



# Beyond the Radical Islamist and Right-Wing Threat

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## Introduction

Violent extremist groups exploit times of uncertainty to advance their agendas and inevitably have been seeking to take advantage of the disruption caused by COVID-19 (EU Radicalisation Awareness Network 2020). Extremists have integrated coronavirus into their propaganda (UN CTED 2020), and the pandemic has been used to bolster narratives across all extremist ideologies. Religious extremists, radical left-wing groups, and white supremacists have been determined to raise tensions within society to facilitate the failure of existing political systems and realize their nefarious objectives (ISD Global 2020). These terrorist groups all strive to fit the pandemic situation into their ideological context regardless of whether their commentaries are consistent or logical (Burchill 2020).

## **Narratives Circulated among Extremists beyond Radical Islamists and Far Right Entities**

Antigovernmental narratives have been at the forefront of extremist movements since the pandemic outbreak. Alarming surges in extremism occurred in France, Italy, and Spain, where misinformation campaigns on social media encompassed conspiracy theories and pseudoscience (Lichfield 2020). The relevance of radical Islamists and white supremacists may have been subsiding, but the economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis offered a unique opportunity for these entities to revive (The Soufan Center 2020). Left-wing activists pursue an economic reading of the crisis (Bröning 2020) and contend that the worsening post-pandemic economic situation will deepen economic disparities in society. In line with this, citizen anger emerging from these inequalities may push people to get their voices heard by engaging in violent acts

(The Soufan Center 2020). Interestingly, left-wing participants of a 2020 study claimed a decrease in patriotism and a “more positive attitude toward immigration and welfare policies” (Rigoli 2020), while right-wing supporters reported higher patriotism and a more negative attitude toward immigration and welfare policies. Left-wing agendas may derive strength from state-centric national actions in managing the pandemic crisis. At the same time, the economic consequences of COVID-19 have led to a revival of conflict over redistribution, which may be bolstering far left narratives (Bröning 2020). While the far right in the United States accuses migrants and refugees of bringing in the virus (Kildiş 2020), the far left blames the healthcare system and calls on government to compensate minority groups for the economic inequality that makes them more at risk of the serious health consequences of infection (Bowden 2020; Gaffney 2020). Extreme left activists also protested on the streets. In Paris, they demonstrated to demand better working conditions for healthcare workers (BBC, 16 June 2020), and Antifa’s far left supporters participated in antiracism protests after the death of George Floyd (Sardarizadeh and Wendling 2020).

The global pandemic crisis unequivocally shed light on climate change and associated environmental deterioration. Violent extremist groups have exploited the symptoms of climate change as an effective argument to attract new supporters (Dene 2020). Witnessing the disruption COVID-19 has caused, climate change and its consequences can be deemed to be that powerful as well. The destabilizing effect of both crises inherently paves the way for extremist efforts to endeavor to take advantage of the catastrophe these phenomena may end up creating (Sinan Siyech 2020). Environmental refugees who have already migrated from natural disasters may be the subject of future extremist hatred. In line with this, the threat of ecoterrorism will likely push extremists to exploit the crisis for their recruiting purposes (The Soufan Center 2020). A noteworthy example was Islamic State’s incitements that called on supporters to engage in bushfire terrorism in Australia at the beginning of 2020 (Zimmerman 2020). Leveraging a natural phenomenon and creating a well-timed manmade catastrophe out of it would be highly beneficial for terrorists and would have serious consequences for society. Terrorists will capitalize on future environmental catastrophes; therefore, the associated national security threat should be acknowledged and preparedness should be enhanced (Dene 2020). We need to draw lessons from managing the COVID-19 pandemic, which as a global problem like climate change demands collective action. Effective communication of scientific standpoints has been given the utmost significance during challenging pandemic times. The correc-

tion of false information and the trust in expert opinion is also critically important with regard to climate change (Bellamy 2020). This implies the need for a multiagency coordination and disaster response together with a proactive approach to future natural or manmade disasters (Tin, Hertelendy, and Ciottono 2020).

At the same time, supporters of ecoterrorism ideology blame over-population, immigration, and over-industrialization for climate change (Siegel 2021). Followers think that the mass murder of refugees in Western countries could remedy environmental damage (Kamel, Lamoureux, and Makuch 2020). They cite scientific arguments for finite planetary boundaries and claim a race-based natural aristocracy for white Europeans (Allison 2020). Their social media rhetoric uses nature-themed photos, logos, and emojis, which look harmless at first sight (Owen 2019). Their narratives depicting COVID-19 as the “Earth’s vaccine” have gone viral since the outbreak (Newton 2020). On the news website Common Dreams, the pandemic has been perceived as “nature’s response to human transgression” (Klare 2020). *The Guardian* cited the UN’s environment Chief, Inger Anderson, as asserting that the virus is “nature sending us a message” (Carrington 2020). An article in *Psychology Today* referred to coronavirus as “a gift” and mother nature as “turning it up a notch” after the failure of humans to listen to earth’s other warnings (Goldman-Wetzler 2020). Earlier in the year, an ecoterrorist group shared on its Telegram channel a guidebook titled “Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching,” detailing techniques for damaging property, subverting industrial development, and sabotaging critical infrastructure. In July 2020, an ecoterrorist channel on a prominent online platform encouraged its followers to obtain weapons and capitalize upon the political unrest in the United States (SITE Intelligence Group 2020). Articles titled “Sopa de Wuhan” (Wuhan Soup) suggested racist allegations that “unnatural” eating may be a catalyst for COVID-19 (Fraser 2020). The Telegram account of “Eco-Fascist Central” also refortified traditional antisemitic and Islamophobic narratives with fallacious theories related to the pandemic. The group advocated spreading the virus in countries “with large populations or high levels of pollution” (UNICRI 2020). Therefore, it is of great importance to identify those malevolent interests that aim to support violent measures as “necessary, natural or inevitable” (Anson 2020) to heal the environment. Well-trusted climate justice activists should be provided with platforms to condemn these fallacies (Almonte 2021). At the same time, economic difficulties will force governments to reallocate resources, thereby potentially decreasing amounts devoted to green programs. This disillusionment may add further impetus for eco-extremist vio-

lence (Pauwels 2020). In the end, allow us to remind our readers that Patrick Crusius the El Paso murderer, Brenton Tarrant the Christchurch shooter, and Anders Breivik the perpetrator of the 2011 Norway terrorist attack all shared ecoterrorist views in their manifestos (Darby 2019).

Another worrisome, entwined link can be identified between far right groups and green nationalist activists. Jacob Chansley, known as the “QAnon Shaman,” was arrested in the Capitol riot on January 6. As one of the most visible participants in the riot, he “engages in energy healing, psychedelic ceremonies, requested organic food while in detention and is against chemical pollution of the environment” (NHPR, 22 January 2021). Far right movements can undoubtedly attract new supporters by adopting these environmental elements in their populist narratives. Right-wing environmentalist ideas can be tracked, for instance, in Marine Le Pen’s “patriotic ecology” concept (Patin 2021).

It was suggested that once the pandemic is perceived as an impetus for increased interest in automation and the application of robotics, ideologies that plant aversion toward technology in some people’s minds would be revived (Romei 2020). For such individuals, instead of advocating the benefits of technological advances such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, they regard these novelties as a threat to job opportunities (The Soufan Center 2020). Previous attacks against 5G towers (Brodkin 2020) suggest that technological advances can provide fertile ground for violent incitements.

## Conclusion

In sum, we can speak about an elevated level of intensity with regard to the activities of extremist groups other than those that are radical Islamist and right-wing since the pandemic outbreak. Nevertheless, experts agree that the threat of jihadists or white supremacists and their acts of terrorism in the near future is considerably higher than that of left-wing or ecoterrorist actors (The Soufan Center 2020).

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