



Conclusion

Policy Recommendations



Introduction

Violent extremist groups exploit times of uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic to advance their agendas (EU Radicalization Awareness Network 2020). Extremists have integrated coronavirus into their propaganda (UN CTED 2020) to advance narratives across all extremist ideologies. In carefully examining both radical Islamist and far right trends, this research aimed to establish a true picture of the threat landscape since the pandemic outbreak. This could serve as a basis for policymakers to make amendments to counterterrorism strategies both in conflict and nonconflict zones. With this in mind, both academic and practitioner perspectives on future counterterrorism policies will be put forward in this concluding section.

Academic Perspectives on Counterterrorism Policies

It has been argued that the pandemic has tested “national resilience, international solidarity, and multilateral cooperation” (The Fine Globe 2020). Growing fragmentation in society and anti-racial narratives warn authorities to stay vigilant and allocate funds to prepare for potential acts of terrorism (Pantucci 2020). COVID-19 offered novel opportunities for both radical Islamist and right-wing extremists to accelerate violence against their objects of hate (Kruglanski et al. 2020). Just as terrorists are continuously adjusting to the circumstances of the pandemic, so do authorities need to make adjustments to address the associated challenges (Voronkov 2020). All government policymaking will have been impacted by the pandemic, and counterterrorism policies are no exception. In the following, we take account of the most relevant factors.

Efforts cannot be relaxed to prevent and counter the global threat of terrorism. Countries need to reaffirm their commitment to international counterterrorism coordination. The reallocation of resources to fight the pandemic together with imposed travel and trade restrictions have already had serious consequences for countering violent extremism (CVE) activities (UN CTED 2020). Efficiently preventing and countering the spread of extremist narratives in cyberspace is still important. Therefore, public and private partnerships are still required to counter terrorists' narratives and cybercrime. The United Nations has strongly articulated the need for innovative "pandemic sensitive holistic approaches" to tackle online extremist propaganda (UN News, 6 July 2020). Content moderation policies need to adapt to this new volume of worrisome online information (Counter Extremism Project 2020). Besides an elevated level of vigilance, messages of hate should be publicly discredited. With this in mind, world leaders are recommended to "disavow bigoted conspiracy theories" (Kruglanski et al. 2020).

Tracking apps that slow the spread of COVID-19 by alerting people who have been in close contact with an infected person could be a valuable asset to counterterrorism efforts. Restrictive measures have revealed terrorists' plans and tactics for attacks and redefined their supply chains, which needs to be taken into account when drafting new counterterrorism policies. Violent extremists' changing operational circumstances suggest that they will more likely misuse online financial services and virtual assets to move and conceal illicit funds. By exploiting the difficult economic times, terrorist entities in developing countries will engage in "new cash-intensive and high-liquidity lines of business" (Financial Action Task Force 2020). To tackle these new challenges, law enforcement and intelligence agencies should proactively engage with the private sector to strengthen communication on security issues. There have been various examples of radicalized individuals exploiting social media to establish international links with the clear intention of mobilizing themselves for violence. Such incitements should be addressed by more concerted and systematic counter-efforts (Ong 2020).

Practitioner Perspectives on Counterterrorism Policies

Far right movements have been exploiting the pandemic for their malevolent purposes by all possible means. Firstly, right-wing extremists used the COVID-19 crisis to recruit new members (Christodoulou 2020). Secondly, in the chaos caused by the pandemic, white supremacists ad-

vocated the “collapse of society in order to build a racially pure nation.” In line with this, one associated Telegram channel incited its members to “racialize and politicize the crisis [to] destabilize the economy and accelerate the collapse of society” (Murphy, Oliver, and Maples 2020). By mobilizing their members, they endeavor to spread fear. At the same time, the British far right, as well as neo-Nazi activists, called on members diagnosed with COVID-19 to deliberately infect certain minority groups (Jews and Muslims) (Ehsan 2020; Malik 2020) by targeting their houses of worship and other frequently visited places. Besides the calls for physical attacks (Weimann and Masri 2020), far right activists misused cyberspace in another innovative way, with so-called Zoom-bombing (Koblentz-Stenzler 2020). This targeted harassment on Zoom involved online trolls posting obscene or hateful messages (Middle East Eye, 30 April 2020). Right-wing extremists and white supremacists drew attention to ethnic minorities as the source of the disease. Neo-Nazis in Germany accelerated the spread of conspiracy theories with regard to COVID-19 and put themselves forward as defenders of the deprived by providing assistance for the elderly (Zeit Online, 1 April 2020).

The pandemic is perceived by the Islamic State as a “divine command” (Maor-Hirsch 2020) and as an extraordinary opportunity for a new surge in terrorism. Al-Qaeda in South Asia has claimed that the West is responsible for the outbreak. In accordance with their narratives and as a punishment from God, the virus attacks Western governments “for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims” (Wilson Center 2020). In a May video, Abubakar Shekau, leader of one Boko Haram faction, asserted that the virus is Allah’s punishment for the sins of mankind. He claimed this could be proved by the fact that his group members had not been infected regardless of the fact that they had been praying in congregations without maintaining social distancing (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2020). With the intention to strengthen their political legitimacy, extremist groups distributed food and medical supplies in areas where the state’s presence was weak (Columbo and Harris 2020). The Taliban and Hezbollah even provided public health services for the needy (Clarke 2020). There are, however, grave concerns within the Islamic State’s leadership over potential infections within the group’s support base. Therefore, fighters in refugee camps and prisons are given particular attention (Welby 2020). This is corroborated by the Al-Naba newsletter in which IS incited its followers to make use of the pandemic and free its members in Syrian prisons and detention camps (Reliefweb 2020).

We can observe that certain narratives keep reoccurring, and these have been used in support of a wide variety of ideological objectives,

but ideology-specific interpretations are also being presented. To mention some of the commonalities, both jihadist and far right actors engage in conspiratorial concepts of COVID-19's origins, although with different explanations. Religious extremists interpreted the pandemic as "God's will" and saw the crisis as a "geopolitical opportunity" (Comerford and Davey 2020) for political and economic collapse. Meanwhile, right-wing extremists and white supremacists drew attention to ethnic minorities as the source of the disease. Radical groups in Europe torched 5G telephone towers as they falsely believed that radiation from these telecommunication masts was playing a role in spreading the virus (Reuters, 6 April 2020). It is also informative that "37 percent of a representative British target audience had heard about the 5G conspiracy theory and almost a third of (those) people found it credible" (Hermansson 2020).

As scapegoats of the pandemic, members of two communities have been specifically selected. On one hand, the Jewish community was targeted by five categories of COVID-19-related conspiracy theories. Radical groups first regarded the virus as fake and as a Jewish plot aiming to mislead the public. Another theory said that the pandemic had been deliberately manufactured for malicious purposes. Other conspiracy theories claimed that since Jews primarily spread the virus, huge numbers of Jews would die of the disease. There were also posts that encouraged readers to intentionally infect Jews with the virus (Community Security Trust 2020).

The rise in hatred toward Asian people in the UK, United States, and Australia is alarming too. A 900 percent increase in Twitter hashtags referring to hate speech toward Chinese people have been detected (Light 2020). A man physically and verbally assaulted a woman in a facemask who was waiting in a Chinatown subway station on 5 February 2020. He called her a "diseased expletive" (Sosa and Brown 2020). A Korean woman in Manhattan was grabbed and punched in the face in a March 2020 incident. The offender yelled at her "You've got coronavirus, you Asian expletive" (Miles 2020). At Sam's Club in Midland, Texas, a man stabbed a family from Myanmar on 14 March 2020 (Aziz 2020). As a response to hate crimes against them, Asian Americans used social media to fight back against racially motivated atrocities (VOA News, 4 April 2020).

During the pandemic, our interactive space was predominantly online, and violent extremists exploited the possibilities cyberspace offers (Ackerman and Peterson 2020), making counter-extremist operations considerably challenging. It was highly recommended that special attention be focused on these nefarious operations and new counter-

extremism strategies established accordingly (Commission for Countering Extremism 2020). There is a pressing need to develop effective mechanisms and collaborations to identify and counteract malevolent intentions in cyberspace (Basit 2020). Given the utmost relevance of online platforms, one of the most worrisome assertions is that—according to the Commission for Countering Extremism—90.6 percent of posts containing misinformation were not acted on by social media companies after volunteers flagged them (Center for Countering Digital Hate 2020). There are two fundamental policy response options to counter extremist exploitation of social media platforms. The first is strategic communication and the second is content moderation (Ganesh and Bright 2020).

The prevalence of fake news and misinformation campaigns during the pandemic may have truly undermined the trust in government communications. To rebuild this confidence, effective communication strategies need to be developed to improve the capacities for eliminating the spread of false information, thereby making the extremist narratives powerless (United Nations Institute for Training and Research 2020). To these ends, well-established strategic communication campaigns could clarify and negate misinformation by radical groups and could raise awareness about government policies to thwart radicalization. However, it must be recognized that the development of effective counter-narratives has prerequisites; namely, it is of great importance to gain expertise in ideological, religious, and historical settings (Rasheed 2020). World leaders should actively seek to officially discredit extremist messages of hate (Kruglanski et al. 2020). It should also be made explicitly clear that extremist content available online is radical and harmful for young people, who may feel more displaced and thus more prone to radicalization (UN CTED 2020). Youth should be taught to think critically about online radicalized content. Education programs are a central pillar to building young people's resilience to violent extremist content (UNESCO 2020). There is a stressed need for consistent dissemination of counter-narratives to debunk false extremist statements. When designing counter- or alternative narrative campaigns, the objectives and scope of this initiative should be clearly and coherently set (Radicalisation Awareness Network 2019). For the dissemination, trustworthy and genuine messengers should be selected (Zeiger and Gyte 2020).

To counter the constant indoctrinating efforts of extremists, the misinterpretations of religious doctrines should be eliminated. It should be consistently communicated that there are no religious justifications for waging armed jihad in order to establish an Islamic state or ca-

liphate. Simultaneously, there is no place in Islam for incitements of hatred of the “other.” The Qur’anic teachings do not distinguish superiority among nations and tribes. National religious authorities should have a certain degree of supervision over their local religious entities and be responsible for the accurate interpretation of religious doctrines. They are in the best position to make sure that religious teachers are well-qualified (Halimi and Sudiman 2021).

Regarding online content moderation, first we need to acknowledge the obstacles to regulating online hate speech. Legislative efforts countering terrorist content face the following problems: “the ability of users to find and effectively use mechanisms to flag illegal content, the legal verifiability of deletion requests, and the tracking of offenders, since the police and judiciary have too few qualified personnel” (Bossong 2021). To begin with, it is problematic to define what counts as extremist content; “the definition of terrorist content is broad and possibly encompasses content that may be radical, polemic or controversial, but not illegal” (Kuczerawy 2018). Without international consensus on what content is considered hate speech, when addressing such incitements, it may infringe on the freedom of speech (UN 2020). So-called “grey-zone content” constitutes another limitation to effective moderation. Such sensitive decisions may result in the excessive restriction of free speech, which can further amplify extremist counteractions (Waller 2021). Likewise, it varies per nation which content counts as hate speech. Regardless of unanimous interpretations of fundamental liberal values, harmonizing efforts should be extended (Bossong 2021). Properly assessing content ultimately requires special expertise that may not be available within the short time proposed for removal of the content. In addition, proactive countermeasures may operate against the general monitoring obligation, with unnecessary deletions (Kuczerawy 2018). By the same token, it is questionable who is responsible for “defining an effective and enforceable regulatory framework for content moderation.” Another challenge is the inconsistency in enforcing harmful content moderation (Bromell 2022).

Another concerning issue is the recommender algorithms of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which may lead users to other extremist content. Because of the fact that these algorithms are kept secret, it is difficult to assess how effectively tech companies could limit these promoting tools (Agius and Barnet 2021). The consequences of removal of worrisome content may urge extremists to migrate to other less-controlled parts of the internet, making their detection even more challenging for law enforcement agencies (Whittaker 2019). With regard to right-wing extremist online content, another concerning aspect is that

these actors use coded language, making it difficult to detect via automated search mechanisms.

Cooperation among multiple actors including governments and the private sector is necessary to successfully manage extremist content (Crosset and Dupont 2018). To speed up the deletion of digital extremist content, authorities have been collaborating with major online platforms. With Europol's leading role via its Internal Referral Unit and the EU Internet Forum, there is daily cooperation with companies including YouTube/Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Twitter (EU Internet Forum 2015). A hashtag database together with a crisis protocol to block recorded terrorist acts is the most relevant tool in this collaboration. The volume of radical Islamist propaganda has been considerably reduced thanks to private sector links through the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (Global Internet Forum 2021).

To detect worrisome online content more efficiently, targeted law enforcement investigation is required, and intelligence collection efforts by interdisciplinary staff should apply automated content detection techniques.¹ Human review of these techniques can serve as a corrective measure (Keller 2018). Besides this, social media companies should be encouraged to establish self-regulation within the industry and clearly set their content standards for what is accepted or forbidden and also their moderation policies (Ring 2018). They should also provide periodic transparency reports on their content moderation activity to make better known the threat of violent extremism on tech platforms (Deverell and Janin 2020). It is recommended that technology companies develop a self-regulatory system to detect and remove extremist content (Malik 2018). Besides radicalized content removal, more coordinated cooperation is advisable between internet service providers to self-police social media platforms (Hardy 2017).

One of the most crucial steps in countering the appeal of extremism online is to strengthen digital literacy and a critical consumption of online content among young people (Briggs and Feve 2014). To prevent and combat online misinformation and disinformation campaigns, the use of technological solutions is critical (UNICRI 2020). Data science and big data visualization enable tracking of the spread of fake news and its origin. Machine-learning algorithms detect certain patterns of language in this process. Websites and platforms have been set up where the artificial intelligence-based systems verify the available infodemic. These algorithms validate news with credibility scores and help readers detect false information. Automated chatbots have been designed to debunk false information circulated on private messaging applications. The presence of these autonomous fact-checkers means that accurate

information provided by accountable organizations is what remains. Web browser extensions can provide translating services, are able to review and examine the validity of available information, and also identify security threats by tracking cookies. Digital media information literacy platforms and tools strengthen readers' critical thinking, allowing them to more accurately assess misleading online content. These technology-based countermeasures are able to empower individual users of the internet by providing them with the skills and tools to make better informed decisions (UNICRI 2020).

It has already been articulated that the long-term solution to address radicalization lies in prevention (Käsehage 2020). People who are prone to engage in extremism have individual causes for engaging in these ideologies. Their multiple and intertwined influencing factors for radicalization would be better understood on a case-by-case basis. Well-trained professionals should better understand the needs of vulnerable individuals, and assistance should be provided for them accordingly (Lynch 2018). Successful prevention programs are required to be based on close collaboration with experts from academia and practitioner circles. Regular forums could facilitate the constant exchange of best practices and threat assessments within the pool of these stakeholders (City of Copenhagen Employment and Integration Administration 2015). The youth would be empowered by the appointment of young policymakers to take effective actions to prevent and respond to violent extremism (UNESCO 2015). Educational institutions should play a pivotal role in preventing violent extremism by teaching students about options for peaceful conflict resolution (Samuel 2020).

Proactive community policing has been one of the most effective strategies to address violent extremism (US Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services 2014). In the pandemic situation, however, the law enforcement community was busy with the enforcement of lockdowns and other epidemiological restrictions and therefore lacked the capacity to continue these strategies. The private sector made tremendous efforts to fine-tune adjustment to the "new normal." Traditional violent extremism prevention programs and countermeasures rely heavily on interpersonal connections; many interactions were moved into cyberspace, where existing networks within local communities were maintained via digital communication opportunities (Rosand, Koser, and Schmucky-Logan 2020).

As has happened with COVID-19, future pandemics too will result in reallocations of foreign aid budgets, which are fundamental financial resources for efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism. This forces NGOs operating in the field to reconceptualize programs to pre-

vent violent extremism (*ibid.*). It is also of crucial importance to continue to support existing counterterrorism activities and develop remote access solutions to proceed with them by providing, for instance, online training (United Nations Institute for Training and Research 2020).

Pandemic responses to terrorism have been “state-centric” (Basit 2020) and accordingly accelerated a nation-centered approach. Engaging primarily in state-level pressing problems may demolish international collaboration and incapacitate global counteractions against violent extremism. Particular attention should be given to existing global forums to articulate the need to continue transnational efforts.

Restrictive measures may have resulted in a change of traditional terrorist targets. Because of the pandemic, certain critical infrastructures faced a heightened level of threat as potential terrorist or extremist targets. For future pandemics, security arrangements at hospitals, medical facilities, and supermarkets should be tightened. It is highly questionable, though, whether individuals will seek innovative methods to carry out acts of bioterrorism. The most feasible counteraction will remain with citizens. Once social distancing and fundamental hygiene practices become habitual, the threat posed by a deliberate infection could be lowered considerably (United Nations Institute for Training and Research 2020).

The increasing involvement of women and family networks in jihadist activities raises serious concerns. There are tight links between IS operatives and family members residing in the Al-Hawl camp, and in Southeast Asia several female terrorists were detained (GMA News Online, 11 October 2020; Cepeda and Talabong 2019). Accordingly, counterterrorist authorities should broaden the scope of their investigations to identify the impact of the direct environment on suspected jihadists.

Epidemiological restrictions and fears about infection (SITE Intelligence Group 2020) postponed or canceled general right-wing gatherings for networking and recruiting purposes, leading to an enhanced presence in cyberspace. Numerous real-life case studies underline the threat posed by self-activating individual terrorists who have been radicalized in digital subcultures. These solo terrorists may be members of white supremacist, radicalized conservative, Fascist, Neo-Nazi, or online extremist communities, making the challenge to prevent them from doing harm extremely challenging (UN CTED 2020). Consistent serious actions should be taken to remove terrorist manuals available online. At the same time, it is possible that COVID-related restrictions have resulted in disruptions to terrorist supply chains, leading to less sophisticated means of enacting violence and increased online methods of engagement to make up for it.

Conclusion

This book has proposed to provide a more accurate assessment of the terrorist threat landscape. Online content moderation has been addressed in relation to preventing and countering violent extremism, hate speech, online financial transactions, and radical Islamist and right-wing narratives.

Note

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