (*Grey Wolves*).[10]

While the Soviet-US détente in the second half of the 1970s as well as the end of military dictatorships in Greece, Spain, and Portugal led to a decline of the far-right in Western Europe, right-wing terrorists moved their activities to other parts of the world, particularly Latin America. There they connected with local and foreign right-wing extremists and put themselves in the service of military dictatorships, seeking to build a right-wing global terrorist network to fight some imagined communist world revolution.[11]

When US-Soviet relations deteriorated in 1979, anti-Communism once again became a powerful recruitment tool and an opportunity to reconnect with conservatives, producing an upsurge in indiscriminate right-wing terrorism in Western Europe (e. g. Munich 1980; Bologna 1980). Conspiracy narratives that these right-wing terrorist groups were controlled by secret service agencies and/or NATO have been rampant for years, although scholars lack convincing evidence to prove such an orchestration. Nevertheless, contacts between right-wing terrorists and members of the security apparatus did exist and the judiciary sometimes looked the other way.[12]

Yet, anti-Communism was not the only driving energy for right-wing extremists to resort to terrorism. The process of decolonization and the USA's defeat in the Vietnam War were perceived by many on the right as a sign of Western decay and a harbinger of the elimination of the "white race." Some segments of the far right turned to terrorism in an attempt to stop this decay. The French *Organisation de l'armée secrète* (OAS), for example, carried out multiple assassinations and bombings at the end of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962).

Decolonization in general and Algeria's independence in particular inspired ethno-nationalist groups worldwide (e. g. ETA; IRA; PKK) to use terrorism to achieve more autonomy or even independence. While the loss of the European colonial empire was already a heavy blow to the self-image of the far right, the thought of a potential disintegration of their nation was unbearable. Consequently, new or existing paramilitary units and clandestine organizations including the *Ulster Freedom Fighters* in Northern Ireland, the Turkish *Grey Wolves*, and the Spanish *Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberacion* engaged in terrorist violence against ethno-nationalist groups. Sometimes, as was the case in Spain and Turkey, they collaborated closely with state institutions to achieve this aim.[13]

Despite right-wing terrorism's activities between the 1950s and mid-1970s, progressive parties and movements triumphed in countries like West Germany, Italy, and the USA. In addition, increasing left-wing terrorism further fueled a feeling of marginalization among younger right-wing extremists. Consequently, they abandoned traditional extremist groups and beliefs, criticized fascist nostalgia, and sought new inspirations to overcome what they perceived as the total isolation of the far right. In countries like Italy and France many extremists found a temporary home with the New Right, a loose network of groups that sought to subvert the social and political order by establishing a "cultural hegemony." However, while initially attracted by the New Right's rejection of the modern world, they were soon disappointed with "wait and see tactics" and sought to destroy the decaying modern world to make way for the new.[14]

In Italy this evolution can be seen in the formation of non-hierarchical networks like the *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari*. Inspired by Julius Evola's philosophy, they specifically attacked state representatives to precipitate the downfall of the world.[15] In the United States membership in reactionary terrorist groups like the Klan also declined and this new type of terrorism ultimately came to dominate the increasingly fragmented far-right scene. Many scholars consider Louis Beam the spiritual father of this new typology. Beam rejected any compromises with the authorities and preached revolutionary violence, performed by a small vanguard group ("leaderless resistance"). This tactic was enshrined in the racist and anti-Semitic novel *The Turner Diaries* (1978), written by William L. Pierce, which achieved cult status in the right-wing terrorist scene. In diary style, Pierce describes an apocalyptic race war against the system that ultimately ends in the genocide of the non-white population.[16]

Despite being short-lived in Europe and based on an elusive ideology, this chiliastic form of right-wing terrorism had major impacts on the future of right-wing terrorism. First, thanks to the influence of the New Right, cultural activities such as concerts became important recruiting tools. Second, this subcultural environment also provided a platform to strengthen transnational networks via right-wing music promotional networks (e. g. *Blood & Honour*) and online forums such as the Aryan Nation Liberty Net, a bulletin board system created by Beam. Third, its followers challenged traditional gender roles, thus enabling more women to become increasingly active in right-wing terrorist organizations. And fourth, Beam's idea of "leaderless resistance" would eventually become the preferred tactic among right-wing terrorists.[17]

XENOPHOBIC RIGHT-WING TERRORISM IN THE 1980s AND 1990s

Most right-wing terrorists display some form of racism and/or anti-Semitism. However, during the height of the Cold War only a few right-wing terrorists were predominately driven by racist motivations. In the USA the Klan targeted the African American community, reacting to efforts to end racial segregation in the 1950/60s. Immigrants from former colonies were targets of terrorists in France and the UK, where the youth-subculture group, the Skinheads, embraced increasingly racist ideas in the late 1960s.[18]

As the Eastern Bloc crumbled and ultimately imploded, anti-Communism lost its power to attract new followers and justify the use of violence. New enemies, however, were not hard to find. Thousands of immigrants from Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the "Global South" sought refuge in the West. Right-wing parties successfully exploited fears of foreigners and instances of violence against immigrants and ethnic minorities surged.

While the 1980s had seen several immigrants murdered in West Germany, right-wing terrorism massively increased after German reunification with arson attacks in Mölln (1992) and Solingen (1993). In Great Britain, *Combat 18*, which still has branches today in the UK, USA, Germany, and Canada, advocated for and committed violence against members of ethnic minorities. In South Africa the white supremacist party *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* attempted to halt the process to end Apartheid through terrorist violence.[19] American neo-Nazi organizations, including the *Northern Hammerskins* and the *Aryan Resistance League*, were responsible for deadly attacks on immigrants and minorities. These organizations were in contact with Christian fundamentalist groups such as the *Silent Brotherhood*, the *Army of God* and the *Christian Identity Movement*, all of whom had vowed to defend a vaguely defined Christian identity. Their primary supporters consisted of American Christians who felt threatened by the secular state and began to combine racist ideas, anti-Semitism, a rejection of government, and a belief in white Christian supremacy.[20]

Many terrorist acts during the 1980s and 1990s, including the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma (1995), were carried out by right-wing terrorists with Christian fundamentalist views, who were fascinated by Beam's doctrine of "leaderless resistance" and the example set

by the *Turner Diaries*. For some of these terrorists, all branches of government were controlled by African Americans and Jews who sought to disenfranchise white Americans. This conspiracy narrative became known as Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG).[21]

This combination of religious dogma, an ultranationalist worldview, and a belief in some form of racist supremacy can also be found in other world religions, including Hindu nationalism, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism. Rabbi Meir Kahane sought to establish a Jewish theocracy in Israel by expelling all secular and non-Jews by means of terrorist violence while Yigal Amir, one of his greatest admirers, assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin in 1995.[22]

A "NEW CRUSADE": RIGHT-WING TERRORISM OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The early years of the 21st century saw the electoral successes of progressive parties in many corners of the world and the election of the first African American US-President, Barack Obama. Liberal social politics of gender, racial, and LGBTQ+ equality, as well as ideas of a global neo-liberal economic system further isolated right-wing ideologies. The dark days of fascism, nationalism and protectionism seemed to be consigned to a bygone era. But xenophobia, fascist ideals, and the belief in white supremacy never ceased to exist; rather, they lay dormant, waiting to rise again.

In 2011, Anders Behring Breivik killed a total of 77 people in Oslo and on the island of Utøya, most of them children and adolescents. Although Breivik's detailed planning and the young age of the victims were particularly shocking, the attack was part of a steady increase in right-wing terrorist attacks since the early 2000s. In Germany, the group *Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU)* killed nine migrants and a policewoman between 2000 and 2007. In 2015, Dylann Roof murdered nine African Americans in Charleston with the explicit intent of starting Turner's "race war". Three years later, French police arrested members of the terrorist organization *Action des Forces Opérationelles*. In the same year, Robert Browers committed the most violent anti-Semitic act in the USA to date when he attacked a synagogue in Pittsburgh, killing eleven people. And in 2019, Brenton Harrison Tarrant shot 51 people attending Friday Prayer at the Al Noor Mosque and at the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand.[23]

Many reasons contributed to the massive increase of right-wing terrorist violence, including economic recession, Islamist motivated terrorism, right-wing populism, migration, and cultural marginalization – to name only a few. Such societal and political challenges allow for the construction of narratives of victimhood and self-defense, which in turn are used to strengthen transnational networks and legitimize terrorist violence against groups perceived as the enemy.[24]

CONCLUSION

What can we learn from this overview of past and present right-wing terrorism? How does it contribute to a better understanding of today's right-wing terrorism as a whole? These questions can be answered best in five points.

First, right-wing terrorism is much more heterogeneous than often acknowledged. This might sound trivial, but apodictic labels such as neo-Nazi and Fascist often overshadow the far right's complexity, aims, character, and ideology. In 1995, Ehud Sprinzak developed six categories of right-wing terrorism (revolutionary; reactive; vigilante; racist; millenarian; youth-counterculture). Despite their merits his categories rely on inconsistent criteria and tend to overlap.[25] By looking at historic examples we can easily distinguish two unique main types of right-wing terrorism, which then can be further divided into subcategories according to ideology, targets and (potential) national trajectories: a) a reactionary form that wants to maintain or revert to an (authoritarian) system in

which "inferior" groups are controlled or eliminated; and b) a chiliastic right-wing terrorism that aims to destroy the modern world in favor of an utopian future that only exists "outside history".[26] Today, reactionary right-wing terrorism seems to dominate, although terrorists borrow many ideals inspired by chiliastic terrorists, including that of "leaderless resistance".

Second, right-wing extremists turn to terrorism as a result of both external and internal dynamics. The history of right-wing terrorism illustrates the importance of examining the (global) right-wing extremist milieu itself, from internal rivalries between different generations to debates about ideological orientation and tactics to the influence of (sub-)cultures to the relationship with state authorities as well as segments of society and politics.

Third, right-wing terrorism offers self-identified "marginalized" extremists an opportunity to restore their self-esteem, overcome their isolation, achieve personal power and reclaim their masculinity. Listening to the same music, reading the same texts, chatting on the same social media platforms and ultimately committing a terrorist act in the name of the same radical right-wing doctrine – the "deed" itself is often considered the message – created and creates a sense of belonging. The internet clearly facilitates the establishment of these networks, creating the impression of a transnational community of right-wing terrorists, which in turn gives them a sense of strength and importance.

And fourth, narratives of victimhood and self-defense are key for recruiting new followers and are used to legitimize terrorist violence for both reactionary and millenarian terrorists, although each differs in how they perceive their position within society and towards the "state". While millenarian terrorists see themselves as total outsiders in a hostile world that needs to be destroyed, reactionary terrorists regard the "inferior" groups as enemies but do not *per se* seek the total annihilation of the state and society. They even interpret the introduction of right-wing talking-points such as the 'great replacement' theory into mainstream discourse as justifications for their actions.

As long as right-wing ideologies feature predominately within the mainstream public discourse and right-wing terrorism is occasionally aided by certain segments of society, it seems unlikely that chiliastic terrorism will become the dominant phenomenon within the right-wing terrorist scene. One thing, however, seems certain: Right-wing terrorism, regardless of its form of manifestation, will remain a feature of Western society given that the demographics are against a white majority, which, in turn, will increase the fear of marginalization among the radical right.

NOTES

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8 For fascism, see Roger Griffin, *Fascism, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995; Robert Paxton, The Anatomy of Fascism, New York: Knopf 2004; Stanley G. Payne, A History of Fascism, 1914–1945, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.*

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11 Hof, *Geschichte des Terrorismus*, 239-245.

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CURRENT TRENDS IN LEFT-WING EXTREMISM

José Pedro Zúquete

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INTRODUCTION

A recent academic inquiry into the state of research on counter-terrorism and violent extremism noted that left-wing extremism (LWE) was "largely ignored" by researchers. At the same time, respondents to the survey identified the "lack of research on far-left extremism" as a notable research and knowledge gap.[1] The under-researched nature of left-wing extremism has been attributed to a variety of factors.

First, the insufficient research on LWE derives from a historical focus on right-wing extremism. The politics of memory here is key. Both the historical experience of fascism and Nazism and the way in which their legacies are portrayed in collective memory have convinced many that extremism from the right is the most destructive threat to the stability of liberal democracies. This construction of a collective memory in which right-wing extremism is the ultimate, dangerous "Other" facilitates the perception of left-wing extremism as the default lesser evil – justifying comparatively less attention and resources devoted to studying left-wing extremism.

Second, ideological biases and priorities within academia and government agencies influence the allocation of resources and focus on certain types of extremism over others. In the case of LWE the rationale is that its self-designated values – for example, anti-discrimination, anti-racism, anti-fascism – are more aligned to the values of the wider society than those of other types of extremism. Since they are seen as simply radicalizing the core values of society, rather than clashing with them, LWE is accepted as inherently less threatening. This deduction not only reinforces the more lenient view of left-wing extremist manifestations – which may not even be perceived as extremist by many researchers – but also justifies for practitioners demoting it in the hierarchy of threats to democracy and security.

Third, this research imbalance stems from perceptions of a reduced threat. In the last decades of the twentieth century – especially between the 1960s and 1980s – left-wing, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist political violence was rampant in the West and in the developing world and was dubbed the "third wave" of terrorism. In comparison to this period, the threat and lethality of left-wing armed resistance today seems to have faded away. This fact – the quasi-absence, especially in Western democracies, of abductions, bank robberies, hijackings, bombing and murder campaigns – helps to explain the limited attention from researchers and practitioners from the turn of the century to the present day. The widespread sentiment is that LWE is not as burning a topic as it once was. This disregard helped generate significant blind spots to features of left-wing extremism, such as intimate knowledge of left-wing extremist milieus, their internal dynamics, discourses and drivers of radicalization, and also its violent manifestations.

It can be argued that this asymmetry between research on left-wing extremism and other sorts of extremism may be justifiable in theory given the fact that – in terms of political violence – the data shows that contemporary left-wing groups and networks have been comparatively less lethal than right-wing and Islamist groups.[2] However, there is a caveat: if one expands the analysis to all cases where there has been violence – for example, during mass protests, riots, operations to vacate sites and squats, and resulting confrontations with law enforcement, and the physical targeting of political rivals – taking into account the types of harm (instead of fatalities, injuries especially of police officers, but also ideological opponents), the scope of left-wing political violence becomes more serious and menacing.[3] The idea advanced by scholars that "far-left violence is mostly about property"[4] – as a sort of justification for receiving less scrutiny than other violent extremisms –

should obscure neither the issue of non-lethal violence nor the possibility that lethal violence itself may reemerge/intensify in the near future. At the same time, a major consequence of the neglect of left-wing extremism as a subject of study is that many non-violent dimensions of the phenomenon remain unexplored – vocal extremism and its consequences in the public sphere among them.

Truth be told, this neglect has been more of a feature of universities – and social sciences departments – rather than think tanks or intelligence agencies which have paid attention to the phenomenon throughout the years. It must be noted also that this state of affairs at an academic level seems to be changing; there is an increasing number of scholars looking at extremism on the left – the first academic handbook of left-wing extremism appeared last year,[5] and there has been a spike in studies focused on left wing extremism, independently or comparatively with other types of extremism – and addressing not just ideology[6] but also the nonideological drivers of such extremism.[7]

LEFT-WING EXTREMISM: A VAST LANDSCAPE

Before exploring the current trends in left-wing extremism, one last issue needs to be contemplated: the fact that it can be difficult to categorize, as it includes a variety of ideological trends and belief-systems.[8] This definitional challenge has only heightened since the turn of the century. Traditionally, LWE has been split into two major branches, communism and anarchism – with sub-varieties in between. In different ways, both strive for a free community of equals here on earth – a utopian new order that, when enforced, clashes with the world as it is.[9] This landscape has been further complicated in the 21st century by the rise of a new Identitarian left – which has intellectual and activist factions – driven by a radical-progressive ideology fixated on marginalized identities based on race, gender and sexual orientation. At its center lies the imperative of the intersectional battle against an oppressive system that needs to be dismantled. This collection of themes and struggles with militants adhering to a multiplicity of causes only serves to amplify the diversity and fluidity of LWE milieus.[10] Keeping in mind that the landscape can evolve rapidly, what follows is a condensed overview of the major drivers and trends in contemporary LWE and of potential new directions.

DIRECTIONS IN LEFT-WING EXTREMISM

Not all possible trends will be listed here but only those that are the most dominant and which are often interrelated and complement one another. Some of them are just a continuation/intensification of older dynamics while others have risen in response to new societal and technological developments.

THE DUO ANTI-STATE / ANTI-POLICE

Anti-state militancy can be included under a broader definition of anti-government extremism (AGE) which has been used by researchers almost exclusively in relation to right-wing extremism.[11] One of the defining long-term features of LWE extremism has been the rejection of the state as violent, tyrannical and evil. The state is portrayed as the highest symbol of an authoritarian and exploitive system beyond redemption and seen as the source of a systemic and civilizational crisis and where force and violence against it is often viewed as legitimate.[12] It therefore stands to reason to place it under the AGE umbrella.

A recent Europol trend report noted that some of the main targets of left-wing and anarchist extremists are "government agencies and their personnel."[13] Related to this, sentiment against the police – often viewed as the "attack dogs" of the system – runs high in LWE milieus. A 2021 report focused on Europe indicates that "a key driver of far-left radicalization is clashes with

police" whether as part of mass protests, demonstrations against political opponents, or eviction of squatters and so forth.[14] There have also been attacks on off-duty police officers.[15] Often the confrontation against the state is expressed through the radicalization of collective protests and street battles. These are symbolized by the direct action tactic of Black Blocs where the targets of violence are often state and corporate property but also police personnel.[16] A report authored by the National Gendarmerie of France, where Black Blocs tactics have been prominent in anti-government protests, noted that "the most common slogans [coming from militants] refer to hatred of the state, of law enforcement, and of capitalism."[17]

ANTI-FASCISM

A major driver of LWE has been militant anti-fascism, or Antifa, a social movement that, in practice, is a self-designated countermovement: the goal, through direct action, is to resist and defeat fascism through violence. It is, for the most part, a decentralized network and blends in different kinds of radical leftists from communists to socialists and anarchists. Antifa's method of action is split between street activism and digital activism. In the former they use confrontational violence against far-right protests, gatherings and meetings, as well as isolated individuals or associations identified with their ideological nemesis. Antifa's proclivity for street violence – particularly within mass protests, and in a variety of geographical settings, from the United States to Western Europe but also in demonstrations in Brazil – is what gained them prominence and the media spotlight. For example, a study conducted in the United Stated showed that in the summer of 2020 Antifa appearances at racial justice protests greatly increased the risk of violence.[18] In the latter, digital activism, they resort to 'doxing', the disclosure of private information of far-right activists in order to silence and stigmatize them in their workplaces and neighborhoods; a tactic of direct action that is complemented by physical protests at their homes that have led to vandalism and property destruction.

Compared to far-right violence, Antifa's violence benefits from a more lenient interpretation from some researchers and scholars; it is has been described as essentially "reactive" and "restrained"[19] and as a form of self-defense and even ethical.[20] The idea is that the fight is justified since it is against a greater evil: fascism. However, even if the movement's stated aim is to fight fascism, one should take into account conceptual stretching – where "fascism" becomes a blanket term often used to denounce any group or movement (conservative or right-wing) deemed hostile to the militants' own communist, anarchist or radically socialist worldview.[21] The anti-fascist justification of violence becomes feeble. Furthermore, the idea of a contained use of violence – a sort of a "goldilocks" level of violence – should not be taken as an absolute.[22] It should address the many cases of serious injuries as well as the cases where there have been acts of lethal violence by self–designated Antifa activists.

Also, this estimation of controlled violence is dependent on the context of each country. For example, in Germany, where there have been successive alerts by authorities in charge of monitoring extremist movements; the head of the Berlin branch of the Agency for the Protection of the Constitution warned about a well-organized left-wing extremist violence and that they would not shy away "from killing people, if necessary."[23] The national president of the same office announced in 2023, "we are currently seeing that the [LWE] violence is being directed unrestrainedly against state power, but also against political opponents. We have to keep an eye on whether this radicalization is developing into terrorist structures."[24] Vigilant and "righteous" violence against political opponents has been on the rise in the country. In recent years, this has included physical assaults on AFD members, arson and destruction of their property, and even calls to murder on websites – "death lists" of AfD politicians with their home addresses and bomb-making instructions have also circulated.[25] In 2023, members of a left-wing extremist group, the "Hammer Gang" – with a female as a prominent leader – were given prison sentences for conducting violent attacks, both spontaneous and planned – with the infliction of significant physical injuries on well-known right-wing extremists.[26] At the same time, this trend cannot be

separated from cumulative extremism – the growth of one form of perceived extremism serves as a catalyst for other extremisms to rise against it which often leads to a spiral of violence. This happened in the United States with the rise of the White nationalist Alt-Right which spiked an anti-fascist militancy during the BLM riots of 2020 and endless street confrontations with far right groups.[27] This dynamic can also be seen in Western Europe with the rising support for the far-right which creates a "state of emergency" in the Antifa mindset – although the intensity of the phenomenon of reciprocal radicalization varies from country to country.

Three more potential trends should be mentioned. The first is the possibility of the reemergence of off-the-grid clandestine cells of LWE in response to increased state repression: there are signs of this development in countries like Germany.[28] The second is the possibility of the spill-over of Antifa violence from one country to another with international punitive expeditions against its adversaries – for example, the attacks by a group of foreign Antifa militants (some connected with the German Hammer Gang) on perceived neo-Nazis in Budapest in 2023.[29] Finally, there is the issue of foreign fighters who have gained combat training and experience abroad and returned to their home countries. Although there is still scarce data, a few left-wing extremist militants have been identified as such: one in Germany (who fought in Syria) involved in the physical assault of right-wing extremists, and another in France (also with links to Syria) arrested and sentenced to prison in Paris for allegedly leading a "terrorist conspiracy" against the state and law enforcement.[30]

CULTURE WARS

Culture wars, the twin struggle over values and ideals as well as control over the sociocultural future of societies, have been the cause of political and social polarization and of extremisms, both non-violent and violent, for decades. Today a major cleavage revolves around the rise of a left-Identitarian movement – identified in culture war terminology as "Wokeness" – which has been identified by some scholars as a driver (in actuality or potentially) of left-wing extremism.[31] In short, it is a belief-system anchored in a Manichean framework of good versus evil that divides the understanding of the world in two camps: one uplifting historically marginalized race, gender, and sexual identity groups, the other entrenching a hegemonic system of oppressive forces: systemic racism, white supremacy, patriarchy and heteronormativity.[32] This mindset triggers a powerful desire for purification and expunging of evil: expressed in tearing down all of its foundations – from the educational system to the cultural heritage and monuments – to censoring and casting away those deemed to be adversaries and non-believers.[33]

By and large these traits reflect monism – a term that early research on extremism saw as a kind of dogmatic thought in which everything emanates from one simple truth and dissent is invalid.[34] Further, as indicated by recent psychological research, they reflect features that are *shared* by both right-wing authoritarianism and left-wing authoritarianism, from moral absolutism to preference for social uniformity, to prejudice toward different others, as well as willingness to wield group authority to coerce behavior, cognitive rigidity, and punitiveness toward perceived enemies.[35]

This mental attitude increases the potential for political violence: moving beyond thwarting speech, intimidation and harassment, and into actual physical violence against the putative evil system and those who support it. New trends in extremist violence may emerge from these Identitarian milieus. For example, the violent advocacy for pro-transgender policies against the perceived ubiquitousness of transphobia; there are signs within the extreme transgender activism of such development, for example, with a not-insignificant transgender presence in Antifa street confrontations,[36] with online calls for a "trans day of vengeance" ("take off the kid gloves, they want you dead… start acting like your life is on the line, because it is!" read one of them),[37] or even instances of transgender shooters – as with the fatal shooting at a Nashville private Christian school by a trans person that the Trans Resistance Network (TRN) justified as a case of lashing out against "the genocidal eradication of trans people from society."[38]

CIVILIZATIONAL WARS (1) CLIMATE ACTIVISM

Although it is a heterogeneous field, there is an intricate interplay between climate activism and left-wing extremist ideas and practices – including efforts to influence and sway climate protection protests.[39] Eco-extremism, or the use of violence against property or people in order to protect the environment, has a decades-long history – it has, however, remained, for the most part, at the margins of the environmental movement. Recent years have witnessed the surge of newer groups in the wider field of climate activism – such as Fridays for Future (FFF), Extinction Rebellion (XR), the Last Generation (LG), Just Stop Oil, to name just a few – dedicated to more desperate and confrontational approaches to avert climate catastrophe. These should be designated as eco-apocalyptic movements. Eco-apocalypticism is not new; what has changed is its shift from the fringes to increasing visibility in the mainstream. In order to raise awareness of the climate emergency, the modus operandi of these newer groups is to focus on non-violent actions – from disruptive tactics such as blockades and traffic obstruction to vandalizing art and museums. Authorities have also been cracking down on the illegal and criminal activities of these groups – in 2023 alone, activists have been sentenced to prison,[40] and in France the interior minister announced the dissolution of the collective *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* (Earth Uprisings) accused of eco-terrorism (a decision subsequently annulled by the country's top administrative justice court).[41]

There are, however, dynamics within apocalyptic environmentalism that may be conducive to further radicalization and constitute a threat both to the democratic order and a challenge to security. First, there is development within these groups of vanguardist thinking[42] – meaning, their self-representation as both an epistemologically-privileged group (with exclusive access to knowledge, to the truth) and an instrument of ecological salvation. Within this eco-apocalyptic vanguard,[43] as demonstrated by the Last Generation activist group, there are calls for the establishment of climate governing bodies to rule the population, as well as the curtailment of freedoms and lifestyles. Such proposals undermine both popular sovereignty and representative democracy. The idea of a suspension of fundamental rights, the enactment of a state of emergency and of a "climate dictatorship" led by climate experts has gained ground in these activist circles.[44] The coupling of anti-pluralism with anti-constitutionalism would break down the democratic order.[45]

Second, apocalypticism is also a risk factor for the escalation of violent extremism. The frustration of climate demands furthers a "last resort" mentality as a solution – with eco-terrorism as the only way forward. One of the founders of the German climate group Ende Gelände – which the Berlin Office for the Protection of the Constitution, in an annual report, classified as left-wing extremist – predicted that "a new movement cycle will arise. It will be smaller, more militant and have new action forms, new agents, new stories. It'll begin with networks that will be created at the margins of organizations… If society doesn't want to change, you need to impose costs on the society. On everybody, not just on the polluters…" and warned that "a sort of Green RAF" could emerge – alluding to the Red Army Faction (RAF) left-wing terrorist group active from the 1970s to the 1990s.[46] This development finds parallels in other geographical settings, such as the emergence of self-designated "eco-guerrilla networks," like Deep Green Resistance in the United States.[47] It falls under the category of "climate change as an ideological driver of terrorism" which has been identified by security researchers and practitioners as one of the facets in which climate change acts as a "threat multiplier."[48]

CIVILIZATIONAL WARS (2) TECHNOLOGY

Another front of the civilizational war is specifically anti-technological. Anti-civilizationism – in which civilization is equated with the techno-industrial system viewed as a source of evil to be vanquished – is a phenomenon that includes primitivists, radical environmentalists, insurrectionary anarchists, and other hybrid networks. The need to strike the techno-empire through asymmetric warfare and acts of sabotage and destruction of its infrastructures is at the center of *some radical environmentalist as well as insurrectionary milieus where Ted* Kaczynski's manifesto on the destabilizing

effects of technology on humanity and the natural world is a major inspiration. *Opposition to technologies of surveillance and control meant to herd humans, tame them, and subdue any resistance to the system is also an important part of this anti-technological activism – especially to the anarchists devoted to revolutionary "insurrection".*[49]

The critical infrastructures of the technological civilization – assets, systems, and networks, whether physical or virtual – are singled out as valid targets; many of them – like power lines, pipelines, or railways – are also soft targets. Sabotage and arson attacks against transport and communication systems as well against the power grid and telecommunication networks have featured prominently in the war against the "machine world." At the same time, there are calls for war on the "infrastructure of the Fourth Industrial Revolution," leading to attacks on cell phone towers, wireless infrastructures, and 5G mobile masts and antennas, that are seen as little more than tools of a "techno-prison world" that must be destroyed.[50] Law enforcement agencies are aware of the increasing relevance of tech-related targets; for instance, the 2022 Europol trend report mentions the visibility of "newer themes" such as those related to "digital society and advanced technologies" for potential terrorism from the "left-wing and anarchist extremist" landscape.[51] Its 2023 report emphasizes the anti-technological bent of anarchist and left-wing extremists, whose targets are "more specifically 5G antennas, but also repeaters and the companies producing and installing them."[52] Attacks on critical infrastructures – which may feature a myriad of actors, including right-wing extremists and adversarial states – beyond the physical damage to equipment, may also include cyber attacks particularly through malicious software.[53] A recent Homeland Security threat assessment warned about the role of emerging technologies like AI in new methods of disruptive and destructive attacks on US critical infrastructures.[54]

Finally, anti-technology terrorism does not conceivably stop at infrastructures and could potentially target humans – especially if the perceived ravages of the technological civilization continue. In the aftermath of Ted Kaczynski's bombing campaign targeting individuals accused of advancing technology, the intention to use lethal violence was followed up by other actors. For example, at the start of the 2010s, a group in Mexico calling themselves *Individualistas Tendiendo a Lo Selvaje* (Individualists Tending toward the Wild – ITS) launched its anti-technological civilization mission with homemade bombs sent to bio-nanotechnology scientists. And, a leader of the Italian insurrectionary anarchists proclaimed from prison the need to do "as much damage as possible" to the "megamachine," the ruling "hyper-technological system," including targeting humans: "Those running this 'revolution' today are a limited number of scientists, super-specialized technicians in a few centers scattered around the world. They all are within reach of an anarchist international, a combative one, even if limited in strength."[55]

WAVES OF THE FUTURE

David Rapoport, the scholar of political violence who put together the explanatory model of terrorism as four great "waves" each shaped by the energy of a specific ideology, has been wondering whether or not the rise of right-wing terrorism in recent years is the beginning of a "global Fifth Wave."[56] The likelihood, however, is that unlike previous times, the potential new wave will be a more messy affair, ideologically less clean-cut and blurrier. This is in part because one of the key takeaways from the study of the contemporary landscape of extremism is the evolving nature of radicalization and the fact that digital acceleration drives forward a growing "pick and choose, or mix and match approach to ideologies" instead of the wholesale adoption more common in the past.[57] This development sets off a dual fragmentation: a shift in importance from organized groups to looser networks and lone actors and the rise of ideological hybrids.[58]

This has various consequences for the field of left-wing extremism too – particularly the impact that this has on the "civilizational wars" that many activists adhere to. These groups all operate within a shared frame of collapsism. Collapsism posits that there is an ongoing collapse – with

climate apocalypse at the center – caused by the techno-industrial system that must be taken down. And this collapsism cuts across the left-right divide. Civilization collapse narratives have the potential to lead to an informal, fluid, convergence between individuals and groups with different backgrounds and different post-collapse visions – that are nevertheless loosely "united" by both declinism and a modus operandi of sowing chaos within the much-maligned civilization. The fact that Ted Kaczynski is praised by both eco-guerrillas and eco-fascists is a symbolic testament to this development – and perhaps a sign of things to come. To conclude, the matrix of technology/environment/collapse has the serious potential to intensify not only extremism on the far-left but also the formation of new convergences and strange bedfellows with the potential to shape the terrorist waves of the future.

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THE CONCEPTS OF THE "GREAT REPLACEMENT" AND "REMIGRATION" – CURRENT IDEOLOGICAL FOOTINGS OF THE GERMAN NEW RIGHT AND THEIR ORIGINS

Christoph Schiebel

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2024 narratives of the *New Right* captured German public political discourse: the "Great Replacement" and "Remigration" hit German headlines and civil society. The repercussions have made themselves felt. Alarmed by what can be seen as a far-right momentum, hundreds of thousands of Germans or even more than a million took to the streets across the country to protest against the right-wing radical party *Alternative for Germany* (German name: Alternative für Deutschland) and ideas associated with it.[1]

Opponents and proponents of the Alternative for Germany and right-wing radicalism have entered the spotlight of the German political arena. The overwhelming demonstrations show that there is a great deal of rejection of the German opposition party, while more than 20 % are ready to vote for it nationwide. The public outcry is an immediate reaction to revelations of far-right discussions on "Remigration". There were loose ties to the radical right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany.[2]

Are there key elements of German far-right discourse? And has there been mainstreaming[3] of these ideas? We will see how ethnopluralism has become an ideological mainstay of European right-wing populism. Ethnopluralism transcends biological and cultural racism. Moreover, it provides right-wing radicals with a political ideology, which in part explains their recent success.[4] We can speak of blatant racism and similar concepts. However, it is difficult to attribute individual actors to the official line or ideology of the party Alternative for Germany.

In this article, I will examine the origins of current political Identitarian trends and narratives attributed to Germany's radical right. Moreover, I will focus on the Alternative for Germany, which has enjoyed relative electoral success in the last few years. In 2024 the Alternative for Germany benefited from European and East German elections. The former election is seen as a catalyst for protest parties. The Alternative for Germany performed well in all four elections, having polled first for Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg, three East German federal states. In Thuringia, it even emerged as the strongest party from the election.[5]

As I will elaborate on, current political discourse in Germany has imported narratives and debates not only from the U.S. Surely, there are a complex network and interdependencies.[6] It goes without saying that the concepts of the "Great Replacement" and "Remigration" are interconnected but differ essentially: the former is a conspiracy theory[7], whereas the latter is a set of plans and/or proposals to transform German society and the related political system. These plans are supposed to undermine, change and/or destroy liberal democracy. As long as secret, "Remigration" could be seen as a conspiracy itself.[8] The "Great Replacement" can be described as follows: ""The Great Replacement' is an example of a systemic conspiracy theory, where white Europeans are supposedly being replaced with immigrants from non-European countries through the actions of politicians and power elites".[9] I will define "[c]onspiracy theories – [...] as alternative explanations of historical or ongoing events claiming that people or groups with sinister intentions are engaged in conspiratorial plotting".[10] As we will observe, the concept of "Remigration" is still more of a mere national issue than the international leitmotif of the "Great Replacement". Proponents of

"Remigration" call for the deportation of people, potentially infringing their human rights and civil liberties. The involved disrespect of the foundations of liberal democracy was the reason why "Remigration" was voted "Unwort des Jahres 2023" ("misnomer of the year in 2023") by German-speaking linguists not much into 2024; just after revelations of Alternative for Germany members' engagement with the Identitarian idea of "Remigration" in January.[11] In France the *National Rally* (French name: *Rassemblement National*; formerly *Front National*) has cruised on more than a wave of success,[12] while in Germany the Alternative for Germany is the only relevant right-wing populist party.[13] Although both parties have undergone substantial change in recent years, they have decided to evolve in opposite directions.[14] There is still a *cordon sanitaire* in place in France and Germany, which means that far-right parties are in principle excluded from government.[15] In the wake of persistent crises of government, this practice has eroded in France.[16] Hence, the Alternative for Germany and the National Rally can be described as populist because of their anti-elite narratives also reflected in their nativist ones.[17] I see nativism as a broad concept including the narrower one of ethnopluralism. In research of radical right-wing populism there are intersections between the underlying concepts of populism, nativism, and authoritarianism, and radicalism.[18] I will examine key concepts which share core features of radical right-wing populism.

According to Cas Mudde, the leading researcher of radical right-wing populism, the essence of the subject can be summarized as follows: "an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" [19] These concepts appear to be intricate as well as pervasive. They demonstrate radical right-wing populists' exclusionary character.[20] These concepts entail the violation of human rights and civil liberties. The German political scientist Thomas Kestler said that the populist radical right relied on ethnopluralism, which was a concept subordinate to nativism: "A key element of nativism is ethnopluralism – "the notion that different cultures should not coexist in as much as each of them has a unique character that should be preserved and respected".[21] What is more, I will examine far-right parties in the light of the *New Right*. The heterogeneous set of organizations and networks called the New Right have gained traction in recent decades. The German and the French New Right gather different right-wing radical, right-wing populist and far-right phenomena in European politics.[22]

After sketching out and delineating the French far-right debate and the current relevance of research on the Alternative for Germany, I will analyze the latter's Identitarian motivation to assume power in Germany. Evidently, there has been research into far-right narratives such as the "Great Replacement" and "Remigration". Identitarianism and racism are integral in these far-right concepts. However, there is still a lack of comparative research when it comes to these ideas. What are the ramifications of the ongoing debate? How deep-rooted are these concepts in the German far-right?

THE FRENCH NEW RIGHT

Interestingly, key narratives stem from the French polity.

The conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement" can be deemed as a recurring theme among influential Alternative for Germany politicians. The German Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution describes the "Great Replacement" as follows:

"The term of the "Great Replacement" refers to a narrative of the New Right, which goes back to the French author Renaud Camus and contains particularly the structural substitution of the "autochthonous" European population by immigrants from Africa and the Mideast. Within the New Right this is viewed as both a concerted effort conveyed as a conspiracy theory and the result of demographic trends.

The "ethnic disintegration" of European societies would lead to the erosion of cultural and ethnic boundaries. According to Camus the long-term abolition of all ethnic and cultural differences would create an uprooted mass of individuals benefiting the capitalist interests of not closely defined elites. Oftentimes, different German terms have been used as synonyms for the "Great Replacement". One term, i.e., "Umvolkung", is a direct reference to a Nazi term."[23]

New Right author and philosopher Camus was convicted of mass instigation in 2014 and is admired by Identitarians for his contributions to the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement". Since 2010 his books on the "Great Replacement" have been not only popular in France. In a 2012 interview for the homepage of the right-wing conservative *Action française*, Camus warned against a replacement of the French people with immigrants from Africa and the Maghreb.[24]

However, Camus' theory originates in part from his 2008 book "La Grande Déculturation". Furthermore, "The Camp of the Saints" by Jean Raspail is regarded as a "blueprint" for French and international right-wing radical thinkers. In the novel from 1973, Raspail anticipated the idea of the "Great Replacement". He wrote of mass immigration, i.e., ships carrying a million immigrants who intend to enter France from the south, as a peril to French and European culture and society.[25]

Convicted for instigating hatred against Muslims and Islam, French journalist, writer, and subsequent politician Éric Zemmour has made use of the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement" to warn against a French and/or European civil war.[26] Until his 2022 presidential campaign, Zemmour had his own television talk show. The channel broadcasting the TV show pursues a concept which resembles the far-right American TV news channel *Fox News*: The TV show *Face à l'info* and the channel *CNews* were both set up by French billionaire and media mogul Vincent Bolloré. Before, Zemmour had worked as a columnist, at first for the polemical but diverse newspaper *Le Quotidien de Paris* and from 1996 for the conservative broadsheet *Le Figaro.*[27]

Zemmour proposed a "Remigration Ministry" during his campaign for the 2022 French Presidential Elections: "In March 2022, Zemmour went further to propose a Remigration Ministry –another traditional extreme right policy– setting the objective to deport one million "undesirable foreigners" and all those who "do not assimilate" over the next five years"."[28] Zemmour's party *Reconquête!* has been built around the far-right polemicist and upon the "Great Replacement" as a narrative. The party is "in line with his 'niche' profile and hard line identitarian strategy of publicizing extreme right themes such as the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy and 'remigration'."[29] We will see that this concept of "Remigration" resembles the plans of European Identitarians and some Alternative for Germany key politicians. Major right-wing populist presidential contender Marine Le Pen was keen to appear more moderate and distance herself from the fringe: "While not officially endorsing the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory of the extreme right, Le Pen's message on immigration did not substantially vary from old FN arguments regarding the danger of France being 'submerged' by non-European immigrants."[30] The specter of non-European immigration remained one of her right-wing populist narratives. Both candidates embarked on "nativism and anti-Muslim rhetoric", but only Zemmour disseminated the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement".[31]

A direct line can be drawn from Zemmour's rhetoric of the "Great Replacement" and "Remigration" to ongoing discussions polluted by the Alternative for Germany. Following the revelation of plans for "Remigration" loosely associated with the Alternative for Germany, Marine Le Pen distanced herself from the German radical right-wing party, even threatening to end cooperation at the European level in the first place. Just before the European elections, the Alternative for Germany was excluded from the parliamentary group after its top candidate for the European Parliament, Maximilian Krah, had downplayed the role of the SS in the Third Reich.[32] Both the Alternative for Germany and Marine Le Pen's National Rally were part of the right-wing populist and Eurosceptical *Identity and Democracy Group* in the European Parliament.[33] France's most successful right-wing populist party, the National Rally, has been promoting a strategy of internal

"dédiabolisation" (de-demonization). It has been argued that this strategy has not been completed and there are still remainders of right-wing extremism.[34] Triggering has become an integral part of the new strategy. Marine Le Pen has championed a new version of populism thanks to de-demonization and feminist analogies ("populism in pink"). The National Rally has tried to strike a more tolerant overtone, on the one hand.[35] Zemmour has made an appearance resembling that of former US President Donald J. Trump, on the other hand. In the run-up to the French Presidential elections, the far-right candidate grew ever-more aggressive. Immigration and Islamization were at the heart of his campaign.[36]

THE GERMAN NEW RIGHT

Lately, journalists have revealed Identitarian and far-right networks in Germany. Related research was carried out on behalf of the *Correctiv* network. Four Alternative for Germany members participated in a meeting of the far right in a hotel near Potsdam, Brandenburg, in late November 2023. The internationally active Austrian Identitarian figurehead, influencer, and promoter Martin Sellner gave a speech at the meeting. He maintained that the key to reshaping Germany was "Remigration". This "master plan" was announced by the organizer of the meeting, a retired dentist with a far-right past, Gernot Mörig. According to the speech, Sellner aspires to deport refugees, migrants, and citizens not completely assimilated to what he sees as German society. Descent and skin color are supposed to determine as to who is allowed to live in Germany. Citizenship would no longer be decisive. Dissenting people would be sent elsewhere too. On that occasion, Ulrich Siegmund, the head of the Alternative for Germany parliamentary group of Saxony-Anhalt, even argued that the face of his federal state should change. This idea involved the disappearance of foreign restaurants in towns and cities. Exerting pressure and nudging could help to achieve this aim. Mörig, the organizer of the event, considered verbally the eviction of migrants and migrant-friendly citizens. Mörig had been the leader of a far-right and racist youth group in the 1970s. Furthermore, Alternative for Germany politician Roland Hartwig touted Sellner's most recent book and said that the party was ready to co-fund a network for far-right influencers. Before *Correctiv's* revelations in January 2024, Hartwig was the personal aide to Alice Weidel, who is a key politician of the Alternative for Germany, one of its two chairpersons, and a member of the German parliament, the Bundestag. Granted, the meeting was even attended by two members of the Christian Democratic Union, Germany's major conservative and opposition party.[37] Thus, there have been intersections between far-right activism and the Alternative for Germany. Overall, there are also incursions into German conservatism. In addition, the Alternative for Germany's Identitarianism has been fueled by international organizers.

The "Great Replacement" is among the conspiracy theories the Alternative for Germany makes crucially use of. In view of the Alternative for Germany party gathering to elect the candidates for the 2024 European Parliamentary Elections, the President of the Federal Agency for the Protection of the Constitution, Thomas Haldenwang, argued that there were "right-wing conspiracy theories" in some speeches given by candidates: "Various electoral candidates uttered right-wing conspiracy theories such as that of the so-called "Great Replacement".[38]

There are more and more cases of Alternative for Germany politicians referring to the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement" as the Alternative for Germany politician Beatrix von Storch did in a tweet. She suspected the United Nations of having admitted the existence of the "Great Replacement".

Beatrix von Storch sees proof for the "great replacement" [39]

The former Bavarian Alternative for Germany member of the Bundestag Petr Bystron literally described the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement": "The worst thing, migrant quotas, the forcible allocation of migrants, all that is an attack at everything we are fond of, our culture, our religion, our home." [40] In these words, Bystron coined the narrative of planned estrangement by controlled migration.

The Chairman of the Bavarian Alternative for Germany Stephan Protschka referred to the elites and called the Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder "Södolf". Hence, he insulted Söder as a Nazi. Concretely, Protschka called for the prioritization of Germany and putting an end to migration. Bearing this in mind, Protschka considers Söder a "traitor". [41]

What adds to it, Krah spoke of "Umvolkung" as early as 2019. [42] In the beginning of December 2023 Saxony's state agency for the protection of the constitution regarded the Saxonian Alternative for Germany as "certainly right-wing extremist". The federal state's Alternative for Germany has been bolstering its ideological appeal, making use of the concept of the "Great Replacement" and "Umvolkung". These conspiracy theories are rounded off by calls for "Remigration". For Saxony's Alternative for Germany, citizenship and nationality are only about ethnic descent. This concept can be called ethnopluralism and is typical of the far right. The Alternative for Germany of the Free State of Saxony turns against migration. In addition, there is an ideological proximity to Nazism. [43] Even in August 2023 Haldenwang posited that Alternative for Germany politicians embraced ethnopluralism, which was not in line with the German constitution and excluded parts of the population. [44] Muslims and Islam are the Alternative for Germany's primary targets when it comes to defamation. [45]

The *Antonio Amadeu Foundation* shares this criticism of the Alternative for Germany in a contribution to the *Action Weeks against Antisemitism*. Alternative for Germany key figures such as Alexander Gauland and Björn Höcke believe in "Great Replacement" carried out and planned by Jewish and Western global elites – so-called globalists. [46] Gauland mentions the "Great Replacement" as follows:

"Even the then Alternative for Germany Chairman touched on the "Great Replacement". In mid-2018 Gauland said: "The German Chancellor wants to finish the job before leaving office. She wants to make the Great Replacement irreversible. We are supposed to die off gradually as a people and a nation." The "Great Replacement" is by no means the only antisemitic conspiracy theory. An especially popular example is delivered when it comes to the "globalist elites"." [47]

Surely, there is an antisemitic twist of conspiracy theories such as the "Great Replacement" as portrayed by the expert on the far right Hajo Funke: In 2018, Höcke, the far-right agent provocateur

and since 2014 head of the Alternative for Germany parliamentary group in the federal state of Thuringia, published a book of which he was one of two authors. His co-author was Sebastian Hennig. Its title translates "Never into the same river twice". The authors demand a project of "sweeping Remigration" to restore Germany's ethnic homogeneity. Obviously, Höcke would even be prepared to use violence to that end. HHThere is mention of "well-tempered cruelty". Funke detected ideological connections to right-wing violence as exerted in Germany in the last few years. Funke came to the conclusion he announced in the headline of his article: "Höcke wants a civil war".[48]

In November 2024 an assembly of Bavaria's Alternative for Germany passed a *Resolution for Remigration*. The goal was to deport even migrants not integrated well.[49] The Bavarian state party is deemed to be particularly radical and supportive of Krah.[50] In Saxony where there is another more radical state party of the Alternative for Germany, Krah is running for a constituency at the 2025 German federal elections.[51] It remains to be seen if radicalization becomes a general trend within the Alternative for Germany.

CONCLUSION

Meanwhile, the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement" has become a global phenomenon. The Christchurch, New Zealand, terrorist justified his anti-Muslim carnage with the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement".[52] Further, the pan-European *Identitarian Movement* or *Generation Identity* takes inspiration from the "Great Replacement".[53]

Modern ethnopluralism, i.e., the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement" and the agenda of "Remigration", have become a global brand. Identitarian actors, networks, and organizations help disseminate far-right concepts. There is a global dimension: far-right terrorists have conveyed the conspiracy theory throughout the world. The American far right and Russian propaganda have aimed to benefit from the resulting discourse. In addition, Eastern European government representatives have manipulated discourse and have been dedicated to ethnopluralist ideas.[54]

Truly, there are many intersections and commonalities between the New Right's and the Alternative of Germany's ideological footings. This also applies to the "Great Replacement" and "Remigration". These concepts emerged from French political discourse but have an impressive right-wing radical record and footing in Germany. The concepts of the "Great Replacement" and "Remigration" may not be generalized in case of entire parties, although Zemmour's personalist party comes close to that impression in France.

Furthermore, French far-right discourse might ironically have been a catalyst for the more moderate National Rally. Comforting voters that they are not the fringe, Zemmour could have driven voters into the arms of another presidential candidate, i.e., Marine Le Pen in 2022. Thus, radicalization sometimes works as a paradox, broadening the political realm of what is considered as acceptable.

At least, more key figures of the Alternative for Germany have spread their exclusionary ideology and been craving for ethnopluralism. Nonetheless, I must concede that these statements are all approximations and that the Alternative for Germany has not been fully propagating the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement" as a problem and "Remigration" as a solution.

Zemmour has – more or less – failed in accomplishing "Remigration", i.e., transforming France into an ethnically homogenous society. Yet French voters remain susceptible to a subtler version of right-wing populism, on the one hand. There are more and more actors in Germany who advocate "Remigration" as a goal, on the other hand. Identitarianism looms large when it comes to the Alternative for Germany.

It becomes clear that the related narratives and concepts are a global threat to democracy. In conclusion, there are many figures of the far right manipulating and polluting public discourse. I must admit that far-right influence will stay for longer in times of immigration, and multiple wars and conflicts. Patterns have been repeated and adapted to national resentment.[55]

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ANTI-INSTITUTIONAL EXTREMISM. SOME (MANY) CONCEPTIONAL QUESTIONS

Florian Hartleb

ANTI-INSTITUTIONAL EXTREMISM. SOME (MANY) CONCEPTIONAL QUESTIONS

Florian Hartleb

1. INTRODUCTION TOWARDS THE CORE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES: THE PARLIAMENT

Distrust towards political institutions has been a growing phenomenon in many countries around the world, reflecting a widespread sense of disillusionment with governments, political systems, and public authorities. On January 6, 2021, supporters of then-President Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. In Germany, a far-right group known as the Reichsbürger movement, along with other extremists, planned to storm the Reichstag (Germany's federal parliament) and overthrow the government. The group was linked to a conspiracy to re-establish a German monarchy, reflecting extremist beliefs in the illegitimacy of the modern German state.[1] On January 8, 2023, supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro stormed Brazil's Congress, Supreme Court, and Presidential Palace in Brasília. This event occurred just days after the inauguration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), who had defeated Bolsonaro in a contentious election.[2] Anti-institutional extremism is therefore regarded as a new threat.[3] Protests and social movements: in many cases, distrust in political institutions manifests in mass protests, civil disobedience, or grassroots movements that challenge the status quo. Examples include movements like Occupy Wall Street[4], Black lives matter, or France's "Yellow vests".

Liberal democracies are under pressure or can even die (out), as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have pointed out in their famous book thesis in 2018.[5] This also fits in with the leading measures in terms of the status quo of how (liberal) democracies and dictatorships develop further. It seems that authoritarian systems are getting more and more influence.[6] But it is difficult: Measuring anti-institutional extremism can be challenging due to its diverse expressions and the subjective nature of distrust. However, there are several methods to assess and quantify the prevalence, intensity, and impact of this form of extremism. These measurements can include qualitative and quantitative approaches across social, political, and behavioral dimensions:

The new authoritarianism represents a sophisticated and adaptive form of autocratic governance that blends democratic appearances with increasingly authoritarian practices. This model of governance is spreading across the globe, presenting significant challenges to democratic systems, both domestically and internationally. The general trend in the rise of new authoritarianism is the resurgence of authoritarian practices within frameworks that retain democratic appearances. These regimes are often referred to as "illiberal democracies" or "competitive authoritarian regimes", where elections still take place, but democratic norms, such as a free press, judicial independence, and political competition, are systematically undermined.[7] The new authoritarians rely on nationalism and control of media and technology to maintain their power, posing significant challenges to global democracy.

This trend reflects a global shift toward democratic backsliding, with new authoritarian leaders consolidating power by eroding the very institutions designed to check their authority, while at the same time using modern tools to enhance control and legitimacy. As this trend continues, the future of democracy globally becomes increasingly uncertain, with long-term consequences for international stability, governance, and civil liberties.

Understanding and addressing the underlying causes of new authoritarianism – such as economic inequality, disillusionment with political elites, and the influence of disinformation – will be crucial for defending democratic norms and institutions in the 21st century. New authoritarian regimes

are increasingly using modern technology to monitor, control, and suppress dissent. Countries like China have developed extensive surveillance systems that use facial recognition, social credit systems, and data collection to monitor citizens' behavior.[8] These tools enable more precise control over populations without the need for traditional repression. The question is if digital tools (including disruption) help to stop these developments. As the Estonian example shows, this is possible to implement but all is based on trust from the population, for example in the case of e-voting.[9] And the trust towards political procedures and institutions is more and more lacking.

The general distrust can undermine the stability of democracies, weaken social cohesion, and foster the rise of the so-called populism[10], authoritarianism, and extremism. Anti-institutional extremism refers to a form of radical ideology that targets established institutions, such as governments, corporations, or social systems, with the intent to undermine or overthrow them. This extremism arises from a deep distrust of institutions and a belief that they are corrupt, oppressive, or illegitimate. It can manifest in various ways, from non-violent protests to violent actions like sabotage, terrorism, or armed resistance.

There are two aspects:

1. Anti-institutional extremism is a radical rejection of established political, legal, and social institutions, driven by a belief that these systems are corrupt, illegitimate, or controlled by elites. Extremists within this ideology seek to undermine or overthrow governments, parliaments, courts, and law enforcement through protests, civil disobedience, or violence. Rooted in distrust of democracy, conspiracy theories, and a desire for radical change, anti-institutional extremism spans the political spectrum, from far-right groups challenging electoral systems to anarchist movements rejecting state authority altogether. It poses significant threats to democratic stability by fostering polarization, radicalization, and political violence.

2. Anti-institutional extremism is a form of radical ideology and activism characterized by deep rejection of and opposition to established political, legal, and social institutions. These movements often believe that institutions such as governments, parliaments, courts, and law enforcement are fundamentally corrupt, illegitimate, or controlled by elites who do not represent the people's interests. As a result, anti-institutional extremists seek to dismantle or undermine these structures, either through protest, civil disobedience, or, in more extreme cases, violence.

Here are some key sub-elements of anti-institutional extremism:

1.1. CORE BELIEFS

Distrust of authority: anti-institutional extremists often believe that mainstream institutions (e.g., government, law enforcement, corporations) are inherently corrupt, repressive, or controlled by elites who don't represent the people.

1.2. CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Many anti-institutional extremists subscribe to conspiracy theories that reinforce their belief that institutions are part of a larger plot to control, oppress, or harm the public. Conspiracy theories in the context of critiques against liberal democracies are narratives that suggest powerful, secret groups are manipulating political and societal events to undermine or control democratic institutions and processes. These theories often claim that the visible workings of liberal democracies are just a façade, with real power lying in the hands of hidden elites or organizations operating behind the scenes for nefarious purposes.

The "Deep State"

This theory claims that an entrenched network of unelected government officials, bureaucrats, and military leaders secretly control national policy and undermine elected leaders. The "deep state" is often depicted as a hidden power structure that works against the interests of the people, subverting democracy for its own gain.[11]

The Great Replacement Theory

Popular in far-right circles, this theory claims that liberal democratic governments, often in conjunction with global elites, are deliberately facilitating mass immigration to "replace" native populations with immigrants. This is allegedly done to weaken national identity and gain political control, eroding the traditional social and cultural fabric of the country.

Election Fraud Theories

These conspiracy theories assert that elections in liberal democracies are rigged or manipulated by elites to keep certain political parties or candidates in power. For instance, theories about widespread voter fraud or election interference (as seen in the 2020 U.S. election) undermine trust in democratic processes and can motivate political violence.

1.3. OPPOSITION TO GLOBALISM

Some anti-institutional movements focus on opposing global institutions like the United Nations (in times of migration), the World Health Organization (as we saw during the pandemic), or multinational corporations, which they see as eroding national sovereignty or manipulating world events.

2. DEFINITION OF DISTRUST TOWARDS POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

High political trust is often interpreted as a sign of good democratic health, and widespread distrust as a sign of democratic ill health. However, there is little knowledge about the basis on which people make assessments about whether to trust or distrust political actors.[12] But there can be found some attempts to systemize and synchronize beyond the emotional aspect of the topic:

2.1. LEGITIMACY

Distrust implies skepticism about whether institutions have the right to govern or make decisions on behalf of the public. Citizens may question the authority of institutions based on perceived biases or failures to represent their interests.

2.2. EFFECTIVENESS

Individuals may doubt whether political institutions can effectively address societal issues, deliver public services, or respond to crises (e.g., economic downturns, health emergencies).

2.3. INTEGRITY

Distrust often stems from concerns about corruption, abuse of power, or unethical behavior within institutions. Citizens may believe that political leaders prioritize their interests over those of the public. In times of crisis, some citizens may be drawn to authoritarian solutions that promise order and decisiveness, even at the cost of democratic freedoms. This can lead to democratic backsliding, where trust in democracy erodes further as citizens prioritize stability or efficiency over participatory governance.

3. CAUSES OF DISTRUST

There are several reasons why distrust in democracies has been growing in recent years, with complex and interconnected factors contributing to this erosion of confidence in democratic institutions. The distrust stems from economic, political, social, and technological influences that have shifted people's perceptions of their governments' legitimacy, effectiveness, and fairness. In some democracies (even in Eastern Germany where it has come to a great economic development after the unification in 1990), citizens feel that their voices are not adequately represented in government, particularly those from marginalized or minority communities. This "democratic deficit" leads to disillusionment with politics, as people believe the system is not responsive to their needs or concerns.

3.1. CORRUPTION AND SCANDALS

High-profile corruption cases or scandals involving political figures can erode public confidence in institutions. For example, persistent corruption allegations against politicians can lead to widespread cynicism about the political system.

3.2. INEQUALITY AND ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

Perceived or real economic inequality can fuel distrust, as citizens may feel that institutions favor the wealthy or powerful over ordinary citizens. This is particularly relevant in discussions about wealth concentration and corporate influence in politics

3.3. INEFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

When institutions fail to address pressing issues – such as unemployment, crime, healthcare, or education – citizens may become disillusioned and distrustful of their capabilities. Germany is a good example for this development as the recent developments have shown.

3.4. POLARIZATION AND PARTISANSHIP

In highly polarized political environments, citizens may distrust institutions that they perceive as biased toward one political party or ideology. This can lead to a loss of faith in the objectivity and fairness of political processes. In this regards, there is also a new fear towards the wave of migration, the rise of politically motivated attacks and Islamistic-motivated terrorist attacks, and, in general, new ideological dynamics. A worrying trend is therefore the antisemitism which is spreading throughout Europe.[13]

3.5. MEDIA INFLUENCE

The role of media, including social media, in shaping perceptions of political institutions can also contribute to distrust. Sensationalized reporting or misinformation can amplify negative views of government actions and decisions.[14]

To sum up: Distrust in democracies refers to a growing skepticism or loss of confidence in democratic institutions, leaders, and processes by citizens. This distrust can manifest as doubts about the integrity of elections, the efficacy and fairness of governments, and the impartiality of the judiciary and media. Factors contributing to this distrust include political corruption, economic inequality, ineffective governance, misinformation, polarization, and perceptions of elite control over politics. As distrust deepens, it undermines democratic stability, weakens public engagement, and fosters extremism, paving the way for populism, authoritarianism, and even political violence.

4. CONCEPTUAL APPROACH: WHAT IS EXTREMISM ACTUALLY?

Many publications[15], institutions, and specialized scientific groups are currently focusing on the research on extremism. A large part of the findings from research in extremism is also in close interaction with counter-extremist policy or is due to the governmental utilization, criticized primarily by scholars from critical schools of contemporary social sciences and humanities. Extremism is a problematic phenomenon to conceptualize, both in governmental and academic spheres, and its research is a very dynamic process. But some scholars criticize comprehensive research on extremism or its actual or alleged misuse by governmental institutions.

Obviously, the threats posed to liberal democracies by political actors often intersect with the phenomenon of extremism, which can take various forms, including political extremism, religious extremism, and ideological extremism. Understanding this relationship is crucial for comprehending how extremism can endanger democratic institutions and values.

In the contemporary world which is recently analyzed as disorder[16], it is hard or impossible to achieve a common consensus on the definition and conceptualization of extremism and interconnected terms and issues despite the struggle of several academics. Extremism is a normative term due to different perceptions of the attitudes and values identified as a "middle" and different approaches to understanding extremes. In the Western traditions of extremism research, the following main concepts of simplified definitions of extremism can be identified:

1. Extremism is an extraordinary, excessive, and intolerant political attitude or activity (for example, US expert Gus Martin characterizes extremism as "intolerance toward opposing interests and divergent options"[17]).
2. Extremism is an anti-systemic political activity (it means extremism in democratic states is anti-democratic; in non-democratic states, democratic opponents can be understood as extremists according to this concept;
3. Extremism as violent political activity (in this understanding, extremism is immanently connected with the use of violent methods, as, for example, Michael Minkenberg stated[18]);
4. Extremism as an activity against the democratic constitutional state in a kind of normative approach (this conceptualization is typical of Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse and their followers);[19]
5. Activity aimed against the democratic "core" (meaning the fundamental procedures of democracy, as Cas Mudde explained).[20]

The first conceptualization mentioned above of extremism, as an extravagant or intolerant attitude, can be transferred into various cultural and normative milieus; however, it will have different meanings. The Western liberal democratic constitutional state defined its fundamental democratic values and norms differently than multiple actors from the non-Western (or even non-democratic milieu). It can cause misunderstanding and contradictions in various definitions of the same terms. Islamic extremism can serve as an example. While a part of Western literature defines – consistently with the general "democratic-constitutional" definition of extremism – this form of extremism as a misuse of Islamic beliefs for a subversion of the democratic constitutional state, many Muslim scholars use a different approach. Saudi Arabian expert Suliman Abdul Rahman al Hageel tends to use the term extremism "as congruent to the term religious extravagance because the term extremism is a term used in Western mass media that connect Islam with extremism."[21] Further, al Hageel stated: "the way the Westerners perceive fundamentalism, many of them have gone astray for they accused Muslims of extremism, dogmatism, and religious hyperbole. That happened when Western mass media tried to establish a relationship between Islam and fundamentalism. In the Western sense of the word, fundamentalism refers to extremism, austerity, and hatred of education. Fundamentalism, as perceived in Islam, has a different meaning. This term means a return to the basis or the roots in an attempt to understand Islam and to be guided by it, and to invite people to convert to Islam using kind exhortation and wisdom"[22].

These academic discussions reflect the cultural and political tensions. It is essential to mention that academic definitions are only one category of various dimensions of using the term extremism. It can be used (with similar or different meanings[23]):

- in the context of political competition (as a defamation term against political enemies);
- in the media and politics (usually for a brief label of a subject);
- in official government (usually for the label of anti-regime forces);
- in law documents (mostly in penal or administrative law);
- in social sciences (for the exact label of specific subjects).

German political scientist Armin Pfahl-Traughber elaborated on the categorization of the intensity of extremism. It is called the E-IOS-W (Extremism – Ideology, Organisation, Strategy – Effect, in German Wirkung).[24] To this scheme, he later added the ten-level stage model of the intensity of extremism, which is focused on violence (0 = Individual extremists in democratic organizations, 1 = Significant parts of extremism in organizations, 2 = Official norm and system-affirming forms, 3 = Openly norm-denying and system-affirming forms, 4 = Legalistic forms that openly reject norms and the system, 5 = Non-legalistic forms that openly deny norms and system, 6 = violence against facilities or vehicles – "things," 7 = Violence against persons without intention to kill, 8 = violence against persons with eradicating taken into account, 9 = Violence against persons with intent to murder, and 10 = violence against persons with intent to commit mass murder)[25]. This categorization creates a base for various comparisons (for example, between individual forms of extremism in one country). Of course, it can be modified for specific areas.

The international definition with global scope can be found in the Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons, published in 2016 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The extremists are characterized as "people who tend to reject equality and pluralism in society. Extremists strive to create a homogeneous society based on rigid, dogmatic ideological tenets; they seek to make society conformist by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities"[26]. In this "global" definition, the substantive elements of protected values and regimes are not included (as democracy according to the British definition). It makes this definition flexible in various milieus. However, it can also cause disputes about its use for multiple subjects in different countries.

5. CONCLUSION

Distrust towards political institutions is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors, including corruption, ineffective governance, and polarization. Its consequences can undermine democratic processes, erode civic engagement, and fuel political or religious (Islamic) extremism. Addressing this distrust requires a multi-faceted approach focused on transparency, accountability, civic education, and inclusive engagement, ultimately working to restore public confidence in the legitimacy and effectiveness of political institutions. Distrust in democracies is the result of a combination of factors, including economic inequality, ineffective governance, political polarization, corruption, disinformation, and perceived lack of representation. These issues are often exacerbated by crises, both domestic and global, and can be manipulated by authoritarian figures seeking to undermine democratic norms. Rebuilding trust in democracy will require addressing these root causes, improving transparency and accountability, fostering greater political inclusion, and ensuring that democratic institutions are responsive to the needs and concerns of all citizens.

Governments typically respond to anti-institutional extremism by monitoring these groups, passing legislation to prevent violent actions, and improving security around sensitive institutions. However, balancing security measures with civil liberties, like freedom of speech and the right to protest, is a constant challenge. In summary, anti-institutional extremism is driven by a profound

distrust in the structures that govern society. It can be seen across the political spectrum and in various forms, from peaceful dissent to violent extremism. Its rise in recent years reflects broader societal frustrations and disillusionment with established systems.

The counter-extremist efforts are researched from various perspectives. The concept of militant democracy, introduced by Lowenstein in the late 1930s into political science[27], was developed mainly in Germany and other countries. It combines three main scientific paradigms – legal science, political philosophy, and political science (including comparative political science)[28]. Recently, the comparison of preventing radicalization and de-radicalization policies and policies against violent extremism has been researched more as "derivates" of the research on terrorism and homeland security studies.[29]

In recent eras, the unique challenges are connected with the comparison of the impact of current or future armed conflict on extremist scenes in various countries and areas (as we can dramatically observe in the Middle East and Ukraine), with new fringes of extremism, which are difficult to conceptualize or even find an appropriate name for (the so-called anti-government extremism) or with many issues of countering extremism and radicalization (including a comparison of the misuse of the extremism concept to fight democratic opposition in non-democratic regimes). It seems illusionary to elaborate broadly accepted terminology and analytical frameworks for contrast in the academic and political spheres. However, well-done comparative studies improve knowledge on extremism and contribute to networking and sharing common approaches in academic and expert epistemic community researchers on extremism. It is also a still open question if anti-institutional extremism can be regarded as an adequate category for academics and policy-makers.

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CURRENT, SELECTED IDEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS, NARRATIVES AND CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS, "REICH CITIZENS" AND "SELF-ADMINISTRATORS" AS WELL AS "DELEGITIMIZERS"

Stefan Goertz

CURRENT, SELECTED IDEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS, NARRATIVES AND CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS, "REICH CITIZENS" AND "SELF-ADMINISTRATORS" AS WELL AS "DELEGITIMIZERS"

Stefan Goertz[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

With regard to extremist radicalization courses and extremist radicalization factors, it should be noted that there are no standard radicalization courses. Every radicalization process is individual. Locations of extremist radicalization courses can be extremist groups, both in the real world and in social networks. Extremist ideological elements, narratives and conspiracy narratives exist in all areas of extremism. The different ideological elements, narratives and conspiracy narratives are qualitatively and quantitatively different within the areas of extremism. In recent years, numerous places have emerged on the internet, both on websites and in social media, where people have become radicalized or can become radicalized. This applies to both extremist groups and extremist individuals. Extremist actors on the internet are heterogeneous and range from partially violence-oriented individuals to loose groups of people. Online, extremist groups or ideologically sympathetic individuals can network quickly and across borders with like-minded people. Extremists use the entire breadth of the virtual infrastructure. In social networks, messengers, forums and boards, radicalization processes of individuals and groups can be started or promoted in "echo chambers" created there.

Common radicalization factors for extremist radicalization are extremist ideological elements, narratives and, in some cases, conspiracy narratives. This article presents current, selected ideological elements, narratives and conspiracy narratives that are widespread – in varying quality and quantity – in the three extremism areas of right-wing extremism, "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" as well as "delegitimizers" ("Verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates").

2. CURRENT, SELECTED IDEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS AND NARRATIVES OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS

According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, in right-wing extremism, membership of an ethnic group, nation or "race" determines a person's worth. In such an ethnically and racially defined "national community", the central values of the free democratic basic order of the Federal Republic of Germany are disregarded. Nationalism, group-related misanthropy such as racism and anti-Semitism, historical revisionism and hostility towards democracy characterize right-wing extremist agitation, the German constitution protection authorities currently declare.[1]

2.1. ANTI-SEMITISM

According to the German constitutional protection authorities, anti-Semitism is a unifying factor in German right-wing extremism across all scenes, which – in various forms and in different stages of radicalization – ranges from resentment at the attitude level to murder at the action level. Neo-Nazi and violence-oriented right-wing extremists in particular publicly and clandestinely refer to anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives that suspect Jews behind global elites as criminal "masterminds"

1 This article represents the personal opinion of the author.

with a claim to world domination. Such anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives can, as the attack in Halle on October 9, 2019 – the planned attack on the synagogue by right-wing terrorist Stephan Balliet, who did not get into the synagogue and killed two people in the immediate vicinity of the synagogue – showed, be a motive for attacks and murder.[2]

For right-wing extremist parties in Germany, anti-Semitism has been a key ideological identification feature and a broad field of agitation for many years – to varying degrees. Classic party themes such as "anti-asylum agitation" or the alleged "Islamization" of Germany remain dominant, but are often combined with anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives. Recently, the coronavirus pandemic and the associated criticism of government measures as well as the Middle East conflict have provided a particular connection for the dissemination of anti-Semitic narratives and conspiracy narratives by right-wing extremist parties, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution currently explains.[3]

For strategic reasons, right-wing extremist parties and their members often use coded anti-Semitism. With regard to the Middle East conflict, however, anti-Zionist anti-Semitism is also openly conveyed by members and politicians of right-wing extremist parties. The spread of the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory of the "Great Reset" – especially in connection with the coronavirus pandemic – plays a vital role within the right-wing extremist group "New Right". The great danger of right-wing extremists using the connectivity of anti-Semitic positions for their own purposes has become particularly apparent in connection with the coronavirus pandemic and the associated government measures to combat it. The pandemic offered and continues to offer right-wing extremist and anti-Semitic actors the opportunity to instrumentalize protests from the very heterogeneous spectrum of people who deny corona, criticize government measures and reject vaccinations in order to increase the reach and acceptance of their own arguments.[4]

The example of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine illustrates the dynamics of anti-Semitism in right-wing extremism and especially of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in right-wing extremism. According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the current events of the war in Ukraine were reinterpreted in anti-Semitic terms by right-wing extremist actors immediately after the start of the war of aggression. Stories according to which, for example, the war in Ukraine is part of an alleged "Jewish" strategy to achieve world domination are spread on social media and elsewhere. Reference is made to alleged "Jewish" control of either Ukraine or Russia or both states.[5]

2.2. HOSTILITY TOWARDS MUSLIMS/ISLAM

Islamophobic agitation is not limited to the area of right-wing extremism. Even beyond right-wing extremist Islamophobia, which is primarily based on racism, there are groups and individuals who do not want to grant Muslims the freedom of religion enshrined in the German Basic Law. These groups and individuals equate "Islam" as a world religion with Islamism and Islamist terrorism and portray the religion of Islam as a "fascist ideology" that poses a significant threat to our society.[6]

According to the constitutional protection authorities, extremist efforts in connection with Islamophobic statements are directed against the human rights set out in the Basic Law (Article 1 of the Basic Law), the prohibition of discrimination (Article 3 of the Basic Law) and freedom of religion (Article 4 of the Basic Law). Certain targeted and purposeful forms of behavior that seek to override or eliminate the validity of the aforementioned principles for Muslims and Islam and its religious communities are to be considered extremist.[7]

The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution analyzes Islamophobia and hostility towards Muslims as a field of action for right-wing extremists, which has increased significantly since the refugee crisis in 2015. According to the German constitutional protection authorities, Islamophobia among right-wing extremists is "not only due to mere resentment and the adoption of

right-wing populist theses, but is rather rooted in pronounced ideological convictions, especially in the ideal of an ethnically homogeneous 'national community' constructed by right-wing extremists. Right-wing extremists try to create fears of foreign infiltration or prejudices against the religion of Islam or Muslims themselves or to stir up corresponding reservations in order to influence public opinion in their favor. They spread the thesis of a supposed 'impending Islamization' of Europe. The boundaries between extremist and populist Islamophobia are often blurred".[8]

2.3. QUEER HOSTILITY

Group-focused misanthropy is a fundamental component of right-wing extremist ideology and agitation. According to the BfV, the right-wing extremist scene is currently increasingly agitating against the LGBTQI+ community. For example, during Pride Month in June 2022, the BfV observed a large number of specifically anti-queer agitations – some with extremely derogatory and misanthropic positions and statements – on the internet, as well as individual protest actions by right-wing extremists. Based on their world view, right-wing extremists largely reject diversity in terms of sexual orientation as well as partnership and family models. They see heterosexuality and the traditional nuclear family associated with it as having no alternative and being biologically "natural". In itself, this is not a sui generis right-wing extremist position, but right-wing extremists are attempting to use the topic ideologically, explain the German constitution protection authorities. They link the rejection of modern understandings of gender and family models to their world view, which is characterized by racism and nationalism. This is articulated, for example, in the family policy of right-wing extremist parties, according to which an impending so-called "Volkstod" (death of the people) can only be stopped by a family policy that is exclusively geared towards ethnic German families and marriage between a man and a woman.[9]

In the "New Right", the buzzword "globo-homo" is used to warn of a supposedly advancing homogenization of society worldwide. The term is a neologism made up of the adjectives "globalist" and – apparently variable depending on the context of use – "homogeneous" or "homosexual". In a broader sense, the term is linked to the "ethnopluralism" concept of the "New Right". Ethnopluralists see a diversity of peoples, which is reflected in ethnically largely homogeneous states, as an ideal state. According to this position, globalization and the liberalization of society are causing people to lose their cultural and ethnic identity, which must be prevented.[10]

However, the buzzword "globo-homo" is also often explicitly used to refer to gender issues. In this context, the term expresses a rejection of equal rights for different sexual orientations and a warning against a supposed loss of sexual identity. The idea that the population should be manipulated or even sexually re-educated through targeted "gender propaganda" is a common narrative in the right-wing extremist scene. This "gender propaganda" is carried out by public broadcasters, corporations, politicians and schools.[11]

2.4. RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

According to the German constitution protection authorities, large sections of the right-wing extremist scene are trying to use complex crisis events and the associated dissatisfaction in parts of the population to their advantage in order to spread their ideological narratives among the middle classes, for example in connection with the war in Ukraine.[12]

The majority of online and real-world statements from the far-right scene were already characterized by an undifferentiated and one-sided pro-Russian stance before the Russian attack on Ukraine, analyzed the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) in summer 2023. From the propagandistic point of view of a number of right-wing extremist actors, Russia had been pushed into a military and security policy corner by the NATO states; an interest in a war between Russia and Ukraine existed primarily on the part of the USA or the NATO states, the BfV explained in June 2023.[13]

Following the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, some German right-wing extremists, some of whom had questioned Russian President Vladimir Putin's intentions for war and the majority of whom had expressed pro-Russian views, were forced to differentiate or revise their positions. However, numerous right-wing extremist individuals and groups, including, for example, the regional party "Freie Sachsen", the new right-wing "COMPACT-Magazin GmbH" and the right-wing extremist blog "PI-NEWS", maintained their pro-Russian stance, according to the BfV. In this Russia-friendly camp, the military attack by Putin's system was relativized and considered legitimate.[14]

According to the BfV, the economic upheavals resulting from the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which have led to rising energy and living costs in Germany, have also been taken up by right-wing extremist actors in political campaigns and mobilization calls.[15]

3. CURRENT, SELECTED IDEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS AND NARRATIVES OF "REICH CITIZENS" AND "SELF-ADMINISTRATORS"

According to the German constitutional protection authorities, it is sometimes difficult to make a clear distinction between "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators". "Reich citizens" reject the Federal Republic of Germany by referring to a "German Reich" of any kind. "Self-governors", on the other hand, feel that they do not belong to the state at all. They claim that they can leave the state by means of a declaration and are therefore not bound by its laws. Referring to a UN resolution that allegedly makes it possible to leave the Federal Republic of Germany and enter "self-administration", some mark their residential property, for example by drawing borders, signs and coats of arms, in order to identify their allegedly sovereign administrative area. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution explains that this is sometimes defended violently by invoking the right to resist. Conspiracy narratives also play an important role in the "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" scene. For example, some members of the scene refer to S.H.A.E.F. legislation and declare it to be still valid.[16]

According to the German constitutional protection authorities, a small proportion of "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators" can also clearly be classified as right-wing extremists. Ideological overlaps can be found in the areas of territorial and historical revisionism, nationalist and in some cases National Socialist ideas and anti-Semitic ideological elements. For the vast majority of members of the scene, however, right-wing extremist ideological elements can only be identified to a limited extent or not at all. However, anti-Semitic ideological elements are particularly widespread in the right-wing extremist part of the "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" scene and in connection with conspiracy theories. These range from classic anti-Semitic narratives such as a "global Jewish financial elite" to openly anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, for example that the First World War was planned by "the Jews", to denial of the Holocaust.[17]

"Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" consider government measures – including those to contain the coronavirus pandemic – to be unlawful and vehemently reject them. The group "Verfassunggebende Versammlung" (VV), which belongs to the "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" phenomena, was particularly frequent in its coverage of the coronavirus pandemic and repeatedly spread disinformation and conspiracy narratives in 2020, particularly via its internet platform "ddbnews" and "ddbradio".[18] For example, the "Constituent Assembly" group linked the coronavirus pandemic to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory of a "New World Order" (NWO). The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution analyzes that the coronavirus pandemic represented a new, motivating experience for "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators" as opponents of the state, as other critics of the coronavirus measures "do not exclude the "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators" during high-profile actions, but protest

together with them".[19] The German security authorities stated that in 2020, some "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" no longer limited themselves to expressing their protest in connection with "hygiene demonstrations", but also used physical violence, for example against deployed police forces. For example, "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" took part in demonstrations against the coronavirus measures from 28 to 30 August 2020 in the vicinity of the Reichstag building (German Bundestag) in Berlin. In the course of a rally at the Reichstag building, several hundred people, including members of the "Reichsbürger" scene, occupied the steps of the parliament building.[20]

3.2. ANTI-SEMITISM

The "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" extremist groups are characterized by ideological elements that are partly influenced by anti-Semitic views and linked to conspiracy narratives. Individual groups and individuals hold anti-Semitic views. These are often expressed in corresponding posts on the internet or social media or through the repeated sending of letters with relevant content. Anti-Semitism among "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators" covers all of the manifestations described above. Above all, the anti-Semitic narrative that there are Jewish forces that allegedly control and influence the fate of the world from the background and by means of financial power is spread. In various forms – above all with reference to the Rothschild family and their alleged exercise of power – conspiracy theory views are sometimes also linked to current affairs and socio-political issues.[21]

Radicalization processes of "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators" also take place primarily online, mainly in social media. "Echo chambers" have also been established on various platforms in this area of extremism, where extremist narratives and ideological elements are spread unfiltered and mobilized for activities in the real world. According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, even highly inhumane or violence-oriented statements made by individual members often go unchallenged or are even actively supported.[22]

4. CURRENT, SELECTED IDEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS AND NARRATIVES AND CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES OF "DELEGITIMIZERS"

With the start of the government's coronavirus protective measures to protect the population from the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, there were widespread social discussions and demonstrations in Germany against the associated restrictions on freedom. However, according to the German security authorities, the opinions and actions publicly expressed by individuals and groups of people (e.g. "Querdenken") went beyond legitimate protest in some cases and showed actual indications of anti-constitutional aspirations ("delegitimization of the state relevant to constitutional protection").[23] However, according to the police and constitution protection authorities, in many cases the individuals and groups of people involved in this context could not be classified either structurally or ideologically as belonging to one of the phenomenon areas of constitution protection (e.g. right-wing extremism or "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter"). In order to be able to adequately analyze this new phenomenon, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution established the new phenomenon area "Delegitimization of the state relevant to the protection of the constitution" in April 2021.[24]

According to the German constitutional protection authorities, "delegitimizers" aim to "suspend essential constitutional principles or impair the functioning of the state or its institutions", for example by disparaging democratic decision-making processes and institutions or calling for official or judicial orders and decisions to be ignored. The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution is currently analyzing the fact that this form of delegitimization often does not

take the form of an open rejection of democracy as such, but rather a constant disparagement of and agitation against democratically legitimized representatives and institutions of the state. This approach goes far beyond legally permissible criticism of government, politics and the state.

The phenomenon area "delegitimization of the state relevant to constitutional protection", which has been described as new by the German constitution protection authorities since 2021, has various references to and ideological overlaps with other extremism phenomenon areas, above all with the phenomenon areas of right-wing extremism as well as "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter".

According to the German constitutional protection authorities, common conspiracy narratives and narratives spread by "delegitimizers" include the "Great Reset" conspiracy narrative or conspiracy narratives about a "New World Order" (NWO) supposedly planned by the elites. What these two conspiracy narratives have in common is that supposedly powerful individuals or "the elites" are generally accused of striving to implement a new political order and using current developments, such as the coronavirus pandemic, as a means to achieve these goals. However, the German constitution protection authorities emphasize that "the mere reception of conspiracy narratives does not in itself justify membership of the aforementioned spectrum and does not necessarily indicate an extremist orientation".[25]

The following examples of rhetoric, agitation and actions in the phenomenon area of "delegitimization of the state relevant to the protection of the constitution" are classified as extremist by the German constitution protection authorities:

- Individual protagonists of the "Querdenken" movement have indirectly called for the overthrow of our country's existing political order in the context of coronavirus protests and via social media
- Analogies to dictatorships, including National Socialism, are repeatedly and deliberately made in order to deny the legitimacy of the federal government, the state governments and the executive branch
- National Socialist crimes are relativized by equating the state coronavirus vaccination campaign with the persecution of Jews[26]
- German national sovereignty is disparaged and questioned in an agitational manner
- The Federal Republic of Germany is deliberately denied the status of being a constitutional state (principle of being bound by the law)
- Rhetorically and physically aggressive interaction with media representatives, police officers and other administrative staff
- Spreading anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives
- Calls for the use of violence against dissidents
- Relationships and personal contacts to organizations and actors in the areas of right-wing extremism, "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter".[27]

"Delegitimizers" have various references to and ideological overlaps with other extremist phenomena. During the coronavirus pandemic, delegitimizers also spread anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution currently explains. Common conspiracy narratives spread by delegitimizers include narratives such as the "Great Reset" or narratives about a "New World Order" (NWO) supposedly planned by the elites.[28]

5. CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES PREVALENT IN THESE THREE AREAS OF EXTREMISM

Conspiracy narratives are intended to stir up emotions, reinforce assumptions and give certain developments a normative charge. Conspiracy narratives massively reduce complexity and aim to "help" people "understand and explain world events". They create and reinforce group identities

and serve to identify "opponents, enemies and culprits" and make them responsible for political, economic, social and even very personal situations. This creates friend-foe patterns, "us against the opponents, the enemies, the elite, those responsible", which in turn can develop the potential for violence.

Butter explains that conspiracy believers divide the world into victims and perpetrators of a conspiracy and advocate the idea "that history can be planned and controlled, and that people can steer the course of history according to their intentions. Events are always the result of deliberate action. Coincidence, unintended consequences and structural effects would be ruled out by conspiracy believers, the actions of the conspirators would have to be uncovered, and hidden connections between people and institutions could be found with sufficient "deep analysis".[29]

Supporters of conspiracy narratives see themselves as "enlightened" and the belief that they have understood the true connections behind political and social developments and have recognized those supposedly responsible for them strengthens cohesion among themselves.

The current conspiracy narratives "QAnon", "Conspiracy of the Elites": "Deep State", "New World Order", "The Great Reset", "The Great Exchange", "The Siege" and "S.H.A.E.F." ideology are spreading in the extremism areas of right-wing extremism, "Reichsbürger" and "Selbstverwalter" as well as "delegitimizers" and are briefly outlined here.

QAnon is a conspiracy narrative that originated in the USA and has quite a following there. The originator of the "QAnon" conspiracy narrative first published supposedly exclusive information on the image board "4chan" in October 2017, according to which the then US President Donald Trump was waging a battle against the "Deep State", i.e. "hidden elites in high and top government offices and social positions".[30] The term "Q" comes from the reference to the "Q Clearance", the highest clearance level for secret information within US authorities, which the anonymous author of the postings allegedly possessed. "Anon" is in turn the abbreviation for Anonymous.

In mid-February 2022, two research teams, one from Switzerland and one from France, are said to have used artificial intelligence to determine that "the" creator of QAnon was two people. Paul Furber, a South African software developer and conspiracy believer, and Ron Watkins, an operator of conspiracy narrative websites.[31]

According to the "QAnon" conspiracy narrative, children are abducted, tortured in underground camps and murdered in order to extract an elixir of life from them, the so-called "adrenochrome".[32] The publications of "Q" are usually cryptic messages with abbreviations that are not in common use and leave plenty of room for interpretation. According to the German government in an answer to a minor question in the Bundestag in 2020, this conspiracy narrative is also spreading in German-speaking countries, primarily through a large number of websites, blogs and YouTube channels, but their reach is difficult to quantify. The adrenochrome child blood conspiracy narrative takes on elements of medieval anti-Semitism ("Christian blood" as a cure) with its child murder claim.[33] The conspiracy narratives "QAnon", "Conspiracy of the Elites": "Deep State", "New World Order", "The Great Reset" are closely linked to political anti-Semitism and thus to old, powerful and enduring narratives: The minority of "the Jews", imagined as powerful, conspire against "the majority" in order to harm and dominate them. The image of "the Jews" as wire-pullers and string-pullers who instigated economic crises, revolutions and wars on this basis stands for this.

The conspiracy narrative of a "Deep State", a "deep state in hiding", a "secret elite behind the government", which developed in the USA in the context of the QAnon narrative described above, sounds strikingly similar. This "Deep State" is said to be made up of hidden elites in high government offices and social positions. Conspiracy believers associate a weakening of the (German) economy, open or uncontrolled borders, the banning of private firearms and the introduction of a so-called "globalist agenda" with an alleged "Deep State". One fear of the supporters of this conspiracy

narrative is that the "deep state" will become an "overt, visible" totalitarian state in the future if the actors who have been operating in secret ("deep state") put their plans into practice.[34] The narrative has also found supporters in Germany. The magazine "COMPACT", which has been classified as "confirmed right-wing extremist" by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, has contributed to its spread.[35] In 2019, this magazine published a special issue on the alleged 'deep state'. In a YouTube video, editor-in-chief Jürgen Elsässer explained what it was all about: "This is a network of secret services, business bosses, stock market gurus and left-wing media".[36] The "Deep State" conspiracy narrative is also being spread in right-wing populist and right-wing extremist forums.[37]

The term "New World Order" was coined in the USA after the collapse of communism in the early 1990s ("New World Order"), where it initially stood for a global system of collective security. The term was later reinterpreted by right-wing extremists. Today, it usually refers to a conspiracy narrative in which a global, mostly Jewish elite pursues a secret plan to abolish "autochthonous" peoples and nation-state borders and install an authoritarian world government.

In most variants of this conspiracy narrative, Jewish actors, such as the US investor George Soros or the Rothschild banking house, and supposed secret societies, such as the Illuminati or the Freemasons, as well as international organizations, are seen as the main culprits or helpers of the secret elites. The terms "East Coast" or "high finance" are often used as anti-Semitic synonyms for the Jewish elite.[38]

From the accusations of the alleged poisoning of wells by Jews during the plague epidemic in the Middle Ages to the invented "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and the crude constructs of the "QAnon" and NWO conspiracy narrative, anti-Semitism runs like a red thread through conspiracy narratives. The assertion of the alleged existence of "string-pullers", "Jewish financiers", "East Coast Jewish elite" ("high finance"), "New World Order", "Zionist Occupied Government" ("ZOG"), "machinations", "Jewish clique", "beneficiaries" is a structural feature of conspiracy narratives.

The conspiracy narrative "Great Exchange"/"Der große Austausch" is a central narrative of the right-wing extremist "Identitarian Movement" and other actors of the New Right. According to the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, this narrative or conspiracy narrative essentially states that an unspecified elite is aiming to "exchange" the native population for migrants. In addition, the "Identitarian Movement Germany" issues a blanket warning against the "Islamization" of Germany.[39] The "Identitarian Movement", which is active in numerous European countries and has very close links between Germany and Austria (including Martin Sellner), adopted the "great exchange" as its central propaganda concept from around 2017 and became the driving force behind the spread of this conspiracy narrative. COMPACT magazine also joined the spread of this narrative.[40]

The right-wing terrorist and Christchurch attacker, Brenton Tarrant, had published a manifesto before his attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, in which he killed 51 people and injured 50 people, some of them seriously. This manifesto is called "The Great Replacement", the translation of the right-wing extremist conspiracy theory "the great replacement". In 2001, the French author Renaud Camus called his book "Le grand remplacement" and painted a picture of a French society in which a "takeover by Muslims is approaching". Among other things, Camus called for a ban on family reunification and a tightening of citizenship laws.[41]

Martin Sellner wrote about the spread of this narrative: "Stickers, films, flyers, posters and banners proclaimed the ominous message in many German cities."[42]

The "Siege" ideology goes back to the eponymous title of a collection of texts by US right-wing extremist James Nolan Mason from the 1980s. In addition to Mason's ideological foundations,

such as racism, anti-Semitism and the theory of the supposed superiority of the "white race" ("white supremacy"), it also contains detailed descriptions of possible targets for attacks as well as explanations of operational preparations. The focus of the ideology is in the USA, but individuals and groups spreading the "Victory" ideology are also repeatedly identified in Germany and other European countries. These include offshoots of international groups such as the "Atomwaffen Division Deutschland" and the "Feuerkrieg Division Deutschland".[43]

Although the "Siege" ideology has its main focus in the USA, it is also increasingly gaining young radicalized followers in Germany, who can be recruited by groups such as the Atomwaffen Division (AWD). According to the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, individuals and groups that spread the Siege ideology are also repeatedly identified in Germany. Examples include offshoots of international groups such as "AWD Deutschland" (AWDD) and the "Feuerkrieg Division Deutschland" (FKDD).[44] The initially verbal radicalization on the internet also poses a real potential threat. In Germany, several supporters of the FKDD have already made concrete preparations for an attack. The spread of the Siege ideology across national borders and language areas is an example of the dynamic internationalization of right-wing terrorist content and emphasizes the need for international cooperation between security authorities.[45]

According to the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, S.H.A.E.F. is a conspiracy narrative promoted by some "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators". The supporters and sympathizers of this conspiracy narrative refer to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (S.H.A.E.F.), which exercised supreme command over the Allied forces in Europe during the Second World War and was disbanded after the end of the war. They assume that the S.H.A.E.F. is still active and that the corresponding "S.H.A.E.F. laws" are still valid. In essence, it is claimed that the Federal Republic of Germany is still an occupied state. Accordingly, the applicable legal system is not recognized. The followers of this ideology see civil servants and politicians as vicarious agents of an illegitimate government. They see themselves as official representatives of the Allies with the authority to issue orders and directives to the German population.[46]

According to Moghadam's stage model, most radicalization processes do not lead to extremist or even terrorist violence; the majority of radicalized individuals remain at levels below violence and terrorism.[47] Nevertheless, the danger is visibly present: as shown, for example, by the right-wing terrorist murders in Halle an der Saale and Hanau as well as murders and attempted murders of police officers by "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators" and numerous cases of violence by "delegitimizers" (often self-proclaimed "lateral thinkers") against police officers and journalists.

Various theories, narratives and ideological elements of right-wing extremist actors, "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators" as well as "delegitimizers" can entangle people in a closed conspiracy ideological world view, in which disenchantment with the state can turn into hatred of the state. This world view can be the basis for radicalization processes, including the use of violence. In various European countries, members of these scenes deliberately obstruct the work of courts, police and other authorities and threaten their employees. According to the German security authorities, any state intervention – especially the withdrawal of firearms licenses from "Reich citizens" and "self-administrators" – can trigger considerable aggression and dangerous situations. Conspiracy narratives can thus be the breeding ground for acts of violence, for example when resistance to alleged injustice (resistance to coronavirus hygiene measures) is called for.

Conspiracy narratives pose major challenges for security authorities, but also for societies worldwide. Accordingly, further and more intensive research efforts are needed to better assess the potential danger, the spread and the impact and to develop effective measures to make democratic society more resilient to conspiracy narratives.

6. CONCLUSION

Extremist ideological elements, narratives and conspiracy narratives are present in all areas of extremism, but to varying degrees. In the image of a ladder, the vast majority of extremists do not reach the last rungs of the ladder, which represent politically motivated violence. However, previous levels exist because ideological elements, narratives and conspiracy narratives – such as the current and selected ones presented above – are disseminated in the real world and online. Such and other ideological elements, narratives and conspiracy narratives can then radicalize other people who potentially commit politically motivated violence in the future.

In recent years, numerous places have emerged on the internet, both on websites and in social media, where people have become radicalized or can become radicalized, both extremist groups and extremist individuals. Extremist actors on the internet are heterogeneous and range from partially violence-oriented individuals to loose associations of individuals to strictly hierarchically structured extremist groups that call for violence or commit acts of violence themselves. Online, extremist groups or ideologically sympathetic individuals can network quickly and across borders with like-minded people. Extremists use the entire breadth of the virtual infrastructure: social networks, messengers, forums and boards as well as encrypted messengers. The "echo chambers" created there can encourage reciprocal radicalization processes.

Every radicalization process is individual. The analysis of terrorist attacks and other cases of politically motivated violence shows that, in addition to radicalization factors such as the milieu, the peer group, the social environment (peer pressure, group dynamic processes), economic factors, psycho-social and other factors, extremist ideological elements, narratives and conspiracy narratives have had a significant influence on past radicalization processes and will continue to do so in the future.

NOTES

1 See Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Home Affairs (2023): Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2022, Berlin, p. 48.

2 See Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (2022): Anti-Semitism situation report 2020/2021, p. 64.

3 Cf. ibid.

4 Cf. ibid. pp. 64-65; Goertz, S. (2024): Öffentliche Sicherheit in Gefahr?, p. 60-63; Goertz, S. (2024): Antisemitismus in Deutschland – eine (neue) Querfront von Rechtsextremisten, Islamisten, "Grauen Wölfen", Linksextremisten und anderen Antisemiten? In: Gustenau, G./Hartleb, F. (2024): Antisemitismus auf dem Vormarsch. Neue ideologische Dynamiken, p. 161-163.

5 See Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Home Affairs (2023): Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2022, Berlin, p. 69.

6 Cf. Bavarian State Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Was ist verfassungsschutzrelevante Islamfeindlichkeit? https://www.verfassungsschutz.bayern.de/weitere_aufgaben/islamfeindlichkeit/definition/index.html (2.3.2024).

7 Cf. ibid.; Goertz, S. (2024): Öffentliche Sicherheit in Gefahr?, p. 72.

8 See Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (2018): Compendium of the BfV. Presentation of selected areas of work and objects of observation, p. 20.

9 Cf. Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (2022): Queerfeindlichkeit im Rechtsextremismus; https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/hintergruende/DE/rechtsextremismus/2022-08-17-pridemonth.html (2.3.2024).

10 Cf. ibid.; Goertz, S. (2024): Öffentliche Sicherheit in Gefahr?, p. 72-73.

11 Cf. ibid.

12 See Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Home Affairs (2023): Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2022, Berlin, p. 60.

13 Cf. ibid. p. 61.

14 Cf. ibid.

15 Cf. ibid. p. 62.

16 Cf. ibid. pp. 104-105.

17 Cf. ibid. p. 105.

18 See Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Home Affairs (2021): Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2020, Berlin, p. 114.

19 Cf. ibid. p. 114.

20 Cf. ibid. pp. 114-115; Goertz, S. (2024): Öffentliche Sicherheit in Gefahr?, p. 123-129.

21 See Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (2022): Anti-Semitism situation report, pp. 67-71.

22 Cf. Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Home Affairs (2023): Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2022, Berlin, p. 123.

23 Cf. ibid. p. 116.

24 Cf. ibid.

25 Cf. ibid. p. 117.

26 See Federal Ministry of the Interior and Home Affairs: Verfassungsschutzbericht 2021, Berlin, June 2022, pp. 114-115.

27 Cf. Ministry of the Interior of North Rhine-Westphalia: Special report on conspiracy myths and "corona deniers", Düsseldorf, May 2021, p. 69.

28 Cf. ibid. pp. 116-117.

29 See Butter, M.: "Nothing is as it seems." On conspiracy theories, Berlin, 2018, pp. 21-29.

30 Cf. https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/240/1924084.pdf, p. 3 (2.3.2024).

31 See https://www.rnd.de/politik/qanon-wer-oder-was-ist-das-computerwissenschaftler-identifizieren-zwei-maenner-A7YQ22U7RBG55ES7Z33A3NKRPY.html (2.3.2024).

32 Cf. Goertz, S.: Corona fake news, conspiracy theories and the cross-front in Germany, in: Polizei Info Report 3/2021, p. 14.

33 Cf. ibid.

34 See Verfassungsschutz Baden-Württemberg (2022): Fear yourselves! Functions of doomsday scenarios in an extremist context, pp. 18-19.

35 https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/das-magazin-das-jetzt-auch-der-verfassungsschutz-liest-a-2dd9ac07-47bc-4461-9962-b9078274b925 (2.3.2024).

36 Quoted from ibid.

37 Cf. Goertz, S. (2024): Öffentliche Sicherheit in Gefahr?, p. 123-128.

38 See https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/DE/service/glossar/Functions/glossar.html?cms_lv2=678608 (2.3.2024).

39 See Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community (2021): Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2020, pp. 75-77.

40 Cf. ibid. p. 81.

41 See Goertz, S. (2022): Internal security from A to Z, pp. 186-187.

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43 See https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/glosaareintraege/DE/S/siege-ideologie.html (2.3.2024).

44 Cf. Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Home Affairs (2022): Report on the Protection of the Constitution 2021, June 2022, p. 71.

45 Cf. ibid. p. 72.

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“SIGHTLESS IN A SAVAGE LAND”: LESSONS FROM THE OCTOBER 7, 2023 HAMAS ATTACKS AND ENSUING GAZA WAR

Bruce Hoffman

"SIGHTLESS IN A SAVAGE LAND":[1] LESSONS FROM THE OCTOBER 7, 2023 HAMAS ATTACKS AND ENSUING GAZA WAR

Bruce Hoffman[2]

"[S]urprise lies at the foundation of all undertakings, without exception," Carl von Clausewitz famously wrote, "and secrecy and rapidity are the two factors of this product."[3] Two hundred years later, Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad validated this core dictum of military success when, on October 7, 2023, some 3,000 terrorists stormed across Israel's border with Gaza.[4] In simultaneous, coordinated air, ground and sea[5] assaults, they attacked 22 Israeli communities, including two key military facilities as well as a music festival[6] and advanced fifteen miles into Israel – a distance halfway between the border and the West Bank.[7] In the carnage that ensued, 1,139 Israelis – 767 civilians, including 36 children, perished.[8] The Nova music festival alone accounted for a third (364) of the fatalities.[9] The terrorists abducted another 242 persons, who disappeared into Gaza.[10] At this time, 129 hostages presumably remain captive – their condition unknown and among whom at least 34 are believed to have died.[11]

For Israel and the Jewish people, as well as the terrorists themselves, the attacks were without precedent. More Jews died that day than on any other since the Holocaust.[12] Nearly three times as many Israelis were killed on October 7th as died on the first day of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.[13] Even the massacre at Kfar Etzion during Israeli's war for independence in 1948 unfolded over two days and still claimed just a tenth of the Jewish fatalities on October 7th.[14] In less than twenty-four hours more people were killed than from the 138 suicide attacks that terrorized the country during the Second Intifada between 2000 and 2005.[15] Given Israel's miniscule population compared with the United States, the death toll equaled fifteen September 11th 2001 attacks.[16] It would have been as if 40,000 Americans had died on 9/11.[17]

For Hamas and PIJ the attacks were also unprecedented. In the past, a unique constellation of planning, logistics, and command and control had infrequently enabled only the most adept terrorists to launch simultaneous, coordinated attacks. And, those attacks almost always utilized only one spatial dimension – air (e.g., the 9/11 attacks), land (e.g., the 2004 Madrid commuter train bombings), or sea (e.g., the 2000 maritime suicide attack on the *USS Cole*). But not all three at once – as occurred in "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood".[18] The attacks, moreover, successfully utilized swarming tactics. Although coordinated, simultaneous assaults have been among the most consequential terrorist operations of the 21st Century, incidents that utilized swarming attacks, such as in Mumbai, India in 2008[19] and Paris, France in 2015,[20] have been even more devastating. Swarming as a mode of combat has been characterized as "a deliberately structured, coordinated, strategic way to strike from all directions, by means of a sustainable pulsing of force and/or fire, close-in as well as from stand-off positions." As John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt argued in an influential 2000 RAND Corporation report, "swarming depends on a devolution of power to small units and a capacity to interconnect those units that has only recently become feasible, due to the information revolution."[21]

Swarming attacks, as occurred in both Mumbai and Paris as well as along Israel's border with Gaza on October 7th are specifically designed to crash defenses and completely collapse any response. In this manner, swarming shatters decision-making and chain of command, overwhelms first responders, and paralyzes effective, timely intervention. The timeline of the attacks and fractured Israeli mobilization bear this out.[22] At 0630 the separation barrier along the Gaza border was breached. Approximately a half hour later the first gun shots are heard at Kibbutz Nir Oz. Not until 0740, however, does the IDF sound the alarm that terrorists have crossed the border from

Gaza. At 0752 a resident of Kibbutz Be'eri reports "a lot of wounded and dead here." Only at 0823 – nearly two hours after the wall was initially breached – does Israel declare a state of alert. About an hour later, the terrorists seize the first hostages at both Kfar Aza and the Nova music festival at Re'im. At 1006 Defense Minister Yoav Gallant announces that "Israel is at war" and forty minutes later, the first Israel Air Force strikes occur. Still, not until 1135 does Netanyahu issue his first public statement on the attacks. At that point, it is over five hours since the terrorists entered Israel. Noon passes before the IDF announces that Israeli forces have been ordered to the south-western part of the country. At 1350 IDF units arrive at Sderot. Meanwhile, the carnage at Be'eri and elsewhere continues. "Where is the army" a resident of Nir Oz texts at 1403. Three-and-a-half hours later, she again pleads, "Does anyone know where the army is?" At 1800 the IDF arrives to rescue the surviving residents of Nir Oz. But it is not until 0300, nearly twenty-one hours after the attacks began, that the IDF finally secures Kfar Aza and reestablishes security along the border.[23]

The October 7th attacks, however, should not have come as a surprise. Although the prevailing conventional wisdom in Israel was that Hamas, flush with Qatari[24] largesse, was content with governing Gaza and not waging war on Israel, the group's covenant and charter as well as its leaders' repeated statements made crystal clear its longstanding genocidal intentions. The 1988 Covenant's thirty-six articles are explicit in its sanguinary intentions so far as Israel and the Jewish people are concerned. The document also stridently asserts the movement's total disdain for, and dismissal of, a negotiated resolution of the Palestine-Israel conflict. It unambiguously calls for the complete destruction of Israel as an essential condition for the liberation of Palestine and the establishment of a theocratic state based on Islamic law (shari'a) alongside the need for both unrestrained and unceasing holy war (jihad) to attain this objective. Finally, the covenant reinforces the most odious antisemitic tropes and calumnies married to completely unhinged conspiracy theories. [25]

Although the revised 2017 Hamas charter lacks some of the more febrile language of its predecessor, its amended statement of purpose also makes abundantly clear Hamas's unchanged position regarding Israel's existence and its continued rejection of any kind of negotiated political settlement of the Palestine-Israeli conflict. The landmark 1993 Oslo Accords and specifically any prospect of a two-state solution come in for special opprobrium. "Resisting the occupation with all means and methods is a legitimate right guaranteed by divine laws and by international norms and laws," the charter unambiguously states." Violence is thus regarded as intrinsic to Palestine's liberation.[26] This was the message of Hamas military leader Yahya Sinwar, who was killed in September 2024, a year before the October 7th attacks. Directing his remarks to Israel, he presaged "Operation-Aqsa Flood"; promising that Hamas "will come to you with endless rockets, we will come to you in a limitless flood of soldiers, we will come to you with millions of our people, like a repeating tide."[27] Even more revealing was what Saleh al-Arouri, who at the time of his death in January 2024 was deputy chairman of Hamas' political bureau, had told two London *Times* journalists. "Our job is to keep Palestinians radicalized," he explained in a 2007 interview. "Most of them would settle in a moment for peace, some deal that will let them get on with their lives. We need to keep them angry."[28] As *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan aptly observed, "October 7 was Hamas showing you who they are. Believe them." [29]

The problem was that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's strategy to isolate and marginalize Palestine by negotiating peace treaties with a succession of Middle Eastern and North African counties[30] blinded him and his government to the threat from Hamas and other rejectionists. With the prize of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic recognition of Israel and a landmark Saudi-American defense alliance within reach,[31] Netanyahu had convinced himself that Hamas was concerned more with governing Gaza than waging war. The group's relative quiescence since the 2021 flare-up doubtless contributed to this complacency. Critically, Netanyahu had also been preoccupied with the months of mass, rolling Israeli protests against the proposed judicial reforms that had successively convulsed Israel. In addition, there were other distractions including IDF reservists refusing to report for duty in support of the protests; rising tensions surrounding access to the al-Haram al-Sharif – the Muslim holy places of the al-Aqsa mosque and Dome of the Rock adjacent

to the Western Wall, which Jews hold sacred; an escalation of violence from Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank; the recurrent threat from Hezbollah on Israel's northern border with Lebanon; and Iran's ongoing de-stabilization of the region and development of nuclear weapons. Netanyahu's own arrogance may also have contributed to a failure to fully appreciate the danger from Hamas. Netanya styled himself as "Mr. Security" – the only Israeli leader capable of keeping Israel safe, having been elected to office a record six times.[32]

Technological hubris also lulled Israel into a fatally false sense of security. In 2019, Israel built a 65 kilometer-long "smart fence" along its border with Gaza at a cost of $1.1 billion. It was touted by defense minister Benny Gantz at the ceremony marking the fence's completion as "a creative, technological project of the first order [which] denies Hamas one of the capabilities that it tried to develop and puts a wall of iron, sensors and concrete between it and the residents of the south." [33] With its automated machine-guns, sensors, cameras, and other detection equipment, the fence was believed to be the ultimate high-tech solution to Israel's southern border security needs – reducing the number of military forces stationed there, who could now be deployed to the northern border or West Bank to counter more serious threats. On October 7th, however, the separation barrier was breached within minutes in at least 30 spots. Its sophisticated observation and detection technology was rendered useless by low-cost, explosives-laden, quadcopters (drones) flown by Hamas controllers that systematically knocked out the cell towers along the fence: thus effectively rendering Israeli intelligence deaf and blind. Only the Maginot Line, constructed by France in 1928, would prove as useless a bulwark against invasion. Another key line of defense overwhelmed that long day was Israel's highly vaunted Iron Dome anti-rocket system. A highly effective countermeasure in normal circumstances when confronted by tens or twenties of rockets and missiles, it too collapsed under the weight of the approximately 3,000 fired by Hamas and PIJ into Israel that fateful morning.[34]

The October 7th attacks have of course been widely decried as an intelligence failure of epic proportions.[35] The evidence, however, is far from compelling. For example, on two occasions – on March 19, 2003 and again on July 16, 2023 – Brigadier General Amit Saar, then-director of IDF Military Intelligence Research, warned Prime Minister Netanyahu in writing that Israel's internal political divisions and acute polarization were emboldening the country's most implacable enemies – Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas – to provoke some new crisis either independently or in cooperation with one another. Both letters presciently mapped the situation that Israel actually finds itself in today. Accordingly, they are worth quoting at length. "The view from over there – how is Israel perceived in the [regional] system?" Saar began the March 2023 letter.

All across in the systems indicate that Israel is in a blistering, unprecedented crisis threatening its cohesion and weakening it for our main enemies, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas. This weakness is an expression of a process ending in the collapse of Israel, and the current situation is an opportunity to accelerate and deepen its distress. . . . We are seeing deliberation on whether to sit on the fence and let Israel continue to weaken itself, or to take initiative and worsen its situation.

Added to this is an estimate that American and European support for Israel is eroding in a manner that reduces its ability to deal with a broad security crisis.

An opportunity has been identified to create the perfect storm, internal crisis, broad escalation in the Palestinian arena and challenges from other areas, which would create continual multidimensional pressure. To our understanding, this insight is the foundation of Hamas' high motivation to execute attacks. . . at the present time, and it also spurs Iran to increase efforts by its proxies to advance attacks against Israel.[36]

Saar doubled down on his previous assessment in the July 2023 letter. "The worsening crisis is intensifying the erosion of Israel's image," he stated, worsening the damage to Israeli deterrence and increasing the probability of escalation. . .

For our enemies, with emphasis on the Iranian regime and Hezbollah, this wasn't just a situation assessment, but the practical fulfillment of their basic worldview – Israel is a foreign implant, a weak, divided society that will ultimately disappear.[37]

Nor was Saar the only voice in Israeli military intelligence raising the alarm. The *tatzpitaniyot* – "look-outs" in Hebrew – the IDF's mostly female border surveillance force, had repeatedly reported signs of attack preparations by Hamas. Stationed at a military surveillance post in Kibbutz Nahal Oz, located just 4.3 miles from the border,[38] these soldiers were at an ideal vantage point to provide ground truth to their chain of command. But their warnings were curtly dismissed by a senior IDF intelligence officer who, while praising their work, reportedly termed their assessment "imaginary."[39] Twenty *tatzpitaniyot* tragically lost their lives that day and at least a half dozen were taken hostage. "It's infuriating," a surviving member recalled. "We saw what was happening, we told them about it, and we were the ones who were murdered."[40]

"The knowledge that intelligence can be wrong is useful for shifting blame onto the assessments and convenient in rationalizing the rejection of them when they clash with desired policies," the late Professor Robert Jervis wrote in his 2010 book examining the reasons behind the failures of United States intelligence to anticipate the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and understand that Saddam Hussein was bluffing about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs prior to the 2003 invasion.[41] With terrorism it is often less faulty intelligence than neglect or even outright dismissal by decisionmakers and political leaders. Perhaps the most consequential exemplar of this lamentable proclivity was detailed in the chapter of the *9/11 Commission Report* titled, "The System Was Blinking Red." It contains a redacted version of the analysis presented in the August 6, 2001 Presidential Daily Brief (PDB) titled, "Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in US."[42]

This was the 36th time in 2001 alone that the PDB had highlighted the threat from Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda and significantly the first to call attention to the danger of an attack in the United States. But lacking a specific target or date, and coming on the heels of a long succession of such threat reporting, President George W. Bush told committee investigators that he considered the new information more "historical in nature" than current – much less imminent – and hence not of any immediate concern.[43] This pathology, it should be noted, is not unique to the United States or Israel. In 1995, for instance, the French government failed to heed its intelligence service's warning of an impending, escalated campaign of terrorism in that country by Algerian terrorists.[44]

Simply cautioning decisionmakers to take intelligence warnings more seriously – especially regarding terrorism – is nonetheless not a straightforward admonition. "To the extent that good intelligence will remain open to alternative interpretations and sensitive to discrepant information," Jervis explains, "it will be problematic for political leaders."[45] This point is reflected in the title of another book about the challenges of obtaining good intelligence in an era of information saturation, if not overload. Veteran intelligence officers, Bruce Berkowitz and Allan Goodman, detail the challenges of making sense of intelligence coming from a multiplicity of sources and platforms. "We also know today that, in many cases, the truth is simply unknowable," they explain, "and the future depends on 'unknown unknowns'," in the memorable words of former secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld. "In these cases," Berkowitz and Goodman continue, "policy must be made in an environment of uncertainty. Decisions depend more on judgment calls than on simple facts"[46] – a judgment call in the case of the October 7th attacks that not only was patently wrong but had profoundly tragic consequences.

Indeed, the barbarity of the now well-documented assault – including accounts of torture, rape, desecration of corpses,[47] and even reported necrophilia[48] – demonstrates how "ultra-violence" has become a prominent fixture of terrorist operations over the past decade. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) arguably changed the nature of terrorism with its unbridled visual depictions of particularly gruesome executions and other wanton acts of violence. It quickly learned that videos of these atrocities simultaneously galvanized the world's attention and attracted recruits,

donations, and support.[49] "Ultraviolence," as terrorism scholars Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger term this phenomenon, "sold well with the target demographic for foreign fighters – angry, maladjusted young men whose blood stirred at images of grisly beheadings and the crucifixion of so-called apostates."[50] Hence, what may previously have proven repellent was instead generating voluminous "likes" on social media and effectively publicizing the group's existence and cause. It was also a means to thoroughly terrorize ISIS's enemies – most especially through its wanton targeting of women and attendant rape and sexual enslavement.[51] It is therefore perhaps not entirely surprising that Israeli soldiers found an ISIS flag on the body of a Hamas terrorist killed in combat at the Sufa kibbutz.[52]

Hamas was in fact similarly intent on publicizing their depredations[53] – and ensured that they were able to do so in real time. Just hours before the attack, the IDF detected the simultaneous activation of about 1,000 Israeli SIM cards in Gaza.[54] By switching out the Palestinian tele-communications SIM cards in their mobile phones for Israeli ones, Hamas fighters intended to literally terrorize Israeli viewers by live-streaming videos of their attack as a weapon of psychological warfare. With the terrorists' connectivity ensured, they were also able to trumpet their triumphal bloodletting to Palestinians across Gaza and the West Bank. Accordingly, in the midst of the attack, one terrorist was able to phone his parents in Gaza to boast of his killing prowess. "Dad I'm calling you from the phone of a Jew! I just killed her and her husband. Look how many I killed with my own hands!" he exclaimed. "Your son killed Jews! Mom, your son is a hero." "I wish I was with you," his mother approvingly replied.[55] In addition, as Professors Gabriel Weimann and Dana Weimann-Saks note of this dimension of "Operation Al- Aqsa Flood," it "allowed the terrorists to connect to Israeli networks during the attacks and use the phone to record the massacre and destruction, upload the visuals to Hamas sites and social media and to improve their ability to communicate with each other while carrying out the attack."[56]

Hamas, however, completely denies the deliberate targeting of civilians by its fighters. In a 16-page report, titled, "Our Narrative," which the terrorist group released on January 21, 2024, it admitted that "maybe some faults happened" in the attack but claimed that avoiding civilian casualties "is a religious and moral commitment" undertaken by all its fighters. "If there was any case of targeting civilians," the Hamas report fatuously maintains, "it happened accidentally and in the course of the confrontation with the occupation forces." Their position is that the civilian fatalities were actually caused by "the Israeli army and police due to their confusion."[57]

Looking towards the future, one of two big questions is whether Brig. Gen. Saar's assessment that Israel's principal enemies in Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran seeing the Jewish state as "a foreign implant, a weak, divided society that will ultimately disappear" may inspire future attacks along the lines of October 7th – this time by all three of Israel's preeminent enemies. The answer is hardly assuring. For nearly a quarter of a century Hezbollah's leader, Nasrallah Hassan, who was killed in September 2024, has argued that, while Israel is still a formidable military power, as a society it has become materialistic and lazy; its citizens self-satisfied, comfortable and pampered to the point where they have gone soft. Known as the "spider-web**"** theory, in reference to a verse from the Koran, titled *al-'Ankabut*, that describes "the most fragile of houses is the spider's house,"[58] this theory was first articulated by Nasrallah at a celebration on May 25, 2000, of Hezbollah's nearly two decades-long successful struggle to liberate southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation. Nasrallah declared that Hezbollah had now showed Israel to be "weaker than a spider's web."[59]

According to this rationale, then-IDF Chief of Staff Moshe "Bogie" Ya'alon, explained in an interview published in *Haaretz* in August 2002: "The Israeli army is strong, Israel has technological superiority and is said to have strategic capabilities, but its citizens are unwilling any longer to sacrifice lives in order to defend their national interests and national goals. Therefore, Israel is a spider-web society: it looks strong from the outside, but touch it and it will fall apart."[60] Nasrallah repeated this comparison in 2007;[61] and again in 2011;[62] once more in 2019;[63] and, most recently a month after the October 7th attacks. Commenting on "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood," he declared

that, "Israel has revealed itself to be a weak state, as fragile as a spider web, and it needs American and Western support. Otherwise, why would the US navy send an aircraft carrier shortly after the October 7 attack? Why else would Biden visit Israel, alongside numerous American government secretaries, the military top brass and European leaders?"[64] This analysis is also applied by Hezbollah as well as Hamas and Iran not only to Israel but to the United States and the West, as well. It was in fact highlighted in the "Day Of Resistance Toolkit" distributed in the United States by the National Students for Justice in Palestine in advance of the protests scheduled for October 12, 2023 – just five days after the Hamas and PIJ attack. "Israel is fragile," the document declares, claiming that, "Setters [Israelis] are already fleeing the land, their 'dedication' to the settler colony is easily broken."[65]

Meanwhile, terrorism today is increasingly legitimized in the United States and Europe as global opprobrium towards Israel grows. An opinion survey conducted at the end of October 2023, for instance, revealed that nearly two-thirds of 18 to 24 year-olds in the United States – Israel's staunchest ally – believe that the Hamas attacks "can be justified by the grievance of Palestinians." Moreover, over two-thirds of respondents agreed with the statement that "Jews as a class are oppressors and should be treated as oppressors."[66] A subsequent poll from April 2024 similarly found that one-third of American voters age 18 to 24 believe that Israel does not have a right to exist.[67]

The second question concerns the longer-term impact of the October 7th attacks and Gaza War for the Palestinian and Israeli people themselves. In this context, is there in fact a viable political solution to this conflict? At least a dozen commissions searched for an answer to this question during the period of British rule of Palestine between 1917 and 1948. They considered every possible solution and permutation but rejected them all – except for partition – creating separate Arab and Jewish states. This was also the conclusion reached by the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine in September 1947 and of the General Assembly when it voted in November 1947 in favor of the establishment of the state of Israel.

But is the two-state solution still tenable now – after months of relentless bloodletting and an astonishingly loss of life? Can Hamas' strategy, as articulated by al-Arouri, "to keep Palestinians radicalized [and] angry" ever be reversed given the tens of thousands of Palestinians killed by Israel in its determination to destroy that terrorist organization? And, what about the two-thirds of Israelis who now oppose a Palestinian state given the events of October 7th – and the 71 % who believe terrorist attacks on Israel would either continue or even increase as a result of the creation of a Palestinian state?[68] Indeed, the question that looms over all others is whether the long elusive "moment for peace" – that Hamas has worked to deprive the Palestinian people of – can still be found and used to end the violence that has raged for too long?

NOTES

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REFLECTING ON THE LEBANESE HEZBOLLAH-IRAN RELATIONSHIP

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Since its creation in the early 1980s, Lebanese Hezbollah has been regularly referred, both in its positions and in its actions, to the special ties it maintains with two countries, who stand as some of the major Middle East's powers: The Assad family's Syria, and revolutionary, Islamic Iran. The civil war in Syria since the early 2010s reduced Damascus's external influence and moved the focus of Hezbollah's regional sponsorship exclusively to Tehran. According to domestic but also, regional and international perceptions, the Lebanese organization is more than ever dependent on and subservient to Iran.

Indeed, the links observed between Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias as early as the mid-2000s have been interpreted by some as an expansion of Iran's sphere of intervention in the Middle East. In the same vein, the organization's acquaintances with the Yemeni Houthis since the middle of the 2010s led many observers to stop mocking the notion of a "Shiite Crescent" that King Abdullah II of Jordan had modeled, as early as 2004, as a growing threat to stability in the region[1]. Finally, Hezbollah's decision to lend a helping hand to Hamas in the event of the resumption of large-scale hostilities between Israelis and Palestinians in October 2023 reinforced, in the eyes of many experts, this reading of an Iranian-led militia whose strategies respond above all to the needs of its regional sponsor.

Hence, Hezbollah appears in this configuration as a prime engine in the expansion of Iran's projection in the Middle East, an indispensable element of it, as if Iran had become as dependent on its *protégé* as the latter is on its mentor. If this reading is pertinent, is it extravagant to suggest that Hezbollah has become an indicator of Iran's expanding sphere of intervention and its ideological and strategic impact in the region? Or is the Iranian-Lebanese couple less schematic, more conditional and more fluid than it seems?

LEBANESE HEZBOLLAH, "*SON OF IRAN*"? [2]

To speak of "Iran's action in the Middle East" requires some clarification of the concepts involved. To begin with, "Iran", understood as a sovereign political authority, is organized around several strongholds of power. Within the regime itself, there are competing forces with representations and priorities that may not always be aligned[3]. As a reminder, there is no post of Prime Minister in Iran, and the President heads the cabinet himself. At the same time, another authority sits at the summit of the State, that of the Guide of the Revolution, whose role is to determine the main principles of secular policy, without usually bothering with strategic translations, let alone implementation methods. The armed forces take three forms: the regular army inherited from the deposed monarchy of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and whose loyalty the 1979 Republic was not sure of; the Bassij, mobilized to defend the interests of the Revolution internally; and the Pasdaran, defenders of the Republic against external threats. These last two institutions, created by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, depend above all on the Guide, much more than they answer to the President.

This socio-historical distinction is important for two reasons. The first is that it enabled the Pasdaran in particular, and the Lebanese Hezbollah, to find ground on which to connect. Secondly, it explains the fluctuating relations between Hezbollah and the Iranian political authorities – the President in particular.

HEZBOLLAH, A "MADE IN LEBANON" ORGANIZATION

The invasion by Israel of Lebanon in June 1982 mobilized part of the Shiite militant world around a desire to take up arms against the invader. However, this aspiration led to the creation of a military organization based in the north-east of the country: the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon (IRL). The latter's main founders, Subhi al-Tufayli and Abbas al-Musawi, who would later become Hezbollah's first and second Secretaries General (in 1989-1991 and 1991-1992 respectively), were both clerics who had already been involved in militant action for several years, with the priority remaining the fight against Israel. When the invasion came, al-Tufayli took advantage of his Iranian connections to set up the IRL and obtain logistical, financial and organizational support from the Iranian Pasdaran.

At this point, it's important to point out that Tufayli and Musawi's first call for help was not answered by Ayatollah Khomeini. The latter in fact opposed the idea of sending troops to Lebanon, in an obsession not to disperse Iranian efforts then focused on the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani, President of the Assembly, was of the same opinion, believing that the Israeli army was too powerful to be defeated. It took the intervention of Ali-Akbar Muhtashemi-Pur, Iran's ambassador to Syria and a personal friend of Tufayli's, to get the Ayatollah to send a few hundred (500-1,500, according to sources) Pasdaran troops to the Bekaa, for educational purposes only. The Pasdaran thus limited their contribution to the creation of the IRL to weapons training and organizational know-how.

During the first few months, a small structure flanked by embryonic social mobilization institutions soon formed the IRL's civilian counterpart. Its name was finally decided in the spring of 1984: Hezbollah. Officially dedicated to defending the social and political interests of the Resistance, it was tasked with mobilizing on its behalf and defusing any threats that arose on the domestic scene. Relations between the Islamic Resistance and Hezbollah always hinged on the complementarity of their functions: the former is responsible for the military struggle against the occupier, while the latter ensures the necessary conditions within Lebanese society and the political class to carry out this mission. The strategies that both IRL and Hezbollah have developed over the years have never escaped this original logic.

What the members of the IRL/Hezbollah duo have in common is their shared adherence to the two principles that make up the organization's ideological identity: serving the interests of the IRL above all other objectives, and abiding by the principle of the *Wilayat al-Faqih*, a hierarchical link that officially places it in the orbit of Iranian regional influence.[4]

WILAYAT AL-FAQIH: PRACTICAL SIMPLICITY DESPITE THEORETICAL COMPLEXITY

Wilayat al-Faqih, literally, the Government of the Jurisconsult, is a Shiite dogmatic principle, often presented as religious in essence, yet quintessentially political, and is usually considered to be the very nature of the link between Hezbollah and the Iranian regime. On paper, it places any organization or individual claiming obedience to it under the authority of the Waliy, the Jursiconsult, embodied since 1979 by the Guide of the Iranian Revolution (Ruhollah Khomeini 1979-1989, Ali Khamenei since). In reality, however, the links between Hezbollah and the Waliy turn out not to be as institutionalized as they may seem. Beyond the obedience it implies to the Iranian Guide of the Revolution, the principle is not univocal. As the Iranian regime sees it, the nature of the support it is ready to offer Hezbollah depends on the specific evolutions of both Iranian and Lebanese politics, just as it relies on personal affinities between Iranian and Hezbollah officials.

Hence, the possible modes of carrying out the *jihad* against Israel come under the responsibility of the IRL leadership. That role distribution between the *Waliy* and the IRL/Hezbollah duo provides the organization with a strong autonomy when it comes to applying on the field the general

principles defined by the Guide. In practice, Hezbollah addresses him only on its initiative and whenever it needs a clerical permission that would provide the legal *Shari'a* (Islamic law) grounds for executing or ceasing from certain actions[5].

It remains difficult to estimate how much Hezbollah's adherence to the *Wilayat al-Faqih* principle influences its decision-making process. In the case of the 2006 "Truthful Pledge" operation (which led to a full blown 33-days-long war with Israel), or the IRL's intervention in the Syrian war (2013 onwards), it seems reasonable to assume that approval must have initially been given by Ayatollah Khamenei in each case. But the IRL as probably must have been left to choose the suitable moment to launch its initiatives and to deal with the operational details.

HEZBOLLAH FACING THE EVOLUTION OF IRANIAN POLITICS

For Hezbollah, a clear difference stands between the Jurisconsult's authority and that of the Iranian State (President or the government). According to Hezbollah's leadership, "there is no connection between the internal administration of the Iranian State and Hezbollah's administration. These are two separate issues, each having its particularities and bodies of administration despite the commitment of both to the commands and directions of the Jurisconsult"[6]. In other words, the Iranian Administration would have no right to comment on the way Hezbollah intends to interpret these principles.

When Khomeini was alive, the Iranian authorities actually paid relatively little attention to Hezbollah and preferred to direct their concern to their war against Iraq[7]. After Khomeini's death and Ali Hashemi Rafsandjani's accession to the Iranian presidency in 1989, the latter wished to see the Iranian national interest prevail over an "exportation of the Revolution" and to have a normalized relationship with the West, which was reflected by him drastically cutting Iran's support to Hezbollah. The organization was explicitly urged to become "a political party, just like others" in Lebanon[8].

During the second half of the 1990s, the links between Hezbollah and the Guide strengthened thanks to the choice made by the organization's leadership to see in Khamenei their *marja'* (cleric of reference), but were not accompanied by a reinforcement of the relationship between the organization and the Iranian President. During his two mandates (1997-2001 and 2001-2005), reformist President Mohammad Khatami worked on establishing contacts with other political actors in Lebanon, thus tuning down the Iranian exclusive relationship with Hezbollah.

It was not before 2006 that the Iranian presidency got interested in the IRL's combative capabilities. A year earlier, Mahmud Ahmadinejad was elected head of the Iranian State. He was a former Pasdaran himself. From then on, an ideological convergence between the President, the Guide of the Revolution, and Hezbollah's leaders dominated. Contrary to his two predecessors, Ahmadinejad wanted to portray Iran as a symbol of the struggle against the United States and Israel. In the history of Hezbollah's relationship with the Iranian regime, the year 2006 therefore marks the merger of the Iranian President into a "*Hezbollah-Iranian Holy Trinity*".

THE GUIDE-PRESIDENT-HEZBOLLAH "HOLY TRINITY": IMPACT OF THE SUMMER 2006 WAR

Resolution 1701, passed on August 12, 2006 strengthened UNIFIL's action plan in South-Lebanon. Three countries – France, Italy and Germany – confirmed their participation in the reinforced UNIFIL only after they obtained explicit guarantees from Hezbollah and Iran concerning their troops' security. The French government, in particular, did not wish a reoccurrence of the tragedy of October 1983[9]. Khamenei himself sent a warning when he announced that "*any attempt to attack [Hezbollah], whether from Zionists [Israel] or miserable agents of the Great Satan [USA], will be fought*

back by the Islamic world"[10]. UNIFIL's vulnerability provided Iran with extra means of pressure in its negotiations with the international community over its nuclear projects. At the end of July, Resolution 1696 was passed; it demanded that the Iranian State suspend its uranium enrichment activities by August 31, 2006, or face international sanctions. Mahmud Ahmadinejad replied by establishing a link between the summer war of 2006 and the Iranian nuclear file, and invited the international community to learn the appropriate lessons from the war[11]. A message well understood by Washington DC: in early May 2007, the US State Department officially announced that it "*preferred a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue*"[12]. Eventually, while the George W. Bush administration thought all 2005 long of launching a preemptive attack on Iran, they decided to respond positively to the Iranian invitation for bilateral talks on Iraq, something the American administration had till then always refused.

In other words, the positive fallout from Israel's war against Lebanon in the summer of 2006 confirmed the validity of the Iranian regime's new gamble in the combative skills of the IRL. The 'Guide-President-Hezbollah Trinity Connection' established, ties strengthened between the IRL and the Pasdaran and aligned the visions of the two major poles of political authority in Iran.

LIBERATING THE PASDARAN-IRL COUPLE: IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN WAR

Lebanon, Hezbollah's home country, went through 15 years of civil war from 1975-1990, themselves followed by 15 years of Syrian *tutelage* and authority for 15 years, from 1990-2005. Until 2005, the Syrian fatcor played a major role in determining the degree of cooperation between Hezbollah and Tehran. Between 1982, year when the IRL was created, and 2005, when the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon, both the Iranian regime and Hezbollah never succeeded in ignoring the Syrian role in the Middle Eastern game – and within their own relationship.

THE SYRIAN CONSTRAINT

As far as Lebanese domestic politics is concerned, *Wilayat al-Faqih* gives only "general orientations" from which Hezbollah is supposed to take inspiration to manage its everyday affairs. It is indeed worth noticing that the different political authority centers in Iran have never meddled in Lebano-Lebanese politics: Iran's resort to Hezbollah's services concern military, regional dossiers, while internal affairs in the country of Iran's *protégé* seem in comparison to trigger a next-to-zero level of interest from the Iranian authorities.

A contrario, the Syrian regime has always taken a hands-on approach in shaping the manner in which Hezbollah envisions its participation in Lebanese politics, or even its actions against Israel. Syrian authority in Lebanon, concerned with preventing any local group from reaching self-autonomy, has regularly blocked Hezbollah's political aspirations, even when the organization benefited from direct Iranian support. For instance, when the Syrian regime decided in February 1987 to re-establish its authority on the southern suburbs of Beirut, the Syrian army did not hesitate to gun down 23 Hezbollah members, while the Iranian regime, anxious with preserving its own alliance with Syria, could do nothing to defend them. In 1992, along with participating in the first post-war legislative elections, Hezbollah planned to enter the Lebanese government. However, despite the move having the support of political and religious authorities in Iran, the Syrian regime kept vetoing it.

MUTATING INTO A FULL PARTNERSHIP

The departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon, following the end of Damascus' tutelage over the country in 2005, relieved much of the pressure that the Assad regime had imposed on Lebanese political players on their internal scene – including Hezbollah. However, the end of the tutelage

did not really alter the dynamics of Syrian "parasitism" within the Hezbollah-Iran connection. The real change came with the significant investment of IRL troops in Syria from the spring of 2013, alongside the regular Syrian army. The effectiveness of the Lebanese fighters gradually put Bashar al-Assad back in the saddle, removing the possibility of the fall of his regime. The support of the Russian military air force, from autumn 2015 onwards, helped the Assad family preserve their political and institutional gains – but it must be kept in mind that the great winner of this overthrow is above all the IRL itself. A fact that earns the IRL two major benefits.

Firstly, within the Lebanese-Iranian couple, the relationship was finally capable of moving away from a hierarchical setup towards a partnership between players of a quasi-similar level. Whereas the Iranian Pasdaran are involved in the Syrian conflict as advisors and strategists, the men fighting on the ground, taking most of the vital risks, remain the Lebanese fighters. They became indispensable, irreplaceable, as the Iranian authorities refused to risk the lives of their troops. Second, and more importantly, Lebanese fighters became a valuable asset to the Iranian military force, with their knowledge of combat techniques learned, tested and perfected in the field. Nowadays, it is the IRL's high-ranking officers who train cadets in the Pasdaran's military schools in Iran[13]. Indeed, in the 2010s, the time is long gone when the Pasdaran trained the IRL based on their combat experience against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. While the IRL fighters of the first cohorts perfected their skills and sense of strategy through face-to-face encounters with the Israeli army between 1982 and 2000, then in 2006, and with various opposition groups in Syria since 2013, the Pasdaran have not practiced full-scale armed combat since 1988, at the end of the conflict with Iraq.

A perception shared in Syria in the 2010s was that Bashar al-Assad owed his victories solely to the participation of the IRL. Above all, it shows that, although observers and experts were then divided in their analyses as to the identity of the "real victor" behind Bashar al-Assad being put back in the saddle (Syria? Iran? Russia?), the players on the ground made no mistake: the Syrian civil war made the IRL, a non-state organization, a player of the same stature as regular armies engaged in the conflict, and a partner to be addressed on the same terms.

The Syrian civil war did strengthen the IRL's position by making it a partner of Iran in its own right[14]. It has to be said that to some extent, Iran in the early 2020s needs the IRL as much as the IRL needs Iran. And the institutional format of the IRL/Hezbollah duo, namely the fact that it is not a regular army in its own right or an extension of a state authority, is in no way a hindrance to those concerned.

TESTING 'THE RESISTANCE AXIS': THE 2023-2024 GAZA WAR

The resumption of large-scale, armed conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in the autumn of 2023 revealed in several ways how *Mihwar al-Muqawamah*, the 'Axis of Resistance' – a term self-assigned by the strategic alliance built around the Pasdaran at regional level – operates. *Mihwar al-Muqawamah*, thought of in the West as a network of players serving Iranian regional interests, which *a priori* includes Iranian Pasdarans, the Syrian regime, Lebanese Hezbollah/IRL, Yemeni Houthis, Iraqi Shiite militias, Afghani Shiite and Bahraini opposition groups, seems in practice to be far from being as structured and binding as an institutionalized official military alliance (of the NATO type, for example). As the noticeable "absence" of the Syrian regime in the conflict indicates, an attack against one of the members of this "axis" obviously does not seem to necessarily elicit intervention from the other members.

Undeniably, the narrative of Hamas's decision to launch the "*Rising Tide for Jerusalem*" operation (trigger for the conflict) being taken from Beirut, after planning it with high-ranking Iranian and Hezbollah officials, followed by the intervention of the IRL as early as the day after the Palestinian initiative in support of Gaza, led to various interpretations on the degree to which Levantine

Arab interests (Palestinian, Lebanese) are subjugated to Iran's regional aims[15]. Observation on the ground allows us to draw some preliminary nuanced conclusions based on facts.

In particular, despite the brutal retaliation of the Israeli army in Lebanon for a year round, and then Tel-Aviv's decision to launch a full-blown war on this country starting September 2024, the IRL undoubtedly worked to prevent any escalation that would be devastating for its home country. The Hezbollah leadership's support for the Palestinian cause was never without reservations. In their eyes, it would have been an strategic *faux pas* to burden with massive destruction a population severely hit since 2019 by an unprecedented socio-economic crisis. Hezbollah did not wish to damage its popularity, or be accused, as it was in 2006, of being behind the tragedy caused by Israeli action on Lebanese territory. Beyond these contextual considerations, Hezbollah had also not forgotten the position of the Lebanese population as a whole with regard to the Palestinian cause. Certain Palestinian groups, which settled in Lebanon in the 1980s, then took advantage of their hosts' hospitality and, above all, of the 1969 Cairo Agreement, to set up a "state within a state" in southern Lebanon. The population of this predominantly Shiite area suffered as a result – and 40 years later, those bitter days are not yet completely forgotten/forgiven.

For Hezbollah, participation in *Mihwar al-Muqawamah* alongside Iran must obviously not exceed certain red lines defined by Lebanese national imperatives. A condition that the Iranian regime seems to have taken note of: on the night of April 13 to 14, 2024, as part of the Iranian response to the destruction of its Consulate in Damascus by Israel, the Iranian regime clearly did not request a massive intervention on its side from its Lebanese ally, who refrained from making the escalation choice at the Israeli-Lebanese border.

In the same logic, the assassination in September 2024 of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary General, by the Israeli army triggered only a relatively lukewarm response from Tehran against Tel-Aviv. Iran's "punitive" action on the following October 1, limited in scope and impact, and announced in advance, also indicated that Iran had no intention of jeopardizing the integrity of its territory to avenge its *protégé* to the scale that the latter's followers had come to expect. Undeniably, *Mihwar al-Muqawamah* remains a network where the interests of participants are prioritized according to each party's priorities.

NOTES

1 *The Washington Post*, 12/08/2004: "Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran. Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State". On the notion of the "Shiite crescent" approached by academia, see among others a commentary by Laurence Louër: « Déconstruire le croissant chiite », in *Revue internationale et stratégique*, n.76, April 2009, pp.45-54.

2 Christophe Ayad summarizing the content of his book *Géopolitique du Hezbollah* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2024): « Christophe Ayad, grand reporter : Le Hezbollah est le fils de l'Iran », France24, YouTube, 04/03/2024.

3 Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, Washington DC, WINEP, 2002.

4 Cf. infra.

5 For more on *Wilayat al-Faqih* in the Hezbollah case, see Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah. Mobilization and Power*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, chapter 5.

6 Naim Qassem, *Hezbollah: la voie, l'expérience, l'avenir*, Beirut: Dar Albouraq, 2008, p. 57.

7 In June 1982, Khomeini decided to send two battalions of the Iranian army to support the Lebanese Shiite Islamists against the Israeli invasion. However, the Syrian authorities refused to let them enter the Lebanese territory and the Iranian battalions were repatriated as soon as early July, after Ali Hashemi Rafsandjani and Ahmad Khomeini – Ayatollah Khomeini's son – had estimated that the Israeli success was too complete for the Iranian forces to be able to do something about it. In a famous sentence, Ayatollah Khomeini himself gave up his first project to export the Revolution to Lebanon: "The road to Jerusalem goes through Karbala".

8 Houchang CHEHABI, "Iran and Lebanon in the Revolutionary Decade", in Chehabi, Houchang E. (ed.), *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2006, p. 228.

9 In October 1983, a suicide bombing against the US Marines barracks in Beirut killed 241 people; at the same time, a second bombing against the barracks of the French paratroopers killed 58 people. Responsibility for those bombings was claimed by a then unknown organisation, *Islamic Jihad*, later considered by western analysts as an organisation used as a cover by Hezbollah. For more details on the listing of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization by western governments in the 1980s and 1990s, see: Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah Born with a Vengeance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, as well as Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'Allah in Lebanon*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1997.

10 *Al-Safir*, 10/14/06.

11 According to Ahmadinejad, the Israeli offensive has "influenced" the way the Iranian authorities received the western proposal for a negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue. *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 07/31/2006.

12 *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 05/03/2007.

13 Interviews by author with Hezbollah high-ranked officials, autumn 2015, 2016.

14 On this matter, and the way to understand the metamorphosis of the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah since the Civil War in Syria, see the article by Amal Saad, *Challenging the Sponsor-Proxy Model: The Iran–Hizbullah Relationship*, Global Discourse, 9(4), November 2019, pp. 627-650.

15 Think tanker Michael Young (Carnegie Middle East Center) speaks of "Teheran's Hostile Takeover of the Palestinian Cause", *L'Orient Le Jour*, 10/10/2023.

HAMAS, ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN & ISLAMIST VIOLENCE – WHAT'S NEW? A THREAT ASSESSMENT FOR THE WEST

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INTRODUCTION

The most defining characteristic of the terrorism threat facing the West is its diversity across diffuse locales stretching from West Africa to Southeast Asia.[1] Even as new threats emerge, others stubbornly persist. As an organization, Al-Qaeda has been attenuated, but it remains highly disaggregated, and some of its branches have decided to focus on hyper-localization, cultivating grassroots efforts in parts of Syria, Yemen, and Mali to garner political support from local clans and tribes. Recent actions have seen the Houthis in Yemen tacitly cooperating with al-Shabaab in Somalia and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, a troubling trend. The Islamic State has faced myriad ups and downs over the past several years, with a string of successive leaders killed before they ever made an official statement to the group's followers. But despite significant progress in mitigating the threat posed by these organizations, Western countries cannot afford to be complacent, especially when it comes to the Islamic State's Afghan affiliate, Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K). The Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, should serve as a sobering reminder of the ubiquitous threat posed by a range of Islamist groups and even as the United States and its allies focus on great power competition, transnational terrorism remains an evolving threat.

Overall, October 7th has forced the counterterrorism community writ large to reinterrogate prior assumptions, leading to a broader reckoning about the global jihadist threat, including a reassessment of al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their respective franchise groups, geographic branches, and affiliates. Shortly after the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States embarked upon the so-called Global War on Terrorism, waging a worldwide counterterrorism campaign against Salafi-jihadist groups. Now, with both al-Qaeda and ISIS in varying states of disarray, there is a possibility that Iranian-sponsored terrorism could vault to the top of the agenda for the foreseeable future.

This chapter will provide an overview of the terrorist threat landscape in 2024, taking stock of jihadist groups while also evaluating Western counterterrorism efforts and where the situation may be heading next. As the U.S., UK, and other Western countries continue to focus on great power competition with China and Russia, there has been a tacit acknowledgment that counterterrorism resources are being stretched thin. Thus, this chapter analyzes the threat posed by organizations like Hamas, Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K), and other Islamist actors to the West and how these threats may evolve over time.

HAMAS

The Hamas attack of 10/7 will be remembered not just for its extreme brutality but also as a watershed moment in counterterrorism. The much-vaunted Israeli intelligence service – Mossad – often thought to be both omnipotent and omniscient – failed to detect a mounting threat right on Israel's border.[2] The attack itself killed more than 1,200 Israelis and stands as the single deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. Few counterterrorism analysts recognized that Hamas had the capabilities to engineer such a sophisticated and lethal attack. Moreover, many in the Israeli political establishment also misjudged Hamas's intentions, believing the group was content with receiving economic assistance and had been properly deterred from engaging in

significant violence. From a counterterrorism perspective, Hamas gained an asymmetric advantage by applying low-tech methods to a high-tech defense, an innovation other violent non-state actors may seek to mimic in the future.

Iran's "axis of resistance" is a proxy network that includes Lebanese Hezbollah, Houthi rebels in Yemen, Iraqi Shia militias including Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat al-Nujaba and others, in addition to Sunni groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).[3] In response to the Hamas attacks of October 7th, Israel invaded Gaza with the stated objective of eradicating Hamas. But even following one year of intensive fighting and more than 43,000 people have been killed in Gaza, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are realizing that the goal of destroying Hamas is likely unfeasible.[4] Furthermore, the IDF's military campaign in Gaza is leading to such catastrophic collateral damage that whatever tactical gains Israel is achieving are being nullified, risking a strategic loss. Israel's ongoing military campaign in Lebanon, which kicked off in earnest in mid-September 2024, also contributes to the overall sense of regional instability, with conflicts raging on multiple fronts.

COULD HAMAS GO GLOBAL?

As Hamas continues to battle the IDF in Gaza – there are growing concerns that the group could evolve into the type of global threat posed by Lebanese Hezbollah.[5] By December 2023, approximately 5,000 Hamas militants had been killed out of 30,000 total fighters.[6] In late January 2024, Israel estimated that it had increased the number of Hamas militants killed, suggesting its forces had eliminated approximately 10,000 Hamas fighters, roughly 30 percent of its overall organization.[7] As of October 6, 2024, nearly a year to the day of the attack that sparked the conflict, Israel claimed that it had killed 17,000 Hamas militants, although some reports suggest the true number is closer to 8,500 fighters.[8] The head of Hamas's military wing, Yahya Sinwar, remained on the lam until mid-October 2024, having relied on the group's labyrinth of underground tunnels to evade capture.[9] He was killed in an ambush by IDF soldiers near Rafah.[10] The IDF also killed other prominent Hamas members, including Mohammed Deif, a high-ranking commander in Hamas's Qassam Brigades, and one of the individuals believed to be behind the planning of the 'Al-Aqsa Flood,' the name Hamas gave to its attack on Israel on October 7th.[11] The Israelis also killed Hamas political bureau leader Ismael Haniyeh with a remotely detonated bomb during a visit he made to Tehran. Yet, even after killing Sinwar, Deif, and Haniyeh, Hamas will continue as a terrorist organization. And there is an increasing risk of Israeli military mission creep in Gaza, a potentially disastrous scenario that would lead to the deaths of many more Palestinian civilians while simultaneously turning global public opinion squarely against the Israelis.[12]

Trained, equipped, and financed by Iran and its elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Hezbollah began as a rag-tag militia in Lebanon in the early 1980s and developed, with Tehran's assistance, into perhaps the most formidable violent non-state actor on the global stage. With Iran more brazen now than at any point in the last several decades, there is a distinct possibility that the regime in Tehran could seek to build Hamas into a similar entity, with cells operating in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia.[13] In December, European law enforcement authorities and security services arrested several individuals believed to be linked to Hamas across Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands. They charged them with planning attacks on Jewish institutions across the continent.[14]

As the conflict drags on, the attack itself and a new phase of the conflict have reverberated beyond the Middle East, as reports of antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents, as well as conflict-related hate speech and mis- and disinformation online, have increased in Europe and elsewhere. In the first two weeks after the October 7 attack, the London Metropolitan Police recorded a 1,353 percent increase in antisemitic offenses and a 140 percent increase in Islamophobic offenses

when compared with the same period the year prior.[15] In Australia, there has been a 591 percent increase in anti-Semitic incidents.[16] Across the United Kingdom, over one thousand antisemitic incidents were reported in the first month after the attack, according to Community Security Trust. An increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic discrimination, vandalism, graffiti, and abusive behavior in schools has also reportedly occurred throughout the country, according to non-profit organizations that monitor antisemitism and Islamophobia.

There have also been a number of incidents across North America and Europe that have been associated with the ongoing conflict in Gaza and the period of instability ushered in by the October 7th attacks. There was an attempted arson at a synagogue in Berlin, Germany[17]; fire damage to the Jewish section of a cemetery in Vienna, Austria[18]; Molotov cocktails thrown at the U.S. Consulate General in Florence, Italy[19]; and several incidents in Canada.[20] Some analysts believe that the ferocity and savage nature of Hamas's attack was explicitly designed to provoke a harsh reaction, not just from Israel, but more broadly.[21] And even though Hamas has been denigrated by jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, labeled as apostates for participating in electoral politics, these same jihadist groups nevertheless used October 7th as an opportunity to galvanize supporters and attract new recruits.[22]

Some may be skeptical about Hamas developing a transnational capability, but given the importance of Iranian sponsorship, the decision to expand beyond the borders of Gaza and the West Bank will also be impacted by Tehran. A global Hamas presence would achieve several things at once – occupying more bandwidth of Western and Israeli counterterrorism services; diversifying the group's funding streams, especially with respect to the so-called "crime-terror nexus;" and constructing a layer of redundancy into the organization so that, despite potential setbacks in the Middle East, the group can retain a global network.

If the conflict with Israel intensifies, Hamas could seek to follow the model of external operations devised by the Islamic State, which was able to develop attack options along several different pillars. First, and the most likely course of action by Hamas, is the use of propaganda and slickly produced social media products to inspire, incite, or spur radicalized individuals in the West (sometimes referred to as homegrown violent extremists) to launch terrorist attacks. Second, Hamas could attempt to replicate the ISIS "virtual plotter model." This is a technique that leverages the availability of encrypted communications to communicate with an individual or individuals outside of the conflict zone, directing the various elements of their attack, an innovation that has "revolutionized jihadist external operations."[23]

Lastly, there is a directed attack, where a terrorist group trains attackers directly and dispatches them to conduct an attack, similar to how the Islamic State leveraged those terrorists that conducted the November 2015 attacks in Paris, France. Since the attacks of October 7, 2023, the threat landscape in the West, but especially in Europe, has shifted and numerous European governments and security services remain on high alert. Triggering events, similar to the Quran burnings in Sweden, could be enough to push an individual from rhetoric to action.[24]

ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN (ISIS-K)

Of all the Islamic State's franchise groups, ISIS-K is perhaps the most worrisome in terms of groups that have the potential to rebuild an external attack planning capability. The group has launched multiple terrorist attacks throughout the region, including firing rockets at both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as launching attacks in Iran and Pakistan.[25] ISIS-K has also targeted foreign interests within Afghanistan.[26] In September 2022, an ISIS-K suicide attack struck the Russian Embassy in Kabul, leaving two employees and four Afghan civilians dead.[27] In December 2022, ISIS-K attacked the Pakistani embassy in a failed effort to assassinate Islamabad's chief diplomat.[28] That same month, ISIS-K attacked a hotel in Kabul predominantly frequented by Chinese nationals, demonstrating the group's intent and capabilities to go after foreign targets.[29]

According to terrorism experts Abdul Sayed and Tore Refslund Hamming, ISIS-K is attempting to tap into extremist networks on its periphery, including in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.[30]

But many believe the group has its sights set on attacking the West.[31] Indeed, in her opening statement to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs in October 2023, Christine Abizaid, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), listed ISIS-K as one of the groups that the United States intelligence community is "monitoring closely" with respect to attempts at rebuilding and refocusing efforts to attack the United States.[32] Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover of the country in August 2021, there has been a dearth of intelligence on the capabilities of ISIS-K, a group that has been linked to a growing number of plots in Europe.[33] In one of the most serious plots, in April 2020, German police halted a plan to attack US and NATO military bases in the country. The four Tajik nationals were reported to be in contact with Islamic State officials in Afghanistan and Syria.[34] In February 2023, an ISIS-K plot to attack the FIFA World Cup soccer tournament in Doha, Qatar was foiled, in addition to ISIS-K plots targeting embassies, churches, and business centers that were revealed as part of the Discord leaks.[35] There have also been several plots targeting Türkiye.[36] There is clear intent on the part of the Islamic State's Afghan leadership to construct a robust external attack operations network capable of striking in various regions throughout the world.

In late 2023, three men were arrested in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia over alleged plans to attack the Cologne Cathedral on New Year's Eve. Police say the group planned to use a vehicle in the attack, and one had been taking photos of the site.[37] The arrests were linked to three other terror-related arrests in Austria and one in Germany that took place on December 24, 2023.[38] The four individuals were reportedly acting in support of ISIS-K. In July 2023, Germany and the Netherlands coordinated arrests targeting an ISIS-K-linked network suspected of plotting attacks in Germany.[39] In early January 2024, ISIS-K launched a sophisticated suicide attack in Kerman, Iran, killing 84 people at a commemoration for slain Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani.[40] In March 2024, ISIS-K claimed responsibility for an attack on the Crocus City Hall music venue in Moscow, Russia, an attack that killed over 130 people and injured hundreds more.[41] And in August 2024, authorities disrupted an ISIS-K plot to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna, Austria, a plot that involved the use of chemical weapons.[42] This was one of several disrupted plots in Europe in the summer of 2024. So the capability to launch attacks outside of Afghanistan's borders certainly exists, and given the Taliban's poor track record with counterterrorism, it seems likely that ISIS-K will have the operational space it needs to continue building its global capabilities, a core objective of the organization.[43]

The global jihadist movement is at an inflection point. Both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as their respective affiliates, are jockeying for relevance as the world focuses on Ukraine, Gaza, and several other hotspots around the globe. Given the West's focus on great power competition with China and Russia, there is an opportunity for groups like ISIS-K to rebuild their transnational networks and gain momentum without having the total weight of U.S. and allied counterterrorism bearing down on it. Within Afghanistan, the Taliban remains unable to defeat ISIS-K, and heavy-handed responses merely serve to embolden the group and allow it to recruit new members.

After the United States withdrew its forces from Afghanistan, the Biden administration attempted to assuage those concerned about terrorist groups metastasizing by touting Washington's "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism capability.[44] After all, the administration argued, the U.S. was able to kill longtime al-Qaeda chieftain Ayman al-Zawahiri with a drone strike in Kabul in late July 2022, veritable proof that it could continue to degrade terrorist groups and eliminate their most important leaders.[45] In March 2023, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Michael Kurilla told lawmakers that ISIS-K would be capable of rebuilding its external operations network and eventually focus on attacking U.S. or Western interests abroad.[46] In 2024, ISIS-K is

the most operationally aspirational of all Islamic State branches and is in many ways reminiscent of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the late 2000s, as that group, based in Yemen, relentlessly sought to attack aviation targets on numerous occasions.

Without robust human intelligence networks, the U.S. and its allies are forced to rely almost exclusively on signals intelligence, which, while powerful, is not enough in and of itself to provide a full and clear intelligence picture of how terrorist groups are adapting. As the current rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban are unable to completely defeat ISIS-K, which remains determined to launch strikes beyond Afghanistan's borders. As the Kerman and Moscow attacks demonstrate, it retains the capabilities to do so. Wars in Ukraine and Gaza have also occupied the finite bandwidth of Western intelligence agencies, leaving fewer resources focused on Afghanistan at a time when the threat could be percolating. To be sure, many counterterrorism analysts are ringing the alarm bell, concerned about the blind spot Afghanistan has once again become, with all of the horrific memories of the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001. To be sure, few ISIS-K watchers would be surprised if the group managed to conduct a successful terrorist attack in the West at some point over the next few years, especially with the organization's continued focus on plotting attacks in Europe.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE WEST

Even as groups like Hamas and Hezbollah occupy the bandwidth of policymakers and the media at the moment, it is dangerous to underestimate organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Some scholars, including terrorism expert Daniel Byman, believe that al-Qaeda has suffered a massive "decline in both capabilities and ideological influence."[47] Others, such as Asfandyar Mir, believe that "despite being the most hunted organization in the world, al-Qaeda is able to threaten the U.S. homeland, its broader security interests, and regional stability in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia."[48] My own assessment falls closer to Mir's – despite all of the success in degrading al-Qaeda, I believe it remains too premature to write the group's obituary once and for all.[49] Further, a range of factors or variables could breathe new life into the group and its affiliates.

In a post-10/7 environment, it will be crucial to monitor the evolution of Shia extremism closely. Iran is still seeking revenge for the January 2020 targeted assassination of IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani, killed by a U.S. drone strike while he was visiting Iraq, as well as for the assassination of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. But beyond Shia groups, the attacks of October 7th have also galvanized other Islamist actors, including groups normally critical of Hamas and Hezbollah, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. As the conflict continues, there are also specific incidents that could spur extremists to action. If Israel is accused (credibly or otherwise) of killing or injuring civilians, this could serve as a tripwire for violent attacks against Jewish targets. As images of dead and injured civilians in Gaza and Lebanon continue to appear on social media, it seems highly likely that some jihadist groups will seek to leverage these posts to generate a groundswell of anger, perhaps serving as the impetus for homegrown violent extremist attacks in the West, perpetrated by lone wolves and small cells of jihadist sympathizers. According to FBI Director Christopher Wray, who appeared before the U.S. Senate in late October to offer an assessment of the implications of the Hamas-Israel conflict, "multiple foreign terrorist organizations have called for attacks against Americans and the West", while al-Qaeda "issued its most specific call to attack the United States in the last five years."[50]

More than twenty years after the so-called Global War on Terrorism, the West has reached a crucial pivot point. Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and ongoing tensions in the South China Sea have catapulted Russian revanchism and China's rise to the forefront of the international security agenda. The shift from counterterrorism to great power competition is being felt immensely among Western intelligence agencies, which are attempting to deal with a more diverse array of threats while doing so with much smaller operating budgets and a younger generation of analysts who lack the historical knowledge and expertise gained throughout two

decades of fighting against jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS. And while Western countries have disrupted a number of terrorist plots over the past several years, the threat posed by Salafi-jihadists and militant Islamists has not receded, even as it assumes new forms. After all, as the Provisional Irish Republican Army reminded British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher after nearly killing her in a bombing of a hotel in Brighton in 1984, "You have to be lucky all the time. We only have to be lucky once."[51]

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EXTREME CHILDHOODS: GROWING UP IN RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST AND ISIS-AFFILIATED FAMILIES

Lynn Schneider & Joana Cook

EXTREME CHILDHOODS: GROWING UP IN RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST AND ISIS-AFFILIATED FAMILIES

Lynn Schneider & Joana Cook

Children in families involved in violent extremism (VE) and terrorism are at increased risk of indoctrination by their family members, and may even be coerced into participating in extremist activities.[1] While scholars primarily view these children as victims, numerous media outlets have also framed them as security threats.[2] Studies on children in RWX and VE Islamist environments have generated important information on the intergenerational transmission of violent extremist ideology,[3] children in terrorism-affected conflict zones,[4] and on potential venues for deradicalisation and rehabilitation.[5] However, children's lives and development may be impacted well beyond their potential indoctrination. Scholars have expressed concern about their stigmatisation, emphasising that not all VE parents raise their children in line with their world-view, and that they even hide their extremist identity from their offspring.[6] Moreover, the intergenerational transmission of VE ideology is far from deterministic, and not all children of parents involved in VE or terrorist groups take part in illegitimate activities or can be considered radicalised.[7] These children's experiences and development can be heavily affected by a family member's involvement in VE or terrorism, and interventions that exclusively focus on deradicalisation do not sufficiently account for the adversities that some of them may experience. The well-being of these children remains a key concern for policy makers and practitioners, and a more holistic focus on their living conditions expands the knowledge base needed to support them.

Drawing on data collected as part of the EU-funded PREPARE project,[8] this paper addresses how children's environments and relationships can be affected by parental affiliations with VE and terrorism. Specifically, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (an analytical framework deriving from child development studies; henceforth EST) allows us to chart systematically the similarities and differences in the lived realities of children in RWX and ISIS-affiliated families.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper evaluates how children's interactions in their homes, schools, neighbourhoods, and wider societies are affected by family links to VE and terrorism. Bronfenbrenner's EST maintains that human development is shaped by the social interactions and relationships that children establish in different settings. The socio-ecological system includes five intersecting layers of children's social environment. The *microsystem* encompasses the relationships that children form in their daily life. The *mesosystem* entails the relationships between the individuals in the children's microsystem. The *exosystem* captures relationships and settings that affect children without their direct participation. The *macrosystem* includes the societal norms, cultures and legislation that shape children's circumstances and relationships. Finally, the *chronosystem* captures changes and continuities in children's development over time.[9]

Cook (2024) used Bronfenbrenner to detail the lives of ISIS-affiliated children in Iraq, and highlighted various factors that uniquely impacted Iraqi children's experiences across these five systems.[10] In another paper, Cook and Schneider (2024) relied on EST to develop a set of guiding questions, applied to a single case study of a family who travelled to Syria to join ISIS.[11] This allowed us to demonstrate that family affiliation with a terrorist group can significantly impact a child in a myriad of ways beyond presumed notions of radicalisation. The present paper applies

these guiding questions (Appendix A) to different VE-affiliated families. We assess shared and unique features that impact children raised in right-wing extremist (RWX) families in Germany and children of parents who travelled to Syria and lived under ISIS.[12]

Our findings draw on a triangulation of evidence from literature on neo-Nazi and ISIS-affiliated individuals and their families, and eight qualitative interviews with five German practitioners and experts focused on right-wing extremism (referred to as Participants 1-5); a German family member of three child returnees (Participant 6), a German returnee coordinator (Participant 7), and a member of a NGO who supports the repatriation of ISIS-affiliated children and mothers to Sweden (Participant 8). Furthermore, we relied on notes taken during two international workshops conducted under PREPARE with legal experts, social workers, psychologists, academics, and policy makers concerned with children in VE and terrorist environments (WS Notes). While some of the findings also apply to children of parents who are not directly involved in VE or terrorism, the paper is exclusively concerned with those in families who are verifiably involved in VE or terrorism-related activities (including those with a proven affiliation with proscribed groups or organisations).

The study relies on a qualitative research design intended to capture children's life experiences rather than to draw causal relationships between environmental factors and specific child outcomes (the latter will be addressed in future publications). We are also aware that the experiences of individual children are unique and shaped by complex personal risk and resilience factors. These include age, gender, family constellations, ethnic background, and factors such as physical disabilities and neurodiversity. Key findings presented in this paper do not automatically apply to all children raised in comparable contexts. Finally, while the findings in this paper are not exhaustive, they provide the first examination of both shared and distinct factors that affect the lives of children in RWX and ISIS-affiliated families to date. These insights are particularly useful for academics researching these topics, and practitioners working with VE and terrorism-affected families.

THE EXPERIENCES AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN IN RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST AND ISIS-AFFILIATED FAMILIES

MICROSYSTEM CONSIDERATIONS

This section explores how the relationship between children and their immediate environment is affected by their family's involvement in VE and terrorism. We focus specifically on the impact of VE family affiliations on children's relationship with their parents and other immediate family members, their educational experiences, and their relationship with peers.

The relationship between parents and children

Each parent has a unique relationship with their child, and there is no single type of parenting in VE or terrorism-affiliated families. However, investigations into child rearing practices in VE families have revealed that their children may be subjected to an "instrumentalised" upbringing, which serves the primary aim to prepare them to take part in activities linked to their parents' VE ideology.[13]

This finding is supported by all our interviews with German experts and practitioners focussed on RWX. Research in RWX family settings in rural Germany finds that child-rearing guidebooks published in the Nazi era remain popular among extremist parents.[14] These books instruct parents to raise their children in the belief that German identity is under existential threat. In turn, parents continue to impose on their children the duty to defend their land and culture.[15] Repressive child-rearing methods advocated in these guidebooks are designed to instil

obedience and discipline and to impose soldierly obligations on children. These methods include paramilitary training, corporal punishment, deprivation of love, and other strategies designed to 'toughen up' children,[16] and which are now widely condemned and labelled as 'poisonous pedagogy'.[17] Participants 1-5 all noted that these practices are still frequently observed in RWX-affiliated families.

At the same time, it is important to note that not all RWX parents raise their children in line with their VE ideology. Research on former members of white supremacist groups internationally suggests that children can become decisive reasons for parents to disengage from the scene, and some of those who remain part of RWX groups express no desire to pass on their ideology to their offspring (and even hide their RWX activities from their children). This suggests that parental affiliation with RWX groups and activities does not preclude loving and caring relationships.

Most of the experiences of children taken to or born in Syria are not comparable to those of children raised in RWX or VE Islamist families in Europe. Moreover, like children raised in RWX or domestic VE Islamist families, child returnees do not constitute a homogenous group, and their relationships with their parents are unique and context-dependent. However, there remain some notable similarities. Like children in RWX settings, some ISIS-affiliated children were also instrumentalised for their parents' ideology. Some children of foreign fighters are reported to have been deliberately exposed to violence and deprivation of love to 'toughen them up', as well as being subjected to an authoritarian and punitive upbringing style.[18]

However, the examples of children living under ISIS could go further. While some children in RWX families receive 'para-military' training, a few of those who lived under ISIS were subjected to genuine child soldier training, and in some cases even deployed in armed conflict.[19] This was frequently facilitated by their ISIS-affiliated fathers, but we also found a case in which a mother took her son to Syria and enrolled him as a child soldier without his father's knowledge.[20] In another instance, a mother did not agree with her husband's decision to include her son in weapon training, but supported her partner nonetheless.[21] The relationship between some children and their parents is thus characterised by unparalleled levels of oppression and abuse, designed to instil in them soldierly behaviours and mentalities. At the same time, most children in ISIS-affiliated families were never involved in training and combat,[22] and their experiences fundamentally differed from those of child soldiers.

While women in the Islamic State have assumed several roles, ranging from traditional domestic tasks to the active support, facilitation, and perpetration of terrorist acts,[23] not all mothers shared ISIS' ideology (Participant 7). Some of them were actually able to shield their children from VE exposure and exploitation.[24] Despite the dire conditions in camps, some mothers even demonstrated a remarkable ability to ensure the well-being of their children and established loving relationships (Participant 8).[25]

The separation of children and parents

Children in both RWX and jihadist affiliated families can experience separation from their parents. The removal of children from RWX families on the grounds of child endangerment is highly unusual, and they are more likely to experience separation due to parental imprisonment, or because parents part. Child returnees, on the other hand, are routinely separated from their mothers upon their repatriation for significant lengths of time (Participant 7 and 8), even in cases where the mothers were not prosecuted for terrorism-related offences.[26] These children have also frequently experienced the loss of their fathers prior to returning to their home countries, either because they died or went missing, or because they were separated as a result of detention in Syria or Iraq.[27]

Children, parents, and their extended families

Parental involvement in VE or terrorism may have an impact on children's relationships with their extended family members, with some children being unable to form bonds with non-VE and terrorism-affiliated relatives. RWX parents and their children were less likely to be in contact with extended family members if they do not share their parents' extremist ideology (Participant 1). Similarly, children of ISIS-affiliated parents in Syria and Iraq were often unable to stay in regular contact with their non-VE-affiliated relatives at home (Participant 8). In some cases, these children were exposed to other VE/terrorist family members who also travelled abroad.[28] However, this was not true in all cases and some parents were able to maintain relationships with their parents and siblings. Upon return to their home countries, extended family members were often eager to care for the children, even though not all countries allowed them to assume guardianship or even contact them.[29]

Children, parents, peer groups and neighbourhoods

Children's immediate environment and social contacts can also be directly affected by their parent's ideology. While not all children in RWX families are raised in specific neighbourhoods as a direct result of their parent's ideology, many families affiliated with RWX groups in the so-called 'Völkische Settler movement' – such as the recently banned 'Artgemeinschaft' (which loosely translates into ethnic or racial community) – have settled in rural areas to establish their own RWX communities.[30] Here, children are raised in communities of like-minded families, where exposure to democratically-oriented communities and peer groups is limited (Participant 1 and 2). RWX parents may also proactively determine their children's peer groups, for example by sending them to paramilitary RWX summer camps where they primarily encounter children of other RWX parents.[31]

Children who came to live under ISIS in Syria and Iraq lived in insecure and dangerous neighbourhoods both in cities and in detention camps surrounded by others who shared their parent's ideology. While their environments and physical conditions were very different, children in RWX families in Germany and ISIS-affiliated families in Syria were both often raised in hermetic social conditions (Participant 1, 2, and 7). Many ISIS-affiliated children spent most their time at home and were primarily exposed to peers of other ISIS-affiliated families and to Yezidi slaves kept in their home. In camps, meanwhile, the living conditions are squalid and unsafe, and children have no exposure to individuals on the outside.[32] In one case, three children were even repatriated from an Iraqi prison, where they had been detained together with their mother (Participant 6).

Upon repatriation, children from ISIS-affiliated families are either placed with family members or in foster care settings, which also determines their new neighbourhoods. Relatives of these children usually undergo thorough screenings,[33] so it is unlikely that children are exposed to extremist individuals in their home countries (Participant 7 and 8). How their relationships with peers are affected by their parents' affiliation with ISIS requires deeper investigation. Our interviews suggest that these children may be highly adaptive, but that they are also excluded and stigmatised by neighbours and other parents (Participant 7) and their primary points of contact remain family members such as cousins and siblings (Participant 6).

Educational experiences

Children's education can also be directly affected by their parent's ideology. Growing up in RWX families can strongly impact children's educational experiences. Some of these children experience significant loyalty conflicts upon enrolment in kindergartens and schools (Participant 1, 2, 4). They are often expected to keep their parents' ideology and family activities secret, preventing them from fully participating in their school community.[34] Having been raised with strong depictions

of a perceived 'enemy', some of them also express views and display behaviours that render them outsiders in their schools and bring them into conflict with their peers. For example, parents may also encourage their children to discriminate against ethnic minority peers and to limit interactions with children from non-extremist families (Participant 1, 2, 4).

The education of children in ISIS-affiliated families was also uniquely impacted as a result of living in Syria/Iraq. Some children may have attended schools prior to being taken to the conflict zone, but those born in Syria/Iraq were either enrolled in ISIS-administered schools or did not receive any formal education at all. ISIS schools pursued a curriculum focused on *sharia* education and military training. Even mathematics textbooks contain references to extreme forms of violence, depicting pictures of Kalashnikovs and asking children to calculate how many 'unbelievers' can be killed in a suicide bombing.[35] Although UNICEF supports self-learning classes in al-Hol camp, many of the detained children do not receive any education.[36]

By the time they are repatriated, children from ISIS-affiliated families have significant educational gaps. While many seem to thrive in their new school environment and perform well academically,[37] there is also a wide range of challenges associated with their status as child returnees. To avoid stigmatisation, their guardians may not communicate the children's background with their educators. While this can prevent their securitisation, it can also mean that their needs are not fully supported. Even educators who are aware of their situation and committed to supporting them are not always equipped to do so (Participant 6). More research is necessary to appreciate fully child returnees' educational experiences upon return.

MESOSYSTEM CONSIDERATIONS

The previous section addressed the impact of parental involvement in VE and terrorism on children's immediate environment and relationships. But parents also interact with the individuals and institutions in their children's microsystem. Bronfenbrenner has categorised such interactions as the mesosystem. Despite this conceptual demarcation between micro- and mesosystems, there are significant overlaps. Parents' interactions with each other and with teachers, peers and relatives can strongly affect the relationships between children and these parties. This section analyses how parents' interactions in their children's microsystem may be informed by their VE/terrorist affiliations.

The relationship between parents

A parent's involvement in VE and terrorism can significantly impact the relationship with their partner. Research shows that some RWX parents idealise traditional family structures, and family unity constitutes the basis for RWX settlement projects.[38] However, involvement in VE is also frequently associated with compounding factors such as divorce, substance abuse, and domestic violence.[39] In such cases, children are at risk of living in broken homes. This is particularly likely when partners separate over ideological differences, or when one of them is imprisoned.

Some parents also experienced significant difficulties in their relationships resulting from one or both of their affiliation with ISIS. Some cases record mothers taking their children to ISIS-held territory without their husbands' knowledge.[40] But other women who travelled stated that they were not only deceived into travelling to Syria/Iraq by their husbands, but also emotionally and physically abused.[41] Even though their husbands were in many cases deployed by ISIS and absent for prolonged periods, children also witnessed domestic violence in their presence when they were home.[42] Regardless of the nature of their relationship, foreign fighters and their wives were often separated due to death or imprisonment, particularly of the male partner. Widowed women were expected to remarry,[43] meaning that some children were exposed to their mothers' new ISIS-affiliated husbands.

Relationship between parents and educators

Participants 1–5 all highlighted the complicated and antagonistic relationship between RWX parents and educators. They reported cases where parents had intimidated and threatened teachers for trying to teach their children democratic values, and who tried to exercise control over the curriculum (Participants 1, 2 and 4). They also found low levels of cooperation with teachers when their children have problems in schools (Participants 3 and 5). In order to evade external influence from educators, some RWX parents even tried to set up private education institutions, enrolled their children elsewhere, or illicitly took children out of schools entirely (Participants 1 and 2).

There are only limited accounts of the relationships between teachers and mothers returning from Syria. Some teachers may be overwhelmed when dealing with child returnees and their families, which can negatively impact the children's reintegration (Participant 7). Participant 6 observed constructive relationships between educators and the children's grandparents who were caring for the children. However, more research is required to understand the relationship between educational institutions and returning mothers and other guardians.

EXOSYSTEM CONSIDERATIONS

Children's lives are not only impacted by their own and their parents' engagement with regular contact persons and institutions, but also by parents' relations with other individuals with whom children are not directly involved. For example, parents' employment situation and their relationship with state representatives and the media can impact children's socio-economic circumstances, opportunities, and family life.

Parental occupation and economic situation

In the 2010s, RWX was most prevalent among unemployed and low-income persons in Germany,[44] and involvement in extremist activities leading to prosecution could negatively affect parents' employment and economic situation. However, it is difficult to draw a causal relationship between parental involvement in an extremist organisation and *resulting* economic hardship, and we lack recent statistics on the socio-economic background of members of RWX groups. However, the president of the Thuringian State Office for the Protection of the Constitution points to a substantial and comprehensive financing network for RWX projects and ethnic settlement plans, fuelled by individual contributions such as membership fees and donations and inheritances, as well as sizeable financial support from ultra-conservative businesses.[45] In our workshops, social workers told us about parents affiliated with the RWX Völkische Settler movement who have stable jobs in agriculture or are supported by their communities (WS Notes).

Individuals who travelled to Syria were unable to maintain their jobs at home, and foreign terrorist fighters and their families were temporarily financed by ISIS, including through employment by the terrorist group.[46] Their economic situation drastically declined throughout the war. In some cases, individuals who came to live under ISIS received financial support from their families;[47] some women detained in camps even set up crowdfunding campaigns on social media.[48] While repatriated mothers may receive welfare aid, finding employment and permanent accommodation can be a prerequisite for retaining guardianship, though for many reasons, finding employment can prove very difficult for returnees, particularly those with criminal records.[49]

Relationship with state representatives

Both jihadist and RWX groups reject democratic forms of governance, and VE organisations are usually subjected to increased surveillance and scrutiny. Participants 1, 2 and 4 confirmed that RWX parents often make a conscious effort to evade state interference. German practitioners

also observed that the relative prosperity of many RWX individuals and communities facilitates such evasion. Not only are these individuals independent of welfare support, but they also have the necessary resources to move abroad if necessary (WS Notes). This makes it particularly difficult for practitioners to assess the wellbeing of children in these families, and to react to suspected cases of child endangerment. According to practitioners, children in extremist families are more likely to receive support if their families already depend on child welfare services (WS Notes).

The relationship between returning ISIS-affiliated mothers and social services has proven complicated. While mothers and children usually benefit from psychological, social, educational, and financial support, social services are also involved in separating them from each other upon their return in some cases. During this time of separation, there were instances in which Swedish social services have continuously postponed supervised visitations, resulting in a loss of contact between mothers and children, and in eroding trust in authorities.[50] Other mothers who lived with their children in social institutions were reportedly kept from working by social services, which further exacerbates their struggle for their reintegration and their wish to reunite with their children.[51] While we found evidence of regular and positive relationships between grandparents and German social services (who also prepared them for the children's arrival) the issue of maintaining contact between mothers and their children was also present. In the German case, three children were not allowed to see their imprisoned mother for over eighteen months (Participant 6).

Families' relationship with the media

Media coverage can significantly impact how children in VE and terrorism-affiliated families are perceived by the public. Right-wing extremism is currently receiving increasing media attention, not least because of the attempted 'Reichsbürger' coup in Germany in December 2022. In January 2024, the German media company *Correctiv* released a shocking report about a secret hotel meeting between convicted Neo-Nazis and leading figures of the highly popular far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The report revealed plans to deport millions of asylum seekers, "non-assimilated" people, and individuals of "non-German heritage" (even if they have residency rights and citizenship).[52] The subsequent decision by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution to categorise the AfD's youth wing as "definitely extremist" and the AfD itself as a "suspected case" has led to an ongoing legal battle,[53] generating headlines around the world. Mass protests across the country signal an increasing public awareness of the threat of RWX. But while some newspapers have reported on illegally organised RWX youth camps and RWX incidents in schools,[54] the children of RWX parents have not yet been stigmatised and subjected to significant levels of securitisation in the media.

ISIS' elaborate campaigns and related atrocities have been notably broadcast by media outlets across the world. The significant media attention that jihadist terrorist attacks have attracted has distorted threat perceptions in public debates and even contributed to the mainstreaming of RWX, xenophobic, and Islamophobic narratives.[55] Children of foreign terrorist fighters have frequently appeared in ISIS propaganda, leading to the narrative that all child returnees are weapon-trained and ideologically indoctrinated. These children have been extensively scrutinised and framed as significant security threats.[56] Not only did this cause reluctance among many countries to repatriate their children, but it also continues to exacerbate the social exclusion of women and children upon their return, especially in cases where their names or other identifying information have been made public (privacy regulations vary across countries). However, in one case a child whose identity was already revealed through his appearance in an ISIS propaganda video agreed to take part in a documentary, which allowed him to share his own view and challenge the perception of him as an indoctrinated ISIS child recruit.[57]

MACROSYSTEM CONSIDERATIONS

The lives of children in extremist families are fundamentally affected by the broader culture and legal and political systems of the countries in which they live. For example, whether parental indoctrination into (or exposure to) extremism constitutes an endangerment of a child's welfare remains a complex issue, and varies greatly depending on the jurisdiction and specific circumstances. The German youth welfare office is yet to specify whether the fundamental right to free development of the personality of children is restricted by a RWX upbringing, and there is no explicit acknowledgement of RWX as an endangerment of a child's welfare.[58]

Children of ISIS-affiliated families were significantly impacted by the customs and laws under ISIS and in camps. ISIS' interpretation of *sharia* law left children without rights and legal protections against violence and exploitation, and the dire living conditions in detention camp annexes for foreign women and their children equally constitute a violation of human rights.[59]

Beyond this, children in ISIS-affiliated families are also directly affected by the legislative frameworks of their home countries. For example, legal provisions that allow for the removal of children of convicted terrorists and extremists are often ambiguous, with approaches differing across countries. In the UK, the removal of children from mothers who attempted to travel with their children to join ISIS was approved, especially in situations where there was evidence that parental extremism had already caused harm to the children. But the permanent removal of children from their families remains contentious, and UK family courts have previously favoured less invasive measures focused on supporting and monitoring of these children.[60] Authorities in many European countries immediately separate child returnees from their mothers if the mother is being investigated or charged with IS-related offences.[61]

Across Europe, experts from social and security authorities, youth welfare offices, and public prosecutors are also investigating whether mothers who travelled to Syria with their children deliberately put them in danger and breached their duty of care.[62] While some of the separations from children and mothers were indeed in the best interest of the child, in most cases even a temporary separation has proven to have a devastating impact on children's mental health;[63] and mothers and children are often reunited eventually. A comprehensive synthesis of approaches to repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration, as well as in-depth case analyses of custody orders, are required to capture how terrorism, child welfare, and family law impacts the situation of children in ISIS-affiliated families.[64]

CHRONOSYSTEM CONSIDERATIONS

Children's lives and development over time can be directly affected by their parents' involvement in VE and terrorism. While children of RWX parents grow up in more stable situations, some of them have also experienced multiple transitions because of their parents' involvement in VE. For example, some had to change schools and move to different cities or even abroad. Custodial sentences for VE and terrorist activities can tear families apart, and place children at risk of social exclusion. Many children have been exposed to RWX networks and activities since birth, and leaving the close-knit scene behind as they grow older can prove challenging and may even require a loss of contact with their parents and other family members.[65] Parental efforts to evade social services bars children from receiving the psycho-social support they may require as a result of facing extremism-related adversities. Future research should therefore focus on exploring possible avenues for addressing their vulnerabilities.

Parental affiliation with ISIS has an ongoing impact on child returnees' lives. These children have experienced high levels of uncertainty and multiple disruptions and transitions in family and social structures. Moving to Syria caused significant and frequent changes to their living conditions and social contacts. Many children were subjected to ever-changing life situations: under ISIS, during

war, and in detention camps. Many of these children lost their fathers, and upon return were separated from their mothers. Young children have never met their extended family members before living with them, and some children were placed in oft-changing foster care settings. Even future reunions with their mothers can cause an interruption to their lives. However, more research is required to understand how this affects their long-term development and their needs.

CONCLUSION

Using Bronfenbrenner's EST, the paper provides some initial insights into the situations of children raised in families affected by VE and terrorism. Spatial constraints have limited the depth of analysis, preventing us from addressing these children's possible developmental outcomes. However, the paper highlights various key features that these children may share, as well as those that uniquely apply to their respective context. While there is no single model of a child or family affected by VE and terrorism, a range of experiences were identified both in children in RWX and in ISIS-affiliated families. We demonstrated that parental involvement in VE and terrorism can put their children at increased risk of adverse experiences. We also addressed significant differences in the experiences of children in RWX and ISIS-affiliated families and demonstrated that the provision of state-led interventions can impact children's living situation both negatively and positively. Drawing on EST enabled us to move beyond a narrow security lens to a holistic focus on children's wellbeing and complex life experiences.

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COUNTERTERRORISM'S CHALLENGES: THEORETICAL, POLICY AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Ronald Crelinsten

COUNTERTERRORISM'S CHALLENGES: THEORETICAL, POLICY AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Ronald Crelinsten

For years, I have argued that terrorism and counterterrorism are forms of communication that can be exercised by a wide range of actors, including both non-state and state ones. Recognizing that state actors can engage in terrorism as well as non-state actors exposes the essential symmetry between the two. I call this the mirror relationship between controller and controlled (Crelinsten, 1987, 1989, 2021). Once one acknowledges this symmetry, legitimacy issues surrounding state efforts to counter terrorism by non-state actors come to the fore. Friedrich Nietzsche captures this well in his famous aphorism, "Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that they do not become monsters in the process. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you". Inherent in this reciprocal relationship between controller and controlled, between terrorist and counterterrorist, lurks an ever-present danger of mirroring the monster that one is fighting. This is the greatest challenge for counterterrorism in democratic states. By considering the communicative aspects of different control models, democratic governments can discover innovative ways to deal with the problem of terrorism that are both effective and acceptable to our democratic way of life. In doing so, they might succeed in avoiding the trap identified by Nietzsche.

In my book, *Counterterrorism*, I developed a schema to encapsulate the different control models that have been used to deal with terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization – coercive and persuasive, proactive and reactive, short-term and longer-term (Crelinsten, 2009, pp. 235-43). I argued that it is not a matter of which model to use, but when to use which, in what combination, in what order or sequence, and for how long (Ibid., p. 247). This more flexible approach avoids the institutional stove-piping and bureaucratic infighting that too often characterize counterterrorism efforts. The most common terms for this approach are "comprehensive," "all-of-government" or "all-of-nation," which includes civil society and the private sector.

"Hard power" (security intelligence, policing and military power) and "soft power" (political, social and economic control) are two well-known aspects of modern counterterrorism strategy.[1] As terrorism and the efforts to control or prevent it acquire a more and more global scale, the theoretical framework used to study and understand these interrelated phenomena is becoming commensurately broad in scope and complexity. Policy areas that deal with the environment, migration, public health, resource development and critical infrastructure such as banking, energy and transportation have also become important. In describing what they call "the new economic security state," Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman (2023) argue that "the definition of security has expanded beyond matters related to warfare and terrorism, as previously disregarded economic and environmental problems such as food insecurity, energy shortages, inflation, and climate change have moved to the 'very core' of the official U.S. National Security Strategy." For these analysts, government officials "cannot easily disentangle trade and commerce from security when U.S. markets are intertwined with those of adversaries, consumer electronics are readily weaponized, and beefed-up graphics chips are the engines of military artificial intelligence."

In my book, *Terrorism, Democracy, and Human Security: A Communication Model* (Crelinsten, 2021), I developed a model that attempts to capture all these complexities and how they interact. The model incorporates six policy domains – territorial/environmental, economic, social/cultural, politics/governance, criminal justice, and military. These domains are not isolated from one another, but often blur into each other into zones of ambiguity or grey areas that separate them. What follows is an inventory of the kinds of relationships involved in each zone, labelled A through F, and

the blurry boundaries within each that pose challenges for counterterrorism. In some zones, for example, new forms of governance have emerged to deal with these challenges.

GREY ZONES AND DELICATE BALANCES

A. *Zone A* separates the *territorial and environmental* policy domain from the *economic* policy domain. It can help to understand the relationship between terrorism and climate change, including the massive wave of migration that will ultimately be triggered by its increasingly catastrophic effects. Here, the rural-urban divide is a fundamental duality. The need to balance these two constituencies bedevils development policy and resource utilization, supplanting the left-right, communist-capitalist divide that fuelled political conflict during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Zone A highlights the difficulty of clearly demarcating resource utilization from resource exploitation or depletion, environmental degradation from economic opportunity, resource from commodity, national interest from regional interest, or domestic problem from transnational or international problem. Some of the governance issues in this zone include:

- how to promote or sustain development without irrevocably endangering the environment or depleting resources;
- how to harmonize regional needs with national ones and to balance different regional needs;
- how to reconcile aboriginal/indigenous needs with non-indigenous/settler needs;
- how to avoid the plundering of national resources by political or business elites more interested in private gain than the public good; and
- how to reconcile national sovereignty over environmental problems within a state's territory with transborder and transnational cooperation to deal with environmental problems that cross borders and travel across the territories of other states.

New forms of governance that emerge in this zone include:

- the idea of sustainable development; and
- the granting of self-government and a degree of control over local resources to indigenous peoples, including the creation of new provinces or subnational jurisdictions.

Some of these new forms of governance involve uploading responsibility for national policy to international organizations and the regimes they administer, while others involve downloading power from central to regional and local governments or offloading responsibility to the private sector, civil society or new actors, such as autonomous indigenous authorities (Crelinsten, 2001).

Some of the human rights pertinent to this zone include freedom of movement, the right to work, immigration and refugee rights, and the right to quality of life. Some of the more egregious forms of governance, often justified in terms of securitization and counterterrorism, include closing borders to refugees and immigrants, stripping foreign fighters of citizenship, and privileging resource development over indigenous treaty rights (Crelinsten, 2021).

B. *Zone B* separates the *economic* policy domain from the *sociocultural* policy domain. It can help to understand the relationship between terrorism and money laundering or corruption, as well as the impact of wealth inequality on levels of social alienation, anger and resentment that can fuel radicalization to violence. Here, the class divide – between business owners and their workers, employed and unemployed, rich and poor – informs the relationship between regulation and production, where definitions of the common or public good vary according to where one is situated in the class structure.

Zone B highlights the difficulty of clearly demarcating private interest from public interest, economic prosperity from social welfare, tax incentives from tax loopholes, and economic competitiveness from social dumping, whereby governments sacrifice social welfare in order to remain competitive (Deacon 1997: p, 1). Governance issues include:

- the problem of balancing economic competitiveness with social welfare and the reduction of world poverty;
- the balance between allowing market forces to operate without government intervention and protecting the socially disadvantaged from the negative impact of market competition;
- how to reconcile decreasing capacity of governments to deal with many policy problems stemming from economic globalization and the increased public demand for governments to do something about these problems;
- how to promote domestic industries and businesses without undermining innovation and global competitiveness;[2] and
- how to protect citizens from harmful products, consumer goods, production methods and management practices while opening domestic markets to foreign goods and services or outsourcing production to states with low or nonexistent safety, environmental or labour standards.[3]

New forms of governance in this zone include:

- deregulation and reregulation;
- privatization;
- partnering between public and private sectors; and
- social dumping.

Here, the impact of globalization, decentralization and privatization is particularly strong and the trends of offloading, downloading, and uploading can sometimes conflict with one another (Crelinsten, 2001). An example would be when states upload control of policy to international organizations, while offloading responsibility for implementation to the private sector in the interests of market control. One controversial form of governance is privatizing profits while socializing losses/risks, sometimes known as "lemon socialism," whereby states nationalize failing companies (lemons).

C. *Zone C* separates the *social and cultural* policy domain from the *political and governance* policy domain. It can help to understand the relationship between terrorism and ideology, including broader issues of religion, culture and education. The ideological divide – between left and right, liberal and neoliberal, socialist and conservative, social inclusiveness/cultural diversity and social exclusion/cultural supremacy, educated/informed and uneducated/un- or misinformed – is the prime driver of the dynamic relationship between politics and protest.

As religion fades away in the face of demographic shifts, and less and less young people adhere to any traditional religion, many unfortunately appear to be turning to conspiracy theories and other "post-truth" epistemologies instead (Caldwell, 2019). The irony is that we have more information available to us than ever before in human history, although much of it is *bad* information. Because of the algorithms used by Meta, Google and other tech companies, people with extreme views, who would normally be fringe players in the world of political discourse, gain equal footing with more mainstream, centrist players. Because they are more extreme, more strident, and more provocative in their posts, they get a lot more engagement, ending up at the top of our news feeds, while the middle ground gets buried far down the list.

One of the greatest challenges for counterterrorism and counter-radicalization is bad information and an inability on the part of citizens to know how to identify it. Digital media have greatly amplified and expanded the range and diversity of voices, requiring readjustments in separating

the signal from the noise. More widespread access to media may also increase disaffection as people become more aware of economic disparities and their own acute deprivation (Marshall & Elzinga-Marshall, 2017, p. 7). It is therefore incumbent on all of us to learn how to tell the difference between good, reliable information and bad, unreliable information. A new kind of literacy is required.

Zone C highlights the difficulty of clearly demarcating society from polity, deviance from dissent, private from public, information from misinformation or disinformation, and societal security from national security.[4] Some of the governance issues in this zone include:

- the maintenance of social cohesion in the face of identity politics;
- the politics of fear and loathing and its role in extremist politics[5];
- the protection of minority rights and rights of the disadvantaged in the face of powerful interest and lobby groups with disproportionate influence on the policy process;
- the reconciling of increased public consultation with the limited capacity of government to deal with a wide range of social issues;
- the reconciling of partnership with the private sector with maintaining public accountability for social programmes;
- reconciling downloading and decentralization with the creation and maintenance of national standards and the avoidance of excessive regional disparity in access to social programmes;
- the maintenance of government credibility in a cacophonous sea of multiple voices and claims; and
- the fostering and nurturing of an informed public through the open flow of information, public education, and the promotion of media and computer literacy.

New forms of governance in this zone include:

- governance-at-a-distance, where governments rely on civil society or the private sector to implement government policies; and
- the related emphasis on partnering and public consultation.

Some have argued that globalization has actually outpaced governance, particularly the control of competitive global markets and the impact of globalization on people (see, for example, UNDP, 1999). In this view, the new forms of governance identified here may more accurately reflect a failure of governance or a vacuum in governance structures. Offloading to the private sector in areas such as crime prevention, for example, can relieve the state of responsibility for public welfare, as well as accountability if anything goes wrong (Crelinsten, 2001; Garland, 1996).

D. *Zone D* separates the *political and governance* policy domain from the *criminal justice* policy domain. It can help to understand the relationship between terrorism and crime, extremism and violence. Here, the divide between illegal and legal, nonviolent and violent, determines the relationship between security intelligence and security threats. The distinction between radicalization, per se, and radicalization to violence lies at the crux of basic freedoms such as expression, assembly, and religion.

Zone D highlights the difficulty of clearly demarcating legitimate opposition movements from fronts for criminal, subversive, or terrorist activity; violent protest of a less serious nature from violence that threatens national security; sympathizers or fellow travellers from active supporters or members of criminal, subversive, or terrorist groups; and those who loudly advocate violence from those who secretly plan to commit violence. It also highlights the difference between proactive policing and reactive policing and the close similarity between the former and security intelligence, as well as the difficulty of demarcating external and internal security, public and private policing, and political (high) and ordinary (low) policing (Crelinsten, 1998). Some of the governance issues in this zone include:

- the undermining of police accountability and openness due to the need for secrecy;
- the danger of selective and discriminatory targeting of specific groups identified as dangerous;
- a widening of the net of surveillance to include legitimate organizations or "secondary targets", i.e., those who communicate with those who are already targeted;
- law-breaking or crime creation by authorities through covert facilitation, infiltration or the use of informers who become *agents provocateurs*;
- impunity for law-breaking by criminals (the problem of when to arrest); and,
- for reactive policing, unreasonable grounds for arrest, discrimination, racism, or violence during arrest, and selective enforcement based on profiles of dangerous classes of people.

Clearly, a lot of these issues can be exacerbated by identity politics and the politics of fear and loathing (Crelinsten & Özkut, 2000; Crelinsten, 1998).

One form of governance in this zone that deviates from traditional democratic principles is what some call "political justice," whereby political opponents of the state are selectively targeted with prosecutions and "show trials" are held to delegitimize and incapacitate political opposition. The weaponization of the justice system and the use of dirty tricks by intelligence agents or secret police are other examples (Brodeur, 2010; Marx, 1988).

Zone E separates the *criminal justice* policy domain from the *military and national security* policy domain. It can help to understand the relationship between terrorism, insurgency and revolution. Here, the divide between state and nonstate violence, repression and resistance, oppression and freedom, is central to the relationship between terrorism from above and terrorism from below. As I have argued before, counterterrorism can become just another form of terrorism when the rule of law is politicized, deformed, or otherwise ignored or circumvented (see, for example, Crelinsten, 2009).

Zone E highlights the difficulty of clearly demarcating the purely criminal from the politically-motivated act, the lone actor from the group actor, the once-only attack from the systematic campaign, and the "strategic" or sole use of terrorism from the tactical use of terrorism as one tool in a larger arsenal of tactics. For the controller or counterterrorist, there is the problem of distinguishing isolated incidents of police deviance or political justice from systematic human rights violations or state terrorism, peacetime from wartime, and noncombatant from combatant. Failure to properly distinguish any of these could open the way to nondemocratic forms of governance, such as sidestepping the rule of law in the name of security (the primacy of security over freedom, and effectiveness over democratic acceptability), the commission of gross human rights violations such as torture or extrajudicial killings (the primacy of necessity over proportionality), the emergence of a cult of clandestinity (primacy of government secrecy and coverups over transparency and disclosure), and a lack of accountability (primacy of authority over legitimacy – we know what's best; just trust us). New forms of governance in this zone include:

- the merging of police and military functions;
- the merging of internal and external security; and
- the expanding of cooperation amongst police, military, customs, immigration, and border control agencies (Crelinsten, 1998; Anderson et al., 1995, esp. pp. 156-80; Bigo, 1994).

It is in this zone that the most egregious forms of "innovative" governance emerge and the counterterrorist becomes Nietzsche's monster. State terrorism, disappearances, systematic torture, extrajudicial executions, states of emergency and the militarization of ordinary policing are all examples of how counterterrorism can degenerate into a reign of terror or a torture regime (Crelinsten, 2021; 2003).

Zone F separates the *military and national security* domain from the *territorial and environmental* policy domain, closing the policy circle and bringing us back to Zone A. Zone F can help to understand the relationship between terrorism and war, both conventional and unconventional, total and

small-scale.[6] The divide between revisionist and status-quo states, developing and developed states, external interference and civil disorder, all inform the relationship between sovereignty and self-determination. Here, the transnational dimension comes particularly to the fore (Stockhammer, 2023; Crelinsten, 2021).

Zone F highlights the difficulty of clearly demarcating sovereignty from interdependence, state from nation, military defence from military offence, international conflict from civil war, domestic affairs from foreign affairs, and external security from internal security. Governance issues include:

- how to reconcile the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of other states with the maintenance and protection of international norms, such as human rights – both economic, social and cultural rights and civil and political rights;
- how to reconcile the right of self-determination of peoples with the sovereign rights of states in the international system;
- how to reconcile the exercise of state power with the maintenance of international regimes and the emergence of a global civil society;
- how to construct sovereignty bargains that allow the control of transnational threats and problems while maintaining social cohesion within individual states;
- how to maintain international peace and security while integrating developing and under-developed nations into the international system; and
- how to promote economic development of such states without jeopardizing the integrity of the world's environment.

New forms of governance in this zone include:

- the rejection of the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of states in favour of counterterrorism, conflict prevention and peacemaking/keeping;
- the protection of human rights and minorities at risk; and
- the kinds of sovereignty bargains, particularly in the environmental domain, whereby states give up some elements of autonomy in order to gain more control over a transnational problem.

In the area of human rights, Fred Halliday (2002, p. 240) argues that "a concern with the political rights of individuals has been matched by a commitment to social and economic rights, and, by extension, with the rights of collective groups, be these nations, women, children, refugees or disabled people." In a post-9/11 world, however, the search for answers to these interrelated ethical and rights issues has become more complex and fraught: "Those involved in distributing humanitarian assistance may have to buy off warlords and indicted war criminals with percentages of fuel, food and medicine. Those concerned with the rights of individuals, not least women, may have to override the supposedly 'authentic' or 'traditional" values of religions and communities" (Halliday, 2002). This latter dilemma was highlighted in Afghanistan, when the Taliban regained power and all the advances that Afghani women had experienced since the US-led invasion in 2001 were wiped out.

CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE OF BRIDGING DIVIDES

Grey area phenomena are inherently difficult to study, to define and to typify. They blur the boundaries between distinct fields of study, areas of expertise, and tools of inquiry, as well as between institutions, jurisdictions and policy domains. In the atmosphere of pressure, panic and promotion that characterizes the sense of urgency surrounding responses to terrorist attack, careful analysis of inherently ambiguous phenomena is at best a luxury and at worst a hindrance to resolute and firm action. Reasoned reflection is easily ridiculed or excoriated. Balance and perspective can become political liabilities or, for some, even signs of treason.

To deal effectively with these challenges, it has become increasingly difficult and indeed often counterproductive to confine research on the prevention and control of terrorism within one or two academic disciplines. Multidisciplinary research that combines the methods and theoretical traditions of several disciplines, or what might be called "transdisciplinary" research that moves across disciplinary boundaries, are more suitable. Similarly, any counterterrorism policy that remains compartmentalized in one or two areas tends to miss the larger picture. Policies that are coordinated across a wide array of domains promise to be more effective. The traditional separation between domestic and foreign policy can no longer be strictly maintained either, as boundaries blur and local or regional jurisdictions blend into one another.

The anthropologist and epistemologist Gregory Bateson has argued that "if you want to explain or understand anything in human behavior, you are always dealing with total circuits, completed circuits.... The way to delineate the system is to draw the limiting line in such a way that you do not cut any of these pathways in ways which leave things inexplicable" (Bateson, 1972: 459). He gives an example: "If what you are trying to explain is a given piece of behavior, such as the locomotion of the blind man, then, for this purpose, you will need the street, the stick, the man; the street, the stick, and so on, round and round" (Ibid.).

The same can be said about terrorism and counterterrorism. The tendency to focus exclusively on violence by nonstate actors at the expense of violence by state actors, whether legitimized by the rule of law or otherwise, blinds both researchers and policy-makers to the central role that state action can play in provoking or exacerbating nonstate violence. This is true not only of action by criminal courts, prison officials, intelligence agencies, ordinary police or special forces, and the military. It also applies to all the policy domains examined above. All elements and the pathways that connect them must be taken into consideration. Lack of fairness and equity in the formulation and implementation of government policies can fuel resentment and hostility within communities or societal groups who feel excluded or discriminated against. Statements like "If you're not with us, you're with the terrorists" or us-and-them thinking fuel the kind of extreme polarization that leads non-state actors to resort to violence. And so on.

In view of these complexities, the study of terrorism and of counterterrorism have to proceed in tandem, reaching across disciplinary boundaries, bridging pure and applied research, transcending national borders and jurisdictional boundaries, moving beyond a narrow focus on non-state actors as perpetrators of violence to include state actors and institutions and, finally, avoiding truncating the field of study to suit political or ideological agendas. Much of the existing literature on terrorism and counterterrorism is policy prescriptive and often ideologically driven, either implicitly or explicitly. The result is that definitions, frames of reference, and objects of inquiry tend to be truncated or limited, creating blind spots and erecting barriers between different research approaches or lines of inquiry.

One example of this is the way that certain forms of terrorism have received undue attention at the expense of other forms that can pose a greater threat. Mass-casualty terrorism, where terrorists use weapons of mass destruction (WMD), whether chemical, biological, radiological (for example, dirty bombs) or nuclear (CBRN), has often received more attention than more likely small-scale attacks (Crelinsten, 2000, pp. 177-91). This is primarily due to an understandable fear of low-probability, high-impact threats – what I have called the tension between certain vulnerabilities and uncertain threats (Crelinsten 2009, pp. 43-4). The rise of Islamic terrorism was ignored due largely to a singular focus on left-wing and separatist terrorism. Right-wing terrorism was ignored first because of this same narrow focus, but after 9/11, because of a laser focus on Islamist terrorism.

More recently, the emergence of the term "stochastic terrorism" (Amman & Reid Meloy, 2021) is evidence of a new recognition that extremist rhetoric and incitement to violence, especially disseminated through social media and television coverage of political campaigns and rallies (Schwarz, 2023), can provoke random acts of violence that though they can be predicted statistically,

cannot be predicted at the level of the individual actor, where one tries to identify who exactly will decide to heed the call to violence. This is a good example of how theory can evolve to tackle grey areas of ambiguity – in this case, the grey area between speech and act, extremist rhetoric and individual violence, as well as between lone actors and group identity which, in a digitalized world, can reach far beyond national borders.

Counterterrorism policies will always evolve as the threats they deal with evolve. The key is to stay alert to unstated assumptions, implicit biases, inchoate fears, and processes of securitization and selective attention, bridging the divides that compartmentalize research, policy and operations into like-minded camps of thought and action.

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NOTES

1 The distinction between hard and soft power was first made by Joseph Nye. See Nye (1990).

2 For a discussion of this dilemma in the area of security, see Crawford (1995).

3 The tenth *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) deals with many of these issues. See UNDP (1999).

4 On the merging of societal and national security, see Crelinsten (1998), pp. 407-9.

5 For more on the role of fear and hatred in politics, crisis management and media coverage, see Altheide (2006; 2002); Korstanje (2019).

6 For a discussion of the fine line between terrorism and war in the context of the Hamas-Israel conflict, see Fisher (2023).

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