EUROPEAN TREND REPORT ON TERRORISM 2025

European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention

Nicolas Stockhammer

April 2025

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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.

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FOREWORD

"*Kill one, terrify 10,000*" – a famous Chinese proverb, often attributed to Sun Tzu, explains the inherent logic of terrorist attacks. Terrorism is in many regards like a theater play- the staging manifests the root for the show effects. In a nutshell, it is all about creating fear and destabilization. To counter this vigorous drama, it will be necessary to expose its underlying fatal dramaturgy. Perhaps this can be mandated by purposely not falling into the trap set by its directors, the extremist plotters, that stage the play. The deep-rooted problem is uncertainty and our weakness in dealing with it. Or should we call it unpredictability? It may hit anybody and anytime. Such imponderability instils diffuse fears. Nassim Nicholas Taleb has put it correctly: *"We wish to not merely just survive uncertainty, not merely just escape again. We wish to survive uncertainty completely unharmed and what is more – like a certain class of belligerent Roman stoic – to have the last word. The question is: How will we succeed not only to comprehend what we cannot see, cannot explain, taming it, dominating it, perhaps even subduing it?"*.[1] In essence, terrorism executes an often meticulously prepared act of mostly indiscriminative violence. Its apparent unpredictability immediately stirs up our enlightened system of values. We instinctively ask ourselves: How could this happen? What can be the rationale behind random terrorist attacks?

The media have *nolens-volens* become a catalyst of the terrorist messaging. In 1985, after a TWA flight was hijacked by a Shiite terrorist group, then UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher criticized the news media, accusing them of providing terrorists with the "*oxygen of publicity*". Without intense reporting and media coverage terrorism slowly suffocates. The camera lenses, in their craving of the sensational, display the full extent of suffering, despair and destruction.[2] This corresponds to the voyeuristic mentality of gaping onlookers in society, based on the sheer curiosity for the sensational. Some commentators hence already speak cynically of "*terrortainment*". Reporting on terrorism has traits of media hysteria, with strong commercial traits. In other words: "*Terrorism is an emotionally charged and fashionable subject*".[3]

Terrorism appalls us deeply, despite the low probability of an individual becoming a victim. We are morbidly fascinated by extreme behaviors and the implications of moral decay, questioning political motives and personal grievances behind these acts. Furthermore, terrorism reveals vulnerabilities in national security, sparking debates on the adequacy of initial public responses and the need for long-term preventative measures.

In Shakespeare's drama "Hamlet", the Prince of Denmark laments that "*time is out of joint*". The negative hero slips ever increasingly into self-pity, until he finally seals his own fate. Are we possibly likewise now on this same path of ignorance and self-centeredness? The sociologist Ulrich Beck famously coined the term "*world risk society*" on his search for a lost security. Accordingly, risks are not just real and present, but are stage-managed and exploited for political ends. With the result that anxiety and fear become the dominant emotions.[4] This is especially true for terrorists: "*They succeed in landing a double blow, firstly through physical force and then via our brains. The first blow initially attracts all the attention, the second one on the other hand often remains undetected.*" [5]

An important aspect in today's emotionally charged debate on new dimensions of terrorism has almost come to an end: Contrary to the recent excited debates, terrorism in Europe is nothing new. In the 20th century, waves of terrorism descended on Europe again and again from the 1970s until the middle of the 1990s. Researchers at the University of Maryland have attempted to record and categorize global terrorist attacks since 1970. Most global databases indicate that terrorism has been on the increase worldwide ever since, however periodically not in Europe to the same extent. Methodically, terrorist attacks are included in the "*Global Terrorism Database*" (GTI) with one definitory precondition: A non-governmental organisation as the protagonist must intentionally

exercise force against people or objects, or at least threaten to do so, to achieve political, religious, or social goals.[6]

Without doubt, we currently find ourselves in the epicenter of a beginning new wave of terrorism.[7] The previous four waves[8] have been almost seamlessly followed by a fifth one:[9]

- 1st wave: *anarchistic terrorism* (at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century): attacks on numerous heads of state and governments in monarchies (Russia and Europe)
- 2nd wave: *anti-colonial waves of violence* (from the 1920s), for example in Indochina, Algeria, and several South American countries
- 3rd wave: *left-wing extremist motivated terrorism* in countries such as Italy, Germany, and Spain (second half of the 20th century)
- 4th wave: *Islamist terrorism* (from 1979[10], above all in the first two decades of the 21st century) with no limits to violence, propelled by the terrorist organisations al-Qaeda and Daesh (the "Islamic State").
- 5th wave: Strong indications suggest we may have entered a fifth wave of extremism and terrorism – one defined by a mutated form of *„multidimensional extremism"* emerging from diverse sources. This wave is characterized by heterogeneous ideological influences (for instance conspiracy narratives), patchwork ideologies (salad-bar-extremism), and transgressive shifts, where fluid, polymorphous low-threshold extremist narratives (e.g. "borderline-content" dispersed by some Salafist influencer preachers or by non-violent legalistic Islamism) evolve and adapt into more customized and radicalized forms.

The subsequent trend report on terrorism in Europe suggests that the current threat landscape has changed significantly due to fast-paced technological progress and a growing ambition of extremists to exploit them. Moreover, the dynamics and manifestations of extremist violence are more than ever subject to continuous transformation. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly monitor and re-evaluate this threat matrix and the derived trends accordingly. In contrast to many existing reports and research publications, our trend report does not limit itself to the observation of past developments but strives for a strategic foresight projection. It sheds a light on possible future trajectories, in some cases perhaps only a continuation of existing trends, sometimes the emergence of new phenomena but always a daring glimpse into the future.

As president, I sincerely hope that our EICTP trend report will add a strategic dimension and provide substantial food for thought. Hopefully it will spark necessary discussions among scholars and decision-makers alike to prepare adequately and to improve preventive and counter measures.

A terrorism trend report serves as an essential tool for policymakers, law enforcement, academics, and the wider public. It provides actionable intelligence, supports proactive measures, and fosters collaboration, ultimately reducing the risk of terrorism and its impact on societies. Such reports not only enhance immediate security but also contribute to long-term strategies for global stability and peace.

The following report has two goals:

- Identifying New Patterns: Terrorism trends evolve rapidly, influenced by technological advancements, geopolitical shifts, and social dynamics. This type of report, grounded in scientific research, facilitates the identification of emerging tactics, potential targets, and evolving ideological trends.
- Tracking Extremist Narratives: Monitoring the development and spread of extremist ideologies (e.g., through social media, propaganda, or encrypted platforms) and the emergence of new narratives fueling radicalization that lead to violent extremism.

Strategic foresight is crucial in ensuring that counterterrorism measures are not only responsive but also prepared to tackle challenges of a constantly evolving threat landscape. It hence transforms counterterrorism into a more strategic, future-oriented, and sustainable endeavor. Instead of bluntly reacting to attacks after they occur, foresight allows governments to anticipate threats and address root causes, such as social grievances or recruitment channels. Terrorism is dynamic, with groups constantly adapting their strategies. Strategic foresight helps security agencies stay ahead of these changes. Investing in prevention and preparedness can reduce the economic and social costs of responding to attacks. Terrorism is a transnational threat, predominantly caused by the Islamist threat in Europe. Foresight fosters collaboration between nations to address common challenges.

Sincerely,

Herbert Scheibner
President of the European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention

ABSTRACT

Focusing on Europe, most of the key developments, dynamics and trends shaping the terrorist threat landscape are largely determined by four parameters: *shifting ideologies*, *technological advancements*, *tactical modifications/adaptions* and *geopolitical influence*. Based on statistics extrapolated from Europol's most recent Europol *TE-SAT 2023* report[11] and other relevant data sources ("*Global Terrorism Database*", "*Global Terrorism Index*", "*RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents*", C-REX "*RTV*", FFI "*JPED database*", etc.)[12] employing the future projection methodologies of Strategic Foresight Cockpit (refer to "method" below), the authors have identified and analyzed key trends that are very likely going to manifest in extremism in various ideological expressions and terrorism for the next 3-5 years. Both phenomena are rooted in a systemic context of poly-crises, increasing geopolitical instability and a substantial polarization in Europe.

The ongoing wars in Ukraine and in/around Israel, regime change in Syria, turbulences in the MENA region and other developments have for different reasons a negative impact on European security. International constellations like the Middle East conflict or the Ukraine war continue to influence, even arouse terrorist activities in Europe. Foreign fighters, either returning from conflict zones or radicalized online by events abroad, present ongoing security challenges. Multiple concurrent crises – such as sustained migration coupled with ineffective integration, energy insecurity, economic instability, and pervasive disinformation campaigns – have significantly intensified political polarization across Europe. These challenges not only strain social cohesion but also deepen divisions within and between nations, exacerbating ideological fractures and undermining trust in political institutions. Extremist groups capitalize on these divisions, using the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and the Gaza conflict to recruit new members and advocate their agendas.

Far-left and anarchist terrorism has – surprisingly for many scholars and policymakers – experienced a resurgence in Europe, particularly in countries like Italy, where most of these assaults occurred. These attacks mostly target property or infrastructure rather than individuals.[13] Furthermore, the convergence of left-wing extremism with elements of "climate extremism" has emerged as a growing concern.[14] This synergy involves the adoption of radical tactics by some climate activists, aligning with extremist ideologies to disrupt societal systems and push for transformative environmental agendas. Evolving threats like eco-terrorism, motivated by environmental causes, are beginning to gain traction. Accordingly, there is increasing blurring between different extremist ideologies. For instance, far-right extremists might adopt tactics used by jihadist groups, and anarchist groups may overlap with environmentalist movements, creating hybrid threats that are harder to classify.[15] This ideological fluidity complicates counterterrorism efforts, as the separating lines between ideologies are no longer as clear.

Jihadist terrorism very likely remains the most significant threat for Europe and has in 2024 further evolved. While the number of jihadist attacks has temporarily declined, it had still accounted for most terrorism-related arrests (70% of all arrests in 2022[16]). Preliminary data already indicates a dramatic increase since October 7, 2023.

Far-right terrorism seems also on the rise. Though it constitutes a smaller number of attacks, the growing influence of far-right extremist groups and individuals, particularly in online spaces, poses an increasing risk that could further materialize in attacks.[17]

A general trend, attackers and their supporting networks are increasingly younger, reflecting a concerning shift in the demographic profile of individuals involved in extremist activities. This dynamic is driven by the digital age, where social media platforms and online forums serve as breeding grounds for radicalization. Against this backdrop, there is growing concern over the fast radicalization of adolescents, especially through popular platforms like TikTok. Social media allows

extremist groups to target vulnerable individuals, particularly those disillusioned, to recruit and radicalize them. The spread of conspiracy theories, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic[18], has further contributed to radicalization and recruitment into extremist groups. Such narratives often have an anti-government, anti-elite, or anti-globalization texture, which aligns with various far-right, far-left, or jihadist ideologies.[19]

Low-level attacks carried out by individual perpetrators with minimal planning and logistical support remain the typical pattern. Lone attackers, often radicalized online, have become more a symptom of this opportunistic low-threshold terrorism. Such attacks typically involve simple arming such as cut-and-thrust weapons, firearms, IEDs or vehicles.

Structurally, the unfolding decentralization of terrorist organizations in terms of recruitment, networking and plotting is another notable trend. The internet, particularly social media platforms, has become a vital tool for spreading extremist content and recruiting new affiliates. Terrorist organizations, from jihadist groups to far-right extremists, use the internet to inspire lone attackers or small autonomous cells to act on their own.

The frequency of disrupted plots indicates that European law enforcement and intelligence agencies are becoming more effective at preventing planned terrorist attacks. However, challenges remain concerning the resilience of democratic institutions and the capacity of security forces to keep pace with evolving security threats.

Conclusively, terrorism in Europe is becoming more ideologically diverse and decentralized, with increasing threats from far-left to far-right, and eco-terrorist movements alongside the overarching and enduring presence of jihadist terrorism. The role of online radicalization, lone actors, and the targeting of infrastructure are notable trends, all of which highlight the complex and evolving character of the current terrorist threat landscape. Counterterrorism can also include measures to dismantle terrorist networks, disrupt financing, and counter radicalization through social programs or online monitoring.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The future of terrorism is likely to be influenced by a variety of emerging trends and evolving push- and pull-factors. Based on a future-oriented trend research methodology that examines the etiology, morphology, and phenomenology of both extremism and terrorism, defining trends can be extrapolated. These trends are highly likely to shape the nature of the terrorist threat and extremism across Europe over the next three to five years. By means of a tripartite analysis of underlying causes, observable patterns, and emergent dynamics, this approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the evolving landscape, highlighting factors that will influence the tactics, targets, and ideologies of extremist actors.

- The threat landscape is shaped by a convergence of polymorphous crises, increasing societal polarization, and a declining resilience against extremism in the West. Such extremism often manifests in non-violent forms. Simultaneously, persistent conflicts within the European strategic security environment continue to impact terrorism in Europe.
- On an ideological level, diverse forms of extremism are gaining momentum, including a rising Islamism, far-right and far-left extremism, growing anti-government sentiments, antisemitism, and the proliferating of conspiracy theories. Additionally, "*salad-bar extremism*," a new form of mixed patchwork ideologies characterized by an eclectic blend of extremist narratives, further complicates the ideological spectrum. The emergence of a **multidimensional extremism** from multiple sources may signal the arrival of a fifth wave of terrorism. This phase is defined by a fusion of heterogeneous ideological influences, fragmented and adaptable belief systems, and transgressive shifts. Extremist narratives, fluid and polymorphic in nature, evolve seamlessly, lowering entry barriers while progressively morphing into more personalized and radicalized forms.
- A concerning trend is the growing radicalization of teenagers, positioning them as the next generation of young extremists and potential perpetrators. This generational shift highlights the vulnerability of youth to extremist propaganda and the need for targeted prevention efforts. Furthermore, psychopathology is playing an increasingly significant role, intersecting with other factors to drive radicalization. The crime-terror nexus – a dynamic where criminal networks and terrorist organizations or lone actors collaborate or overlap – also intensifies the complexity of the terrorist threat in Europe.
- Low-level attacks will in the intermediate run remain the preferred tactic of terrorists in Europe, however combined attacks including drones or other unsophisticated means could become more likely.
- The convergence of societal and technological factors, including the rising use of artificial intelligence (AI) by extremist groups is paradigmatic. Extremists are leveraging the internet and social media for recruitment, propaganda dissemination, and operational coordination, with AI amplifying the sophistication and scale of these efforts. Advanced algorithms enable targeted messaging, creating personalized radicalization pipelines that disproportionately affect vulnerable demographics.

The proliferation of encrypted communication tools and dark web platforms further complicates detection and intervention efforts, providing extremists with secure channels to coordinate and operate outside the reach of conventional surveillance. AI also facilitates the creation of convincing deepfakes, misinformation campaigns, and automated content dissemination, which accelerate the spread of extremist ideologies like Islamism, far-right extremism, antisemitism, and anti-government narratives. The rising of mixed extremism rooted in conspiracy narratives thrives in this digitally enhanced environment. AI-driven tools are increasingly utilized to facilitate illegal activities, from financial fraud to weapons procurement, underscoring the need for innovative countermeasures.

As global security policy dynamics, technology, and socio-political contexts change, terrorism is also expected to adapt and manifest in new forms. Here are some of the key areas that experts predict will influence the future of terrorism:

1. Increased Role of Technology

Digital Platforms: Extremists increasingly use the internet and social media for recruitment, propaganda, and coordination. The rise of encrypted communication and dark web platforms will likely continue to facilitate terrorist networks and lone actors while making detection more difficult.
AI and Automation: Extremists may exploit artificial intelligence and automation technologies to conduct sophisticated attacks, spread disinformation, or create autonomous weapons systems. The use of advanced technologies, including drones, 3D- printed weapons, encrypted communications, and potentially even artificial intelligence, is likely to enhance terrorists' capabilities and pose new challenges for counterterrorism efforts.

2. Decentralization of Terrorist Networks

There is a growing trend towards leaderless resistance and lone-actor terrorism[20], where individuals or small cells act independently of formal jihadist organizations. This decentralization makes terrorism harder to track and prevent, as self-radicalized individuals operate outside traditional hierarchical structures.
Lone actor attacks are increasing and often inspired by online extremist content, rather than through direct membership in terrorist groups.

3. Extremism and Political Polarization

Extremism has been on the rise, particularly in Europe and North America[21], with some groups transitioning from mere political activism to violence. Terrorism driven by anti-immigration sentiments, nationalism, and racial or religiously motivated hatred is expected to continue growing.
Political polarization and the resurgence of authoritarian movements may exacerbate far-right violence, as extremists exploit societal divisions for recruitment and incitement to violence.

4. Eco-Terrorism and Climate Change-Related Extremism

Climate change will not only cause geopolitical stress (e.g., resource wars and migration crises) but also inspire forms of eco-terrorism. Extremists motivated by environmentalism may resort to violence to target industries they see as damaging the planet, such as fossil fuel companies or agriculture. What is already recognizable to some extent (in Germany and elsewhere) is an alliance between left-wing extremists and radical climate activists.[22]
Eco-radicalization could become a potent source of terrorism, with attacks on energy infrastructure or symbolic targets such as deforestation projects or mining operations.

5. Jihadist Threats Persist Evolving

Returning foreign fighters and homegrown jihadists remain a concern for European security.[23] Though large-scale attacks have declined, small-scale, high-profile attacks (e.g., stabbings, vehicle attacks) remain a persistent threat.
While the global jihadist threat, especially from groups like the IS and al-Qaeda, seemed to have temporarily diminished in the West, Africa and South Asia are emerging as new theaters of jihadist activity. The rise of local terrorist groups could shift global counterterrorism focus to these regions.

6. State-Sponsored Terrorism and Proxy Wars

Terrorism may increasingly be used as a tool in geopolitical conflicts. Countries may use non-state actors to conduct proxy wars and terrorist attacks, particularly in regions of strategic interest (e.g., the Middle East, Ukraine).
This is already factual in some states in the MENA region, Iran and elsewhere, where multiple actors are involved in funding and arming extremist groups to influence outcomes in local and international conflicts.

7. Increased Radicalization via Conspiracy Theories
The spread of conspiracy theories – often amplified by online platforms – will play a significant role in the radicalization of individuals, particularly in the context of anti-government, anti-elite, or anti-globalization sentiments. This trend was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and may continue to fuel extremist movements.

8. Geopolitical Tensions and Conflict Zones
Instability in conflict zones, such as those in Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, is likely to remain a significant driver of terrorism. Failed states and regions with ongoing wars provide fertile ground for extremist groups to gain territory, resources, and recruits. The current Gaza conflict is a massive accelerator of terrorist violence.
The Russia-Ukraine war is contributing to political polarization and could indirectly fuel extremist recruitment by radicalizing foreign terrorist fighters or inspiring ideologically motivated groups to act violently.

9. New Forms of Extremism
Salad-bar-extremism as the random mixture of sometimes contradicting ideology components may become a common pattern of eclectic narratives that lead to violence.
The rise of transhumanist and technocratic ideologies could create new forms of extremism based on opposition to technology, globalism, or bioethics.

10. Counterterrorism Adaptation
As these trends evolve, counterterrorism efforts will need to adapt accordingly. Improved international cooperation, intelligence-sharing, and technological innovation (such as the use of AI for detecting extremist content) will be essential in combating emerging threats.
There will be a growing need to address radicalization prevention at the community level, especially online, by working with tech companies to prevent extremist content from proliferating on their platforms.

In essence, the future of terrorism will likely be marked by increased technological sophistication in terms of availability, ideological diversification, and heightened geopolitical instability. Extremists are expected to continue exploiting societal divisions, technological advances, and global conflicts to further their agendas, necessitating that governments and international organizations remain vigilant and adaptable in their counterterrorism efforts. A successful counterterrorism approach must emphasize strategic, forward-thinking initiatives rather than reactive, tactical measures alone. By employing tools such as strategic foresight analysis[24], decision-makers can better anticipate emerging threats and prepare more effective, preemptive responses. This report, while explorative and experimental by nature, should be perceived as an initial step towards integrating strategic foresight into counterterrorism planning, helping governmental bodies to build resilience against the evolving tactics and motivations of terrorist organizations.

EXPLORATIVE TREND RESEARCH

Terrorism remains a serious threat, disrupting global security and therefore presenting an ongoing political challenge. The pervasive nature of terrorist activities impacts communities across borders, influences political landscapes, and raises critical questions about security, justice, and freedom.[25] Recent trends focus on virtual terrorist planning platforms, the gamification of activities, and emerging online subcultures, each creating its own virtual ecosystem.[26]

Given evolving shifts in the character of terrorism, there is a growing need for exploratory research to investigate emerging patterns, underlying motivations, and societal impacts beyond traditional perspectives. This trend report aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon by examining factors such as radicalization pathways, technological influences, and the socio-political environments that foster extremist ideologies.[27] It aims to explore fundamental questions about the origins, motivations, and effects of terrorism, with a focus on areas that remain insufficiently examined. Specifically, it will investigate how social, economic, and digital environments contribute to radicalization and how these factors vary across different cultural and regional contexts. By embracing an open-ended exploratory framework that is subject to constant review and evaluation, this research seeks to uncover patterns and insights, ultimately informing more adaptive and effective counterterrorism strategies. This approach aims to offer a broad audience a clear overview of current terrorism trends, highlighting its exploratory research methods, accomplishments, but also potential limitations. Though research on terrorism has advanced in recent years, there are still significant gaps (among many others the changing radicalization pathways, new variants and compositions of extremist ideology, the yet unclear role of AI in future terrorist recruitment, plotting, etc., the impact of outer-European conflicts, new forms of illicit trafficking and terrorist financing, a long-term assessment of the impact of terrorism on society, and a comparative evaluation of counter-terrorism policies, etc.) that limit our understanding. To address these mentioned gaps, interdisciplinary approaches that combine insights from psychology, sociology, political science, and technology are essential. More localized and context-specific research, coupled with longitudinal studies, can provide a deeper understanding of how and why terrorism evolves. These areas of research are crucial for developing more targeted and effective counterterrorism strategies, prevention programs, and policy responses.

METHOD [1]

Based on the assumption that developments around extremism and terrorism are a central security policy challenge for the states of Europe, several questions inevitably arise regarding the classification of currently recognizable and future developments that will shape terrorist events. Security policy challenges require a holistic strategic analysis, which is carried out as part of the EICTP's research work using the methods of strategic future management.

Since policy consulting research always aims to develop strategy options for strategic decision-makers and strategies are always future-oriented actions, a valid future analysis is an indispensable prerequisite.

The software-supported analysis model SPHEERE/method, which was developed by the EICTP, makes it possible to carry out all sub-steps of strategic security management on one platform in a collaborative manner, i.e. with the continuous involvement of a wide range of experts.[28] The first step consists of a strategic early warning process, usually carried out using a combination of future scenarios and trend management, followed by an opportunity and risk analysis, which finally leads to the development of strategy options in the third step.

The EICTP had already presented initial work on the factors and scenarios for the development of transnational terrorism in 2022 and 20223 and is now expanding this with a comprehensive trend management system.[29] Trend management is about identifying and evaluating relevant environmental trends in order to make deductions regarding future terrorist incidents on this basis. Trend analysis also provides the basic framework for the trend monitoring process.[30] In combination with the future scenarios for transnational terrorism in Europe, trend management also provides the basis for scenario monitoring. Based on the trend analysis, it becomes clear which scenarios are more likely to occur and which counter-strategies will have to be developed, and which scenarios are less likely to occur and should therefore only be observed.

The task of this study is to develop a trend-based picture of the development of terrorist activity in Europe.

Trends are understood as directional developments that extend over a certain term and influence the future system dynamics of terrorist activity in Europe as depicted in the scenarios. Due to their relative stability, trends allow a valid statement to be made about developments in a foreseeable period of time.

The following steps were undertaken as part of the methodology for this trend study:

- Trend identification: In this phase, the subject areas for trend scanning were defined. The analytical levels of observation that characterize terrorist events in Europe or have a direct or indirect impact on them were defined. Two main areas were defined: etiological (cause-related) and morphological (manifestations of terrorism). These two main areas of observation were in turn subdivided into a total of 10 areas of influence, in which the various trends were identified by the experts. The etiological areas of influence are: Global developments; strategic environment; political framework and EU counter terrorism environment; motives of terrorism ideologies, religion, and radicalization. The morphological areas of influence are Instrumentality- technology and virtualization; Instrumentality- *modi operandi*; Instrumentality- tactical scenarios (vulnerability and attack vectors); Instrumentality- categories of players: Affinity for violence and extremism; Strategies; Finality, purpose and objectives. Within these

1 The chapter on the methodology was provided by Gustav E. Gustenau, Secretary General of EICTP Vienna.

areas of influence, over one hundred trends were identified and described by the EICTP experts.

- Trend selection: A cross-impact analysis was carried out to find out which of the more than 100 trends play the most relevant role in the trend system. This involved assessing the impact of each trend on all other trends. The result is presented in a so-called asset-passive matrix and thus enables the identification of those trends that have the greatest impact on the other trends on the one hand and are strongly influenced by other trends on the other. 34 trends were identified as particularly relevant, with the aim of selecting at least one trend from each of the areas of influence.

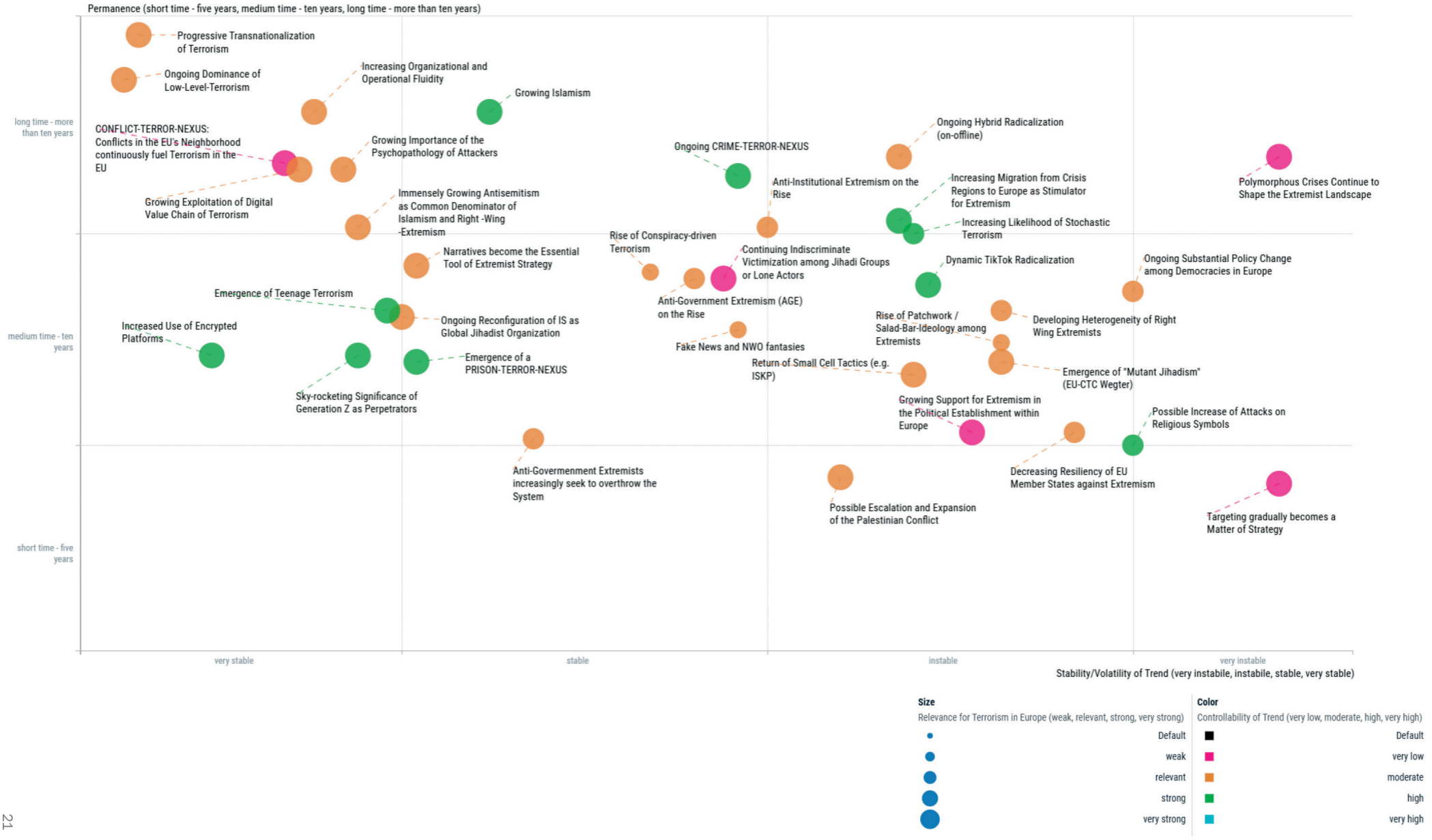
- Trend assessment: These 34 trends were assessed by other experts as part of an online survey using three further assessment criteria:

  - relevance for terrorism in Europe,
  - impact on other trends, stability/volatility of trend,
  - permanence and controllability of trend.

The online survey is an initial attempt to involve a larger number of experts in the future to assess the development of the most relevant trends. The current assessment is intended to create an initial basis on which more external expertise can be successively incorporated in the coming years.

- Trend projection: Based on the previous analysis steps, better statements can now be made on the expected trend dynamics, in particular the *expected development* and possible *tipping points* and *uncertainties*. This means that the trend description can be completed with corresponding *conclusions* in the form of summarized assessments.

- Trend analysis and trend implication: In this final step, it was clarified which trends will shape terrorism in Europe with some certainty and which trends are rather uncertain in their development. The latter are to be given special attention in future as part of a monitoring process. A trend portfolio was created as a basis for this and as a result of the trend evaluation.


Permanence (short time - five years, medium time - ten years, long time - more than ten years)
long time - more than ten years
medium time - ten years
short time - five years
Progressive Transnationalization of Terrorism
Ongoing Dominance of Low-Level-Terrorism
Increasing Organizational and Operational Fluidity
Growing Islamism
CONFLICT-TERROR-NEXUS: Conflicts in the EU's Neighborhood continuously fuel Terrorism in the EU
Growing Importance of the Psychopathology of Attackers
Growing Exploitation of Digital Value Chain of Terrorism
Immensely Growing Antisemitism as Common Denominator of Islamism and Right -Wing -Extremism
Narratives become the Essential Tool of Extremist Strategy
Emergence of Teenage Terrorism
Ongoing Reconfiguration of IS as Global Jihadist Organization
Increased Use of Encrypted Platforms
Emergence of a PRISON-TERROR-NEXUS
Sky-rocketing Significance of Generation Z as Perpetrators
Anti-Govermenment Extremists increasingly seek to overthrow the System
Ongoing CRIME-TERROR-NEXUS
Ongoing Hybrid Radicalization (on-offline)
Anti-Institutional Extremism on the Rise
Increasing Migration from Crisis Regions to Europe as Stimulator for Extremism
Increasing Likelihood of Stochastic Terrorism
Polymorphous Crises Continue to Shape the Extremist Landscape
Rise of Conspiracy-driven Terrorism
Continuing Indiscriminate Victimization among Jihadi Groups or Lone Actors
Dynamic TikTok Radicalization
Ongoing Substantial Policy Change among Democracies in Europe
Anti-Government Extremism (AGE) on the Rise
Rise of Patchwork / Salad-Bar-Ideology among Extremists
Developing Heterogeneity of Right Wing Extremists
Fake News and NWO fantasies
Return of Small Cell Tactics (e.g. ISKP)
Emergence of "Mutant Jihadism" (EU-CTC Wegter)
Growing Support for Extremism in the Political Establishment within Europe
Possible Increase of Attacks on Religious Symbols
Possible Escalation and Expansion of the Palestinian Conflict
Decreasing Resiliency of EU Member States against Extremism
Targeting gradually becomes a Matter of Strategy
very stable
stable
instable
very instable
Stability/Volatility of Trend (very instabile, instabile, stable, very stable)
Size
Relevance for Terrorism in Europe (weak, relevant, strong, very strong)
Default
weak
relevant
strong
very strong
Color
Controllability of Trend (very low, moderate, high, very high)
Default
very low
moderate
high
very high

The x-axis shows the stability and uncertainty assessment (very stable on the left and unstable or volatile on the right) and the y-axis shows the assumed permanence of the trends for terrorism in Europe (the higher up, the more permanent). The trends in the left and upper areas are very permanent and rather stable and will determine terrorism in the coming years before all others. Of particular interest are the trends on the right and at the top, i.e., those that are permanent but rather unstable, meaning that there are uncertainties regarding their development. The size of the circles indicates the relevance of the trends, the larger the circle, the more relevant. This evaluation, derived from the cross-impact analysis, provides insights into the influence each trend exerts on all others within a dataset of over 100 trends. It also assesses the degree of interconnectedness, highlighting how trends interact and potentially amplify or mitigate each other's effects. Such interconnectedness is critical for understanding the systemic dynamics and cascading impacts within the broader framework of extremism and terrorism. The coloring provides an initial assessment of the potential influence of counter-terrorism measures (red – no influence, orange – limited influence, green – good influence).

This step concludes the methodological processing of the trends in the current study but forms the basis for further analyses. These are a summarized conclusion in the sense of the authors' *main findings* (see above) and supplementary illuminations and assessments by external experts.

The analytical process is to be expanded shortly by extending the online evaluation with additional external experts and, above all, a structured process for developing the strategic implications is to take place.

KEY TRENDS ANALYSIS[2]

2 The instant trend research has been conducted together with Dr. Florian Hartleb, who contributed as (co-)author of some of the trends (particularly those focusing on extremism) examined in the “section Key Trends Analysis”.

I. ETIOLOGY | The underlying causes | GLOBAL & EUROSTRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

1. POLYMORPHOUS CRISES CONTINUE TO SHAPE THE EXTREMIST THREAT LANDSCAPE

Multiple, polymorphous crises like armed conflicts, a financial recession, pandemics, climate change, the yet unknown consequences of AI and social polarization influence and shape new manifestations of extremism.[31] Security-relevant crises always have both a tangible real impact and a perceived dimension. Problematic overall developments become particularly drastic when they occur simultaneously and have a disruptive effect or at least such potential. Disruption refers to an unexpected, massive break in trends, an abrupt change or deviation from a linear development that was considered likely, and possibly even a paradigm shift. It is important to distinguish between the unexpected and the unforeseeable, especially regarding the expectations and belief in the ability to manage crisis situations. A blackout is unexpected, but not unforeseeable. In contrast, the simultaneous occurrence of several mega-crises is more aligned with the unforeseeable.[32] It is precisely this simultaneity that suggests a certain contingency.[33] When consequential events and harmful developments occur that were indeed expected but considered extremely unlikely beforehand, it creates a climate of uncertainty coupled with fears about the future. This uncertainty is stimulated by an acceleration of processes which sometimes is a necessary reaction. One consequence of this acceleration of various processes is certainly that it leads to a sense of alienation and an inability to keep up in specific segments of society.

Unleashed financial markets, noticeable price increases for basic foodstuffs and soaring energy costs, an uncontrollable revolution in artificial intelligence[34] with unprecedented impacts on working life, the looming threat of transformative climate change, and a widespread feeling that politics is merely engaged in symptom management – all of this is increasingly accelerating the uncertainty within a broad segment of society. Such acceleration is perceived as a threat, as an attack on stability and prosperity. Crises are catalysts for this acceleration, which could inevitably lead to overheating, and for some commentators, even to collapse or catastrophe-induced downfall. Against this backdrop, for many, turning to extremist ideas – regardless of ideology – is the logical consequence of uncertainty, as it simultaneously reflects their desire for clarity, predictability, and stability in familiar certainties. Therefore, the dichotomy of a binary worldview without shades of gray is appealing to these individuals – a simple reduction to "good and evil." This Manichaean division, i.e., polarization, at least superficially eludes the creation of clarity in an increasingly complex world and fosters radicalization. Hence extremist ideas are booming, as they are sold as a remedy for the crisis phenomena and their unpleasant expressions. Extremist actors take advantage of rampant uncertainty and disorientation.[35] "*How democracies die*", is a scenario Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have profoundly described in 2018. They argue: "*Simply restoring the liberal democratic ideals of a bygone era will not be enough to revitalize Western democracies today. We must not only restore democratic norms but extend them through the whole of increasingly diverse societies.*" [36] A frustration with political elites brims over.[37] This is where radicalization steps in. Major crises (be they socio-political, socio-economic, environmental, health-related, or other) are a breeding ground for polarization and consequently for radicalization. Extremism hence increasingly becomes a subject of crises, crisis perception and crisis experience.

TREND DEVELOPMENT

The trend is expected to display high volatility within the observation period of the forthcoming 3-5 years. This is due to the probable diversification of existing and/or emergence of new crises and their propagandistic absorption/exploitation by extremist groups. Disruptive events could potentially serve as turning points in the progression of this trend.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

As the COVID-19 pandemic has unambiguously demonstrated, any kind of global shut-down may become a disruptive game-changer. It could mean an instant freezing of any kind of dynamics, even that of extremism. However, most major extremist organizations and actors were particularly between 2020 and 2022 constantly trying to capitalize on overall crisis developments. This approach has shown some delayed success, as evidenced by the growing dynamics of radicalization across various forms and expressions of extremism. Once a crisis reaches this stage, it becomes uncertain whether it will influence the evolution of the extremist landscape.

The only certainty is uncertainty. Based on that proposition, the progression of this trend is grounded in assumptions about global disruptions and crises, inherently involving multiple layers of unpredictability. Major societal crises significantly affect the extremist landscape. A scenario devoid of major crises for extremist actors to exploit would indeed be transformative, yet such an outcome remains highly improbable.

1.1. ONGOING SUBSTANTIAL POLICY CHANGE AMONG DEMOCRACIES IN EUROPE

Reflecting deep-seated social, economic, and cultural divides, the polarization of politics in Europe is a challenge for liberal democracy. The fragmentation of traditional parties, and cultural conflicts around immigration and national identity all play into this trend.[38] While polarization creates challenges for political stability and democratic governance, it also highlights the evolving nature of European societies as they grapple with rapid changes in a globalized world. When political actors no longer engage in dialogue or compromise, democratic institutions can weaken. In some countries, the rise of authoritarian tendencies is evident, with leaders undermining judicial independence or restricting press freedom.

In particular the migration crisis, in essence boiling down to asylum quotas and integration issues, has exposed a certain lack of consensus among EU member states, often resulting in a renationalization of policies and a distancing from the ideals of European integration. The migration crisis in Europe, particularly from 2015 onwards, exposed significant shortcomings in how political elites managed the situation. While the crisis involved complex humanitarian, political, and logistical challenges, several key areas were mishandled by political leaders. There is criticism that the European Union (EU) may have failed to develop a unified and cohesive policy for addressing migration. Countries like Germany and Sweden adopted open-door policies, while others, such as Hungary and Poland, closed their borders, leading to tensions within the EU. The existing asylum system, based on the Dublin Regulation, required asylum seekers to apply for protection in the first EU country they entered. This overwhelmed southern European states and led to delays and inefficiencies. Political leaders often failed to clearly communicate their policies or the rationale behind them. For instance, Angela Merkel's "*Wir schaffen das*" ("*We can manage this*") statement in 2015 was seen by some as inspiring but by others as overly optimistic and naive, leading to misinterpretations.

In areas where jobs, housing, or social services are limited, the arrival of migrants can be perceived as a threat to resources. This perception is often exploited by extremist groups to generate resentment against migrants. Extremists can frame migration as an "invasion" that threatens to overwhelm local populations, fueling hostility and creating fertile ground for radical ideologies. When migrants are not adequately integrated into host societies, it can create isolated communities, misunderstandings, and cultural tensions. Discrimination and lack of perspective can lead some migrants to turn to extremist ideologies out of frustration or as a response to perceived or real injustice. Migrants may struggle to learn the host country's language, which can hinder access to education, employment, and social networks.

Extremist groups have substantially capitalized on this situation, pushing for policy changes that align with their nationalist, far-right, Islamist or left-wing agendas. This has created a new cleavage in European politics, pitting globalists against those advocating anti-migration positions. The impact of this divide is currently evident in countries like Sweden and Denmark, where governments have implemented more restrictive migration policies in response to public pressure and security concerns. The rapid dissemination of information via social media has been pivotal in influencing migration patterns and shaping public perceptions. Moreover, stories portraying Europe as a "promised land" for immigrants, coupled with practical guidance on undertaking the journey, have emerged as significant pull factors for prospective migrants. This has further fueled public discontent and provided ammunition for extremist narratives that portray migration as a threat to national security and cultural identity. The underlying sentiment has been skillfully exploited by extremist groups, who frame migration and terrorism as interlinked issues to gain political support and push for more restrictive policies. Extremists aim at policy changes among EU democracies as a minimum requirement. In response to these challenges, the European Parliament approved a major reform of the EU's migration and asylum rules in 2024, after years of negotiations.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

It is very likely that especially the Islamist threat will impact European societies in the next 3-5 years. This means more restrictions and concrete changes for the security policy on the national and EU level.[39] However, given its reliance on various external security, political, and societal factors, this trend is highly volatile and inherently unstable.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

It may evolve that the "crisis management" at the EU level especially in terms of migration management is going to improve soon. Notwithstanding this, a new, larger wave of migration could further intensify existing debates about Europe's capacity and willingness to accommodate additional migrants.

It is also evident that the very foundation of liberal democracy may come under pressure from ongoing global and European developments. Recent elections and forthcoming administrations have the potential to significantly challenge the rules-based international order and the principles of liberalism.

1.2. GROWING SUPPORT FOR EXTREMISM IN THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT WITHIN EUROPE

A current European dynamic is that elections increasingly result in a rise of radical, sometimes even extremist forces, on the right and the left political spectrum as well as religiously motivated, accompanied by an uninhibited political language, verbal violence, and *ad hominem* attacks in political debate. Radicalization and a polarization of large parts of society are a manifest consequence. To a growing extent, extremist parties and movements in Europe no longer operate outside the democratic system. The longstanding effort to keep extremist forces out of government in Europe may perhaps be over.

With multiple forms of radicalism emerging across the political and ideological spectrum, extremism in Europe has become a growing concern in recent years. These movements challenge the foundations of liberal democracy, social cohesion, and security in various European countries. Extremism is increasingly amplified online, where conspiracy theories like QAnon or the Great Replacement Theory have gained traction, also in Europe.[40] These ideologies push individuals toward radical views, creating a new kind of threat landscape, particularly post-COVID-19. Anti-vaccine movements and skepticism toward democratic institutions have also been fertile ground

for extremist mobilization. The European extremist landscape is diverse, with a complex mix of far-right, Islamist, left-wing, and anarchist threats, all interacting with socioeconomic, cultural, and political dynamics. Governments and civil society are grappling with how to address the root causes, such as economic inequality, cultural fear, and marginalization, while implementing stronger counterterrorism measures. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes preventive measures, deradicalization programs, and promoting social cohesion to counter the growing divisions in society.

Far-right parties regularly generate significant controversy, but their rise also highlights certain dynamics within democratic systems. Respective policies can be contentious and divisive. Understanding their appeal helps address the root causes of their rise and adapt democratic systems to reflect diverse perspectives. The evaluation of political issues depends largely on individual political beliefs and societal context. Recent political developments in the light of the European elections in 2024 indicate that the mainstream "center" is more and more under pressure. A key driver for extremism on the political far-right is the ongoing migration crisis, whereas on the far-left the evolving impact of so-called "*identity politics*" as Francis Fukuyama has described has gained influence.[41] Identity politics serves as a significant promoter for far-left politics, as it overemphasizes the struggles and rights of marginalized and oppressed groups. Far-left movements increasingly seek to challenge existing power structures claiming to fight for social justice, equality, and inclusion. By overemphasizing minority issues, left-wing parties challenge the foundational principles of liberal democracy that prioritize the rights and interests of the majority. An excessive focus on identity politics or minority concerns, also referred to as "*wokeism*" leads to divisive policies that undermine social cohesion and the universal principles of equality and individual rights that liberal democracy upholds.[42]

Most extremist movements attempt to argue that European identity is under threat and must therefore be protected.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

It seems very likely that extremist forces will gain further ground in Europe within the next 3-5 years. The ongoing shifts in the extremist landscape, whether in terms of actors, ideologies, or the emergence of new political structures, contribute to the instability of this trend.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

The radicalization of politics in the European Union does not necessarily stem from a rise in violent activity associated with those ideologies. Without doubt, it remains an open question if the terrorist threat will further increase due to the growing support for extremism. The election of Donald Trump as the 47th US president, for example, has the potential to influence European politics, particularly in how the political center is perceived and how it confronts both left-wing and right-wing movements as well as a growing Islamism. Trump's rise to power shifted the political discourse in the United States, emboldening nationalist movements globally, including in Europe. This not only challenged the traditional political establishment but also redefined the dynamics between the political center, which began to be seen as more vulnerable, and the increasingly polarized left and right. The polarization of American politics under Trump could serve as a model for similar movements in Europe, where the political center faces mounting pressure to adapt to or confront growing nationalist sentiment.

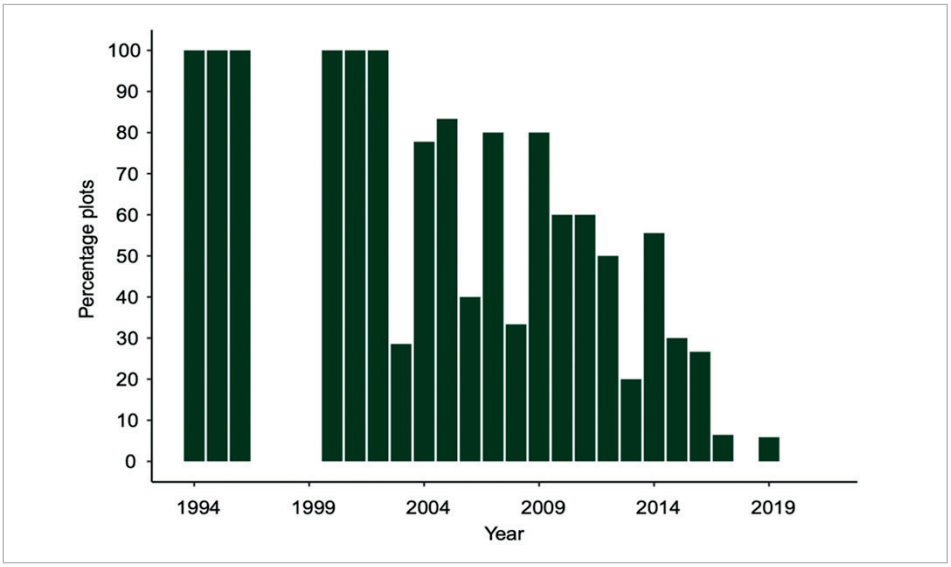
1.3. INCREASING MIGRATION FROM CRISIS REGIONS TO EUROPE AS STIMULATOR FOR EXTREMISM

Increasing migration towards Europe with a constant influx of people from unstable, in many cases conflict regions with fragile statehood, has undeniably a strong impact on extremism (predominantly in its Islamist and right-wing dimensions) and subsequent terrorist manifestations.[43] It is evident that terrorist attacks also have an impact on the perception of migration.[44] The (non-)integration of migrants, including both recent arrivals and those who have been in Europe for years, remains a pressing political issue. This challenge extends beyond newly arriving refugees and asylum-seekers, encompassing a broader spectrum of immigrant communities.[45] The rise of vigilante movements is a concrete consequence throughout Europe.[46]

Existing difficulties in integration of migrants have become a focal point for public discourse and policy debates across Europe.[47] In essence, migration and integration cannot be set apart and need to be reflected holistically. A comprehensive approach is necessary to effectively manage the influx of migrants while simultaneously promoting their successful integration into European societies. Extremist players alike in Europe seek to take advantage of existing shortcomings of policymakers in mastering the task of integrating migrants, but also in limiting a persisting inflow from many, sometimes far away regions in the world.[48] The exploitation of public concerns about cultural identity, economic competition, and security to gain political support remains a core "competence" of extremists. Moreover, the narrative of migrants as a potential threat has been frequently used to justify more restrictive policies and to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment.[49] Recent campaigns and elections in the EU but also on a Union-level have shown that migration remains a pressing issue for the – increasingly younger – populace[50] and that particularly right-wing parties have profited from recent dynamics.

However, further returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and jihadist transborder migration are still considered a major risk for European security.[51] In the mid-2010s, the Syrian conflict, along with IS' call to establish a cross-border caliphate, attracted approximately 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters from across the globe. Similarly, conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and other crisis regions have also drawn thousands of foreign recruits. Some of these fighters become battle-hardened, gain weapons training, and undergo radicalization. In the medium term, the increasing number of foreign terrorist fighters returning from, or still operating in, Syria and Iraq poses a significant threat to European security. Some returnees possess military expertise, raising concerns about their potential involvement in planning or executing terrorist attacks.[52] As early as 2016, former U.S. National Intelligence Director James R. Clapper warned that these individuals could leverage their skills from Iraq and Syria to carry out attacks in the West. Many of these fighters, born and raised in Europe, hold EU passports, and joined extremist groups already in conflict zones.[53] Their return has alarmed European governments, particularly after terrorist attacks in cities such as Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016, where returnees were involved. As Petter Nesser analyzed among the 249 sufficiently documented Jihadist plots between 2004 and 2019, 84 (33.7 %) involved at least one foreign terrorist fighter.[54]

Table 1: *Foiled and launched attacks involving foreign terrorist fighters in Western Europe from 1994- 2019.*



Source: Nesser (2023): 323.

Jihadists with combat experience and weapons expertise can inflict significant damage, especially when operating in well-trained groups with tactical know-how. The logistics employed by these war returnees, often with access to firearms and equipment infrastructure, resemble guerrilla warfare tactics and support the prevailing low-level strategy of lone actor scenarios using easily obtainable means. Therefore, counterterrorism strategies must account for the cross-border spillover effects from conflict zones like Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan.

According to reports, at least 15,000 people escaped from IS' self-proclaimed "caliphate" before it collapsed under pressure from the international anti-IS coalition. Of these, about 7,500 have returned to their home countries, with only half being detained or closely monitored.[55] A UN Security Council report from February 2023 highlights the substantial security risk posed by returning FTFs, particularly those entering the EU via the "Balkan route".[56] 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.[57]

A controlled, legal repatriation of these returnees presents a significant challenge for European governments, which must balance public security needs with the protection of human rights and adherence to the rule of law.[58] Considering this, it is essential to establish support and rehabilitation programs for radicalized returnees to prevent further radicalization or re-recruitment.[59] Ongoing civil turbulences, riots and military conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa further complicate Western counterterrorism efforts in Europe. Against the backdrop of the emergence of ISKP as a transnational operating terrorist offshoot this aspect has gained further significance, with its Central Asian component.[60]

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

It is perceivable that migration will remain a relevant issue for European politics as well as a driver for polemics, polarization and even extremism within the next 3-5 years. Moreover, the issue of returning foreign terrorist fighters will remain on the agenda of European states. Yet it remains uncertain how the EU will address this challenge, both domestically and in foreign policy, given the

unstable security and political environment. This uncertainty is the root cause for the instability of the trend.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Unforeseeable disruptive security-political developments like conflicts in relevant crisis environments, failing statehood and regime change or fundamental changes in national or European legislation concerning migration or the repatriation of former FTFs may impact this trend in different directions.

1.4. DECREASING RESILIENCE OF EU MEMBER STATES AGAINST EXTREMISM

The ongoing decrease of resilience against extremism in the EU highlights a growing issue of radicalization within EU countries, where individuals or groups become more susceptible to extremist ideologies, either through social, political, or economic factors. Such radicalization might involve jihadist terrorism (linked to Islamist extremist ideologies), far-right extremism (linked to nationalist, anti-immigrant, and supremacist ideologies) and left-wing extremism (fueled by anarchist or postcolonial and/or Marxist ideologies).

The resilience of a political entity often refers to its ability to maintain social cohesion and unity, even facing substantial anti-democratic challenges. If resilience is further decreasing, it could mean growing divisions between social or cultural groups. This could be caused by economic disparity, cultural conflicts, or political polarization, all of which can increase vulnerability to extremist ideas. There may also be concerns about external influence from revisionist states or groups that support or sponsor extremism in Europe. If EU states' internal resilience is weakening, they may be more vulnerable to disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, or direct support for extremist groups from outside actors.

Resilience against terrorism refers to the capacity of individuals, communities, governments, and organizations to withstand, adapt to, and recover from terrorist attacks or the threat of terrorism. It involves maintaining societal functionality, ensuring public safety, and minimizing the psychological, economic, and social impacts of such events. This concept extends beyond immediate security measures to encompass long-term strategies for building a robust and adaptable society. Resilience against terrorism ultimately aims to create an environment where societies are not easily destabilized by acts of terror, ensuring safety and stability despite ongoing threats. In essence, resilience against terrorism is about ensuring that acts of terror do not achieve their goals of destabilizing societies, creating widespread fear, or undermining democratic values. It's a comprehensive approach that intertwines prevention, preparation, response, and recovery to empower societies to face threats without compromising their core principles. EU member states are increasingly struggling to resist the influence of extremist ideologies and to prevent the growth of extremism within their societies. It highlights the difficulty of maintaining security, social stability, and political cohesion in the face of rising extremist threats.

Militant democracy is a concept in political theory and constitutional law that refers to a democratic system that takes active and preventive measures to protect itself against threats posed by anti-democratic forces. It recognizes that democracy is vulnerable to being undermined or destroyed by individuals or groups who exploit democratic freedoms to achieve authoritarian or undemocratic goals. A militant democracy is proactive in identifying and neutralizing threats to its core principles. It does not allow enemies of democracy to use the democratic system to dismantle it from within. The concept of militant democracy was first introduced by German political scientist Karl Loewenstein in the 1930s. Loewenstein analyzed the collapse of the Weimar Republic, where democratic freedoms allowed Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP to rise to power and dismantle democracy. He argued that democracies must actively resist threats by adopting defensive measures to preserve themselves.[61]

Militant democracy raises questions about the balance between safeguarding democratic systems and preserving individual freedoms:

- How much restriction is too much?
- Can limiting freedoms undermine the very values democracy seeks to protect?
- How can such measures avoid being abused by those in power?

In essence, militant democracy is a system that prioritizes the survival of democracy over absolute freedom, acknowledging that not all participants in a democracy may share its commitment to democratic principles.

Liberal democracy is under threat virtually around the world. A much greater share of the world's population lives in autocracies today than in democracies. In the last decade, their proportion has increased from 48 to 72 per cent.[62] At the same time, the quality of democracy has been declining in many parts of the world, with freedom of expression being the most negatively affected component. In the European Union specifically, although most citizens believe that democracy is the best system of collective governance, the functioning of representative democracy faces increasing criticism and disengagement.

Therefore, resilience has become an important term in practice. It means the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner. In the wake of different crises, the EU member states are more and more becoming a target for extremist organizations, lone actors, and tendencies to destabilize even on the state level (Turkey, Iran, China, Russia, etc.). Given the impact of these destabilizing crises (a democracy crisis being a major factor), the resilience is declining. Hate speech, whether online or offline, poses a threat to democracy and human rights. Addressing this constitutes an urgent challenge. EU member states are consequently becoming more prone to extremism and terrorism. The German example (the constitution is based on the so called "Wehrhafte Demokratie") is evidence for the growing challenge of extremism and the decreasing resiliency (according to the official statistics).

EU member states currently face several anti-democratic threats that make them appear less resilient towards extremism compared to other regions. These challenges arise from a combination of political, social, and structural factors that contribute to vulnerabilities in countering both far-right, far-left and Islamist extremism. Across Europe, many countries have seen a rise in political polarization, where centrist parties have been weakened, and radical or even extremist parties have gained influence. This fragmentation reduces the ability of governments to form cohesive strategies to address extremism, as political leaders are more focused on competing for votes than on bipartisan solutions to national security threats.

The question of resilience can be seen more broadly for Europe: Critical sectors such as transport, energy, health, and finance have become increasingly dependent on digital technologies to run their core businesses. Economy and consequently society have become a target for cyber threats. Cyber-attacks and cyber-crime are increasing in number and sophistication across Europe. This likewise affects the terrorist threat landscape.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

It is likely that surging cyber-attack efforts will affect EU member states in the next 3-5 years. This also concerns the question of whether the common legislation offers sustainable problem-solving strategies.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

The EU and its member states have enforced policies to strengthen the resilience also in terms of cyber-crime. It is possible that some measures are effective in this regard. By identifying strengths and weaknesses, the resilience dashboards can help countries, and the EU as a whole, understand where to focus efforts to make progress towards policy objectives. The EU has taken concrete measures to strengthen its defense against disinformation by adopting new laws and seeking other ways to boost resilience and safeguard democracy. The internet and social media platforms will likely continue to play a major role in allowing these individuals and networks to spread information and coordinate action. Terrorism – whether from right-wing perpetrators, jihadists, or others – will remain a persistent challenge, necessitating continued counterterrorism cooperation among Western governments.

2. PROGRESSIVE TRANSNATIONALIZATION OF TERRORISM

According to Martha Crenshaw, transnational terrorism "*involves actions in which victims, perpetrators, and sites of violence represent different states and nationalities*".[63] Moreover, "*transnational terrorist attacks may be initiated by local actors against foreign targets in the geographic conflict space, or by radicalized local residents or transnational networks against targets outside the combat zone*".[64] In a wider organizational context, "transnational" reflects a network's core ability to operationally transcend borders. It addresses the organization's intention to bundle strengths to subsequently promote a collective extremist purpose.

Transnational terrorism has gradually evolved and even tremendously flourished in the era of globalization. By virtue of its claim to transcend boundaries by uniting advocates of common ideologies and aspirations, it has profited from the ongoing interdependence encompassing almost any aspect of cross-border (mostly social) networking, essentially ranging from propaganda to agitation, recruitment, and assistance (e.g., in plotting attacks). Intensified cross-border activities of subversive terrorist groups and sub-conventional network structures provide these groups with the ability to spread their messages and to enlarge the scope of their operations. The impact of transnationalization alters not only the organizations *per se*, but also terrorist groups' respective approach to methods, their intention to acquire necessary capabilities and the handling of their resources. Furthermore, this symptomatically concerns their motivational repertoire and ideological fundamentals or positions. Under these conditions we have seen the "*proliferation of transnational terrorist groups with globalized agendas*"[65] whose operations involve many countries or have ramifications that transcend national borders.

The Schengen Area, which allows free movement between many EU countries, has in some cases inadvertently facilitated easier cross-border travel for extremists or later terrorists. This was starkly demonstrated during the 2015 Paris attacks, where perpetrators were able to move between countries with relative ease.[66] Also, a meaningful example among many others, the 2020 Vienna attack suggests intense transborder coordination and exchange prior to the execution of an assault.[67] Recent operations of the IS-offshoot ISKP further suggest a strong transnational networking component and transborder outreach.[68]

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

Current transborder-operations by local small cells and lone actors alike suggest that this trend is going to remain stable at least for the mid-term future. Evidence suggests that especially cross-border communication and plotting are being perceived as a "success model" for terrorist perpetrators. In this light the assumption prevails, that transnational terrorist activities remain a stable trend.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Intense international cooperation could mitigate the risk of transborder terrorist activities. Also, a potential strict border control regime among EU Schengen member states may have a curtailing impact on transnational terrorist activities.

2.1. CONFLICT-TERROR-NEXUS: CONFLICTS IN THE EU'S NEIGHBORHOOD CONTINUOUSLY FUEL TERRORISM IN THE EU

Geopolitically relevant security dynamics and conflicts can have a direct impact on transnational terrorism and the related terrorist threat elsewhere[69], specifically in Europe. This contextuality can be referred to as the "*conflict-terror-nexus*".[70] 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.[71] A recent striking example for this

vicious nexus is the large-scale terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, in which over 1,200 Israelis were killed, followed by the harsh operational response by Israeli armed forces in Gaza and the reaction this military intervention caused in many Western states.[72] It started with protests at universities and in the streets of Europe's and American capitals.[73] The Islamist agenda of Hamas is often propagandistically reframed as a "post-colonial struggle against colonial oppression" in the sense of Frantz Fanon.[74] UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres remarked in late October 2023 that the violence had deeper roots: "*It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum. The Palestinian people have endured 56 years of oppressive occupation*".[75] Reinterpreted as a "freedom fight" against injustice by stakeholders of Islamism, such a framing enables various Islamist groups to resonate not only with young Muslims, emotionally affected by sometimes disturbing images from Gaza, but also with non-Muslim students in Western universities who are eager to engage in activism and consider the Middle East conflict as a "legitimate" cause they can support. This can be regarded as a trivialization, as Hamas' genocidal ideology stands for "*Israel's complete and utter destruction*" and a "*base antisemitism*" as Bruce Hoffman convincingly pointed out.[76] Rooted in these sentiments, a progressive polarization and rampant hatred of Israel ("*from the river to the sea*") evolved, as has the fostering of a "*socially acceptable anti-Semitism*" in substantial parts of the Muslim diaspora communities in Europe. Such Anti-Zionism is becoming a fertile breeding ground for a new Islamist threat, which jihadist actors could gratefully cultivate and extend.[77]

The current security situation related to the conflict in Gaza and Israel equally poses a significant challenge to European security authorities and is expected to further motivate radical Islamists across Europe to carry out terrorist attacks in the name of Palestinian autonomy / independence.[78] Meanwhile IS and al-Qaeda had been reluctant to materialize on this, as Hamas was widely regarded as a competitor.[79] Nevertheless, the narrative of intolerable Western ("Jewish") occupation fueled by antisemite stereotypes has meanwhile become part of jihadist narratives and propaganda. The ongoing rise of ISKP as an organization, both in Afghanistan with its enduring conflict with the Taliban, but even more so abroad, also inspires attacks in Europe by sympathizers or affiliates seeking to demonstrate their allegiance to the jihadist cause.[80]

The interconnectedness of geopolitical developments and Islamist terrorism undoubtedly has direct implications for Europe's security. The continent has become a frequent target for jihadist attacks, both large-scale attacks like the Paris and Brussels attacks as well as smaller-scale incidents carried out by lone wolves or small cells.[81] 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.[82]

Moreover, the uninterrupted 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.[83] While many refugees are fleeing violence and persecution and have no connection whatsoever 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.[84] 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.[85]

According to Europol, in a more general approach, political instability outside the EU could "*exacerbate the terrorist threat from within the EU, materializing in a surge in the activity of terrorist groups, an increase in online propaganda and the strengthening of recruitment efforts that may spread to member states. This is particularly the case for jihadist terrorism. Potential developments in key regions where jihadist terrorist groups are active represent sources of concern for the future*".[86]

TREND DEVELOPMENT

The conflict-terror-nexus is a continuing, even constantly rising trend. Major security crises and conflicts in the unstable environment around Europe, be it the MENA region, Sub-Saharan Africa or elsewhere, have an impact on Islamist extremism and terrorism in Europe. One may even assume that on top of this, future large scale disruptive threats such as possible pandemics, the global climate change and mass migration will drastically leverage on European security. Altogether there are clear signals for a linear and stable trend development.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

A substantial decline of conflicts in the crisis regions around Europe as well as a decrease in polarization could lead to a perceivable reduction of the conflict-terror-nexus. Given current geopolitical dynamics, however this must be regarded as highly unlikely.

Inner-European dynamics could overshadow the external influence of conflicts on terrorism. Most recently, violent protests in the UK were a reaction to the fatal stabbing of three young girls by a jihadist perpetrator at a dance class in the seaside town of Southport, in the north of England.[87] According to some commentators this far-right riot was considered the worst unrest the UK had seen in more than a decade. These violent eruptions, in towns and cities across England and Northern Ireland, have been fueled by online disinformation and the promotion of far-rightand anti-immigration sentiment.

2.2. POSSIBLE ESCALATION AND EXPANSION OF THE PALESTINIAN CONFLICT AS A DRIVER FOR EXTREMIST VIOLENCE IN EUROPE

The October 7 Hamas attack on Israel was a pivotal event at a local and international level. The Middle East conflict may evolve into a possible permanent escalation scenario.[88] In the aftermath of the Oct. 7 attack in Israel and alongside the ongoing Gaza war, the possible involvement of third parties (Iran, Yemen, Qatar) may further lead to an extension of the conflict. To some extent it already does, impacting terrorism in and against European targets.[89] Even great powers (USA, China, Russia) may be involved, which could in sum turn into an impetus for terrorist violence in other theaters based on a deepening polarization, particularly in Western societies.[90] Therefore, there is a direct influence in terms of growing antisemitism. Since Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, numerous anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli cases of fake news and disinformation have been spreading both online and offline.[91] In the course of several demonstrations in Germany, there have been openly anti-Semitic chants and calls for the eradication of Israel.[92]

Under the assumption of a growing antisemitism in a broader society, security risks are the consequence:

- *An increase in attacks on Jewish persons or symbols and properties.*
- *Radicalization as a feature in public discourse, striking an antisemitic tone.*
- *The rise of Islamism if some correlations with other ideologies occur.*
- *The growing influence of foreign policy interests within Europe related to Israel and opposing Islamic states.*

Given the most recent conflict dynamics in the Middle East it is not foreseeable what a possible further escalation involving states like Iran or Yemen could mean in terms of extremist violence in Europe. What is already apparent is a growing radicalization among young Europeans fueled by anti-Zionist and antisemitic narratives.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

The current escalation of violence in Israel and Gaza is unprecedented. In this sense, it seems likely that the conflict and its consequences will have a continuing impact on European security at least for the next 3-5 years. However, the stability of this trend is considered as volatile, as the overall influencing environment in security policy and geopolitics remains unclear in terms of effects on the trend.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

International pressure on Israel and a decreasing international support for the cause may intensify due to the increased material and immaterial cost of military and counter-terrorist operations. Without doubt the next US-administration will inherit a complicated security challenge that will definitely impact both sides of the Atlantic, whereas Europe will probably be more in the focus of Islamist violence connected to the situation in the region. The question arises if the newly elected US president Donald Trump and his administration will be determined to bring more stability in the region and if so, at what cost.

3. ONGOING RECONFIGURATION OF IS AS GLOBAL JIHADIST ORGANIZATION

3.1. INCREASING ORGANIZATIONAL AND OPERATIONAL FLUIDITY

Movements with transnational goals, such as the re-establishment of a Caliphate, can destabilize regional and global politics. The principle of "*leaderless jihad*" has during the past decade even more become a substantial guiding strategic principle for Islamist terrorists and respective organizations.[93] As Marc Sageman aptly noted, the main actors in this form of leaderless terrorism are homegrown, self-trained, and self-financed. He describes a global network of "*homegrown wannabes*," that has become leaderless in the sense of operating autonomously from a headquarters.[94] The phenomenon of homegrown extremism is closely linked to prior criminal activities, often analyzed through the "*crime-terror nexus*" model.[95] Exactly this kind of franchise (lose networked) terrorism (decentralized and effective) dynamic will for the next 3-5 years remain a guarantee for operational fluidity. Symptomatic for this development is what has been coined by one of the authors as "*McJihad*".[96]

McJihad epitomizes a particular and dynamic form of terror franchise involving a loosely connected network of lone wolves, opportunists, and imitators – typically individual perpetrators without a proven history as jihadists. A majority of recent attacks are low-level assaults carried out by "gangster-jihadists"[97] (petty criminals), failed foreign fighters, asylum seekers facing displacement, converts or aspiring terrorists with no prior affiliation or minimal contact with jihadist networks, attempting to compensate for their various deficiencies.

Table 2: *Perpetrator typology (categorized) of Jihadi plots in Western Europe from 1994- 2021.*

Type	*Total plots*	*Percentage*	*Foiled plots*	*Percentage of foiled plots*
Foreign fighter	84	34	60	71
Woman	17	7	13	76
Minor	21	8	15	71
Convert	43	17	22	51
Refugee	40	16	19	48
Criminal	66	27	24	36
Re-offendig jihadi	14	6	5	36

Source: Nesser (2023): 323.

In the past, jihadist groups would have dismissed petty criminals as recruits due to their activities violating Islamic principles. However, increased law enforcement pressure on traditional recruitment methods has forced jihadists to seek new sources of potential followers.

Such a simplified *"join-in"*-approach allows virtually anyone to become involved at short notice, bypassing lengthy vetting processes, preparation periods, or complex instructions. The general jihadist framework is already in place or not provided; the specific execution is left to the individual. According to this model, the attacker(s) remain(s) tactically flexible and disconnected from any command hierarchy, yet still linked to, or supported by, the broader jihadist movement. At the very least, attackers receive post-attack backing from terrorist organizations, which take credit after the fact. A recurrent pattern of Daesh and its branches is to claim responsibility for attacks committed by their "soldiers".[98]

This decentralized structure enhances the element of surprise in terrorist attacks, making prevention and disruption extremely challenging. The effectiveness of this loose franchise system lies in its reliance on spontaneity and simplicity, with low-level attacks requiring minimal pre-attack communication. *McJihad* is intrinsically tied to low-level terrorism, with perpetrators capitalizing on their independence and lack of direct affiliation.[99] However small cell attacks are also included in this approach.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

This will go on for some time, as the efficiency of this strategy seems to underscore the rationale behind group related terrorist activities such as plotting coordinated attacks. For the next 3-5 years the trend will very likely remain stable.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

A terrorist organization potentially (re-)gaining the strength to compete with security forces symmetrically could change this strategic approach. However, this is from the current perspective to be considered as highly unlikely.

3.2. RETURN OF SMALL CELL TACTICS (E.G. ISKP)

The recent cases involving ISKP operations and operational structures suggest that we may be confronted with a return of small cell tactics and projected attack scenarios.[100]

In the domain of "opportunistic" or low-level terrorism (see 5.), more and more spontaneous and logistically simple attack scenarios with no or minimal connections to so-called "entrepreneurs" (middlemen) have been carried out by individual Islamist perpetrators or (small) cells since 2015.[101] The majority of the attackers were self-radicalized individual actors who meanwhile appeared as free riders.[102] However, cells of different dimensions were also repeatedly involved in the planning and execution of attacks. A distinction is made here between 'planning' and 'support' cells: these structures often consist of fewer than 10 members, who are primarily responsible for fundraising. They may also be responsible for providing driver's licenses, cash, credit cards or shelter, as well as procuring materials for bomb-making. Members of "sleeper" cells may have lived clandestinely in the target country for years and remain inconspicuous until they are activated. "Execution cells" are used in the final phase of an attack. They will use the resources provided by other cells. Operational commanders may only arrive at the last moment before the attack. They may be the only link between local cells and the larger umbrella organization. The commander may not even conduct the operation himself and often leaves the country before the terrorist attack takes place.

Regarding the question of operational-tactical independence or self-sufficiency of the individual perpetrators and/or cells, or whether they are organizationally and/or logistically controlled, it should be noted that the difference between autarkic individual perpetrators and/or cells and loose members or supporters of a jihadist organization in the sense of a jihadist movement or organization is fluid.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

The trend is proving to be rather instable. Both in the jihadist and right-wing extremist spectrum, the focus on small tactical task forces remains relevant and practicable. Many existing CT measures tend to be geared towards larger terrorist groups and traditional methods of operation. In contrast, the low-level approach related to inspired or directed lone attackers is likely to persist as the most common attack pattern.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

If the CT strategies and tactical procedures in place are adapted and the focus is directed towards the detection and disruption of small groups and lone perpetrators, this tactical preference of the terrorists could potentially also be adapted or discarded.

II. ETIOLOGY | MOTIVES | Ideologies & Radicalization

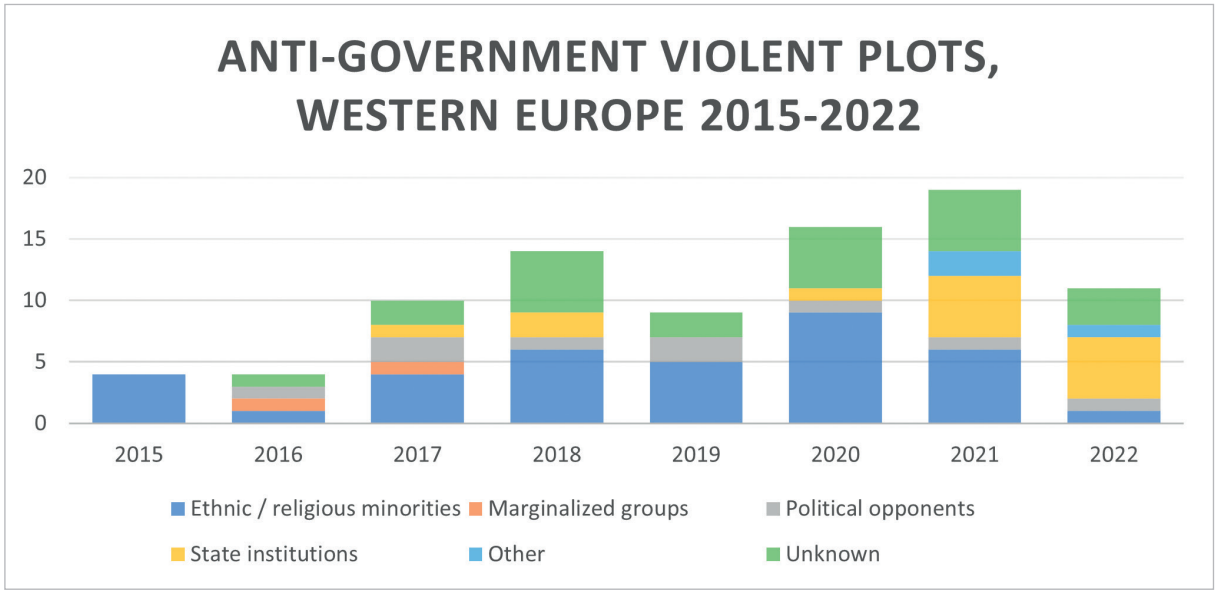
4. ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISM (AGE) ON THE RISE

A generalized climate of distrust in political institutions is not functional to healthy democracies.[103] With the advent of social media, recent scholarly efforts attempt to better understand people's conspiracy theory beliefs in inhibiting institutional trust. Building citizens' trust is fundamental to the development and the consolidation of democracy, and the erosion of institutional trust may endanger established democracies and the system of government. Political Islam (PI) – understood as legalistic Islamism – encompasses ideologies and movements that aim to organize society and governance according to Islamic principles, with Sharia (Islamic law), as a foundational framework. It spans a spectrum from reformist political parties to violent extremist groups. Many strands of PI advocate for the establishment of a society governed by Sharia, which is often seen as incompatible with secular legal and political frameworks. For example, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood or more extreme groups like al-Qaeda reject secular governments as illegitimate.[104] The dangers of political Islam depend on the form it takes and the context in which it operates. While many political Islamist movements function within legal and democratic frameworks, others have demonstrated behaviors or ideologies that pose risks to democratic governance, pluralism, and social stability. PI can exacerbate divisions between religious and secular citizens, or between Muslims and non-Muslims, leading to societal polarization. Many political Islamist movements advocate for conservative interpretations of gender roles, which can restrict women's rights in areas like education, employment, and political participation.

During the last few years, intelligence and security agencies have pointed to 'anti-government extremism' (AGE) as an emerging threat to democracy, political processes, institutions, and elected politicians.[105] However, this term is used to refer to a rather wide range of phenomena, movements, ideas, and actions. Due to recent events, anti-government extremism is obviously a relevant topic that has attracted attention and interest among scholars and security services alike. The general notion is that it refers to movements or ideas over which the government does not have a legitimate basis to exercise power. The pandemic crisis and repressive governmental measures such as lockdown, obligatory facemasks and vaccine requirements provoked widespread resistance, with new constellations of protesters who – despite very diverse ideological backgrounds – often adopted the same conspiracy theories, such as those of QAnon.

A major trend, anti-institutional extremism in different appearances is becoming the most relevant new development in the sphere of ideologically motivated extremism. Anti-government extremism finds different expressions in terms of organizational formations, conspiracy theories, collective action, and violence and threats against politicians and government representatives. These different expressions are loosely connected or combined. Generally, the messages of anti-institutional extremists are not aimed at the system of a democratic legal order. Although anti-institutional extremists do not accept the authority of the current government and strive for such things as a new government, what they consider to be correct media coverage, other/new judges, and independent law enforcement, in general there are no explicit proposals for a different political system. Most of the supporters of this narrative advocate matters such as the preservation of current constitutional rights and do in fact appear to support a separation of powers. Active participation in the democratic process is therefore meant to change the current situation. People have lost faith, but the messages do not target the system itself. The 'evil elite' narrative poses a threat to the vertical dimension of the democratic legal order because it wrongfully harms and undermines the trust in the institutions of the rule of law based on factually incorrect messages stemming from an extremist ideology. Representatives of institutions, such as politicians, journalists, and judges are threatened and intimidated more often.

Table 7: *Anti-Government violent plots, Western Europe 2015-2022.*



Source: RTV Trend Report 2023

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

It seems likely that dissatisfaction with political institutions will persist over the next 3–5 years, fueled by ongoing social and economic challenges. However, this trend remains unstable, as the manifestations of antigovernment extremism (AGE) are constantly evolving, influenced by shifting political landscapes and changing societal dynamics. Moreover, government transitions and democratic shifts could alter the motivations and targets of such movements, potentially leading to new forms of dissent or radicalization. As the political climate continues to fluctuate, the strategies and ambitions of antigovernment groups may also adapt in response to these changes.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

It is also possible that the post-pandemic period could reduce the anger and fear directed at governments, institutions, and the broader framework of "liberal democracies." However, this remains uncertain, as tipping points may emerge where lingering socio-economic hardships or unaddressed grievances reignite public dissatisfaction. Factors such as economic recovery, shifts in political leadership, or new crises could either alleviate or exacerbate existing tensions. The pace of recovery, alongside how effectively governments address the root causes of discontent, will play a critical role in determining whether this period of instability subsides or if it leads to a new phase of heightened antigovernment extremism. The interplay of these dynamics introduces significant uncertainty in predicting the trajectory of public sentiment and radicalization in the coming years.

5. RISING ISLAMISM

The continuing expansion of Islamism in different forms and expressions in European societies is a key trend of this analysis as it influences extremism and terrorism to a high degree.

Islamism, an ideology advocating for the integration of Islamic principles into political governance often opposing democratic values, has been a subject of concern in Europe due to its potential impact on liberal democracy and social cohesion. The debate over wearing the burqa or niqab in public spaces has sparked controversy in countries like France, where secularism is regarded as a societal achievement of the French Revolution. Islamist groups in France cultivate environments that facilitate the spread of their ideologies, impacting local communities and their integration into broader society. These networks create "ecosystems" that promote anti-democratic ideologies in essence at odds with constitutional principles of the French Republic. By fostering environments that support communalism and radical interpretations of Islam, these networks challenge secularism and social cohesion.[106]

The rise of Islamist movements, both non-violent and violent, poses challenges to European societies. Islamist narratives can obstruct integration efforts by promoting separation from mainstream society, leading to parallel and counter-societies. Islamist terrorism has in the last two decades gained traction in Europe with short interruptions. The presence and subversive activities of non-violent Islamist organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have raised concerns about efforts to influence political systems and societal norms. These groups aim at sneakingly fostering Islamism in public life, which may be regarded as conflicting with secular and democratic principles.[107] Purposely, ("*Political*" or *legalistic*) Islamism explicitly presents itself in rejection of violent extremist expressions such as jihadism. However, some undeniable original ties between legalistic organizations such as those between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas exist.[108] Jihadism in the West is still in a post-caliphate transitory phase, as Lorenzo Vidino argues.[109] According to his assessment, factors such as the presence of radicalizing agents, the socio-economic marginalization of local Muslim communities, and the effectiveness of local counter-terrorism efforts determine how "successful" Islamist motivated terrorism can be.

Demographic Changes and Migration

Europe has experienced significant demographic shifts, with an increasing Muslim population resulting from immigration and higher birth rates among Muslim communities. Between mid-2010 and mid-2016, approximately 3.7 million Muslims migrated to Europe, including about 1.3 million refugees.[110] This growth has led to more visible Islamic practices and institutions across the continent, with a special impact for Western European countries.[111] On the other side, there are still no clear, exact figures on how many Muslims have left Europe since 2010, as migration data is often aggregated by nationality or general migration flows rather than specific religious groups. The trend has been marked more by a steady increase in Muslim immigration rather than a significant exodus. Additionally, Europe has faced threats from terrorist groups like IS and al-Qaeda, which have orchestrated terrorist attacks, leading to heightened security measures and public anxiety. Organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood may not endorse violence but promote anti-democratic values and undermine pluralism through gradual societal changes.[112] Certain Islamist movements in Europe receive outside financial and ideological backing from states interested in supporting such dynamics. Among others Qatar, Turkey or Iran have been often criticized, sometimes openly accused of providing such direct or indirect support.[113]

Cultural Integration and Social Tensions

Growing Muslim populations in Europe have sparked debates over cultural integration and the preservation of European values. Countries like France banned full-face veils in public spaces in 2010. Such measures have also been criticized for potentially stigmatizing Muslim communities and infringing on religious freedoms. Several countries, such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Italy, illustrate this current phenomenon. Mass migration from crisis regions particularly from

Muslim countries, overt religious expressions in schools and public spaces, growing crime rates involving migrants (knife attacks, sexual assaults and others) and also Islamist terrorism have created growing insecurity among the European populations and caused a shift in voting behavior towards the Right margin of the political spectrum. In response, some Social Democratic parties also adjusted their policies accordingly.

Balancing Security and Integration
European governments face the challenge of addressing security concerns related to radicalization while promoting the integration of Muslim communities. Efforts include counter-terrorism initiatives and programs aimed at fostering social cohesion. However, balancing these objectives remains complex, as overly restrictive policies can alienate Muslim populations, potentially exacerbating radicalization. The real question is how to push back against the relevant legalistic Islamist organizations and their ideology while simultaneously addressing the needs and concerns of ordinary Muslims in the country.

In summary, the growing influence of Islamism in Europe presents various challenges, some of undeniable complexity, involving demographic changes, cultural integration, security threats, and political dynamics. Addressing these issues requires nuanced policies that uphold democratic values, protect religious freedoms, and ensure the safety and cohesion of European societies.[114]

The risks and challenges associated with a rising Islamism- both in its non-violent and violent forms- in Europe are wide-ranging, encompassing security concerns, societal tensions, political polarization, and challenges to democratic values. Risks concern security matters and the stability/ resilience of liberal democracy (social cohesion and integration) alike.

SECURITY CHALLENGES

- *Radicalization and Terrorism*: Extremist Islamist groups pose a direct threat to public safety through pertinently motivated terrorist attacks. Groups like IS have actively recruited in Europe, targeting vulnerable individuals, and fostering homegrown terrorism.[115]
- *Return of Foreign Fighters*: Individuals who traveled to conflict zones such as Syria or Iraq and joined extremist groups may return to Europe, potentially radicalized and posing a security threat.
- *Underground Networks*: Non-violent Islamist movements may support radical ideologies indirectly by fostering environments conducive to radicalization.

SOCIAL COHESION AND INTEGRATION CHALLENGES

- *Community Polarization*: Perceived or actual Islamization can lead to alienation between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, reducing trust and cooperation.
- *Cultural Clashes*: Differences in values, such as views on gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, or secularism, can create friction between communities.
- *Marginalization*: Discriminatory policies or societal attitudes can push Muslim populations to the margins, increasing their vulnerability to radical ideologies.

DEMOCRATIC AND CULTURAL RISKS

- *Erosion of Secularism*: The essence of Islamist movements lies in their commitment to these goals – this is what defines Islamism. And it's not just about gaining control of state leadership; that is merely the final step. Initially, their efforts focus on embedding their values within Muslim communities. The next phase involves extending these values to the broader society, such as promoting modest fashion for women, gender segregation, or adherence to Islamic dietary and fasting rules. In some cases, they have already achieved significant success. For example, the supposed Islamic prohibition on images has largely become a

societal and media norm. No newspaper would dare to publish depictions of Mohammed anymore, not even historical ones from Islamic manuscript art.
- *Impact on Free Speech*: Debates surrounding Islamism often lead to accusations of Islamophobia, potentially stifling open discourse.
- *Challenge to Liberal Values*: Practices such as sharia-compliant finance, gender segregation, or the imposition of conservative Islamic norms may challenge existing societal norms.

POLITICAL RISKS

- *Influence of Islamist Groups*: Political Islam seeks to shape policies to align with Islamic principles, which may challenge pluralistic and democratic frameworks.
- *Fragmentation of Policy Responses*: The policy towards Islamism is inconsistent and lacks coherence. While some measures focus on prevention and deradicalization, others prioritize strict security approaches. This fragmented strategy often fails to address the root causes of radicalization or to present a unified framework for dealing with the issue. A comprehensive and balanced approach is necessary, combining education, integration, and security measures to effectively counter the complex challenges posed by Islamism.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF THE TREND

The trend's stability is contingent upon ongoing counterterrorism efforts, effective integration policies, and the broader socio-political climate in Europe. While European authorities have implemented robust counter-terrorism measures, the evolving nature of Islamist extremism necessitates continuous vigilance. Recent developments indicate that the threat remains present, with certain regions experiencing heightened risks. Ongoing efforts to monitor, prevent, and respond to Islamist extremist activities are crucial to ensuring public safety and security across Europe. Continuous vigilance and adaptive strategies are essential to mitigate the influence of Islamist ideologies and prevent potential escalations. Proactive measures to address integration, counter radicalization, and manage societal tensions are essential to navigating these complex dynamics. Continuous monitoring of geopolitical and social developments is key to anticipating and mitigating potential risks.

TIPPING POINTS AND UNCERTAINTIES

Tipping points are critical thresholds where small changes can lead to significant and often irreversible shifts in the dynamics of Islamism in Europe.

- Large-scale conflicts in the Middle East or Africa could trigger mass migration to Europe (such as the new instable situation in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024).
- Sudden influxes of refugees may strain integration systems, creating conditions for radical ideologies to spread.
- A high-profile Islamist terrorist attack could either bolster far-right movements, creating societal backlash, or lead to more aggressive counterterrorism policies.
- This could exacerbate alienation among Muslim communities, potentially fostering further radicalization.
- If governments fail to effectively integrate Muslim communities into European society, socio-economic disparities and feelings of marginalization may worsen.
- Such environments can serve as breeding grounds for radical ideologies.
- Increased use of encrypted communication platforms or AI for propaganda could allow extremist groups to evade detection while enhancing their recruitment strategies.
    - Two interconnected but distinct developments contribute to the radicalization of young people. One relates to the social structures within communities, while the other concerns the increasing spread of Islamist ideologies online. Both factors can work together to accelerate the radicalization process in youth.

- The role of social and religious communities where Islamist ideologies are propagated is key. In mosques and religious institutions linked to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood or Milli Görüş, young people may be exposed to extremist ideologies. These non-violent extremist structures not only impart religious beliefs but also promote a dichotomous worldview that can foster violent or radical tendencies.
- The fear of a spreading *"Islamist Online Market"* concerns the fast-expanding digital sphere, where Islamist ideologies are increasingly propagated. It provides a platform for radicalization, as extremist content is deliberately targeted at young people. Social media and forums, in particular, sometimes promote a highly polarized worldview that supports jihadist principles or other extremist movements. The online world thus serves not only to reinforce existing ideologies within communities but also as a "catalyst," pushing amenable adolescents further into radicalization.

The ideologies nurtured within communities can be amplified or supplemented by online content, while the digital world also acts as an additional space for the exchange and validation of radical ideas. Radicalization, therefore, takes place not only in physical communities but also in digital spaces, making prevention and intervention more challenging. The challenge lies in recognizing and addressing both aspects to reduce the influence of Islamist ideologies on young people, both within real-world communities and in the digital realm alike.

6. IMMENSELY GROWING ANTISEMITISM AS COMMON DENOMINATOR OF ISLAMISM, LEFT- AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM

The growing antisemitism in Europe is a serious concern that has intensified over the past decade. Antisemitic incidents, including hate speech, vandalism, violence, and discrimination, have been on the rise across various European countries, spurred by far-right extremism, Islamist radicalism, and even left-wing anti-Israel sentiments.

Antisemitic resentment must be seen in a different light after October 7, 2023. From the pandemic to geopolitical conflicts, antisemitism persists, adapting to contemporary contexts and finding new avenues of expression. Indeed, antisemitism is the glue of most modern extremist ideologies. Coming in different manifestations, rooted in various narratives and ideas, it has become a mantra of extremism on the entire scale. Horizontally from the extreme left to the extreme right and in the vertical Islamist foundation. Antisemitism pervades the public sphere, especially in the light of the developments. Reproducing and engraining negative stereotypes about Jews is widespread. Some member states such as Germany have responded by appointing coordinators (via state or federal units) on combating antisemitism. There is a very low reporting for antisemitic discrimination in all ideologies, especially within the phenomena of Islamism and right-wing extremism. The question must be raised how much antisemitism enters the mainstream in times of a new conflict (cleavage) between identity and globalism. A significant increase in attacks on Jewish individuals and institutions (synagogues, schools, cultural centers) has been documented in recent years, especially in France, Germany, and the UK.[116]

With the assumption of growing antisemitism, security risks are the consequence: an increase of Antisemitic attacks against Jews in person or towards symbols und properties; radicalization as a feature in public discourse striking an antisemitic tone; the rise of Islamism and Political Islam if some correlations with other ideologies occur; the influence of foreign policies within Europe towards Israel and the Islamic states. Whereas antisemitism is more and more hidden in official statements from far-right politicians such as Marine Le Pen, antisemitism is openly expressed by Islamist groups. In the case of the extreme Right, it is frequently embedded in revisionist positions on the Second World War. Islamists, on the other hand, voice anti-Semitic positions with references to Israel, anti-Jewish excerpts from Islamic scripture, and hostile attitudes towards Western societies in the context of an alleged “war against Islam”. The two movements – the extreme Right and Islamists – include a variety of organizations with different aims and *modi operandi*. They share anti-Semitic ideology to different degrees and their anti-Semitism takes various forms. The Hamas charter, the statements from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Milli Görüş movement and, not least, the slogans at the pro-Palestine demonstrations show, it is part of the legitimization strategy of political Islamic actors to lend credibility to anti-Semitism through constant recourse to Islamic tradition. Analyzing latest trends in online antisemitism reveals that, instead of existing in isolation, antisemitic speech is intricately linked to the broader socio-political dynamics.[117]

The growth of antisemitism in Europe is driven by a combination of far-right extremism, Islamist radicalism, and left-wing anti-Zionism, all exacerbated by online platforms and political polarization. While there have been efforts at the EU and national levels to address these issues, many Jewish communities still face significant risks, with rising violence, hate speech, and social alienation. Combatting this growing threat requires stronger legal frameworks, public education, and more effective regulation of online content to ensure the safety and security of Jewish communities across Europe.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

Looking ahead to the next 3-5 years, the trend of rising antisemitism in Europe is expected to remain stable, if not to continue to grow. The ongoing social and political divisions across Europe, combined with the economic challenges and geopolitical tensions, may further exacerbate these

forms of hate. Additionally, the continued spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories on digital platforms will likely contribute to the normalization of antisemitic rhetoric, making it more visible and, in some cases, more acceptable. Governments, civil society organizations, and Jewish communities will likely continue to work together to combat these developments, but the persistence of extremist ideologies and the ease with which hate can be propagated online will pose significant challenges. Therefore, without effective countermeasures, the next few years may see an ongoing escalation in antisemitic incidents across Europe.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

While the trend of rising antisemitism in Europe is expected to remain stable in the next 3-5 years, there are several uncertainties and potential tipping points that could alter its trajectory. One key factor is the effectiveness of government and community initiatives to counter antisemitic rhetoric and violence. If robust policies, legal frameworks, and education programs are implemented successfully, this could slow the rise of antisemitism, potentially leading to a trend break. However, there is a risk that continued political and social polarization, combined with economic instability, could fuel even more radicalized anti-Semitic narratives, particularly in the context of global crises or rising extremism.

Another uncertainty lies in the role of online platforms, where antisemitic content can spread rapidly and with little oversight. Technological advancements in content moderation and greater regulation could mitigate this issue, but the rapid evolution of digital tools might allow extremists to circumvent these measures. A significant tipping point could also occur if violent attacks or high-profile incidents of antisemitism spark widespread public outcry and lead to stronger societal pushback. In contrast, if left unchecked, these incidents could reinforce the normalization of hate speech, making it more difficult to counteract. Therefore, while the overall trend may continue, external factors and responses to antisemitism will significantly shape its future development.

7. NARRATIVES BECOME THE ESSENTIAL TOOL OF EXTREMIST STRATEGY

Narratives shape and expand terrorist strategies. Narratives are the battleground for ideologies. Weaponized narratives legitimate violence.[118] In the last years, new patchwork narratives have become visible in the frame of conspiracy theories. Some old narratives such as those fueling antisemitism have been revitalized. A climate of existential insecurity and selective information, and the isolation of certain groups and individuals simultaneously facilitate susceptibility to extremist narratives and depreciative/degrading ideologies in various milieus. This principally affects all ideological spectrums, forms, and levels of extremism, including "state deniers", anti-vaxxers with agenda-specific, recently predominantly pro-Russian actionism, conspiracy theorists, militant climate activists as well as right-wing and left-wing extremists and a wide range of Islamists (from legalists to jihadists). Despite different ideologies, arguments, and ambitions, they basically pursue similar intentions by acting against the fundamental values of the democratic constitutional state. Their common denominator lies in the rejection of the state´s authority as a "*monopoly of legitimate violence*" (Max Weber) and its organs, which are seen as "the only ones to blame" for existing grievances. Extremist narratives are used in a targeted attempt to delegitimize the state and its constitutional institutions and undermine democracy as such. In this context, narratives about conspiracies, exploitation, and oppression, as well as other forms of communication aimed at discrediting the system, experience a boom, especially in times of crisis and exceptional circumstances. Violent radicalization is mainly executed through propagandistically exploited narratives of violence and victimhood that have specific characteristics and content, use relevant communication codes, are aimed at a specific audience receptive to such propaganda and are spread in a variety of ways. These narratives are used to legitimize violence. More than ever, narratives are more effective to promote extremist positions and violence than closed ideologies that are not as accessible for many susceptible persons.[119]

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

The importance of narratives in the context of extremism will continue to grow, as they serve as a powerful toolkit for mobilization, recruitment, and radicalization. Extremist groups utilize compelling and emotionally charged stories to recruit individuals, create a sense of belonging, and justify violence in pursuit of their ideologies. These narratives often draw on deep-seated grievances, perceived injustices, and ideological frameworks that resonate with vulnerable individuals. As a result, the ability to control and shape narratives will remain a central strategy for extremists in promoting their causes and sustaining their movements. In this context, the trend of narrative-driven extremism is expected to remain stable, with extremists continuously adapting their messages to appeal to evolving social, political, and economic conditions. Despite efforts to counteract extremist content, the fluid nature of online platforms and the ability of these groups to quickly adjust their tactics means that the role of narratives in radicalization will remain a significant challenge. Furthermore, the rise of social media and decentralized communication tools makes it easier for these narratives to spread rapidly, amplifying their reach and impact.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

A successful counter-narrative campaign, or one that is rooted in alternative narratives, can significantly disrupt the strategic approach of extremist groups. Extremism thrives on the power of narratives that justify violence, manipulate grievances, and recruit new members by portraying the world in stark terms of "us versus them." By offering compelling, alternative narratives that challenge these extremist ideologies, counter-narratives can reduce the appeal of violence and undermine the recruitment strategies of terrorist organizations. These alternative stories, based on inclusion, tolerance, and shared values, can provide individuals with a sense of belonging that is not rooted in hatred or division.

By countering the toxic and divisive messages promoted by extremists, these narratives can influence attitudes, build resilience, and reduce the likelihood of individuals joining violent movements. Moreover, the effectiveness of such campaigns depends on the engagement of multiple stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and communities, to ensure that these alternative narratives resonate with diverse audiences. With well-crafted messages, these efforts can disrupt the sense of purpose that extremist ideologies provide, challenging their very foundation and ultimately weakening the appeal of violence.

8. EMERGENCE OF PATCHWORK / SALAD BAR IDEOLOGY AMONG EXTREMISTS

The phenomenon of "*salad bar extremism*," or mixed ideology extremism is a growing concern for European security.[120] This term – sometimes also ironically coined as "*Smörgåsbord ideology*" – refers to a blend of contradictory extremist ideologies which is adopted by individuals to radicalize and justify violence. Unlike traditional extremists with a coherent ideology, these individuals cherry-pick from various sources – white supremacism, radical Islamism, conspiracy theories, misogyny, etc. – to construct their own eclectic worldview. Such a customized "*à la carte*" approach makes their categorization and detection more difficult. As Daveed Gartenstein-Ross put it, it reflects "*an amalgamation of different disparate beliefs, interests and grievances (idiosyncratic patterns of grievances) … We as people are becoming more incoherent [and] extremists are becoming more incoherent as well*".[121] Incoherence means arbitrariness. Societal polarization, the proliferation of extremist content online, decentralized access to information, and the normalization of conspiracy theories are factors to explain this trend. Social media and online forums, like a hawker's tray offering a variety, play a significant role in exposing individuals to multiple radical ideologies. Facing an eclectic patchwork of beliefs, this "*lack of rigidity*" translates to what Daveed Gartenstein-Ross has called *'fringe fluidity'* and what Bruce Hoffman has dubbed *"ideological convergence"*.[122] Evidence suggests that this phenomenon already has been a guiding aspect in recent attacks, where perpetrators blended disparate elements such as neo-Nazism, anti-government sentiment, and misogyny. For example, during a 2018 Ohio plot to attack synagogues, the converted IS supporter Damon Joseph expressed admiration for the neo-Pittsburgh Nazi attacker Robert Bowers.[123] Also, in September 2020, an unusual case of cross-ideology amalgamation is suitable to highlight the complex nature of "*salad bar extremism*" in the United States, where this trend originated. Two members of the far-right militia Boogaloo Bois movement, Benjamin R. Teeter and Michael R. Solomon, were arrested by the FBI for attempting to provide weapons to Hamas, a designated terrorist organization.[124] This incident was particularly striking because the Boogaloo Bois, typically associated with far-right anti-government ideologies, sought to support an Islamist group that would seem ideologically incompatible with their usual stance. Their actions were reportedly motivated by a shared hostility towards the U.S. government rather than any genuine alignment with Hamas' goals or ideology. On both sides of the Atlantic after the October 7 attack we have seen alliances between supporters of Hamas and left-wing activists and extremists.[125] It may be discussed if this is a "salad bar" case or just a common cross-ideology alliance. The most recent case of the Magdeburg car rampage attack on a Christmas market just before Christmas 2024 however suggests ideological ingredients that may suit the convergent pattern of salad-bar extremism: conspiracy narratives, Muslim hatred and other mostly contradicting ideology fragments combined seem to coincide.[126]

For intelligence services, the random mixture complicates the identification of potential threats based solely on ideology.[127] Faced with this challenge, approaches to preventing and combating violent extremism must adapt. Even though the phenomenon had been primarily observed in the US context, European authorities are more and more concerned about a spill-over effect and are starting to discuss P/CVE strategies to address this issue.[128]

Against this background, "*salad bar extremism*" illustrates the growing complexity and diversity of contemporary extremism. It underscores the need for a more refined understanding of individual radicalization pathways and flexible, multidimensional prevention approaches.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

It is likely, but by no means certain, that the trend of "salad bar extremism" will gain further ground in Europe within the next 3-5 years. This phenomenon, where individuals pick and choose elements from various extremist ideologies, appears to be more of an emerging trend rather than a fully established development. In the European context, it remains a relatively new and fluid concept, making it difficult to predict its trajectory with accuracy. The stability of this trend is currently not

measurable, as the conditions that allow for such radicalization are still evolving and not yet fully understood. However, there are indicators that suggest instability, such as the constant evolution of online extremism, the growing interconnectivity of extremist groups, and the potential for individuals to be influenced by multiple ideological sources simultaneously. Additionally, the fluid nature of social media platforms and the increasing difficulty in monitoring such diverse and decentralized movements add to the unpredictability. If the trend continues, it may lead to a more fragmented form of extremism in Europe, where radical ideologies become even harder to track and prevent. However, government and counter-extremism efforts could either dampen or accelerate this development, depending on how quickly they adapt to these new forms of radicalization.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

There are several factors that could strongly impact the trend of extremist ideologies online and lead to alternative developments. One potential development is the continuation of salad bar extremism, which may remain predominantly a U.S. phenomenon. This form of extremism, where individuals combine various ideologies to form their own radical beliefs, is influenced by the diverse ideological landscape and political climate in the U.S. However, mixed ideologies do not necessarily have to lead to violence. It's possible that individuals who adopt elements from various extremist ideologies might engage more in online activism, rhetoric, or subversive activities rather than violent acts. Moreover, the radicalization process for some individuals could significantly focus on one particular ideological aspect – such as anti-government sentiments or anti-immigrant views – without the complete fusion of multiple ideologies. This narrowing of focus could lead to more targeted, less complex forms of extremism, which may not escalate to large-scale violence but could still pose serious threats through smaller-scale attacks or sustained online influence.

9. RISE OF CONSPIRACY-DRIVEN TERRORISM

Conspiracy-driven terrorism refers to acts of violence or terror that are motivated by conspiracy narratives, often based on extreme distrust of governments, institutions, or societal elites. These conspiracy theories typically involve complex, often baseless claims about secret plots or manipulations by powerful groups (such as governments, corporations, or global organizations) to control or harm the general population. When individuals or groups become radicalized by such beliefs, they may resort to violence to act against what they perceive as a tyrannical or corrupt system. Conclusively, one may identify some key characteristics of this phenomenon:

1. Misinformation and Radicalization:

- Conspiracy-driven terrorism is fueled by misinformation, often spread through the internet and social media platforms. False narratives can circulate rapidly, reaching vulnerable or already disillusioned individuals who feel excluded or powerless.
- Believers of conspiracy myths often see themselves as part of an awakening or special group of people who understand the truth, which can fuel radicalization and violent responses.[129]

2. Common Themes:

- Anti-Government Sentiments: Several conspiracy narratives center around the idea that governments or elites are intentionally harming or oppressing citizens (e.g., through surveillance, globalist plots, or pandemic-related control measures).
- Fear of Globalist/Elite Control: This belief underlies many far-right conspiracies, including claims about secret societies (e.g., the Illuminati or the deep state) that manipulate global events.[130]
- Apocalyptic and QAnon Movements: Conspiracies such as QAnon have led to violent actions and plots, with followers believing in a hidden cabal of elites who commit crimes against humanity, leading to attacks on political figures and institutions (e.g., the U.S. Capitol storming in 2021).[131]

3. Decentralized and leaderless:

- Conspiracy-driven terrorism is often leaderless. People radicalized by conspiracy theories may act independently, making them more unpredictable and harder for law enforcement to detect.
- They are often lone actors or part of small, decentralized cells inspired by the belief that they are fighting a tyrannical government or saving humanity.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

Conspiracy-driven terrorism is expected to continue its upward trajectory over the next 3–5 years, driven by the growing influence of online platforms and social media in spreading extremist ideologies. As misinformation and radical narratives gain traction, particularly among isolated or disenfranchised individuals, the appeal of conspiracy theories will likely deepen, further fueling acts of violence. This trend is characterized by individuals or small groups motivated by false or distorted beliefs, often targeting perceived enemies or scapegoats, such as government institutions, minority groups, or specific ideological adversaries. The continued proliferation of echo chambers online, where individuals are exposed primarily to reinforcing viewpoints, will contribute to the persistence and spread of these conspiracy-driven ideologies.

In the next few years, we may see an increasing number of lone-actor attacks inspired by conspiracy theories, often with minimal logistical planning but potentially devastating impacts. Although governments and social media companies will likely implement measures to curb the spread of

misinformation, the decentralized nature of these movements makes them particularly difficult to disrupt. The role of so-called "influencers" within these communities – who amplify conspiracy-driven narratives – will remain a critical factor in sustaining the growth of these groups. While countermeasures such as information campaigns and fact-checking efforts may slow the rise of such terrorism, they are unlikely to eliminate the phenomenon entirely.

The next 3–5 years will most likely see this trend stabilize, with conspiracy-driven terrorism remaining a consistent threat. Governments and security agencies will need to focus on both the digital and physical dimensions of this issue, addressing the root causes of radicalization and providing targeted interventions to prevent violent acts inspired by these ideologies.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Possible tipping points in the rise of conspiracy-driven terrorism could include a major event or crisis that amplifies distrust in institutions, leading to a surge in radicalization. Another uncertainty lies in the effectiveness of countermeasures – if governments and tech companies fail to curb the spread of misinformation, the trend could accelerate, while successful interventions might reduce its scope. Lastly, shifting public sentiment or significant political changes could either diminish the appeal of conspiracy theories or, conversely, give rise to new narratives that fuel further violence, making the trajectory of this trend highly unpredictable.

9.1. FAKE NEWS AND NWO FANTASIES

Particularly the emergence of stochastic terrorism indicates the growing impact of conspiracy narratives on terrorist action.[132] It is expectable that future terrorist attacks may increasingly imply conspiracy ideologies. Some conspiracy theories are harmless, but others can have destabilizing effects and incite people to violence. Not surprisingly, conspiracy theories constitute a powerful recruitment tool for extremist ideologies and, conversely, extremist ideologies can be conducive to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have been linked to violent extremist attacks, creating a view that holding one may be a motivating factor for engaging in violence. The FBI intelligence in 2019, describes "conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists," as a growing threat.[133]

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for conspiracy theories. Given that the virus is invisible, corresponding conspiracy beliefs flourished, as in every period of crisis. In the framework of the geopolitical context and the decline of the West, it is very likely that new conspiracy theories arise (as it was during the last years with QAnon, Incels, etc.).[134] On various platforms such as Steam (*gamification of terror*) or recently Tik Tok, it can be empirically proved that conspiracy theories can enforce violence or even terrorism.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

This trend has been particularly concerning in Europe, where we have recently witnessed the rise of antisemitic stereotypes, often fueled by misinformation and conspiracy theories. Over the next 3-5 years, this phenomenon is likely to remain stable, as the rapid spread of misinformation continues to thrive in the digital age. Despite efforts to counter fake news through fact-checking and media literacy campaigns, the amplification of conspiracy theories, including those targeting specific communities, will likely persist. The rise of alternative media platforms and the erosion of trust in traditional news sources could further entrench these harmful narratives, making it increasingly difficult to reverse their impact. As a result, the persistence of fake news and NWO fantasies will continue to shape public discourse, with significant implications for political stability, social cohesion, and intergroup relations.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Tipping points could arise from the growing influence of fake news and conspiracy theories, such as those surrounding the “New World Order” (NWO), which may further polarize public opinion and exacerbate distrust in political institutions. These false narratives can amplify existing grievances, making individuals more susceptible to radical ideologies. Moreover, government transitions and democratic shifts could alter the motivations and targets of such movements, potentially leading to new forms of dissent or radicalization. As the political climate continues to fluctuate, the strategies and ambitions of antigovernment groups may also adapt in response to these changes, creating significant uncertainties in the trajectory of AGE.

10. ONGOING HYBRID RADICALIZATION (ON-OFFLINE)

Online radicalization refers to a process by which individuals are influenced or encouraged to adopt extremist ideologies through the internet.[135]

However as a distinguished group of radicalization scholars has pointed out, *"online extremism at the level of the user works with the assumption that radicalization, while it can be impacted by things that happen online, does not come purely as a result of online behaviors*".[136] Therefore we should preferably speak of "dual" or "hybrid" radicalization, both on- and offline, whereas the online part is steadily playing a more important role in the complex and evolving process of turning towards extremism.[137] Despite growing online-radicalization, the dual aspect of both offline (in person) and online radicalization seems to shape the phenomenon for the time being. Radicalization is not a new phenomenon, but it is increasingly a challenge, with new technologies and the growing polarization of society making it a serious threat throughout the EU. The internet has primarily facilitated radicalization through information provision, as well as amplifying group polarization and legitimizing extreme ideology and violence through echoing.

Ideology appears as an important and constant factor in the radicalization process towards terrorism.[138] Ideological indoctrination plays a crucial role in turning a small but significant minority dissatisfied with existing social and political arrangements into militants. Ideology contributes to the acceptance of violence as a method to bring about political change and leads to the creation of a subculture of violence. In general, radicalization to any form of terrorist violence is a phased process. There are various descriptions in the relevant literature regarding the number and type of phases, stages, or steps within the radicalization process.[139] In this context, "violent radicalization" primarily refers to radicalization to jihadist violence or jihadist terrorism. Yet there are, as will be stressed below, remarkable parallels between radicalization to current jihadist terrorism and radicalization to left-wing, right-wing, or nationalist separatist extremism/terrorism.

Radicalization processes draw on social networks for joining and staying connected. Physical and online networks provide spaces in which people can become radicalized and the more closed these spaces are, the more they can function as echo chambers where participants mutually affirm extreme beliefs without being challenged.

Dynamics in the radicalization process are diverse and multicausal. Radicalization is never merely linear and always requires a platform and catalysts or amplifiers. According to the approach of Arie Kruglanski, there are three main system levels or "*components*" that determine radicalization: the *needs* component, the ideological (*narrative*) component and the *networks* component.[140] In principle, amplifiers must address all three system levels. This is increasingly done online in virtual spaces, but the aspect of real-world confirmation must not be lost sight of. Online and offline worlds are increasingly interdependent – from visits to radical mosques and meetings with like-minded people at sports clubs to specific instructions via TikTok or, at a later stage, Telegram. This can be confirmed as a trend in many recent relevant cases, especially as there seems to be concrete evidence for this dual radicalization.

The ongoing challenge is one of putting together on- and offline activities, the correlations, and interactions between the "two worlds", including the mutual dynamics. Ideologies, strategies and tactics of jihadi groups and xenophobic ethno-nationals are often similar and even symbiotic.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

It seems that we are facing an ongoing and unstable dynamic in the field of "online radicalization" over the next 3-5 years. As technology continues to evolve, the tools and platforms used by extremists to spread their ideologies will also become more sophisticated, making it increasingly difficult for authorities to keep pace. While online radicalization efforts are often decentralized,

the ability to reach vulnerable individuals through targeted messaging, social media algorithms, and encrypted communication channels will likely continue to enable extremist movements to grow and adapt. As extremist content increasingly proliferates across multiple digital platforms, the threat of online radicalization remains fluid and unpredictable, with emerging platforms and technologies constantly shifting the landscape. Governments and tech companies may introduce more stringent regulations and detection systems, but extremists are also likely to develop new tactics to evade detection, creating an ongoing cycle of adaptation. This instability in the dynamics of online radicalization means that the strategies to combat it must remain flexible, continuously evolving in response to new technological and social developments. Thus, in the coming years, it is crucial to anticipate rapid shifts in the digital environment that could either exacerbate or mitigate the spread of extremist ideologies.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Whether “deradicalization”, or disengagement strategies, are truly effective remains uncertain, as their success often depends on a range of factors, including the individual’s personal circumstances, social environment, and the type of extremist ideology involved. While various programs have been implemented with some success, the long-term effectiveness of such strategies is difficult to measure, as they often require continuous support and engagement. The process of deradicalization is complex and may involve addressing deep-rooted grievances, personal trauma, and identity crises, which are not easily resolved. Furthermore, the impact of regulating digital platforms in countering extremist content also remains unclear. While stricter content moderation and the removal of harmful material could theoretically reduce the exposure of vulnerable individuals to radicalizing influences, extremists may quickly adapt by moving to new platforms or using encrypted communication methods. Additionally, overly aggressive regulation could lead to challenges in balancing freedom of speech with national security concerns. As these dynamics evolve, it is likely that both deradicalization strategies and digital platform regulation will need to be continuously reassessed and adapted to effectively address the changing landscape of online extremism.

III. MORPHOLOGY | INSTRUMENTALITY | MODUS OPERANDI

11. EMERGENCE OF "MUTANT JIHADISM" (EU-CTC WEGTER)

Five years after the fall of the so-called Islamic State "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, the EU's new counter-terrorism coordinator (EU-CTC), Bartjan Wegter, identifies a more diffuse jihadist threat, coming from many different directions and spreading online. This is what Wegter terms as "*mutant jihadism*".[141] Such a development must be seen in the context of the emergence of the IS offshoot ISKP (Islamic State – Khorasan Province) and the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel that are empowering Islamist propaganda and radicalization in Western societies. Salafi jihadists, both organizations as well as micro-structures are seeking to take advantage of this dynamic. On the one hand, there is "*low-key*" Islamist online content on different platforms – such as TikTok[142], YouTube, 4Chan, Reddit and others, but on the other hand also very brutal and violent jihadist propaganda material shared on Telegram Channels and elsewhere.

Wegter admits that besides a consequent struggle for removal of jihadist content, more needs to be done to tackle "*borderline content*" (low-threshold formats) online that might be inciting hatred and fueling individuals' radicalization. In this light, the phenomenon of "influencer preachers", which is increasingly significant, can be considered as a driving force of what has been called "TikTok-radicalization"[143] (see the referring trend). A striking example for "borderline-content"[144], is the new generation of "hipster Salafists"[145], as they are sometimes referred to, who seek to adopt a pop cultural expression and aim to present themselves in a modern way on the internet. Everyday problems are framed and interpreted or infused with Islamist ideas. The preacher's casual and relatable appearance and providing Q&A – style content in the language of the followers – is a savvy tactic of low-key Islamist propaganda under the threshold of legal authorities. Their goal is low-threshold proselytization – nothing less than a sort of gateway drug to Islamism.[146] A major concern is that they repeatedly succeed in delivering partially radical messages to their target audience or in trivializing, distorting, or deliberately falsifying messages. Time and again – often in veiled forms – antisemitism and homophobia emerge in their messages. This advances societal division and fosters an open rejection of other religions and lifestyles. Perhaps it is more than just a subversive tactic – rather a sophisticated strategy. Salafist online preachers (who are sometimes both radical preachers and postmodern social media influencers) attempt to present Islamism in a youth–friendly, easily digestible way and to legally propagate Salafi-Jihadist messages. Sometimes, especially for the primary target group of male adolescents, this is the entry ticket to more advanced extremist content and aspirations. In the context of the Viennese attack plot prior to the Taylor Swift concerts, the main suspect allegedly also got radicalized by regularly consuming video material by the German Salafist influencer-preacher Abul Baraa.[147]

Moreover, Wegter draws attention to new forms of terrorist financing such as cryptocurrencies – something that, according to him, the EU and national authorities should keep a close eye on.

The emergence of cryptocurrencies has rendered the landscape of terrorist financing more complex. During the past five years, various terrorist organizations, including Hamas, al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hezbollah, have begun exploring and utilizing cryptocurrencies as a means of fundraising and financial operations. Between 2020 and 2023, cryptocurrency wallets linked to Hamas reportedly received approximately $41 million, highlighting the potential scale of this new financing method.[148] Cryptocurrencies provide a degree of anonymity and decentralization, potentially allowing these organizations to circumvent traditional financial system controls and sanctions. The ability to conduct global transactions without relying on banks is particularly attractive to groups operating across borders. The UN estimates that cryptocurrencies may be involved in financing up to 20% of terrorist attacks.149 Hence cryptocurrency transactions still represent a relatively small portion of overall terrorist financing compared to traditional methods. Governments and law enforcement agencies

have begun responding to this challenge, as even small amounts can potentially fund damaging operations, making this trend a significant concern for security agencies worldwide. There's an increasing push for stricter regulations and reporting requirements for cryptocurrency businesses to combat this threat. An increasing use of intermediary service providers by terrorists further complicates countermeasures, making direct links harder to establish. The rapidly evolving nature of cryptocurrency technology requires constant adaptation by law enforcement agencies. Moreover, there's an ongoing challenge in balancing necessary regulation with innovation in the cryptocurrency sector. While cryptocurrencies present new challenges for counter-terrorism financing efforts, they also offer unique opportunities. The inherent traceability of transactions on the blockchain provides law enforcement with new tools to track and disrupt terrorist financing networks. Undoubtedly, as such technologies continue to evolve, so too must the strategies to combat its abuse by terrorist organizations.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

The emergence of "*mutant jihadism*" reflects a stable (but negative) trend that points toward growth and acceleration. Its main components, the growing significance of ISKP and the extending Gaza conflict, as well as low-key Islamist online propaganda (*borderline content*) and TikTok radicalization, will increasingly shape (mutant) jihadism in the West. Not least, new cryptocurrency-related forms of terrorist financing may create further opportunities for extremists. Moreover, it is not expected that legal authorities will either seize full control over online spaces and platforms fostering Islamist borderline content or over cryptocurrencies.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Hypothetically: Total control over online platforms or cryptocurrencies by legal authorities may be a turning point. A shift towards total transparency in the latter sphere and overall influence on virtual platform contents by governments would be a game-changer, however this is very unlikely. Moreover, significant changes in Gaza (like a stable regional peace agreement) or reverse developments concerning the current trajectory of ISKP could be stimuli for alternative progression.

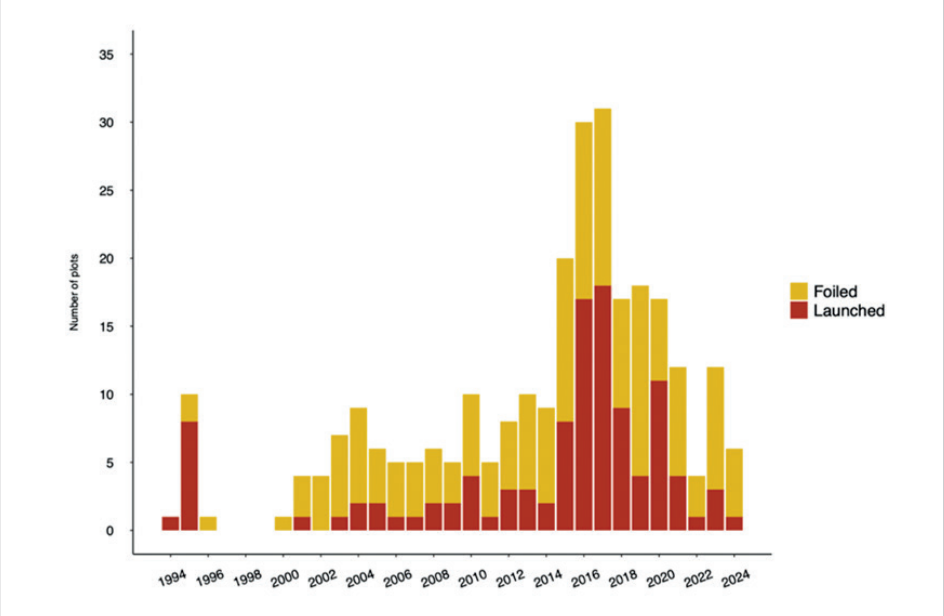
Possible uncertainties in the stability of this negative trend could result from a more resolute European P/CVE policy towards countering online propaganda that may include among others the following measures: addressing false narratives both online and in real life (e.g., in schools or sport clubs and social environments) and putting pressure on internet platforms to remove borderline content. In addition, counter-measures in the field of terrorist financing could have a significant impact in the struggle against a diverse threat.

12. CONTINUING DOMINANCE OF LOW-LEVEL-TERRORISM

Low-level attacks are likely to remain the preferred method of terrorist tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), particularly within the jihadist context. These attacks are expected to continue shaping the terrorist threat landscape in the foreseeable future. The dominance of low-threshold attacks may be considered a consequence of increased CT activities, improved CT cooperation and limited capabilities among perpetrators and terrorist organizations.[150]

According to the indispensable *"Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset"* (JPED) by the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), in Europe alone, more than 100 Islamist attacks have been carried out or prevented by the security authorities since 2004, 130 in total until 2022.[151] The perpetrated jihadist attacks led to more than 800 casualties and at least 3,800 have been injured, some of them seriously.[152] Petter Nesser and his co-authors identify a steady increase in plots – both executed and foiled – since 2022.[153] The highly relevant dataset includes 273 well-documented jihadi terror plots in (Western) Europe from 1994 until 2024. Strikingly, 69 of them have occurred between January 1, 2019, and June 1, 2024.[154] For the period January 1, 2019 until June 1, 2024, foiled plots account for 65 percent (45 of 69 cases).[155]

Table 3: *Foiled and launched attacks with a Jihadist background in Europe from 1994- 2024*.



Source: Nesser / Nasr (2024): 3.

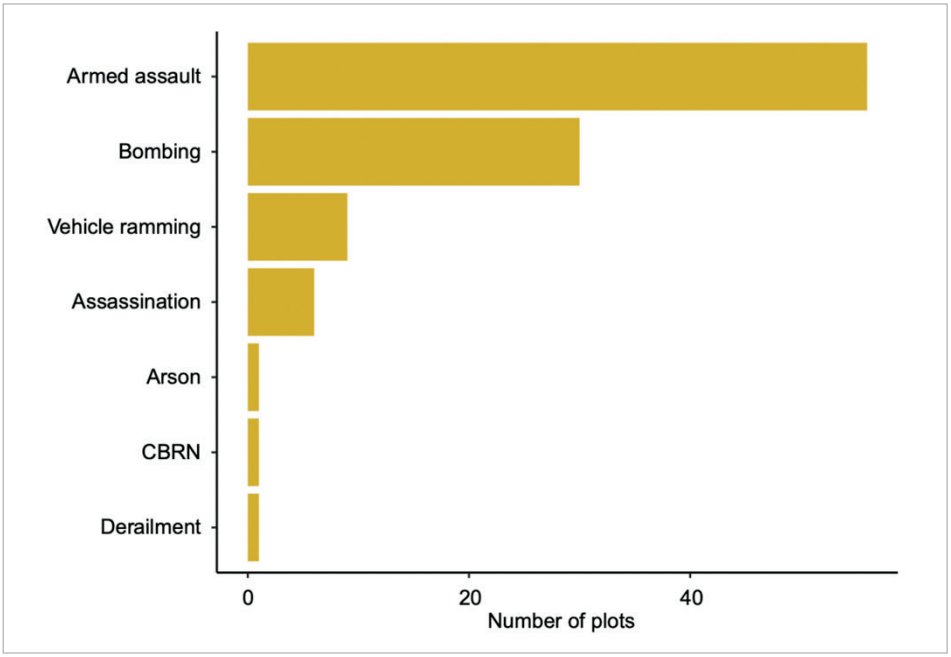
In the past decade, jihadist attacks in Europe were carried out either by hit teams or by individual perpetrators, with the latter being responsible for the majority of attacks. According to Petter Nesser, in fact most of the (Western) European jihadist attacks, since the IS significantly lost territory and finally the military campaign in Syria and Iraq, *"have been low-tech, conducted by single actors, using melee weapons or vehicles. We have not seen complex, mass casualty attacks, like those in Paris in November 2015, which involved a group of attackers, employing different weapons and tactics, such as suicide bombings and mass shootings*".[156] Based on the preliminary data from the JPED for the period 2022-2024, the following patterns have emerged in jihadi terrorist activities in Europe between January 1, 2019 and June 1, 2024[157]:

1. Dominant attack methods:

- Armed assaults using knives or firearms were the most common, accounting for 37 incidents (54% of 69 total cases).
- Bomb attacks were the second most frequent, with 19 incidents (28% of cases).

The graph below (Table 4) indicates that between 1994 and 2021 the majority of launched attacks were carried out using hand-held weapons such as guns or cut-and-thrust weapons. The preliminary data for 2022-2024 seem to confirm this trend.

Table 4: *Type of armament used in launched attacks with a Jihadist background in Europe from 1994- 2021.*



Source: Nesser (2023): 326.

2. Success rates of different attack types:

- For armed assaults, 57% were successful (21 out of 37 incidents), while 43% were foiled (16 out of 37).
- For bombing plots, only 11% succeeded (2 out of 19 incidents), while 89% were foiled (17 out of 19).

3. Effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts:

- The high rate of foiled bomb plots (89%) likely reflects the increased vigilance and effectiveness of European security services in monitoring and intercepting attempts to obtain explosives.
- Armed assaults appear more difficult to prevent, with a lower foiling rate of 43%.

Table 5: *Planned and executed attacks with a Salafi-Jihadist background in Western Europe from 7th October 2023 till 6th June 2024.*

Date	Location	Goals of attacks	Age of the attackers (perpetrators)
13/10/2023	France (Arras)	"Non-Believers" (teachers) – executed	20
15/10/2023	United Kingdom (Hartlepool)	Jews (Jewish man) – executed	45
17/10/2023	Belgium (Brussels)	Enemies of Islam (Sweden) – executed	45
17/10/2023	France (Seine-et-Marne)	Enemies of Islam	15,16,18
19/10/2023	France (Strasbourg)	Jews (synagogue)	15
24/20/2023	Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia)	Jews pro Israel (pro-Jewish demonstration)	29
21/11/2023	Germany (Lower Saxony)	"Non-Believers", Christians (Christmas market)	15,16
29/11/2023	France (Paris)	„Non-Believers" (tourists) – executed	26
7/12/2023	Austria (Styria)	Jews (synagogue)	16
20/12/2023	Spain (Madrid/Barcelona)	„Non-Believers" (school)	15,15,16
23/12/2023	Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia), Austria (Vienna)	Christians (churches)	25,27, 28,30, 30, 38, 41
3/01(2024	Spain (Seville)	"Non-Believers" (schools)	17
15/01/2024	Belgium (Antwerp)	Jews (synagogue)	19
2/03/2024	Switzerland (Zurich)	Jews (executed)	15
3/03/2024	Belgium (Brussels), France (Paris), Switzerland (Geneva)	"Non-Believers" (concert)	15,15,15,15, 16,16,16,17, 17,18
5/03/2024	France (Paris)	Christians (churches)	62
19/03(2024	Germany (Thuringia)	Enemies of Islam (Sweden)	23,30
22/03/2024	France (Lille)	"Non-Believers" (Olympic games, shopping center)	14
12/04/2024	Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia), Switzerland (Thurgau, Schaffhausen)	"Non-Believers" (Christians, Jews, the State)	15,15,15,16, 16,16,18
24/04/2024	France (Haute-Savoie)	"Non-Believers" (Olympic games, shopping center)	16
3/05/2024	Germany (Baden-Württemberg)	Jews (synagogue)	18,24
12/05/2024	France (Occitania and Great East)	Not known	18, 24
15/05/2024	United Kingdom (Manchester)	Jews (synagogue)	35, 36, 40
19/05/2024	Austria (Styria)	"Non-Believers" (market place)	14
22/05/2024	France (Saint-Etienne)	"Non-Believers" (Olympic games)	18
3/05/2024	Germany (Baden-Württemberg)	Enemies of Islam (executed)	25

Source: Neumann (2024): 96.

These statistics highlight the continuing threat by jihadi low-level terrorism in Europe, while also demonstrating the relative effectiveness of counter-terrorism measures, particularly in preventing bomb attacks. However, these data also suggest that armed assaults remain a significant challenge for security services due to their lower detection and prevention rates.

Spontaneous low-level-attacks by radicalized (*opportunistic*) lone perpetrators have remained the prevailing attack pattern in Europe since 2015.[158] Low-level terrorism by individual perpetrators or micro-cells uses the simplest tactical principles and means of action, such as easily procured weapons or everyday objects – knives and cars – which could potentially also include drones in the near future. It is remarkable, as Thomas Hegghammer noted in 2021, that nearly "every jihadi assault in Europe since 2017 has been carried out by a lone individual, suggesting that it has become very difficult to plan group attacks. Similarly, no terrorist strike since 2017 has involved explosives: instead, the attackers have used simpler weapons, such as guns, knives, and vehicles".[159] Against this backdrop, we are currently predominantly confronted with tactical approaches that go by the name of "opportunistic" or "occasional" terrorism. This category, which qualifies as low-level terrorism, comprises very different constellations, all of which merely have in common that the terrorist action (mostly a lone-actor variant) results from the inspiration by operational jihadist propaganda and a favorable environment. The post-caliphate era has marked a shift in the profile of Islamic State plotters in Europe, challenging the stereotype of isolated, self-radicalized individuals commonly referred to as the "lone wolf". While some cases of lone actors without organizational ties exist, investigations increasingly reveal a more complex picture of networked extremism. The category of the "*lone perpetrator plus*" has been introduced to address this phenomenon of external inspirational, logistic, and planning support while executing the attack alone.[160] Most plotters are found to have connections to Islamic State networks, both within Europe and internationally. These interactions occur through a combination of physical meetings and digital communications, utilizing popular messaging apps like Telegram, WhatsApp, or Signal. Such a networked approach allows for the dissemination of tactical guidance and target selection from possibly more experienced operatives to potential attackers. The "Islamic State", and more recently its Khorasan Province affiliate (ISKP), have adopted an effective strategy of "*cyber-coaching*" [161] through "*virtual planning hubs*" [162] as a very effective method for enabling terrorist activities e.g., in Europe. This approach involves experienced members providing remote guidance and support to individuals or small cells planning attacks, often from far-away locations.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

Without doubt, the low-level approach will very likely continue to set the European stage of jihadi-motivated terrorism – at least for the next five years. The strategic shift of jihadist organizations to a cyber-coach approach and the exploitation of the virtual value chain of terrorism as well as growing CT efforts in Europe will further favor low-level attacks as the dominant variant. It is conceivable that there are constantly growing attempts and the motivation by terrorist organizations and perpetrators to resort to attacks involving NBC components. Against the backdrop of increasing efforts to apply recent technological developments from international battlefields such as drones, this could, in combination, lead to more "high-level" attacks with a maximum impact. Consequently, the trend is considered as rather instable.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

A possible return of group terrorism (e.g., ISKP) in combination with reduced European CT efforts and/or resources could lead to more sophisticated plots potentially involving NBC weapons and/or drones. The motivation of relevant terrorist groups has existed since more than a decade, however the capabilities to execute such "high-level" plots are still limited.

13. EMERGENCE OF A PRISON-TERROR-NEXUS

Among the many challenges in the fight against terrorism today is the issue of terrorists or criminals with extremist attitudes within detention facilities i.e., "prisons".[163] Prisons have become a prime location for real life (offline) radicalization. Many later terrorists run through a fully-fledged radicalization process during detention.[164] These environments often serve as breeding grounds for extremist ideologies, where the cross-pollination of terrorist and criminal networks can flourish unchecked. Radicalization within prisons is a significant concern, as extremist inmates often use their time behind bars to influence and recruit ordinary criminal offenders, turning them into future foot soldiers for terrorist organizations. Inmates convicted of terrorism-related offenses often see prison as an opportunity to recruit new followers.[165] The close quarters and shared time in prisons provide extremists with the perfect environment to identify susceptible individuals and indoctrinate them. This creates a hidden pipeline of potential terrorists, who may later be activated after release or maintain connections to terrorist groups from within the prison system.[166] Correction facilities by nature bring together individuals from various backgrounds, many of whom may be vulnerable due to isolation, disillusionment, or personal grievances. Extremist prisoners exploit these vulnerabilities, offering a sense of belonging, purpose, or redemption through radical ideologies. Over time, these inmates may be drawn into terrorist networks, emerging from prison as more dangerous individuals than when they entered. Prisons can facilitate the blending of terrorist and criminal networks (see "*crime-terror-nexus*"). Extremists seek to establish alliances with organized crime groups to secure illicit resources, such as weapons, forged documents, or funds.[167] This relationship benefits both sides: criminal organizations gain ideological justification for their actions or a veneer of legitimacy, while terrorist groups gain access to logistical and financial support. These alliances strengthen both types of networks, making them at once more resilient and hence difficult to dismantle.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

Because ideologically like-minded individuals are frequently housed together in overcrowded detention facilities, the conditions in the prison system can act as a catalyst for radicalization. Group formation in these environments often amplifies the radicalization process, as individuals feed off each other's beliefs, creating an echo chamber that strengthens extremist ideologies. This phenomenon, known as the "prison-terror-nexus," remains a stable trend due to the persistent issue of overcrowding and lack of adequate rehabilitation programs in many prison systems. In such environments, inmates are vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups, with radical ideologies spreading quickly within the close confines of prison walls. The impact of this trend is significant, as individuals who are radicalized in prison may emerge as more dangerous, often carrying out terrorist activities upon release. Furthermore, the lack of effective deradicalization programs and the tendency for prison systems to isolate inmates from broader societal influences only strengthens the grip of extremist ideologies. As a result, both the probability and impact of radicalization within prisons remain high, posing a continued challenge to national security efforts.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

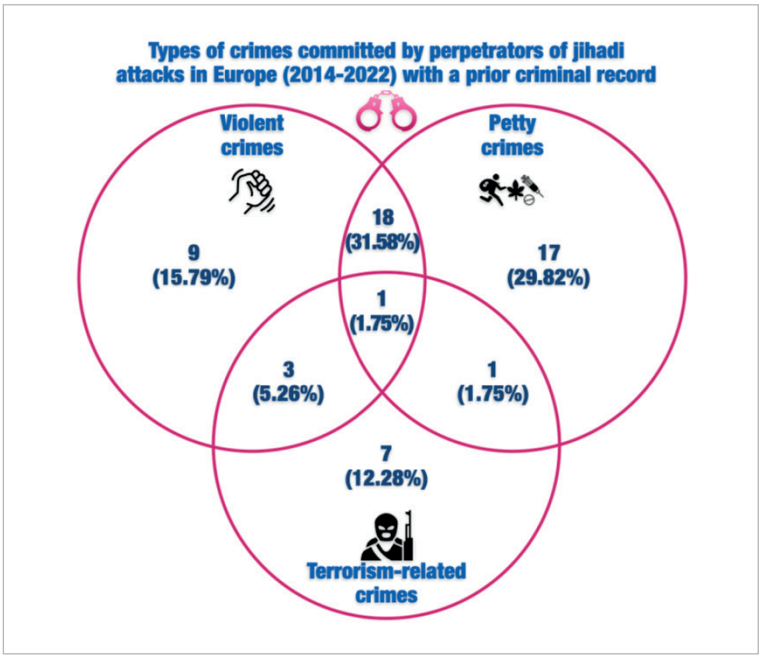
Substantial reforms in the European detention systems, alongside improved inmate PVE (Preventing Violent Extremism) measures, could significantly decelerate the spread of extremist ideologies within prisons. One effective approach could be the separation of convicted criminals from individuals prone to extremist views, ensuring that those with extremist tendencies are not exposed to or influenced by hardened criminals who may share or amplify these ideologies. This strategy would allow for a more tailored approach to rehabilitation, where inmates vulnerable to radicalization can receive specialized interventions, such as deradicalization programs or psychological support, to address the root causes of their extremism. Additionally, creating a clear distinction between different categories of inmates would minimize opportunities for extremist ideologies to spread and gain a foothold within the prison environment.

Furthermore, the introduction of specific counter-extremism training for prison staff could enhance their ability to identify signs of radicalization early on and intervene effectively. Partnerships with external experts, such as sociologists or former extremists, could further enrich these programs, offering real-world insights into the dynamics of prison radicalization. With continuous monitoring and adaptive measures, these reforms could reduce the likelihood of individuals transitioning from violent extremist ideologies to actual acts of terrorism, thereby making prisons a less fertile ground for radicalization.

14. ONGOING CRIME-TERROR-NEXUS

The direct link and causal relation between the spheres of crime and terrorism, the communicating milieus and interdependences suggest an ongoing gain on both sides. "*The crime-terror nexus*" is a technical term that addresses the structural connection between crime and terrorism.[168] It refers to the numerous interactions, collaborations and mutual benefits that can arise between criminal organizations and terrorist groups. In essence, the crime-terror nexus describes a phenomenon that is based on the direct connection (nexus) between (mostly) petty crime, but also organized crime, and terrorism as overlapping milieus (see Table 8).

Table 8: *Types of Crimes by Jihadi Perpetrators (2014-2022) with prior criminal record.*



Source: Hacker 2023, 8.

This connection, which can be observed prominently among young jihadists, has become increasingly important worldwide in recent years and represents a serious challenge for the international fight against terrorism.[169] It also applies to the phenomenon of right-wing extremism. In the relevant research, particular attention has been paid to this increasing entanglement of crime and terrorism for some time. The reciprocal synergies are particularly relevant. Areas in which there are clear overlaps and benefits for both sides are those of financing, logistics, recruitment, knowledge transfer and, finally, the aspects of protection and support. The crime-terror nexus is best illustrated by the biographies of young extremists who first came into conflict with the law, later financed their livelihoods through petty crime and ultimately emerged as terrorists.[170]

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

The crime-terror nexus is a persistent phenomenon that is very likely to remain a significant security challenge for the next 3-5 years. This intersection between criminal activities and terrorist actions enables extremist groups to fund their operations, recruit members, and expand their influence. From this perspective, the trend remains stable and consistent, as the underlying factors driving this nexus, such as economic instability, porous borders, and weak governance, continue to persist. Criminal networks provide terrorists with access to illicit resources like weapons, money, and safe havens, making it easier for these groups to carry out attacks and evade detection. Furthermore, the increasing sophistication of both criminal organizations and terrorist groups could result in even closer collaborations, as both groups seek to exploit the same vulnerabilities in the global security landscape.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Enforcing the fight against crime, executing measures to separate the criminal milieu from extremists, and focusing on the prevention of juvenile delinquency could significantly impact the trend of radicalization and the spread of extremist ideologies. By targeting the root causes of criminal behavior and offering rehabilitation programs, law enforcement agencies can reduce the pool of potential recruits for extremist groups, making it harder for terrorists to exploit vulnerable individuals. Separating the criminal milieu from extremist networks is particularly important, as these groups often exploit individuals with a history of criminal activity, using them as a steppingstone to further their agendas. Focusing on preventing juvenile delinquency can also have a long-term effect, as early interventions and educational programs can help steer at-risk youth away from radicalization and criminality. These measures, combined with community-based initiatives, can foster resilience against extremist narratives by addressing the factors that contribute to both crime and radicalization. Moreover, by targeting crime and delinquency as part of a broader counterterrorism strategy, authorities can prevent the escalation of criminal behavior into violent extremism, effectively reducing the threat over time.

IV. MORPHOLOGY | FINALITY | ENDS, MEANS AND WAYS

15. TARGETING GRADUALLY BECOMES A MATTER OF "STRATEGY"

Targeting symbolic or "*real*" (object-related i.e., for their practical asset value) targets has always been a question of terrorist strategy. Such preference is subject to strategic thinking and organizational decision-making. Terrorist targeting becomes a matter of strategy in several key respects (political messaging, psychological impact, provocation, etc.), involving the careful selection of targets to achieve broader political, psychological, and ideological goals.[171]

1. Symbolic Targeting:
Terrorists tend to choose symbolic targets that represent the power and authority of the state (e.g., government buildings, military installations, or law enforcement agencies). These attacks are designed to send a message that the state is vulnerable and that its authority can be challenged. The same targeting logic is valid for attacks on symbolic sites, like religious shrines, historical monuments, or national landmarks, aiming to provoke strong emotional reactions, foster division, and polarize society.

2. "Real" (object-specific) Targeting:
Striking financial institutions, corporations, or critical infrastructure (e.g., transportation systems, energy grids) disrupts the economy, creating instability and demonstrating the inability of the government to protect key assets. Also choosing targets with the potential for high civilian casualties (e.g., schools, hospitals, or religious gatherings) belongs to the category of real targeting. It can serve as a strategy to inflict maximum harm, gain notoriety, and pressure governments into making concessions.

Besides the distinction between symbols vs. real targeting, the following factors are strategically relevant for terrorist targeting preferences[172:]

1. Psychological Impact:
Terrorist organizations usually prefer targets that will generate the greatest psychological impact seeking to maximize fear and anxiety. Civilian targets, such as crowded public spaces (e.g., markets, concerts, or transit systems), are often selected because they create a pervasive sense of fear and uncertainty among the general population. Strong media attention is a catalyst: By choosing highly visible targets or carrying out spectacular attacks, terrorists manage to amplify media coverage, spreading their message broadly and ensuring that their claims or ideologies reach a wide audience.

2. Provoking Overreaction:
Terrorists may target specific groups or individuals to provoke a disproportionate response from the state. For instance, attacks that inflame ethnic or sectarian tensions can lead to crackdowns, civil liberties restrictions, or military interventions, which can further alienate populations and drive support toward the terrorist group. Furthermore, by targeting vulnerable or minority populations, societal divisions are deepened, leading to increased polarization and potentially radicalizing moderate segments of the population.

3. Undermining Public Confidence:
Attacking transportation systems, communications networks, or public utilities can create widespread disruption in daily routines and undermine public confidence in the government's ability to maintain order and security.

4. Maximizing Casualties:
Terrorists carefully assess and exploit vulnerabilities in security arrangements, striking at times and places (usually soft targets) where they can cause the most damage with the least resistance.

5. International Influence:
Terrorist groups may choose targets that have international significance or attack foreign interests (e.g., embassies, tourists, or multinational corporations) to send messages beyond their immediate national context. This can increase their profile on the global stage, attract international supporters, and create diplomatic pressures on governments.

6. Coercion and Bargaining:
e.g., Hostage-Taking and Assassinations: Specific targets, such as high-profile individuals (e.g., politicians, diplomats, or business leaders), are often selected as part of a strategy of coercion. Hostage-taking or assassinations are intended to force concessions from governments or corporations, such as policy changes, prisoner releases, or financial payments. Killing individuals who represent opposing ideologies, movements, or governments can be used to weaken adversaries, create leadership vacuums, or demoralize opposition groups.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

As terrorist organizations adopt more strategic thinking, the sophistication of their targeting will likely increase. However, perpetrators may still be driven by opportunistic motives, opting for quick, simple, and indiscriminate attacks that focus on soft targets. This trend of low-level attacks is expected to persist. However, the trend remains highly unstable, as more complex and destructive attacks on “harder” targets could emerge in response to the evolving demands of terrorist groups or to achieve greater impact. The balance between opportunistic, low-level/low-risk attacks and the potential for larger, more shocking operations will continue to shape the future of terrorist targeting, with implications for both security measures and counter-terrorism strategies.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

If low-level attacks remain the most common form of terrorism in the long run, the targeting of such attacks is likely to be less influenced by strategic planning in advance. Instead, perpetrators may rely on opportunistic targeting, often choosing soft, high-impact locations with minimal preparation. Additionally, a combination of symbolic and real targeting could become the preferred approach, where perpetrators aim to create a psychological impact through high-profile targets or symbols, while also maximizing immediate damage. This dual approach would allow for both widespread fear and tangible destruction, increasing the effectiveness of the attack.

Counter-terrorism measures will need to adapt to this evolving trend by focusing not only on preventing large-scale, high-profile attacks but also on identifying and disrupting smaller, opportunistic actions before they occur. Security strategies will likely emphasize a more proactive, intelligence-driven approach, including enhanced monitoring of potential attackers in vulnerable populations and environments. The ability to identify early warning signs and intervene before an attack materializes will be essential in managing the risks posed by low-level and symbolic attacks. This trend will require a shift in how security forces prepare for and respond to emerging threats, ensuring they are equipped to handle both sophisticated and more spontaneous forms of terrorism.

16. POSSIBLE INCREASE OF ATTACKS ON RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

As the symbolic dimension of terrorist attacks may reinforce the attention they receive and also their traumatizing effect, we may assume that religious symbols, particularly in times of existent or constructed confessional conflicts are on the rise. The overall surge of antisemitism in Europe makes synagogues a preferred target (as we saw with the potential Halle attacks) and, after the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, a growing attraction point for antisemitic hatred by Islamists. A relevant plot that involved a transnational seven-person ISKP cell of mostly Tajik origin, which planned to attack St. Stephens Cathedral in Vienna and Cologne Cathedral over New Year's Eve in 2023/24 makes the ongoing dynamic evident.[173] The case of the Christchurch attacks in 2019[174] also can be regarded as prototypical for right-wing-inspired lone actors to attack religious symbols such as mosques and synagogues (see below Halle[175], etc.).

Over the past years, terrorists have repeatedly attacked religious sites and places of worship around the world seeking to strike at the very core of communities' sense of identity and belonging. Perpetrators of attacks conducted during religious holidays or celebrations also seek to have a stronger symbolic and human impact due to the higher number of congregants – and thus potential victims – being present. The rationale behind such attacks: attention and delegitimation.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

This trend is likely to persist, though not in a linear fashion. From a strategic standpoint, the desire to target religious symbols is unlikely to diminish in the near future, as such attacks align with the objectives of extremist ideologies that promote religious unitarianism and superiority. However, various factors could make attacks on religious symbols less frequent or less prioritized over time. These factors may include evolving public perceptions, shifts in extremist strategies, or changes in the geopolitical landscape that influence the symbolic value of such targets.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

A significant source of uncertainty lies in the potential for enhanced CT measures aimed at further protecting religious symbols, which could render attempted attacks less effective or even thwart them entirely. As security around religious sites and symbols is strengthened, including through improved surveillance, physical barriers, and intelligence gathering, the ability of perpetrators to successfully target these symbols may diminish. However, this increased protection could also prompt terrorists to shift their tactics, either by selecting alternative targets or adopting more sophisticated methods to bypass security measures. Additionally, the focus on protecting religious symbols might lead to a dynamic where attackers seek to disrupt other forms of symbolism or public infrastructure that could achieve similar ideological and psychological impacts, such as cultural landmarks or sites representing political power. Ultimately, while enhanced CT measures may reduce the likelihood of successful attacks on religious symbols, they could also drive the evolution of terrorist strategies, leading to new challenges in preventing violence.

17. CONTINUING INDISCRIMINATE VICTIMIZATION AMONG JIHADI GROUPS OR LONE ACTORS

Indiscriminate targeting by jihadist groups, relates to the selection of targets that are chosen without specific regard for individual identities, affiliations, or precise objectives. Instead, these targets are deliberately chosen following a strategy of maximizing casualties, fear, and chaos. A reduced selectivity requirement on the part of the attackers can be referred to as "*indiscriminate mass victimization*".[176] Herfried Münkler argues that the effectiveness of jihadist terrorist attacks is increased by and results from this simplified approach: "*The force of jihadist terrorist attacks results from the non-selectivity of its victims, since they do not require any complex or diligent selection*".[177] Indiscriminate targeting and victimization go hand in hand. Perpetrators envisage crowded public spaces and busy locations like marketplaces, public transportation systems (buses, trains, subways), sports arenas, concert venues, and urban areas. The rationale behind this is that these places offer the highest potential for mass casualties. An apparent randomness concerning the victim selection ensures a widespread psychological impact, as the perception of individual security becomes dominated by anxiety. Targeting soft targets, sometimes also places with a symbolic value like churches, adds to this strategy.[178] Through a seemingly random target selection, and by picking vulnerable security environments with low-threshold protection like schools, hotels, shopping malls, tourist spots, and hospitals are in the focus of jihadist violence. The logic behind this: soft targets are easier to attack and generate higher levels of media attention due to the vulnerability of the victims. The same applies for random lone perpetrator attacks on pedestrians, diners at cafes, or travelers at airports. Despite generally declining suicide bombing attacks in Europe179, there is still an elevated risk concerning bomb attacks involving explosions in densely populated areas, with chaotic scenes of destruction and mass casualties. Suicide bombings are a hallmark of indiscriminate targeting, as they typically aim for maximum impact without concern for specific individuals. Such attacks are well-suited to instill widespread fear among the population. In this light, mass casualty events become more likely.

Aftermath scenes of mass shootings, bombings, and vehicular attacks, put a focus on the scale of devastation and the indiscriminate nature of the violence against innocent victims. The strategic aim of such mass-casualty attacks is to project an image of omnipresence and unpredictability, suggesting that anyone, anywhere, can be a target of terrorist attacks. Media coverage and propaganda reinforce the idea that no one is safe, and that jihadist violence can strike at any moment, in any place, affecting anyone. This randomness is a crucial part of the terrorist strategy, as it heightens fear and disrupts normal life far beyond the immediate aftermath of an attack.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

With the ongoing trend of low-level attacks, indiscriminate victimization is likely to remain a preferred approach for jihadist attackers and small cells. These perpetrators often target vulnerable, high-impact locations where the intent is to cause widespread fear and panic, rather than to achieve specific political or ideological objectives. This approach minimizes the risk to attackers while maximizing the psychological and societal impact of their actions. Given the ease of execution and the difficulty in preventing such attacks, this trend is expected to remain stable and consistent for the time being.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Potentially, an increase in attacks targeting specific victim groups based on religion or ethnicity, which may be seen as a strategic advantage by attackers and/or organizations, could lead to a shift away from the focus on indiscriminate violence. If such targeted attacks are perceived as more effective in achieving ideological or political goals, we might see a move towards more calculated, selective targeting, where the emphasis on random victimization decreases in favor of attacks with a clearer narrative or message.

18. INCREASING LIKELIHOOD OF STOCHASTIC TERRORISM

Stochastic terrorism is a type of terrorism that involves the use of mass communication, such as social media or mainstream media, to incite violence or encourage individuals to carry out acts of terror. It is called “stochastic” because it relies on the statistical likelihood that some individuals will act on the messages and carry out attacks, rather than on a specific individual or group being directly targeted.

One of the key characteristics of stochastic terrorism is the use of language and messaging that promotes violence or promotes a violent ideology. This can include the use of inflammatory language, the promotion of conspiracy theories or false information, or the glorification of violence and terrorism.

Another distinctive aspect of stochastic terrorism is the use of social media and other mass communication platforms to spread these messages to a wide audience. The anonymity and reach of these platforms make it easier for individuals or groups to spread inflammatory or extremist content to large numbers of people, increasing the likelihood that some individuals will act on the messages. Stochastic terrorism is rooted in indirect incitement. This deliberately involves the use of suggestive language or symbolism that stops short of explicitly urging violence but increases the probability of someone acting violently.

Stochastic terrorism has become an increasingly significant concern in recent years due to the proliferation of social media and the ease with which individuals and groups can spread inflammatory or extremist content. It has been used by a wide range of actors, including extremist groups, political leaders, and individuals with personal grievances.

One of the significant challenges in addressing stochastic terrorism is the difficulty in identifying and tracking the individual or groups responsible for spreading the messages. The anonymity of the internet and the ability to use fake accounts or profiles make it difficult to hold individuals accountable for their actions. The responsibility is diffused because the person issuing the rhetoric doesn’t directly control the outcome. The initiators may claim they were merely expressing opinions or making general statements, distancing themselves from the individuals who carried out attacks. Effective counter-terrorism struggles with its randomness and low predictability. Because it’s impossible to predict which individuals might be influenced or when they will act, the violent acts are random and sporadic, often targeting specific groups that were demonized in the rhetoric.

There are several strategies that can be effective in combating stochastic terrorism, including:

- Increasing efforts to identify and remove inflammatory or extremist content from social media and other platforms.
- Educating the public about the dangers of stochastic terrorism and the importance of fact-checking and critical thinking.
- Promoting alternative, non-violent narratives and viewpoints to counter extremist messaging.
- Working with social media and other platform companies to develop strategies and technologies to identify and remove inflammatory or extremist content.

In conclusion, stochastic terrorism is a type of terrorism that involves the use of mass communication to incite violence or encourage individuals to carry out attacks. It is a growing concern due to the proliferation of social media and the ease with which inflammatory or extremist content can be spread. Addressing this threat requires a multifaceted approach that includes efforts to remove inflammatory content, educate the public, and promote alternative viewpoints.

The term "*stochastic terrorism*" originates from a 2011 post on the blog Daily Kos and referred to: "*the use of mass media to incite attacks by random nut jobs – acts that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable*", i.e., the targeted radicalization of a group of people through mass media with the aim of getting an element of this group to cross a line and resort to violent means.

Terrorism in Europe continues to present complex challenges, with diverse ideological motivations behind attacks. According to Europol's 2023 Terrorism Situation and Trend (TE-SAT) report, 28 terrorist attacks were reported across the EU in 2022, marking an increase from 18 in 2021. Italy recorded the highest number of attacks (12), with most of them linked to far left and anarchist ideologies, which have grown notably.[180] In total, 18 left-wing or anarchist terrorist incidents were reported, compared to only one the previous year. In contrast, jihadist terrorist attacks have decreased, with six attacks in 2022, down from 11 in 2021.

A concerning element is the rise in right-wing terrorism, with four attacks reported in 2022, consistent with previous years. Arrests for terrorism-related offenses remain high, with 380 individuals arrested across the EU, the majority for jihadist-related activities. Right-wing and left-wing extremist violence is also gaining traction in the EU, with increasing concerns about eco-terrorism and the impact of online radicalization, especially among young people.

Key trends include the use of simple tools like firearms and knives in attacks, the growing influence of online propaganda, and the decentralization of terrorist recruitment efforts. The ongoing war in Ukraine has also contributed to the polarization of European societies, fueling disinformation and extremist narratives. These dynamics highlight the need for increased cooperation between EU member states to prevent future attacks.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

Stochastic terrorism poses a significant challenge for law enforcement and policymakers, as it blurs the line between free speech and incitement to violence. While direct calls for violence can be prosecuted, regulating indirect or suggestive rhetoric becomes more complex without infringing on free speech rights. Despite this, the effects of such rhetoric can be devastating, often leading to hate crimes, terrorist acts, and deepening societal divisions. The future trajectory of stochastic terrorism is likely to be influenced by key factors such as the evolution of media, rising political polarization, and the growing spread of extremist ideologies. Given these dependencies, it can be expected that the trend will remain instable over the next 3-5 years.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Stochastic terrorism is likely to continue contributing to an increase in lone-actor attacks, which are particularly difficult to predict or prevent. These acts of violence are often carried out by individuals who are not affiliated with formal terrorist organizations but are influenced by ideological rhetoric circulating online or in the media. A key tipping point is the amplification of extremist rhetoric on social media, which can quickly escalate into violence. The decentralized nature of these attacks makes it challenging to predict when an individual may act, as violence can be sparked by seemingly unrelated events.

Another uncertainty is the connection between political discourse and violence. Divisive rhetoric from leaders can trigger stochastic terrorism, especially when it resonates with vulnerable individuals. Shifts in political power or societal unrest can act as catalysts, pushing individuals toward violence. The unpredictable motivations behind these attacks further complicate efforts to prevent lone-actor terrorism. Key tipping points will arise from political instability, extremist narratives, and self-radicalization through online platforms, creating a volatile and uncertain environment for counter-terrorism.

V. MORPHOLOGY | INSTRUMENTALITY | CATEGORIES OF ACTORS

19. EMERGENCE OF TEENAGE TERRORISM

Teenager terrorism is an alarming trend, where young people, often influenced by online propaganda, radical ideologies, or a sentiment of disenfranchisement, become involved in acts of terrorism or extremist violence. This phenomenon has been increasingly visible in both, jihadist extremism and far-right extremism, with teenagers being targeted by recruiters due to their adolescent vulnerabilities, access to social media, and often unstable social environments. Social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps have become central in the radicalization of teenagers. Terrorist/extremist groups such as IS and far-rightorganizations exploit these platforms to spread propaganda and recruit young followers. Teenagers, spending large amounts of time online, are particularly vulnerable to such content. The anonymity of the internet allows quick and easy dissemination of radical ideas, often without parental or institutional oversight. Adolescents can be drawn into echo chambers or gaming communities that mask extremist narratives behind popular culture references.

Adolescence is a period of identity formation, and young people who feel alienated or disconnected from their community may be drawn to extremist ideologies that offer a sense of purpose, belonging, or adventure. This is especially true for youth facing social marginalization, economic hardships, or discrimination. Many teenage recruits to jihadist or far-right movements report feeling disenfranchised by their environments or suffering from mental health issues, which extremists exploit by providing them with a cause or sense of empowerment. Social and economic factors such as poverty, lack of opportunities, and exclusion from mainstream society can push teenagers towards radicalization. In communities where young people see few positive role models or pathways to success, extremist groups may appear as attractive alternatives, promising status and meaning. This is particularly true among migrant communities or neighborhoods where cultural or religious tensions create a sense of being “outsiders,” something which groups like IS have skillfully exploited by appealing to both global religious narratives and personal grievances.

In many cases, teenagers are influenced by peer networks, where friends or older figures introduce them to extremist ideologies. The concept of group solidarity, where friends radicalize together, has been seen in both jihadist cells and far-right youth groups. In some cases, radicalized teenagers attempt to recruit others within their peer groups, creating a cycle of extremism within schools or youth communities.

Forms of Teenager Involvement in Terrorism

1. Jihadist Extremism:

- IS had success recruiting teenagers from Western countries to either join their ranks in the Middle East or carry out attacks in their home countries. Many of these recruits were drawn in through slick online propaganda videos, forums, and personal messaging campaigns.
- Notable examples include teenagers from France, Belgium, and the UK, some of whom traveled to Syria and Iraq to join IS, while others carried out lone-wolf attacks in their own countries.
- The exemplary case of Shamima Begum, a British teenager who left to join IS in 2015, is one of the most widely publicized instances of teenage involvement in jihadist extremism.

2. Far-Right Extremism:

- There has been a rise in teenage involvement in far-right extremism in Europe and the US, often linked to white supremacist or neo-Nazi ideologies. Far-right extremists target young people by framing their rhetoric in the context of anti-immigration, anti-government views, and identity politics.
- An example is the increasing presence of teenagers in online forums promoting ideologies like the "Great Replacement" theory, which claims that white populations are being replaced by non-white immigrants, leading to violence like the Christchurch attack (though the perpetrator was not a teenager, his manifesto inspired many younger individuals).

The changing threat has been catalyzed by arguably the two most significant trends in terrorism over the past two decades: the emergence of people acting alone who have been inspired by the ideology of terrorists and the ease of online radicalization. Both trends encourage the increased involvement of young people in extremism: When radicalization occurs in the living room (as with Anders Behring Breivik as a role model, etc.)[181], barriers to entry are lowered, allowing even teenagers to take active part.

Teenagers across the ideological spectrum have engaged as online innovators and influencers, and violent offline activists. Independently of adults, children have succeeded in producing terrorist propaganda, influencing their peers and adults towards violence, and preparing to engage in terroristic violence both domestically and abroad. The current data suggest that terrorists in Europe may become younger. In terms of radicalization, we observe 13–17-year-old adolescents that develop firm intentions to commit terrorist attacks. The emergence is deeply linked with the rise of virtual platforms which can be regarded as a disruption. In the field of jihadism, the predominant trend within this category is commonly referred to as "*TikTok-Jihad*".[182] TikTok has become the fastest growing application in the world, largely thanks to its popularity among "kids and teenagers". The tools are used in both dimensions: to recruit and radicalize. In this case, the "*gamification of terrorism*" has a certain legitimacy due to the impact of memes and symbols. Also, in the case of right-wing terrorism, teenager terrorism plays an increasing role in groups such as Atomwaffen- or Feuerkriegsdivision, or in the category of lone actors. Children are not merely passive consumers of content created and shared by adult counterparts but ideologically driven in the light of radicalization processes and networks sui generis. In the case of youth vulnerabilities to radicalization, online social media, it has been argued, is playing an important role. Research does indicate that young extremists are more likely to engage with social media and other virtual platforms compared with adults who are charged with terrorism. And terrorists such as the above-mentioned Breivik are regarded as heroes and role-models.

For the Islamist spectrum, the recent jihadist Taylor Swift plot in Vienna is significant because of the young age of the, already known about, network. The suspects were 19, 18, 17 and possibly 15 years old. This confirms the current trend across Europe that (attempted) terrorists are getting "younger" all the time, which is obviously due to increasing online radicalization and the heightened appeal to this age group. In this specific case, it seems to be confirmed that Salafist hate/influencer preachers not only specifically address young people via channels such as YouTube and TikTok but can also have an influence on their radicalization with their dichotomous messages. Terrorist organizations such as IS convey clear ideological guidelines to young, radicalized people in closed networks (such as Telegram) – more on this below – and inspire a virtual community, which in turn is more likely to be willing to commit acts of terrorist violence, as the inhibition threshold for manifest violence is usually lower among those radicalized in this way.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

The stable trend is expected to become even more relevant in the next 3-5 years due to the growing importance of virtual networks and platforms such as TikTok or YouTube where potentially

radicalization-prone teenagers may be easily addressed. Moreover, the threshold to violence is due to psychological aspects often lowered within this category of perpetrators.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

European counter-terrorism (CT) and prevention of/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts could place greater emphasis on reaching vulnerable individuals through targeted social media engagement. Public awareness campaigns, particularly in schools, alongside close monitoring of at-risk individuals, may help reduce the likelihood of teenagers turning to extremist violence.

It is also plausible that stricter regulations on the use of certain social media platforms (e.g., banning TikTok or restricting access to users aged 13 or 14 and above) could help lower the risk of teenagers being exposed to extremist content.

20. SKY-ROCKETING SIGNIFICANCE OF GENERATION Z AS PERPETRATORS

Recent terrorist plots – both executed and foiled – indicate a rising significance of perpetrators belonging to Generation Z in terms of planning and executing attacks. Online social media is widely recognized as a significant factor in the vulnerability of youth to radicalization. New York Times journalist Rukmini Callimachi has done extensive investigative work on how IS recruited individuals from Western countries in the Mid 2010s. Callimachi's investigation involved analyzing IS documents, accessing encrypted messages, and interviewing both defectors and families of recruits to understand the methods used to attract people from outside traditional jihadist circles. She revealed how IS recruiters, often skilled in digital communication, used social media platforms to establish relationships with potential recruits. These recruiters tailored their approaches, gradually radicalizing individuals by presenting IS as a place of belonging, purpose, and adventure.[183] Callimachi's reporting also uncovered how the group used emotional manipulation, promising recruits a new life or community where they could "belong" or even fulfill what was portrayed as a religious obligation.[184]

Research does indicate young extremists are more likely to engage with social media and other virtual platforms compared with adults who are charged with terrorism. Finally, terrorists such as Anders Behring Breivik are regarded as heroes and role-models.

Generation Z is particularly vulnerable to radicalization due to its digital immersion, identity struggles, and disillusionment with traditional political systems. Extremist groups, whether jihadist or far-right, have recognized this and adapted their recruitment strategies to appeal to young people through online content, gaming culture, and conspiracy theories. Combating this threat requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both the root causes of radicalization and the ways in which extremist ideologies are disseminated through digital platforms. Effective education, online regulation, and mental health support are critical to reducing the influence of extremism on this generation.

The problematic relationship between Generation Z and terrorism is complex and is influenced by several factors. Generation Z, born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s, is the first generation to grow up entirely in the digital age ("*digital natives*"). This group has experienced terrorism from a unique perspective, shaped by global events such as 9/11, the triumph of social media and ubiquitous, sometimes unfiltered coverage of acts of violence. The majority of the suspects in recent European terrorist plots fall into this category in terms of age. Closely linked to the phenomenon of "teenage terrorism", this shows a trend towards short-term virtual radicalization and the associated spiral of violence.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

It is conceivable that this trend will remain consistent over the next 3–5 years, as Generation Z, and subsequently Generation Alpha, increasingly shape the dynamics of terrorist violence. With their deep integration into digital ecosystems and social media platforms, these generations are likely to redefine how extremist ideologies are disseminated, recruited for, and enacted. As such, understanding their digital behaviors and the evolving online trends will be critical in anticipating and countering future threats.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Once again, as this trend is closely tied to the growing involvement of Generation Z and increasingly that of Generation Alpha in "teenage terrorism", enhancements in European counter-terrorism (CT) strategies, coupled with a stronger collective commitment to addressing this issue, could lead to at least a temporary containment of the phenomenon. By focusing on these digitally native generations, European CT efforts must adapt to the unique ways in which extremist ideologies are disseminated

and consumed online. This includes improved information sharing, tailored prevention programs, and stricter oversight of social media platforms where such narratives thrive. Long-term success will require a comprehensive approach that combines education, digital literacy, and early intervention to reduce the vulnerability of these generations to radicalization.

21. DEVELOPING HETEROGENEITY OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS

The political far-right in Europe has experienced a significant resurgence over the past decade, driven by multiple factors including economic discontent, migration issues, and cultural identity politics.[185] While far-right movements across Europe share certain theme – such as nationalism, anti-immigration, and opposition to multiculturalism[186] – they are not homogeneous, as each movement reflects the unique political, cultural, and historical context of its local societal environment.

Far-right extremism, understood as both an ideology of inequality and exclusion that manifests itself in attitudes and behavior as well as a heterogeneous movement, partially with affinity to violence, challenges and even threatens democratic societies. The scope of far-right extremism is continuously expanding. Neo-Nazis, motorcycle gangs, Identitarians, etc., have only little in common, but express a racist hatred against target groups, which they are advocating with violence. The success of the diverse far-right movement highlights the growing difficulty in distinguishing between 'institutional' politics and the slogan-driven politics seen in physical and digital public spaces. Right-wing parties have become firmly established as relevant and serious political players, who exercise significant political influence, both on their country's politics and at the European level. But there is no unifying force. Some divisions are internal since some far-right groups (such as Marine Le Pen´s in France) want to enter the mainstream.

The far-right in Europe is not homogeneous due to a variety of political, cultural, historical, and ideological differences across countries and movements. Although far-right groups may share some broad themes, such as nationalism, anti-immigration sentiment, and Euroscepticism, their goals, rhetoric, and methods can vary widely depending on the national context and the specific issues each country faces. The degree to which far-right parties focus on migration and Islam also varies. In Western European countries with large immigrant populations, like France, Germany, and the Netherlands, far-right movements emphasize anti-Islamic rhetoric, portraying Islam as incompatible with European values.

Recent disruptive events such as the Russian invasion in Ukraine have demonstrated a split within the growing far-right parties. In one regard, current research is emphasizing a so-called radical party family, on the other hand there are profound limitations for any kind of harmonization. It depends also on strategic questions: being fundamentally in opposition (as an anti-system party), trying to enter the political mainstream, being a party of power (toleration model such as the one used in Scandinavia), or being part of a coalition.

This also provides a fertile ground for radicalization. Some individuals in Europe are increasingly mobilized by the spread of Islam(ism) in Europe, concerns about immigration, and a growing desire for a "white only" society.[187] It is important to recognize that, despite the favorable outcomes at the polls, the current political trend increasingly concerns the creation of new illiberal dynamics both within EU member states and within the political system of the EU. In this regard, liberal democracies have lately been referred to as systems of governance with sufficient 'antibodies' to deal with potential democratic backsliding or regression. This decline in legitimacy can also be applied to Western Europe, but hardly on the same scale since parties in the West still have more stable roots and a more loyal electoral base than in Central-Eastern Europe.[188]

The focus on everyday culture and collective knowledge enables one to understand how political far-right extremist attitudes and practices are embedded in more general societal structures. Far-right cultures and milieus are intertwined and sometimes overlap with non-extremist lifeworld. Hence, far-right extremism is not socially isolated or detached from "mainstream" milieus, but often rather closely intertwined with and embedded in social and political thought. The far-right in Europe is not homogeneous because it is shaped by a variety of national contexts, including different histories, political systems, social issues, and relationships with the EU. Some groups are more focused on immigration and Islam, while others emphasize national sovereignty, anti-elitism, or economic

policies. Their tactics also differ, with some adopting mainstream rhetoric to attract voters, while others remain more radical and extreme.

Understanding these nuances is essential for developing targeted policies to counter the unique threats posed by far-right extremism in different European contexts. The far-right in Europe, as well as the far-left and Islamist movements, are a growing force, evolving from fringe movements into significant political actors. While they share some common goals – particularly around nationalism, anti-immigration, and Euroscepticism[189] – the radical forces are far away from a unified bloc. Their rise has reshaped European politics, but their future trajectory will depend on how mainstream political forces, civil society, and the EU respond to the challenges they present.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

While far-right movements across Europe share certain core themes, such as nationalism, anti-immigration stances, and opposition to multiculturalism, they are far from homogeneous. Each movement is deeply influenced by the political, cultural, and historical context of its local societal environment, meaning that their ideologies and actions can vary significantly from one country to another. For instance, far-right movements in Eastern Europe may focus more on ethnic identity and sovereignty, while those in Western Europe might emphasize concerns over globalization and European integration. It is not very likely that these movements will be unified in the next 3-5 years, as ideological divisions and national contexts will continue to limit coordinated action on a broader scale. However, this lack of unity could inadvertently motivate lone actors and small cell groups, who may feel empowered to act independently, carrying out violent acts driven by their far-right beliefs. Over the next few years, this fragmentation could lead to an increase in such isolated attacks, as individuals or small groups, disillusioned with the broader movement's disunity, take matters into their own hands. Governments and civil society organizations will need to remain vigilant and flexible, as the far-right's lack of cohesion may still lead to localized violence and increased radicalization among those looking to make an impact through violent means.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Tipping points and uncertainties remain. It is unclear how political developments in countries like the USA, Russia, and Turkey will impact the status quo of far-right extremism in Europe. Shifts in foreign policies, political leadership, or international relations could influence the strategies and operations of far-right groups, potentially either amplifying or diminishing their influence in Europe. The dynamics of these global political environments could shift the narrative of far-right movements, introducing new alliances or internal fractures that might affect their use of encrypted platforms and broader tactics. Thus, the relationship between global politics and far-right extremism remains uncertain, with potential far-reaching consequences for future trends.

21.1. ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISTS INCREASINGLY SEEK TO OVERTHROW THE SYSTEM

Anti-government extremism refers to a set of beliefs or ideologies that are strongly opposed to governmental authority, institutions, or policies, often to the point of promoting or using violent means to undermine, disrupt, or overthrow established governments. This form of extremism typically emerges from a deep distrust of government or a belief that government is inherently corrupt, oppressive, or illegitimate. Political Islam's anti-government stance arises from its critique of secularism, its vision of Islamic "*sharia*" governance, and its response to perceived corruption and injustice. The intensity of this stance depends on the political context and the degree to which governments accommodate or oppose Islamic principles. Political Islam (PI) while adopting extremist ideologies, rejecting pluralism, or seeking to undermine democratic institutions and civil liberties becomes a serious threat to democracy.

Political Islam is often viewed as anti-government, especially in contexts where governments are secular, authoritarian, or perceived as illegitimate from an Islamist perspective. This anti-government stance arises from various ideological, theological, and sociopolitical factors. Against this backdrop, PI emphasizes a collective religious identity, which can deepen divisions between religious and secular communities or between Muslims and non-Muslims. In Europe, the rise of Political Islam in some communities has led to fears of segregation and reduced social cohesion.

Anti-government extremism can appear across the political spectrum and take different forms, including:

- *Sovereign Citizen Movement*: A movement that rejects most forms of government authority, viewing themselves as autonomous individuals who are not subject to laws or regulations.[190]
- *Militias and Paramilitary Groups*: Some militias prepare for or encourage armed conflict with the government, seeing it as a legitimate form of resistance.
- *Anarchist Extremism*: Some anarchist groups promote or use violence as a means to dismantle government structures, viewing all forms of centralized authority as inherently oppressive.[191]

Anti-government extremism poses a significant risk not only to government officials and institutions but also to the public. The potential for violent actions, as well as the broader impact on social cohesion and democracy, makes it a serious issue for law enforcement and security agencies.

The democracy-denying scene has become very strong in the past two decades, particularly in Germany and Austria. Many of their leaders attempt to initiate violent actions to overthrow the democratic system. For many years, Reichsbürger were dismissed as harmless cranks, and authorities simply ignored their, often treasonous, declarations. But that has changed in the past decade as the movement became more prominent and began to show a more pronounced propensity to violence and far-right ideology. Reichsbürger and sovereigntists pose a threat to the established legal order, i.e., liberal democracy. Many efforts made to define those terms legally and make them operable for security agencies, prosecutors and courts were evaded by the movements and its agents. So, the challenge to the political system in Germany and Austria is to come up with new concepts of the far-right and extremism in general. Therefore, new categories for this kind of anti-state extremism were created in both countries and the criminal codes were amended accordingly: groups are now being classified as "*staatsfeindlich*" (hostile to the state) or "*demokratieablehnend*" (democracy rejecting) in Austria or "*staatsverweigernd*" (state denying) in Germany, which, in response to the developments during the pandemic, added a new category which addresses "*delegitimization of the state relevant to domestic intelligence*" ["*Verfassungsschutzrelevante Delegitimierung des Staates*"].[192] This new category has been criticized by some as being too broad and ill defined. These legal procedures related to political discourse and practice are indispensable when it comes to the definition of clear terrorist threats and their operation in counterterrorism. There is a severe threat lurking behind the obsolete-looking activities and characteristics of the Reichsbürger and sovereigntist movement. Beyond Germany and Austria, there are, in the global context, even sharper tendencies to overthrow the system including the trend to attack political institutions as a symbol for liberal democracy.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

Anti-institutional movements may increasingly become decentralized and leaderless, with activists and extremists forming smaller, self-directed cells or operating as lone actors. This shift complicates efforts by authorities to track and prevent extremist activities, as the lack of centralized leadership makes it harder to identify and dismantle networks. The trend is expected to remain stable, but its linear nature could change as new technologies or societal shifts influence the way these movements organize and mobilize. Additionally, the growing reliance on online platforms for coordination and recruitment may further complicate efforts to predict and counteract these threats.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

The trend is driven by a complex interplay of political, social, and technological factors. A major tipping point could occur if a political or economic crisis deepens, such as widespread unemployment or government corruption, fueling anger and pushing extremist factions to take more radical action. These groups may become more organized and violent, motivated by the desire to dismantle the existing system. However, successful economic recovery or political reforms could reduce public dissatisfaction, potentially undermining the momentum of such movements. Political polarization is another critical factor, as it could galvanize support for extremist ideologies focused on systemic change. If political leaders or factions adopt increasingly radical rhetoric, it could provide an ideological justification for violent action. Conversely, efforts to bridge political divides and promote unity could weaken the appeal of these movements. In response, governments might resort to crackdowns, which, while attempting to suppress extremism, could inadvertently escalate violence and increase support for overthrowing the system. The emergence of charismatic leaders within these movements could further intensify efforts to challenge government authority. However, the failure or decline of these leaders could destabilize the movement, making it more fragmented and less effective. Technological advancements also play a significant role, as new tools like encrypted communication and digital networks enable extremists to coordinate attacks more easily. This could accelerate their attempts to overthrow the system, but increased surveillance and global counterterrorism efforts may counterbalance this advantage. Public support is another uncertain factor; if the general population begins to view these movements as violent or counterproductive, the radical actions may lose widespread appeal. On the other hand, if counter-extremism measures are seen as oppressive or ineffective, they may fuel further radicalization. The global political climate will also affect this trend, as the rise of authoritarian regimes or global conflicts could embolden local extremists, while international cooperation could suppress their influence. Ultimately, the trajectory of anti-government extremism will depend on the responses of governments, society, and global trends, making it an unpredictable but ongoing challenge.

21.2. DEVELOPING “COLLECTIVE ACTION” APPROACH AMONG AGE ACTORS

Developing a collective action approach among AGE (anti-government extremist) actors involves exploring the possibility that these groups could adopt collective action models to further their extremist agendas. Traditionally, AGE actors have operated using decentralized, often individualistic tactics, but as the movement evolves, there may be a shift toward more coordinated, collective forms of violence. Such a shift could manifest in the formation of organized cells or alliances that work together to achieve common goals, challenging the state through large-scale coordinated attacks, or campaigns of sustained destabilization. This model would allow AGE groups to amplify their impact, pooling resources, intelligence, and operational capabilities to target government institutions and societal infrastructures more efficiently.

Adopting a collective action model would allow AGE actors to spread risks and increase the likelihood of success by coordinating strikes against multiple targets or launching simultaneous attacks across a wider geographical area. These groups could also take advantage of shared ideologies and grievances, which would help unite disparate factions under a common cause. The collective model could also be more effective in recruiting and radicalizing new members, as it presents a sense of community and solidarity among those disillusioned with the state.

However, there are also potential uncertainties and challenges for AGE actors in adopting a collective action approach. Coordinating large-scale operations requires careful planning, strong communication networks, and logistical support – factors that could be difficult for loosely connected extremist cells to achieve. In addition, increased surveillance and counterterrorism efforts by governments and international organizations could disrupt these attempts at coordination, leading to the fragmentation of the groups or their retreat into more decentralized tactics. Moreover,

internal divisions and competing ideologies within AGE factions could undermine the unity required for collective action, making collaboration more difficult.

In this context, the trend toward collective action within AGE groups could fluctuate based on external pressures, such as the effectiveness of counter-extremism measures, shifts in public opinion, or changes in the global political landscape. While the potential for more coordinated, collective action remains a key possibility for AGE actors in the coming years, it is not guaranteed that such strategies will consistently emerge or succeed. This uncertainty adds a layer of unpredictability to how AGE groups might evolve in their quest to challenge and overthrow existing political systems.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

Over the next 3-5 years, anti-government extremist (AGE) actors are likely to increasingly adopt collective action models of violence, driven by the need for more coordinated efforts to challenge state institutions. With advancements in digital communication and encryption, AGE groups will have more opportunities to organize in decentralized yet coordinated cells, making it easier to plan attacks and spread ideologies. The trend is relatively instable.

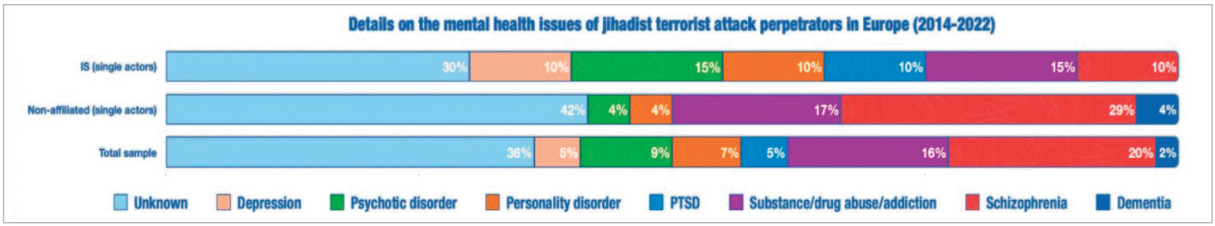
TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

However, this trend may face challenges, as internal divisions within AGE movements or competition between factions could hinder effective collaboration. Despite this, collective action is expected to become more prominent, especially as AGE actors seek to amplify their impact and reduce the risks associated with individual or isolated attacks.

22. GROWING IMPORTANCE OF THE PSYCHOPATHOLOGY OF ATTACKERS

Recent studies by widely acknowledged researchers like Paul Gill, John Horgan and others have revealed a significant shift in our understanding of lone actor terrorism, particularly in relation to jihadist and right-wing extremist violence.[193] Convincingly, Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker (2016) found that around 35% of European lone actor terrorists exhibited signs of mental disorders, compared to 27% in the general population.[194] According to Corner & Gil (2014) lone-actor terrorists were 13.49 times more likely to have a mental disorder than those involved in group-based terrorism.[195]

Table 6: *Mental Health Issues of Jihadist Perpetrators in Europe (2014-2022).*



Source: Hacker 2023, 9.

The mental health conditions commonly seen among lone actors – such as personality disorders, schizophrenia, delusional disorder, and autism spectrum disorders – often involve delusional, rigid, or fixated thinking, which can be easily influenced by ideological beliefs.[196] These findings indicate that, for example, many jihadist lone attackers suffer from some variant of psychopathological illness, often even diagnosed and under surveillance. Such research challenges previous assumptions about the psychology of perpetrators and highlights mental disorder as a significant terrorist risk factor. However, it's crucial to avoid oversimplification, as the types of mental health problems observed range from depression and anxiety to more severe conditions like schizophrenia, each presenting unique challenges for prevention and intervention. Lone actors represent a new paradigm in terrorism, characterized by a lack of formal organizational ties and radicalization through global subcultures communicating in virtual networks, rather than traditional face-to-face recruitment. This shift has led to a blurring of lines between jihadism and right-wing extremism, with some individuals drawing inspiration from multiple ideologies. Recent research also debunks common myths surrounding lone actor terrorism.[197]

Media often portray these attackers without further evidence as "mentally deranged," potentially leading to misunderstandings about their culpability. However, a diagnosis of mental illness does not automatically imply an inability to be held legally responsible, as many lone attackers demonstrate clear ideological motivations and meticulous planning before attacks. Similarly, the myth of rapid radicalization is challenged by evidence showing a longer history of engagement with extremist ideologies, often leaving a significant digital footprint. Reinforcing this claim, important studies have recently identified several recurring patterns among lone actor terrorists.[198]

These include a combination of personal grievances and political ideologies driving their actions, a high prevalence of mental health issues, radicalization occurring within a social context, communication of intent often through online platforms, drawing inspiration from other extremist actors or ideologies, and specific events serving as catalysts for their violent actions. Such findings have significant implications for counterterrorism efforts. They necessitate an interdisciplinary approach, combining the expertise of mental health professionals, law enforcement, and community leaders. Enhanced focus on detecting early signs of radicalization in digital spaces is crucial, as is the development of tailored interventions recognizing that one-size-fits-all approaches to deradicalization may be ineffective. Early warning systems to identify and respond to individuals showing signs of potential violent extremism are also vital. Despite these insights, preventing lone actor terrorism remains challenging. In conclusion, the evolving understanding of lone actor terrorism, particularly its intersection with mental health issues, necessitates a reevaluation of counterterrorism strategies.

A recidivating pattern can be detected for this kind of terrorists with a tendency towards becoming lone actors:

- *Their radicalization does not occur in a social vacuum.*
- *They frequently combine personal and political problems.*
- *They often suffer from mental illnesses.*
- *They sometimes communicate their openness to violence and the possibility of carrying out a massacre.*
- *They regularly express inspiration by other actors and extremist ideas.*
- *There has often been a triggering event, which enables their specific act of violence.*

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

With the general increase in mental health issues such as depression and trauma, it appears likely that "lone actors" vulnerable to these challenges may feel empowered to carry out attacks over the next 3–5 years. This projection assumes a highly stable trend, with mental health struggles continuing to play a significant role in enabling individuals to radicalize and act independently. Recognizing and addressing these underlying vulnerabilities will be crucial in mitigating the risks associated with lone-actor terrorism.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Within this trend, the range of uncertainty is considerable. Defining what constitutes a psychological deficiency and determining whether it directly contributes to a terrorist act can be highly subjective and complex. While mental health issues such as depression and trauma may increase vulnerability, they are not always the sole or even primary factor driving radicalization. The degree of ideological motivation must not be underestimated, as it often plays a central role in shaping the intent and actions of individuals. In many cases, psychological struggles may intersect with ideological factors, amplifying the appeal of extremist narratives and facilitating violent action. Given the evolving nature of terrorism, particularly with the involvement of Generation Z and Alpha, understanding the interplay between mental health vulnerabilities and ideological influences is critical for developing more effective counter-terrorism strategies. This dual focus will be essential in addressing both the individual and ideological components of radicalization in the coming years.

VI. MORPHOLOGY | TECHNOLOGY | VIRTUALIZATION

23. GROWING EXPLOITATION OF DIGITAL "VALUE CHAIN" OF TERRORISM

Terrorists increasingly exploit the entire digital value chain of terrorism. Starting from a first virtual contact with extreme positions and ideologies, over recruitment, propaganda and radicalization to the direct planning and organization of attacks – nearly everything is mandated online.[199] This phenomenon may be referenced as the "*virtualization of terrorism*".[200] It implies the immersion of terrorists into the sphere of cyberspace across the entire value chain (from the initial contact with extremist ideology to the planning and execution of attacks) and is at the core of this terrorist manifestation. The internet and the Dark Net have meanwhile become a preferred space for terrorist activities. In many ways Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be regarded as a game-changer in that sphere as well, as it potentially enhances the terrorist's capabilities.[201] AI is in many aspects a double-edged sword.[202] On the one hand, AI is likely to enhance security measures by automating threat detection through advanced data analysis, pattern recognition, and the monitoring of online spaces for radical content. AI tools can process vast amounts of data to identify potential threats in real-time, making it easier for law enforcement to detect radicalization early or trace suspicious communications on encrypted platforms. For example, AI algorithms can help to flag extremist content on social media, analyze behavioral patterns indicative of radicalization, and even simulate attack scenarios to improve response strategies.

On the other hand, terrorists themselves are beginning to exploit AI for their own purposes, such as creating deepfakes to disseminate propaganda, bypassing traditional surveillance with advanced encryption algorithms, and potentially even using autonomous systems like drones in attacks. The accessibility of AI-driven technologies like chatbots and language models such as ChatGPT could enable extremist groups to automate recruitment, spread misinformation, or even direct terrorist attacks through virtual means, further complicating the threat landscape.

The potential use of AI by terrorist groups has been identified as a disruption and has emerged as a significant concern in the global terrorist threat landscape. As AI technologies become more accessible and sophisticated, terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, IS, and Hezbollah are increasingly exploring ways to leverage these tools for their nefarious purposes.[203] The lowered barriers to entry in terms of cost, training, and technical skills required have made AI more attainable for these groups, potentially amplifying their capabilities and reach. Terrorists are primarily exploiting AI in three key areas: propaganda and information operations, enhancing recruitment efforts, and facilitating financing activities. In the realm of propaganda, AI is being used to generate, translate, and disseminate content more efficiently. For instance, IS has experimented with AI-generated news bulletins[204], while pro-al-Qaeda outlets have created propaganda images likely using AI tools. Far-right groups have also produced guides on using AI for creating extremist memes, demonstrating the technology's appeal across various ideological spectrums. The potential for AI to accelerate and enhance radicalization processes is particularly alarming.[205] AI-powered chatbots can engage potential recruits in personalized interactions, potentially making the recruitment process more effective and harder to detect. Moreover, the immersive environments created by AI, such as those in the metaverse, could serve as powerful tools for terrorist training and indoctrination. Artificial intelligence may be misused to support operational and organizational planning of future attacks.[206] This could be mandated by quickly providing targeting and logistic information as well as something akin to terrorist project management. The attacker, a former Green Beret soldier, who was responsible for the Las Vegas "cyber-truck" explosion next to the local Trump Hotel, is indicated to have been searching for information on ChatGPT referring to "explosive targets", the "speed at which certain rounds of ammunition would travel" and whether "fireworks were legal in Arizona".[207] Specific examples of terrorist use of AI have already been observed. The "Islamic State" has published guides on how to securely use generative AI tools, while various extremist groups are

using AI for translating propaganda into multiple languages, significantly expanding their reach. These developments highlight the adaptability of terrorist organizations in embracing new technologies. While a comprehensive adoption of AI by terrorists is not guaranteed and depends on various factors, these groups' ability to adapt to and exploit new technologies should not be underestimated. Countering this emerging threat requires a collaborative effort between policymakers, law enforcement agencies, tech companies, and civil society. Strategies need to be developed to monitor and contain AI-enhanced terrorist operations effectively. Interestingly, AI also presents opportunities for counter-terrorism efforts. There's potential to use AI for developing personalized counter-messaging to combat terrorist narratives and for enhancing intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities. As AI technology continues to evolve rapidly, the challenge of preventing its misuse by terrorist groups while harnessing its potential for counter-terrorism efforts remains a critical concern for global security. The dynamic nature of this threat necessitates ongoing research, policy development, and international cooperation to stay ahead of terrorist innovations in the AI space.

Not only on a motivational level but also in terms of capabilities, virtualization describes the capabilities and the ability to conduct (cyber) operations along the jihadist "value chain", ranging from providing propaganda platforms to preparing attacks. Capability and deeply rooted motivation go hand in hand, as extremists use the diverse opportunities offered by cyberspace for their activities in every conceivable way. Anonymity and clandestine operations favor organizations and lone actors who take advantage of sub-conventional, asymmetric tactics, and vice versa. If these jihadist followers manage to escape or bypass the countermeasures of counterterrorism investigators, they may create a virtual hub that allows them to quickly adapt and use it as a weapon. Fundamentally, the toxic combination of strong motivation and existing capabilities poses a constant threat to security. Unfortunately, the likelihood of the threat becoming established is considered relatively high.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

The growing exploitation of the digital value chain for terrorism in the sense of a "tech-terror-nexus" is one of the most stable and predictable trends observed in recent years, with little indication that this pattern will change soon. As digital tools and platforms continue to evolve, terrorist groups are increasingly leveraging the internet for radicalization, recruitment, communication, and the facilitation of attacks. This trend is unlikely to reverse, as it offers terrorists a cost-effective and far-reaching means of disseminating propaganda and coordinating operations. Digital technologies also provide anonymity and security, allowing extremist groups to bypass traditional state surveillance and law enforcement efforts. In the coming years, the exploitation of the digital realm is expected to become more sophisticated, with the use of encrypted networks, artificial intelligence, and deep web platforms further enhancing the capabilities of terrorist organizations. As counterterrorism measures evolve, it will become increasingly challenging to track and intercept digital extremist activity, underscoring the need for stronger international cooperation and innovation in monitoring digital spaces.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

While the trend of exploiting the digital value chain for terrorism remains stable and linear, there are several uncertainties surrounding its future trajectory. One key uncertainty is the potential intentional decoupling of terrorist organizations or radicalized individuals from the online space. For example, some groups may deliberately choose to revert to low-tech, offline methods in order to evade sophisticated counterterrorism measures. This has already been observed in the realm of terrorist crypto financing, where extremist organizations have opted for traditional, less traceable methods of financial transactions to avoid detection. If this decoupling becomes more widespread, it could disrupt the reliance on digital platforms, forcing counterterrorism efforts to adapt in new, unforeseen ways. Additionally, the balance between increasing technological sophistication and the ability of authorities to monitor these advancements remains unpredictable, as law enforcement

agencies race to catch up with emerging tools used by terrorists. Finally, the degree to which terrorist organizations will continue to innovate or remain reliant on established digital platforms could be influenced by geopolitical shifts, technological advancements, or increased regulatory interventions. These uncertainties present challenges to both the evolution of terrorism and the efforts to counter it.

23.1. INCREASED USE OF ENCRYPTED PLATFORMS

Extremists and terrorists use peer-to-peer encrypted messaging platforms for several reasons, all of which revolve around enhancing their ability to communicate securely and evade detection by law enforcement and intelligence agencies.[208] Encrypted platforms are constantly available, easily accessible, and not hard to maintain.[209] Moreover, the vast availability of different platforms, apps and tools adds to this development. They can be used as a hideaway for terrorists and a safe space for communication, as they are hard to detect and penetrate. End-to-end encryption ensures that messages are scrambled during transmission and can only be decrypted by the intended recipient. This level of encryption makes it very difficult for third parties, including service providers or law enforcement, to read the messages, even if they are intercepted. Many encrypted platforms like Telegram allow for secure group communications, enabling extremists to coordinate within larger cells or networks without fear of their conversations being monitored. According to recent research by Reuben Dass, "*in at least 44 percent of the 57 virtually directed Islamic State plots between 2014 and 2020, Telegram was used as a method of communication*".[210]

Encrypted platforms and apps are used to recruit new members by providing a safe space for potential recruits to engage with extremist content and communicate with recruiters without fear of being monitored. Extremists frequently use encrypted messaging to distribute propaganda materials such as videos, audio messages, or written manifestos, bypassing traditional social media platforms that might censor or remove such content.[211] Operations are securely coordinated on these platforms. Planners and perpetrators can discuss sensitive details, such as target selection, logistics, and timing, without worrying that their plans will be intercepted by authorities. Peer-to-peer encrypted platforms are particularly useful for small, decentralized cells or lone actors who need to communicate with handlers or other operatives while maintaining operational security.

Specifically, the ISKP and its supporters are increasingly using closed, encrypted peer-to-peer chat groups to carry out virtual terror planning.[212] Conspirators in one location sometimes give online instructions to radicalized followers in another location on how to carry out attacks in their respective target countries. The instructions from these virtual "entrepreneurs" can take different forms: Recommendations on targets, the tactical approach and *modi operandi*, as well as ideological and/or logistical support. In an interview for the Swiss daily "Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)" Terrorism researcher Peter R. Neumann argues: "*They send each other videos of attacks and get excited about the violence depicted*".[213] This is the light in which the messenger service "Telegram" is currently being discussed, especially as in recent years this platform has increasingly been misused by young extremists for relevant planning and coordination. Terrorism and the use of digital exchange platforms are closely linked, as terrorist organizations and extremist groups, but also individuals, are increasingly using the internet to plan and propagate their terrorist activities and recruit supporters. Regarding the specific planning and communication of the suspects in advance, it is also clear that Telegram and other peer-to-peer messenger services were relevant in this case.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

The trend of extremists using encrypted platforms for communication shows no signs of diminishing and is considered as very stable. As technology continues to evolve, the use of these secure platforms will remain a stable and dynamic method for coordinating activities and spreading extremist ideologies. Encrypted communication offers a level of anonymity that is increasingly

vital for terrorist groups, allowing them to evade detection by authorities and operate with greater freedom. This trend is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, as advancements in encryption technologies make it harder for security agencies to monitor these interactions. While governments and intelligence agencies will continue to develop new strategies to counteract this challenge, the widespread use of encrypted platforms by extremists is expected to remain a persistent issue. Additionally, the growing sophistication of cyber tools will likely enable extremists to refine their methods, further complicating counterterrorism efforts. Consequently, the use of encrypted communication will remain a key component of terrorist operations, posing an ongoing challenge for law enforcement and intelligence communities worldwide.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Enhanced legal countermeasures and technological tools could temporarily disrupt terrorist communications, but extremists may quickly adapt by finding alternative methods that are harder to detect. As a result, encrypted platforms – given platform volatility – will continue to be a central challenge for counterterrorism efforts.

23.2. DYNAMIC TIKTOK RADICALIZATION

TikTok has become a major platform, where radicalization of adolescents takes place.[214] Its customized content targeting youth suggests that extremists may be taking over and exploiting this platform for their purposes. It already happens along the spectrum of extremisms. TikTok is used by far-right extremists to promote xenophobic attitudes, manifesting as racism and strong opposition to immigration. Religious intolerance is expressed through anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim prejudice, while gender-based discrimination is characterized by anti-feminist views and hostility towards LGBTQ rights and identities.[215]

Islamist hate preachers and influencers are currently using the Middle East conflict and the war in Gaza in particular as a pretext and opportunity to convince young people of their extremist ideology.[216] German constitutional protectors are alarmed: the instrumentalization of TikTok by Islamists in Germany has developed into a "fire accelerator" for youth radicalization.[217] TikTok is currently providing masses of propagandistically staged videos from Gaza. These include not only misinformation and propaganda, but also Salafist content, some of which achieves enormous outreach. They deliberately spread victim and revenge narratives that are designed to incite young people. Another recurring aspect is the dichotomous division into "*halal*" and "*haram*", a theologically dressed-up division of the world into "good" and "evil", which runs like a common thread through the messages of influencer preachers and is essentially designed to demand a Sharia-compliant life from young people in contrast to non-Muslim society, something which can hardly be reconciled with the requirements and principles of the liberal constitutional state.[218]

Moreover, the video streaming app TikTok is increasingly deployed by political actors to reach younger voters. TikTok grants social media users the opportunity to create and share short videos of between three and 60 seconds with added music and audio-visual effects. In the past years, extremists of all ideological backgrounds have continued to exploit this platform as a space for propaganda to foster radicalization among adolescents. In early August 2024, the arrest of two teenagers, aged 18 and 19, in Austria, who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) and likely plotted a terror attack at a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna, has underscored a growing concern: the recruitment of young individuals into Islamist and far-right terrorist groups through social media, especially TikTok.[219] This trend, often referred to as "TikTok-Jihad" has sparked a resurgence of jihadist activities across Europe.[220]

Intelligence experts highlight TikTok's role as a major recruiting platform for young lone attackers and virtual terror cells, thanks to its extensive reach and algorithmic influence. Telegram, on the other

hand, is often used for planning and coordinating attacks. Such a shift in recruitment strategies poses significant challenges for law enforcement. Monitoring online interactions and identifying virtual meeting places is far more complex than tracking face-to-face meetings between recruiters and recruits.

EXPECTED DEVELOPMENT OF TREND

As a Generation Z and Alpha phenomenon, the extremist exploitation of social media platforms like TikTok remains a trend that is highly likely to continue. These platforms offer a powerful tool for extremist groups to target vulnerable adolescents, particularly teenagers, by providing highly customized content designed to resonate with their interests and concerns. The algorithms of social media platforms are adept at amplifying such content, allowing extremist ideologies to spread rapidly within specific online communities. These tailored messages often exploit social, political, and emotional vulnerabilities, fostering radicalization in individuals who may be seeking a sense of belonging or purpose. As social media continues to be integral to the lives of younger generations, the potential for extremists to manipulate these platforms for recruitment and radicalization will likely persist. Still, the trend turns out to be instable as several technological, legal, and security-related aspects could affect it in the next 3-5 years.

TIPPING POINT AND UNCERTAINTIES

Stronger regulation and monitoring are essential strategies in addressing the significant challenge of extremist online content. A strict content-removal policy by social media platform owners and content providers could, at least temporarily, lead to a decrease in the spread of extremist material. By swiftly identifying and removing harmful content, these platforms can hinder the ability of terrorist groups and violent extremists to recruit, radicalize, and disseminate their ideologies. Consequent labelling and hash-sharing could be a particularly effective method for tracking and removing content produced by, or disseminated from, terrorist or extremist organizations. This approach, involving collaboration between platforms and government agencies, would ensure that flagged material is consistently taken down across multiple platforms. Additionally, the use of machine learning tools and AI algorithms could enhance the speed and accuracy of identifying such content.

CONCLUSION

In Europe, various trends concerning terrorism have evolved and materialized in recent years, influenced by a kaleidoscope of socio-political, technological, and global factors.[221] These trends reflect the changing nature of threats, the influence of both domestic and international security factors, and to some extent the responses of European governments to mitigate these risks. A wide array of extremist groups and individuals operate across borders, rendering counterterrorism efforts more complex. Europe's Schengen Area, which allows for free movement between nation states, can be exploited by terrorists who can plot and launch attacks without being restricted by national borders. The growing use of social media for recruitment and propaganda has made detecting and preventing attacks more difficult. European governments continue to develop comprehensive strategies to combat these threats, but the challenge is evolving rapidly. Soon we may observe more localized, fragmented violence as radical ideologies continue to spread in both the physical and digital worlds. The terrorist threat matrix will be shaped by these trends and counter-terrorism efforts should take these developments and dynamics strategically into consideration.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The phenomenon of transnational terrorism has in the past decade reached a political level at European scale.[222] In the aftermath of attacks political decision-makers regularly express solidarity and empathy for the victims, promising to stand shoulder to shoulder in a "fight against terrorism". However, substantial efforts are necessary, and success in countering the growing terrorist threat depends on constant institutional learning and a strategic foresight approach. Mitigating the terrorist risk will depend on the ability to enhance resilience, robustness, and responsivity. Precondition is *inter alia* the understanding of preferred structures, tactics, logistics and *modi operandi*. Past attacks, both launched or foiled, provide a large sample of evidence and knowledge that is the basis for operationalization in strategic foresight analysis. Nobody can reliably predict the future, but by employing a foresight methodology we may be able to understand existing structures and dynamics indicating a probability of possible trajectories.

In summary, our analysis has shown that terrorism trends continue to evolve rapidly, driven by technological advancements, geopolitical shifts, and complex socio-economic factors. As extremist groups adapt to changing environments, so too must counterterrorism efforts. Moving forward, a proactive approach – integrating robust intelligence, fostering international cooperation, and community-level resilience building – will be critical. While substantial challenges remain, continuous adaptation and a commitment to addressing root causes of extremist violence can reduce the global impact of terrorism. By remaining vigilant and responsive to emerging trends, we can work towards a safer and more secure future.

The ongoing evolution of a fifth wave of terrorism, propelled by the phenomenon of multidimensional extremism, presents profound security and societal challenges. This emerging form of extremism is marked by ideological fluidity, allowing for hybrid and adaptive radicalization patterns that evade traditional classifications. As a result, identifying radicalization trajectories becomes increasingly complex, while the unpredictability of extremist threats intensifies.

The decentralization of extremist activity, coupled with rapid radicalization pathways, has led to a surge in low-threshold, self-directed attacks by lone actors, complicating law enforcement's ability to detect and prevent violence. Unlike previous waves of terrorism, which were often rooted in structured ideological movements, this multidimensional extremism fosters individualized radicalization, where ideological motivations blend and shift dynamically.

Beyond security implications, this phenomenon has profound societal consequences. By exploiting social and political fractures, it deepens polarization, erodes trust in institutions, and facilitates the normalization of extremist rhetoric. Digital ecosystems play a pivotal role in this transformation, as social media algorithms, echo chambers, and AI-driven content personalization accelerate exposure to extremist narratives, creating self-reinforcing radicalization loops.

Extremist groups continue to exploit technology for recruitment and coordination, posing challenges for current security frameworks. Additionally, political instability in certain regions is creating new havens for radical groups, potentially exacerbating the risk of cross-border terrorism. Given these insights, it is essential to consider the implications for counterterrorism strategies. Current approaches may require adaptation to address new forms of radicalization and the transnational nature of modern terrorist networks. A more integrated strategy that includes technological innovations in intelligence, stronger international partnerships, and community-level engagement may help in mitigating the impacts of these threats.

While terrorism remains a significant and evolving threat, proactive measures can help reduce its impact. Continued vigilance, adaptability, and a commitment to addressing both the symptoms and root causes of extremism will be essential in building resilience against future threats. Effective counter-terrorism must take this resilience and preparedness aspect more into consideration.

MOVING FORWARD

Conclusively, while certain terrorist threats in Europe remain consistent, the landscape is continually influenced by emerging ideologies, geopolitical shifts, and technological changes. Continuous monitoring and adaptive strategies are essential to effectively address both stable and unstable trends in terrorism.

Trend reports like this will hopefully prove essential for developing a nuanced, adaptable, and comprehensive approach to countering terrorism. Advancing knowledge in these domains can help policymakers, security agencies, and communities implement strategies that address root causes, prevent radicalization, and effectively respond to the evolving threats posed by terrorism in a rapidly changing world. “Who becomes a terrorist and why” [223], this will be the focus for the next 3-5 years as we are considering the trends in terrorism for Europe. This refers equally for groups, networks and single actors. Terrorism trends in Europe exhibit both stable and unstable patterns, influenced by various socio-political factors and evolving security landscapes. In summary, while certain forms of terrorism, such as jihadist and ethno-nationalist ones, have remained consistent threats in Europe, the landscape is continually evolving. Current challenges, including youth radicalization and the involvement of organized crime in terrorist activities, contribute to the instability of terrorism trends across the continent.

EPILOGUE
by Colin P. Clarke

The 2025 EICTP European Trend Report on Terrorism provides a comprehensive overview of the most important issues in terrorism and counterterrorism in Europe. It also accomplishes what other reports have set out to do but fallen short of – combining analytic rigor with an insightful and data-driven forecast of where things may be headed next. Building on terrorism scholar David Rapaport's Four Waves of Modern Terrorism, this analysis from Stockhammer proposes a fifth wave – low-level terrorism, which has been plaguing the West for the better part of the past decade, if not longer. This fifth wave offers terrorists and violent extremists new opportunities to wreak havoc, leveraging virtual technologies with lethal intent, motivated by a range of ideologies and objectives.

The EICTP European Trend Report identified new patterns adopted by terrorists, distilling a range of technologies at their disposal, analyzing changes in the international system, and assessing various social dynamics that have given rise to the types of plots and attacks that terrorists have planned. By presenting empirical evidence on the tactics, techniques, and procedures adopted by terrorists – not just lone actors, but small cells and groups – this report is a critical resource to counterterrorism practitioners, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement professionals. The other crucial byproduct of this report is the distillation of extremist narratives, which could only be accomplished by tracking and monitoring how these narratives spread online, as well as the ideologies underpinning their resonance.

Groups like the Islamic State Khorasan Province have seized first-mover advantage in using social media sites and encrypted platforms to target myriad demographics – especially, though not exclusively, youth – for radicalization, recruitment, and incitement to violence. TikTok has become one such platform, where young men and women are exposed to seemingly innocuous topics that are merely a Trojan horse or conveyor belt to more radical ideas. Europe has experienced this firsthand, and as the authors note, jihadist terrorism remains the most serious threat to Europe in the near-term, and one that is already being reenergized by the reverberations from the October 7, 2023 Hamas terror attack and subsequent Israeli military reprisal.

Though it represents a smaller portion of plots and attacks, far-right terrorism also remains a major concern in Europe, especially as global networks continue to spread hatred, xenophobia, and racially motivated violent extremist propaganda online. Some of the trends identified by the authors of this report are cross-cutting, impacting terrorist groups across the ideological spectrum. And as the authors correctly note, the terror threat landscape is being shaped by multiple crises, some foreign, others domestic. This includes deep polarization in society, increasing isolation as individuals retreat from public life and spend more time online, and an inability to demonstrate resilience against growing and relentless efforts by radicals and violent extremists to foment unrest in democratic societies.

Oftentimes, terrorists and their supporters are experts at identifying seams in society and exploiting them. This is a continuation of a trend that began before the COVID-19 pandemic but accelerated over those years, with the second and third-order effects now evident and impossible to ignore. Conspiracy theories and ideological convergence – sometimes referred to as composite violent extremism or salad bar terrorism – wherein extremists are comfortable holding discrepant views and acting on these to conduct acts of violence. Layered on top of this challenge is a shift toward anomie and nihilism, increasingly apparent online, and the fact that as part of the fifth wave, occasionally ideology is just a veneer atop a killer's pre-existing propensity for violence. Such an eclectic and kaleidoscopic threat matrix is a massive challenge for counterterrorism authorities, who often struggle with tracing an individual's path to radicalization, given the variegated nature of some terrorist motivations.

The young age of perpetrators is evidence that terrorism and violent extremism in 2025 will remain a generational challenge. At a time when finite resources are being shifted away from counterterrorism and toward great power competition and other state-based threats, there is less funding and manpower to design and implement targeted prevention efforts. Psychopathology is apparent in many cases of youth radicalization, though the subfield of how mental illness interacts with terrorist and extremist ideology remains in its nascent stages, with many studies and recommendations preliminary, lacking a more robust dataset that could help produce generalizable findings.

The EICTP European Trend Report also correctly focuses on the issue of the crime-terror nexus, a phenomenon that was a crucial driver of the foreign terrorist fighter mobilization of Europeans and other Westerners who traveled to join the Islamic State at the peak of its caliphate. Especially in Europe, the Islamic State recruited from the underworld, prizing recruits with criminal backgrounds and illicit skills that could serve as a force multiplier for the jihadist group. While low-level attacks are likely to remain the preferred modus operandi of terrorists in Europe, it is entirely plausible that groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, or any of their myriad affiliates, branches, and franchise groups worldwide could be plotting another complex attack modeled on the Bataclan assault of November 2015 in Paris, France.

Perhaps the most important trend is the way that terrorists and extremists are leveraging various emerging technologies, including unmanned aerial systems (UAS), 3-D printed weapons, encrypted platforms, cryptocurrencies, and artificial intelligence. Because governments are constrained by laws, authorities, and policies in a way that terrorists are not, violent non-state actors have an advantage when it comes to adopting cutting-edge tech. Through trial and error, terrorists refine their approach and sophistication. In the near future, as the barriers to entry continue to be lowered and operational coordination improves, we should expect to see more lethal attacks where terrorists employ advanced technologies to significant effect.

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Recent publications include:

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