TERRORISM IN THE AGE OF INDECENCY:

SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN THE CONVERGENCE OF FAR-RIGHT AND JIHADIST TERROR TACTICS

By

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Abstract

Soft targets, simple plans and readily accessible weapons—regardless of ideology, these have become the common features of the modern lone actor terror attack. Since the emergence and widespread adoption of social media in the mid-2010s, far-right extremists in North America and Jihadists across Europe have become remarkably similar in their tactics and targets. Within the lone actor paradigm, online radicalization abounds and, with increasing frequency, violent acts survive in online circles long after the perpetrator has been killed or captured. This thesis places social media at the heart of a pattern of tactical convergence that has occurred across far-right and Islamic radicalism. It finds that social media enables mentally-ill individuals to become radicalized at a rate far higher than in the past, and that the attendant consequences of this shift contribute to the cross-ideological tactical convergence seen today. It also demonstrates how the decline of successful group-based attacks, the proliferation of violent extremist content on the internet and the rise of digital extremist communities have re-enforced this phenomenon. Although far-right and Islamic terrorists remain distinct in their ideology, social media has played a transformative role in de-emphasizing its importance when it comes to why terrorists choose the tactics and targets that they do.

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

"For an act of terrorism to occur, you need a motivated perpetrator, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians." — (Alex P. Schmidt 2021, 817)

In the early hours of March 21, 2012, the walls started closing in on Mohammed Merah. Nearly ten days after the first of several attacks around the Toulouse-Montauban area that had left seven people dead, French police had finally tracked down the perpetrator to his barricaded apartment (BBC News 2012). While Merah's rampage had officially come to an end, the full ramification of his actions had not. Hours before police arrived at Merah's apartment, a package containing a single USB memory stick was mailed to Al Jazeera's Paris office. When it was plugged into a computer, journalists discovered a video entitled "Al-Qaeda attacks France" (Al Jazeera 2012). Recorded with a GoPro camera strapped to Merah's chest, the footage showed all seven of his killings edited together, set to religious music, and rendered in chillingly clear detail (France24 2012). In addition to the package sent to Al Jazeera, police later indicated that some of the videos may have been posted online based on claims that Merah made during the ensuing standoff (Smith-Spark 2012). Ultimately, Al Jazeera decided not to broadcast any of the footage it had received, and Merah was killed trying to flee his apartment the next day. But the revelation that such a video could exist—screenshots of which can still be found online—sparked intense controversy across France. It was also the harbinger of a new paradigm in international terrorism.

Merah's attacks were remarkable for their brutality—he killed children, a Rabbi and soldiers at several different locations and over several days. But even more perhaps more extraordinary, Merah's rampage represents the first successful instance of a terrorist recording and sharing their attack in real time. Previous terrorists had tried, but all had failed. A year earlier, Anders Breivik had attempted to record his rampage across the Norwegian

1

Island of Utøya in a style similar to Merah's, but he was unable to find a phone to film with once he got there (Macklin and Bjørgo 2021, 19). What happened in the aftermath of Merah's highly publicized attacks is one of the oldest stories in terrorism: other terrorists began to copy him. Starting with Merah, the contemporaneous documentation of violent attacks has become an increasingly common tactic among terrorists across ideology. The most recent example occurred in March of 2024. Terrorists affiliated with a sub-branch of the Islamic State recorded videos of themselves killing at least 143 concert goers at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow—the footage was then quickly shared on Amaq, ISIS' primary news outlet, for the whole world to see (Roth and Sauer 2024).

In the United States, cases abound of far-right terrorists filming and sharing their mass shootings. During the 2022 attack on a Buffalo supermarket that left 10 African American people dead, the gunman, an 18-year-old with no known connects to a terror group and radicalized through the internet, livestreamed the entire attack on the video-sharing platform Twitch. Although the content was quickly removed from the website, it spread like wildfire on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Telegram (Anti-Defamation League 2022). At least one attack was partially inspired by the recording. Anderson Lee Aldrich, a far-right terrorist who killed five people at an LGBTQ-friendly nightclub in Colorado Springs six months later, operated a website that hosted videos of the Buffalo livestream, in addition to other extremist content (Yurcaba and Collins 2022).

All of these attacks occurred against the backdrop of a growing trend in far-right and Islamic terrorism: attacks in North American and Europe, when they do succeed, are becoming deadlier. Between 2014 and 2016, more people in Western Europe were killed by Jihad-related violence than in every previous year combined (Nesser et al. 2016, 3). Attacks slowed significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, but arrest rates for suspected European Jihadists have continued to climb year over year since 2020 (Europol 2023, 27). The Crocus

2

City Hall attack, with at least 143 reported fatalities, surpassed the death of the 2015 Paris attacks to become the deadliest terror attack in Europe since the 2004 (AP News 2024). Meanwhile, in United States and Canada, deaths related to far-right terrorism have soared. According to START's Global Terrorism Database (GTD), There was only one attack between 2000 and 2009 in which five or more people were killed by a far-right extremist. Over the same period of time between 2014 to 2023, 11 far-right attacks killed five or more people (nine in the United States and two in Canada).

While far-right and Islamic terrorism remain distinct movements and retain their unique qualities, the last decade has seen a turn toward mass-casualty attacks, "soft" targets and social media use across both ideologies. Moreover, facilitated by the internet, terrorists who operate as sole perpetrators (or lone wolves) have become an increasingly common phenomenon—in 2022, a relatively quiet year for terrorism in Europe, the only successful Jihadi attacks were carried out by individuals acting on their own (Europol 2023, 23). In North America, attacks like those seen in Colorado Springs and Buffalo are frequently committed by individuals enmeshed within far-right digital communities, but operating with little to no direction, strategic or material support. Such extremists congregate in online spaces to share information, reinforce each other's beliefs and promote a culture of martyrdom similar to that of Islamic extremists (Hoffman et al. 2020, 575).

One key difference that remains between these groups is that, unlike Islamic extremists, the core ideology in far-right spaces can be varied and sometimes contradictory (Parker et al. 2023). The manifesto written by Patrick Wood Crusius before he entered an El Paso Walmart in 2019 and killed 23 people reflects this. In the document, originally posted on 8chan, Crusius cites the destruction of the environment, automation of the workforce, corporate control of the Republic party and high birth rates among immigrants as the reasons behind his desire to kill as many Hispanic people as possible (Evans, 2019; accessed through

3

https://randallpacker.com/). And yet, despite such ideological heterogeneity, far-right terrorists have remained consistent in their tactics and attack typologies since rates of violence began to increase in 2015 (Hoffman and Ware 2024). Indeed, far-right terror tactics consistently bare a close resemblance to strategies used by Jihadists in Europe.

At least one scholar has tried to draw a link between Merah's video montage and Brenton Tarrant's successful attempt to livestream his attack on a Christchurch, New Zealand mosque in 2019 (BrandeisNow 2019). Tarrant was the first far-right single actor to successfully livestream a terror attack, attaching a GoPro camera to his helmet in a style similar to Merah, while drawing much of his ideological inspiration from Breivik (Macklin and Bjørgo 2021, 19). One month later, a man in California tried to emulate Tarrant by shooting worshippers at the Chabad of Poway synagogue. He managed to kill on person in the attack, which he had also planned to livestream before his camera malfunctioned (Byman 2022). Despite the frequency of such attacks, there are still few studies that examine the role social media plays in shaping modern terror tactics, and how it may figure into wider trends of targeting and propagandizing.

Even fewer scholars have focused specifically on the rise of livestreams, recordings and the proliferation of terrorist-produced content, such as manifestos, on the internet. This thesis aims to fill that gap by investigating how new communications technologies have influenced far-right terrorism in North America and Islamic terrorism in Europe. It also seeks to answer questions about terrorists who act with limited outside support. These are people like Brenton Tarrant and Mohammed Merah—men living half a world away from each other and even farther apart in ideology—who still came to employ such similar tactics.

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the role that social media, video sharing and online communities have played in the evolution of terror tactics and targeting patterns since their emergence in the early 2010s. Specifically, I ask why there has been a convergence in

modus operandi between two groups as ideologically and geographically disparate as far-right extremists in North America and Islamic extremists in Europe. To do so, I draw on four distinct types of secondary literature: contemporary terrorism studies, historical cases of contagion between terrorists, Science and Technology (STS) studies and news reports about terror attacks. I also examine manifestos written by far-right terrorists, as well as the online activity of both far-right and Islamic extremists. To identify cases and trends in data, I rely on the Jihadi Plots in Europe Database (JPED) from the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment and the Global Terrorist Database (GTD) from the START center at the University of Maryland. Open source research was also used to supplement this, as the JPED and GTD datasets only record attacks through 2021 and 2020, respectively.

Ultimately, I identify several trends that could be viewed as contagious diffusion between Islamic and far-right terrorism that can be traced back to social media. However, I stop short of calling this process contagion and instead settle on the term "convergence." This convergence, as I outline it, is crosses ideology and is largely mediated by social media technologies that emerged during the same period that Jihadist violence in Europe and far-right violence in North America began to increase. I use the term convergence because, in many instances, it isn't possible to prove with absolute certainty how or why a terrorist was inspired to carry out an attack in the manner they did. This is especially true once a terrorist is dead, or if they've only left behind a limited digital trail. Previous scholars (Midlarsky et al. 1980; Holden 1986; Horowitz 2010; Neumayer and Plümper 2010; Cliff and First 2013; Veilleux-LePage 2020) have been able to prove cross-ideological contagion in the past, but they worked largely with data sets relating to groups and terror networks, not single actors. Terrorists who work alone (i.e., with no material support from a larger group) present a unique challenge and have been understudied in comparative approaches.

I find that social media has created a pattern of convergence across ideology, and that this model has replaced contagion as the dominant paradigm through which to understand the diffusion of terror tactics. Regardless of ideology, the terrorists of today are increasingly being radicalized online, and are less likely to receive any meaningful support in the planning or execution of their attacks. Through a careful analysis of datasets and media reporting, I show that this shift has allowed mental illness to play a greater role in the radicalization of terrorists than at any point in that past, and that social media has facilitated this process. I link this to the already established theory that social media spaces on the far-right glorify a culture of martyrdom, but advance this concept further to show this glorification causes far-right attacks to adapt the tactics of Jihadists martyrs. In turn, livestreams and videos of violent attacks turn terrorism into a performative spectacle, one which drives a greater level of violence than came in attacks before as lone actors compete to outdo each other, largely in an attempt to gain recognition from the public and, crucially, from their like-minded digital peers.

This dynamic is expressed through the target selection and tactical choices that far-right and Islamic terrorists are making in the social media age. I also draw on historical examples of terrorism to show how terror groups and organizations tended to avoid certain types of mass casualty attacks out of concern that this might undermine their group's legitimacy, but that perceived legitimacy is not a concern lone actors seem to have. This also works alongside the emergence of social media platforms that allow conspiracy theories, nihilistic worldviews and fringe beliefs in both Islamic and far-right extremism to take hold, and therefore justify indiscriminate violence at a level previously viewed as too extreme, even for most extremists.

This thesis is structured in four parts. The first is a literature review that covers historical examples of contagion, as well as this paper's specific definition of terrorism. It

6

also includes a brief overview of North American far-right terrorism, Islamic terrorism in Europe and relevant statistics related to both. The second part looks at specific methods of attack used by far-right and Islamic terrorists in an effort to demonstrate convergence in tactical and targeting trends. Part three looks at how the internet and social media have further radicalized already radical ideologies, and the corresponding effect this has had on lone radical attackers. The final section analyzes far-right terror manifestos and extremist content produced by ISIS, and shows how both movements have increasingly employed dehumanizing rhetoric and aesthetic imagery to depict their enemies, as well as how this affects terror tactics. I conclude by suggesting what the convergence of far-right and Islamic terrorism implies for counterterrorism policy, and the future of terrorism more generally.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 DEFINING TERRORISM IN THE MODERN AGE

Any research that concerns terrorism needs to provide a clear definition of what the author means when they use that word. While this thesis will employ Alex P. Schmid's relatively mainstream definition, it is worth exploring why it was chosen over any potential others. In certain cases, terrorism can be quite clear cut. In the immediate aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks, ISIS released a public statement extolling its attackers and praising the way they had "...cast terror into the hearts of the crusaders in their very own homeland" (Fisher 2015). In this case, nobody has to debate whether or not the attacks constituted an act of terror or whether or not the attackers were terrorists. If a group says that their goal is to cause terror—and then they make good on that promise through the use of violence—it's safe to say they are probably terrorists. However, as can often happen, gray areas emerge when perpetrators do not fully explain themselves. For instance, many acts of terror can also fit the definition of a hate crime. A 2022 Parliamentary report in the United Kingdom defined a hate

crime as "any criminal offense which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice based on a personal characteristic." (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism 2022, 3). That same report also defines right wing extremism as an ideology with no "respect for and tolerance of different faiths/beliefs"—i.e, personal characteristics—and cites the explicitly Islamophobic Finsbury Park mosque attack as an example of far-right terrorism, an attack that also meets their definition of a hate crime (Ibid.).

Adding to the difficulty in separating hate crimes and acts of terror is that, like the latter, hate crimes are also on the rise. In 2014, around 5,500 hate crimes were reported to the FBI. By 2022, that number had risen to 11,000 (FBI Crime in the Nation Report 2022; FBI Crime Statistics 2014). In Section 2331 of Title 18 in the United States Code, policy-makers distinguish between hate crimes and acts of terror based on intent. For an attack to be considered "domestic terrorism" it must intend to intimidate or coerce the public, influence policy or otherwise affect the conduct of government in a manner hate crimes do not (Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School). Using the American government's definition, a non-premeditated crime of opportunity would not count as an act of domestic terrorism, as it would not meet the required political, long-term or policy-oriented goals required for acts of terror. The GTD database, however, includes many such incidents.

Moreover, members of the public and scholars frequently use the word "terrorism" differently. This is especially true in cases that draw intense media scrutiny. For instance, Huff and Kertzer find that attacks committed by organizations, as opposed to those committed by individuals, are more likely to be considered terrorism by the general public (2018, 69). They also find that the public is more likely to conflate acts motivated by hatred with acts of terrorism, even in cases where scholars find little cross-over (Ibid.). Framing is also important, as Huff and Kertzer demonstrate through a discourse analysis of articles

8

written about two separate and clean-cut instances of terrorism: the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and the 2015 shooting at a predominantly Black Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Despite the Charleston shooter's active involvement in far-right online communities and the vitriolic manifesto he left behind explaining the motives for his carefully planned attack, news articles were still 13% less likely to use the word "terrorism" when describing what happened in Charleston than when they described the Fort Hood shooting (the shooter, Nidal Hasan, was a self-proclaimed jihadist) (2018, 68). This also raises questions about how different countries define terrorism, or even how they come to define terrorism in a specific moment. This sentiment that far-right violence is less likely to be perceived as terrorism finds supports from other scholars, who argue that far-right acts of terrorism are frequently tried in American courts as homicides or hate crimes, and at a rate higher than similar attacks committed by other ideologies (Ong 2020, 6).

This thesis does not propose a new definition for terrorism, but it does find that Schmid's definition is uniquely suited to navigating the challenges of terrorism in the 21st century. As Schmidt writes, "For the terrorist, the victims of terrorism serve as generators of emotions – of which terror is the most prominent - in order to intimidate coerce, impress, provoke or otherwise influence one or more third parties," (Schmid 2023, 7). I choose this definition because it touches on the notion that attacks can often be carried out to "impress" one's peers, a dynamic exponentially facilitated in the age of social media. This is directly related to another core tenant of Schmidt's definition, and one that can further be used to separate hate crimes from terrorism. "Propaganda by the deed," or the idea that particularly violent terror attacks will be "rewarded" with intense media coverage, is crucial to a terrorist's motivation (Schmid 2023, 15). As Schmidt writes, given this fact, "The arrival of the Internet and its social media and their use for propaganda has, for terrorists, arguably been a bigger game changer than the use of new instruments of violence" (2023, 23). So, acts

9

of terrorism, for the purposes of this paper, will be defined as violent acts that are designed to "intimate, coerce, impress, provoke or otherwise influence" third parties, who are not the victims or the terrorists themselves. Potential terrorists must aspire to achieve a high level of media coverage, and in doing so weaponize terror to spotlight the their social, political or religious views.

2.2 CONTAGION AND TERRORISM

Now that we have established a working definition, we can look at how terrorism spreads and evolves. The contagion of terror tactics between groups was first established by Midlarsky, Crenshaw and Yoshida in their seminal article "Why Violence Spreads: The Contagion of International Terrorism" published in 1980. Their central contribution to the field was that patterns of contagion, whereby a group or groups in one country purposefully adopt the tactics of a group or groups in another, are present within the theater of international terrorism (Midlarsky et al. 1980, 271). The process of contagion is contrasted with diffusion, which occurs when groups in different countries face similar conditions and independently arrive at the same tactical conclusions (Ibid.). Midlarsky et al. found that certain types of violence, like bombings, kidnappings and hijackings are more likely to be contagious than others, such as assassinations or raids (1980, 291). They employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to show that terrorists in 1970s Europe consciously chose to imitate the terror tactics of groups operating in the Global South (1980, 286). "The terrorist organizations of Western Europe," they write, "having borrowed ideology, rhetoric, and methods from third world nations in a kind of reverse hierarchy—may demonstrate the routinization of violence in a pattern of contagion from West Germany to Italy and possibly to smaller European countries" in the present and near future (1980, 295).

Since this landmark study, scholars have followed Midlarsky et al.'s lead and established specific patterns of terroristic contagion. In 1986, Robert T. Holden found that

successful airplane hijackings in the United States (including those that were not acts of terror) were likely to generate additional attempts of the same typology; while unsuccessful attempts had little to no impact on the methods employed in future hijackings (898). Like Midlarsky et al., he identifies a directionality to contagion, arguing that successful airplane hijackings in the United States inspired similar attempts in Europe, but not the other way around (1986, 899). Writing over 30 years later, Yannick Veilleux-LePage confirmed Holden's findings over a wider timespan. He asserts that hijacking was "essentially 'invented' twice," with little evidence of contagion, by separate groups of perpetrators in 1930s Cuba and Peru (2020, 149). However, once international news media began to develop and spread more rapidly in the post-WWII environment, instances of successful airplane hijacking became top stories around the world, and hijackings subsequently began to appear in temporal clusters following particularly notable or successful attempts (2020, 116). The perceived effectiveness, feasibility and legitimacy behind different tactics was the driving force behind their contagion and crossed ideologies (1980, 109).

More generally, a host of scholars have looked into different potential patterns that may may explain terrorist contagion. Neumayer and Plumer find evidence that when terrorists are forced to compete for scarce resources and media attention, they often adopt the tactics of their rivals if such methods have proved successful in the past (2010, 323). This leads Neumayer and Plumper to suggest that strategies of counterterrorism should not just focus on a single radical group or country, but approach counterterrorism as a holistic endeavor, given the different and varied sources of inspiration terrorists tend to find (2010, 323). Other scholars have studied the role the media can play in contagion, concluding that after personal contacts and cooperation between groups, media reports and the internet are the most important factors in the spread of certain tactics (Nacos 2009, 11). Specifically,

incidents that promote shock or outrage have the potential to be copied by a range of groups around the world (2009, 8).

In a more general survey of terror group cooperation between 1950 and 2016, Blair et al. found that shared ideology was the single largest factor in whether or not two groups decided to work together (2022, 165). They also found that rhetorical networks of support, such Boko Haram publicly embracing ISIS, can lend a group legitimacy and encourage it to carry out more deadly attacks (2022, 199). In terms of contagion as it applies to other forms of violence, Towers et al. found that school shootings are frequently influenced by mass killings involving firearms that occurred in the immediate past (2015, 1). Importantly, the authors conclude that such contagion is not correlated along temporal-geospatial lines, meaning that proximity has little effect on a process that occurs in a manner "consistent with what would be expected if the contagion process is potentially due, for instance, to widespread media attention" (2015, 7).

There's also a sub-field of literature that focuses on how non-state actors respond to tactical innovation. If one reconfigures terror groups as military-like actors, then financial and organizational constraints can become the determinant factor in which strategies ultimately get adopted (Horowitz 2010, 36). Taking these constraints into account can explain why a tactic such as suicide bombing—which, based on some calculations, can cost as little as $150 to carry out—spread so quickly among Islamic terror groups that had limited financial or organizational capacity (2010, 44). In an interview with NPR, noted terrorism scholar Robert Pape has talked in detail about how the Tamil Tigers, a predominantly nationalist terror group based in Sri Lanka, learned about successful suicide attacks in Lebanon and then sought training from Hezbollah in order to conduct similar operations (NPR 2009). Following the success of Hezbollah's 1983 truck-based suicide bombing of an American Marine base in Beirut, the Tamil Tigers began launching almost identical attacks by 1987, directly utilizing

the training they received from Hezbollah (Ibid.). In terms of spatial contagion, other scholars have proven that in regions like Lebanon and Israel or India and Pakistan, attacks in one country consistently precede attacks of a similar type in the other (Cliff and First 2013, 304). All of this suggests that media coverage and the internet, just like spatial or temporal proximity, can directly influence terrorists' chosen methods and tactics.

2.3 TERRORISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Identifying how contagion functions in the age of social media come with several challenges. Streaming platforms like Twitch and Facebook Live were launched relatively recently, in 2011 and 2015, respectively. The first instance of a terrorist using one of these specific platforms to stream an attack likely occurred in 2016, when Larossi Abballa took to Facebook Live immediately after killing two married French police officers and taking their three-year-old son hostage (Kupper et al. 2022, 10). Messaging platforms like Twitter and 4chan were established in the early 2000s, but only began to grow significantly in popularity as the decade progressed. The sample size to draw form, then, is quite limited. However, for the purposes of this thesis I place Mohammed Merah's attack in 2012 as the starting point of the social media-terrorism nexus. Since 2012, scholars have noted significant changes in how terrorists plan and execute their attacks. Across the board, single actors and groups have increasingly targeted "soft targets," which are defined as poorly guarded and highly populated locations including, but not limited to, Christmas markets, cinemas, public transport and night clubs (Schmidt 2021, 818). Among European Jihadists, attackers have moved away from kidnapping and assassination, and have increasingly operated as lone actors or in close-knit autonomous cells while opting for firearms and knives more often than bombs or hijackings (Nesser et al. 2016). In terms of recruitment, Nesser et al., the team who developed the JPED dataset, write that "IS entrepreneurs can build cells online in a way never seen before... involving attackers with no prior connections to the network, even genuine

'lone wolves', who have so far largely been a myth in European jihadism." (Nesser et al. 2016, 9).

In terms of far-right terrorism, attacks in North America are increasing at a rate significantly higher than in Europe, arguably making the movement as big a threat to North American security as Jihadism is to Europe (Jasko et al. 2022, 28). In the United States, 67% of all terrorist plots were conceived by far-right extremists in 2020 (Jones Et. al 2020, 2). As attacks have become more common, so too have manifestos. These documents often frame terrorists as "reluctant warriors, driven by desperation" who seek to inspire new attackers and protect white Americans, a group they believe have become an oppressed class in their "own" country (Ware 2020, 7). The internet has also facilitated the creation of what some have termed "grab-bag" extremists (Parker et al. 2023). These are terrorists who hold a collection of contradictory but often racist, sexist and conspiratorial beliefs that are heavily critical of society and promote attacks of an indiscriminate nature. This shift is one reason behind the increasingly deadly outcomes associated with far-right attacks (Ware and Waldo, 2022).

Moreover, social media has opened the door for a range of influences only possible within this era of the internet. Brace et al. writes that "outlinking," or the ability to post an array of clickable URLs that can take a user anywhere on the internet, has contributed significantly to "the cross-pollination of ideas and themes across ideological spheres" in far-right circles (2024, 107). This assessment dovetails with Audrey Cronin's analysis of the internet paradigm shift a decade prior—a process, she argues, that made lone actors more powerful, promoted the audience of violence to a greater role and fundamentally decentralized the process of mass mobilization (2013, 26). Finally, in a study of Western European Jihadists, Pfundmair et al. found that radicals are significantly more desensitized to acts of violence as a result of their behavior online behavior than non-radicals (2022, 58). This process, they claim, has made the archetypal Islamic terrorist a "social loser" struggling

with mental health concerns, rather than the highly educated perpetrator type common to pre-internet Jihadism (2022, 62). In other words, the modern archetype of a Jihadist bears a significant resemblance to the far-right or incel terrorist of North America.

2 MAIN ARGUMENT

"Remember: it is not cowardly to pick low hanging fruit. AKA Don't attack heavily guarded areas to fulfill your super soldier COD [Call of Duty] fantasy. Attack low security targets." — (from The Inconvenient Truth, manifesto of Patrick Wood Crusius 2019)

My argument examines these various strands of research in addition to manifestos written by terrorists themselves, filtered through the lens of this prior scholarship. It presents this information alongside data and case studies collected from the GTD and JPED datasets, as well as through open-source investigation. I argue that the evolution of terror tactics is no longer conditioned by a process of contagion in which two or more groups learn from or work with each other, as in the case of the Tamil Tigers and Hezbollah. Nor is it solely the result of terrorists adopting tactics that have proven to be highly or relatively successful in the past, such as the case of airline hijackings. Rather, I believe that the contagion model has largely been replaced by a pattern of convergence made possible within the wider context of the internet, and specifically as a direct consequence of social media. These websites, apps and platforms have become the primary space in which terrorists are radicalized, learn how to carry out their attacks, watch previous attacks, read terrorist manifestos and feel embedded within a like-minded radical extremist community. Importantly, unlike more formal terrorist groups, these digital communities do not typically provide significant material support, guidelines or direction.

Crucially, social media platforms have demolished the geographic and ideological barriers that previously limited terrorists' access to information about terror tactics. Video of Brenton Tarrant's attack in Christchurch is available for anyone to see, regardless of their ideological beliefs, just as information about Mohammed Merah's tactics, methods and the media storm that resulted are easily accessible to anyone on the internet. Anders Breivik was likely aware of Merah, and Tarrant's time in Europe and specific interest in France meant that he likely was, too (O'Grady 2019). The internet can therefore incubate convergence, but it can also spur retaliation. For instance, it was information about the 2017 ISIS-inspired Nice truck attack that motivated Alexandre Bissonnette to kill six worshippers inside a mosque in Montreal, nearly 4,000 miles away, later that year (Coletta 2018). Bissonnette had consumed a steady diet of far-right content that included videos of Jihadi attacks and violence (Drimonis 2017). The man who carried out the Nice truck attack had also, incidentally, watched videos of mass shootings and searched for information about American terror attacks in the days leading up to his (McAuley 2016).

Finally, while groups like ISIS can sometimes provide material support and direction for certain attackers or cells, the internet has enabled ideologically-inspired lone actors to operate largely without such resources. The Nice attacker was one such example. So too is Kujtim Fejzulai, who went on a shooting rampage outside of a synagogue in Vienna only after several failed attempts to leave Austria and join ISIS forces in the Middle East (Counter Extremism Project, Kujtim Fejzulai). Shortly before he killed four people, Fejzulai posted a picture on Instagram featuring the guns he would use in the attack while pledging allegiance to ISIS; afterward, videos of the carnage captured by bystanders spread across the internet (Wolfe 2020).

The capacity for online resources to motivate, inspire and magnify terrorists' actions, without materially or strategically aiding them, is likely the biggest reason behind the tactical

convergence seen across ideology. Without many terrorists now operating without a sophisticated network to meticulously plan their attacks or secure major sources of funding, readily available weapons such as guns, knives, cars and trucks have become some of the most viable weapons. Soft targets, like mosques and synagogues, have correspondingly become some of the most desirable locations because of the relative ease in attacking them, especially for a single actor. This represents a fundamental break from the long-held notion that "terrorists' targeting choices are crucially affected by their ideology and that ideological differences lead to differences in the targeting patterns of terrorist groups..." (Drake 1998, 78). It also represents a potential new era in terrorism, one in which attacks become less complex, more indiscriminate and highly consumable after the fact.

The implications of this shift, as I identify it, are broad and disruptive. Historically, far-right and Islamic extremism have been treated as two distinct threats by law enforcement and counterterrorism professionals, especially when it comes to the prevalence of lone actors in the former (Cohen 2020). The internet-induced convergence of both movements' tactics suggests that they now pose a similar threat, and that the counterterrorism tactics used again may well work against the other. Importantly, it suggests that previous misconceptions about such actors—that far-right terrorists are typically militia members, or that Jihadists are are motivated solely by religious zeal—are incorrect. Importantly, it also opens a window into the shifting nature of modern terrorism. Across ideology, and not just within the far-right, long term political goals and causes have fallen out of fashion with successful attackers. Personal grievances, and a desire for immediate change or the opportunity to violently strike out to a perceived system of oppression, now predominate. While in the short term this will likely continue to prove a challenge for practical counterterrorism (cells and groups are inherently easier to surveil, monitor, etc.), the sooner this shift is recognized and embraced by

17

professionals, the sooner the field will be able to conceptualize and counter this very real, and increasingly common, archetype.

3 METHODOLOGY

Data on Jihadist plots in Europe was taken from the JPED database through 2021. Information on attacks in 2022 and 2023 was taken from yearly Europol reports on terrorism and supplemented by open source research, while information about attacks in 2024 came solely from open source research. The data collected on far-right terror attacks in North America comes from START's GTD database through the year 2018, while open source data and reports on far-right terrorism were used for the period between 2018 and 2024. Unless explicitly cited, the details of all attacks discussed in the forthcoming sections were drawn from the recorded data in these datasets. The end dates of the datasets, in 2012 and 2018, respectively, did present some challenges. These years were significantly more violent than previous ones, and as a result it's possible that some low profile or under-reported attacks were omitted.

This is also where the rigorous application of the definition of terrorism used in this thesis comes proves valuable. Certain instances of far-right and Islamic extremism included in the GTD and JPED datasets were dismissed from the scope of this study due to a lack of political motivation by the perpetrator. The JPED dataset rates attacks on a scale of 1-3, with one being a certain act of terrorism and three indicating a tenuous connection. All attacks classified as a three were filtered out. The GTD dataset includes a number of instances that meet the definition of a hate crime, but not an act of terrorism, and these were likewise discarded.

Terrorist manifestos and reports about internet history are used when available. In certain instances, authorities have not released manifestos to the public or are they are

routinely purged from the internet by content moderators. I proceed from a review of recent trends in far-right and Islamic terrorism to case studies drawn from each that are emblematic of these developments. In both instances, I investigate how previous theories of terrorism and violent contagion are challenged or supported by these changes.

4 EMERGENT TRENDS

4.1 CARS, TRUCKS AND CROWDS

One of the most evident trends in the GTD and JPED datasets is terrorists' adoption of vehicles-as-weapons, and the correlated shift to softer targets in both Europe and North America. In the United States and Canada, between 1990 and 2013, there was only one terror attack that utilized the ramming potential of a car or truck. In that instance, Mohammed Reza Taheri-Azar attacked students at his alma mater the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in 2006, speeding around a popular campus meeting point. Nobody was killed or seriously injured, and fellow Muslims in the community described Taheri-Azar as highly unorthodox in his beliefs, refusing to pray toward Mecca or recite prayers in Arabic (Stancill and Rocha 2006). In Europe, there is no evidence of any vehicle-based terror attack between 1990 and 2013. This all changed in 2014 when, in both Europe and North America, the first explicitly ideological car-based attack occurred on each continent, followed by a significant increase in that tactic over the following years.

In May 2014, Elliot Rodger carried out what is often considered the first incel terror attack in US history, based on the intensely misogynistic and racist writings and videos he left behind him (Hoffman et al. 2020, 565). Rodger's attack bore similarities to Mohammed Merah's in that he went on a killing spree around his native Isla Vista, California, running over some of his victims while shooting others as he rampaged around the town. The attack soon became legendary in far-right and incel circles, and Rodger's influence has gone on to

be cited by a number of future attackers. For instance, a year after Rodger's attack and shortly before incel Chris Harper-Mercer killed ten people at his community college in Roseburg, Oregon, he wrote at the end of his manifesto that, "I know this is not as long as Elliot Rodgers but its [sic] still good. Elliot is a god" (accessed through schoolshooters.info).

After Rodger, the next far-right car-ramming occurred in Canada in 2018. Shortly before he rammed a white rental van into shoppers and tourists walking around a busy downtown Toronto neighborhood, Alek Minassian made a post on Facebook that read, "The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!" (BBC 2018). The attack killed ten people. Elsewhere, there have been multiple incidents of far-right assailants injuring civilians with cars, vans or trucks. However, besides Minassian's attack, only one other incident has been fatal. That was the highly publicized 2018 car-ramming at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. There, a far-right attacker drove his car into a crowd of counter-protests, killing one and injuring 28. Between Isla Vista, Toronto and Charlottesville, 15 people were killed in North America by far-right car-rammings between 2014 and 2018. Over that same period, one fatal jihadist truck-ramming occurred in North America. It happened in New York City in 2017, when ISIS-inspired Sayfullo Habinullaevic Saipoy killed eight people as he ran over cyclists and pedestrians on a busy Manhattan bridge. There were other car attacks that produced injuries, but none that resulted in fatalities between 2018 and 2020.

In Europe, just a few months after Rodger's attack, a man claiming to be inspired by the treatment of Palestinian children in Gaza and the West Bank injured 11 people in a car-ramming in Dijon, France. Like Rodger, he had no known links to terror groups but did have a history of mental illness. Between 2014 and 2020, Islamic extremists would commit eight more deadly, vehicle-based attacks in Europe. In that timeframe, 135 people (excluding perpetrators) were killed. The deadliest of these attacks occurred in Nice, France, where 86

people walking along a public promenade where killed while gathered to celebrate Bastille Day. Across those six years, there was only one fatal far-right car-ramming in Europe. It occurred in London, and left one Muslim man dead.

In total, there were five far-right car or truck-rammings in North America that injured at least three people between 2014 and 2020. Prior to 2014, there were no recorded far-right attacks in which a vehicle had been used as a weapon, and no successful vehicle-based attack committed by any group in North America regardless of ideology. In Europe, between 2014 and 2020, there eleven vehicle-based attacks that injured at least three or more people. Over that same period in Europe, there were only two far-right car-rammings that meet those conditions. Combined, they left one dead and 16 injured. These numbers do not include incidents in which terrorists began an attack by ramming their car into a building, gate or other structure before exiting to commit more acts of violence outside of their vehicle.

The rise of vehicle-based terror attacks across geographic and ideological boundaries, and within a narrow temporal cluster, indicates convergence. However, the extent to which this harmonization is the result of cross-ideological contagion remains unclear. One thing that is clear is that Minassian was inspired by Rodger in selecting his targets and method of attack, as he said so himself. Given the massive popularity of Rodger's manifesto in online incel circles, it's almost certain Minassian had access to it. Some scholars have argued that, due to Minassian's decision to rent a large vehicle and drive it down a major city thoroughfare, he was also inspired by attacks in Europe, such as the one in Nice (Hoffman et al. 2020, 576). However, as Freilich et al. notes, different types of attack require different amounts of knowledge and preparation to successfully carry out (2018, 44). From this perspective, vehicle-ramming as a tactic may require the least amount of knowledge, training and skill needed to bring plan to fruition, when compared to other methods that may require more material and technical expertise.

This lowest common denominator argument might be able to explain a trend in North American mortality data. At least 18 far-right vehicle-based attacks were recorded following the nationwide, anti-police protests that rocked the United States following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (NPR 2020). Taking clear inspiration from Charlottesville, far-right perpetrators frequently rammed their cars into groups of protestors during this period. A Boston Globe investigation using a much larger dataset of vehicle-related incidents than NPR linked four fatalities to this phenomenon (Bidgood 2021). However, in three of the cases the driver either was said to be following traffic laws and claimed the incident was accidental, the driver was drunk or the driver was driving while impaired (AP 2023; Global News 2020; Vigdor 2021). In the fourth incident, a protestor who was legally open-carrying an AK-47 was shot as he approached the perpetrator's car during a protest in Austin, Texas (Melhado 2023). Taking context into account, none of these deaths meet this thesis' definition of an act of terrorism.

Such a relatively low fatality rate would suggest that, alongside inspiration from ideological predecessors, vehicle-based attacks are popular among North America terrorists because they are accessible and easy to carry out. Vehicle attacks carried out in Europe by Islamic extremists tend to be significantly more deadly, if less common in recent years than the late 2010s. With regards to this tactic, I would suggest that there exists a clear convergence in in its use between far-right and Islamic violent extremists. However, the differences between how this tactic is deployed in North America and Europe suggests that social media plays a significant role in inspiring these attacks within ideologies, but possibly not between them. The evidence that far-right attackers are consciously emulating Jihadists in their use of weaponry, or vice-versa, is simply not clear enough to make this claim. Still, this conclusion undermines Drake's contention that ideology is the main determinate of target selection (1998, 78). Instead, in the case of vehicle-based attacks, both accessibility and any

22

recent history of similar attacks seem to be the two major factors the determine whether or not terrorists employ this tactic. In the age of lone actors, accessibility and visibility may play the same role in shaping terror tactics that ideology once did in the pre-internet era.

A challenge could be made that recent tactical shifts are a function of the increased security surrounding hard targets and the development of more advanced counterterrorism strategies. This is at least on some level true. More bomb plots have been foiled in Europe than any other attack type in the last 25 years, and bomb plots tend to be a group- or cell-based tactic (Nesser 2023, 11). Even relatively professional cells are at a substantially higher risk of discovery than lone actors. The 2024 Crocus City Hall attack was carried out by a highly organized and well-prepared ISIS-K cell and was still uncovered by US intelligence prior to its completion (Harris 2024). Twenty years of experience, this argument goes, has taught security forces how to counter most conventional tactics. The issue with this argument is that it puts the cart before the horse. Lone actors and the shift to soft targets did not emerge as a conscious, tactical response to an evolving security landscape. Rather, they emerged as the result of a changing techno-social one. This idea will be explored in the following two sections.

4.2 LONE(R) ACTORS: INTERNET IDEOLOGY

Another trend revealed in GTD and JPED data is the increased presence of mental illness amongst terrorists across the ideological spectrum. Between 2000 and 2016, the JPED dataset only records three cases of Jihadist perpetrators with noted mental health issues, across 144 attacks and plots in Europe over that period. Across the 92 attacks or plots between 2017 and 2021, it records eight cases of terrorists with mental illness. However, the evidence suggests that the JPED dataset substantially undercounts the prevalence of mental illness amongst terrorists in recent years. Of the 25 successful attacks between 2017 and 2021, only four perpetrators are listed as having had mental illness. However, there is a

strong indication that at least three cases are not properly flagged—the Nice truck-ramming, the Chapelle-sur-Erdre stabbing of a policewoman and the 2017 Marseilles stabbing.

In the Nice case, Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel was described by neighbors as being "on the edge of madness" (France24, 2016). He was also in the middle of divorce proceedings, had active restraining orders against him and, despite his radical Islamist beliefs, frequently engaged in sex with male partners (Ibid). In the Chapelle-sur-Erdre case, the perpetrator had just been released from prison and authorities had noted multiple psychological disorders, although this information was released significantly after the fact (Reuters 2021). In the case of the 2017 Marseilles stabbing, the suspect told police officers after being arrested for shoplifting two days prior that he was divorced, homeless, unemployed and addicted to hard drugs (The Washington Post 2017). All three attackers acted on their own, with ISIS taking credit for having inspired both the Nice and Marseilles incidents. Therefore, at least seven of the 25 of successful attackers between 2017 and 2021 were likely mentally ill, or 28%. Additionally, JPED lists each of these 25 attackers as single actors. This tracks with a trend identified by the dataset's creators, who note a shift in recent years away from the group-based tactics that dominated the late 1990s and early 2000s toward more lone actor assaults (Nesser et al. 2023, 8).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, because it's been a mainstream narrative for several years now, far-right terrorists and extremists also demonstrate an inclination toward mental illness. In one online survey, 70% of self-professed incels were found to suffer from depression (Hoffman et al. 2020, 568). In fact, the frequent overlap of mental illness and far-right terrorism has sparked several debates over whether or not to classify certain attacks as political violence (Huff and Kertzer 2018, 69). To illustrate this, take the four deadliest far-right attacks between 2018 and 2023, as drawn from the GTD and open-source data. They are as follows: El Paso (2019), Pittsburgh (2018), Buffalo (2022) and Allen, Texas (2023). While

still pending trial on a number of charges related to his actions, lawyers for the El Paso shooter have argued in court that their client has schizoaffective disorder, and that it went untreated at the time of the attack (Gonzalez 2023). The Pittsburgh attacker had previously been committed to several mental institutions prior to killing ten people at the Tree of Life Synagogue, although prosecutors ultimately determined he was fit to stand trial (AP News 2023). The Buffalo shooter received a mental health evaluation after making threats at his high school a year before his deadly attack (New York Times 2022), while the Allen, Texas shooter had been discharged from the military over concerns about his mental health (NBC News 2022).

In all four of these cases, the attacker was a lone actor operating without the support or resources of a coherent group, but with extensive involvement in online far-right circles. This trend challenges arguments made by some scholars that far-right terrorists are rarely radicalized through social media use alone (Youngblood 2020, 6). Moreover, the shift to lone actor-style attacks over this period seems to mirror Nesser et al.'s same observation about the increasingly decentralized nature of Jihadist tactics in Europe. While some scholars believe that social media has created a transnational convergence between European and North American far-right terrorism (Auger 2020, 92), it is my contention that a similar process has occurred across different ideologies. Specifically, a social-media induced nexus of mental illness and radicalism seems to have occurred, with greater frequency in recent years, throughout both European Islamic and North American far-right extremist circles

This trend has several implications, and may also account for the rise in terror attacks across the world. Within the context of far-right extremism, this thesis has already detailed how the internet may facilitate the adoption of "grab-bag" ideologies, which can often skew toward the extreme with little obvious logic or reason, and create "grab-bag radicals" (Parker et al. 2023). However, this development may not be limited to the far-right community. The

2023 Europol Terrorism Situation report found that extremists across ideologies "have increasingly been sharing common elements, including similar narratives on topics considered to have a great impact for propaganda purposes...," especially with regards to the rise of conspiracy theories (22). Radical online spaces are attractive to mentally ill perpetrators because they can foster a sense of community (Kupper et al. 2022, 9), but they can also be attractive because conspiracy theories appeal to people who feel rejected by society. For instance, before he killed two Swedish football fans during a 2023 shooting in Brussels, Abdesalem Lassoued watched Tiktok videos detailing a conspiracy theory about how the Swedish government was secretly kidnapping Muslim children (SVT Nyheter 2023).

It's entirely possible that such communities of misinformation, working within a wider theater of destabilized ideology, encourage indiscriminate attacks rather than the traditional targets that groups, with specific goals and motivations, tend to select. Of the far-right attacks in the GTD dataset that meet this paper's definition of terrorism and have a minimum of two victims, between 2012 and 2020 only five were perpetrated against police, military or government targets. 23 were carried against soft targets such as synagogues, mosques and restaurants. In the JPED dataset, the last Jihadist attack carried out against a military target in Europe was in 2017. When police are targeted by Jihadists, it is typically when they are alone or in a small group.

There are currently no studies that investigate how the rise of mental illness and conspiracy theories may contribute to the convergence of Islamic and far-right terror tactics. However, I believe three conclusions can be drawn from the evidence that points to this trend. First, mentally ill lone actors operate within a space that has fewer tactical constraints than groups, and they do so with fewer resources and strategic support. This promotes a particularly violent, indiscriminate mode of attack that utilizes simple weapons such as

firearms, vehicles and knives. Plots that employ such weapons—as opposed to bombs,

hijackings and kidnappings — require far less planning to carry out and encourage attacks

that focus on the number of victims, rather than their individual significance. Second,

mentally ill lone actors are probably less likely to engage in extensive planning or commit to

tactics that have inherently longer time horizons. The rise of such terrorists may account for

the fact that, since 2017, there have been no fatal bomb attacks in Europe or North America.

Indeed, while some of the deadliest attacks in far-right and Islamic terror history have

involved the use of explosives, none (Oklahoma City 1995, Madrid 2004, London 2005,

Brussels 2016, Manchester 2017) were committed by a lone actor. Indeed, the JPED database

contains no fatal instances of a lone actor, Islamic terrorist carrying out a successful attack

with a primarily explosive device. Third, the barrier for radicalization among potential

terrorists with mental illness is likely lower than it is for their non-mentally ill peers. The

internet streamlines the radicalization process for many, but it also has a unique ability to

encourage potential terrorists by spreading fringe beliefs like the "great replacement theory,"

that the Swedish government is kidnaping Muslim children or that 9/11 was actually

coordinated by the U.S. government (NBC 2017). These beliefs, that would get little traction

in the real world, can clearly take on a life of their once they reach the internet.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, historically, terror groups have cared significantly

about their status, recognition, bargaining power and legitimacy (Bassiouni 2004). This

placed constraints on who such groups could and couldn't kill, and how. But many lone

actors have no intention of bargaining, and they certainly don't have the organizational goals

that like Al Qaeda does. While it would be a stretch to say there were rules that governed

international terrorism in the late 20th and early 21st century, there was a certain logic that

created a boundary of what was and wasn't acceptable. Al-Qaeda, one scholar suggests,

disavowed their association with the much more violent ISIS, at least in part, because of how

it negatively affected their "brand" (Sly 2014). Lone actors do not have a "brand," and therefore do not need to take the same precautions that groups do to protect it.

4.3 MARTYRS ON DEMAND, WHEN BRUTALITY BECOMES THE NORM

Oh brothers can you hear my voice or am I all alone

If there's no fire to guide my way, then I will start my own — (We'll Have Our Home Again, by Männerbund; quoted in the manifesto of Ryan Palmeter 2023)

While this thesis disputes the notion that ideology is the primary determinate of target selection, it finds that a lone actor's personal motivation and self-image may be an important factor in this process. Again, there seems to be a noticeable convergence in what motivates far-right and Islamic extremists, and in how they wish to be perceived by their communities and the world at-large. This, in turn, conditions who and where they seek to kill. With increasing frequency, far-right terrorists have embraced a culture of martyrdom similar to that of Jihadists (Hoffman et al. 2020, 575). This mentality can be seen clearly in Chris Harper-Mercer's racist and archetypally incel manifesto, which he wrote shortly before killing nine people at an Oregon community college. Harper-Mercer says that he hopes to inspire others to take up arms, and ends his document writing, "I am the martyr for all those like me. To quote Seung Cho, 'Today I die like Jesus Christ'" (accessed through schoolshooters.info). Dylan Roof, the perpetrator behind the infamous Charleston church shooting, adapted a line from a Japanese movie *Himizu* at the end of his manifesto: "Even if my life is worth less than a speck of dirt, I want to use it for the good of society" (accessed through media.thestate.com). Writing to incite an all-out, anti-Jewish race-war, John T. Earnest, the Poway Synagogue shooter, simply noted in his manifesto, "If I die—I die," (accessed through bcsh.bard.edu). While Earnest clearly states that he believes his life is less important than his cause, like many other far-right attackers who do the same, he ultimately survived.

The level to which martyrdom is a prevalent tactic in far-right terrorism is debated by scholars, and hinges on how one defines suicide-tactics. Daniel Koehler, Director of German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies, argues that far-right extremists do not produce "significant suicide tactics" in the narrow sense, but he does note their embrace of the trope of the "warrior hero" who "goes down fighting till the end" (Koehler 2020). It is true that many far-right icons survived or were captured following their attacks, including the two men most cited by other attackers: Tarrant and Breivik. Nicolò Miotta expands on this notion by conceptualizing far-right "living martyrs and saints" that do not necessarily have to die to be remembered as having made the ultimate sacrifice (2022, 144).

However, if one includes incel and more recent "grab-bag" attacks within the wider far-right pantheon, as this paper does, then suicide by self-inflicted gunshot wound and suicide by cop are common trends among far-right attackers (Hoffman et al. 2020, 575). For instance, the perpetrator behind the 2023 Jacksonville dollar store shooting, Ryan Palmeter, stated in his manifesto that he would "not be taken alive" (accessed through the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office). He subsequently died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound shortly after law enforcement officers arrived at the scene. Moreover, the rhetoric far-right terrorists use to frame their attacks suggests that they believe martyrdom, as a tactic can, inspire future terrorists in a manner similar to the way Jihadists do. For instance, although Patrick Crusius survived after the El Paso shooting, he wrote in his manifesto that "My death is likely inevitable. If I'm not killed by the police, then I'll probably be gunned down by one of the invaders. Capture in this case is far worse than dying during the shooting..." (accessed through https://randallpacker.com/). He clearly hoped that his death would inspire others, writing that his attack was "...just the beginning of the fight for America and Europe. I am honored to head the fight to reclaim my country from destruction" (Ibid).

Language like that in Crusius' manifesto has clear echoes in how Jihadi suicide-attackers describe themselves. Talking to Nasra Hassa in 2001, a former (survived) suicide bomber from Gaza put it plainly: "I wanted to do an operation that would incite others to do the same" (2001). Palmeter, the Jacksonville shooter, outlines a similar hope in his manifesto, albeit more crassly, when he states that "my words will convince [future far-right terrorists] to get off their asses and do what needs to be done" (accessed through the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office). Palmeter clearly believed that dying as a result of his attack would inspire others to act simply by demonstrating of the lengths he would go to for their shared cause. Again, this has parallels with Jihadist violence, and closely resembles the thought pattern of one Gazan suicide bomb recruiter who stated that, of all the tactics available, "It is martyrdom attacks which earn the most respect and elevate the bombers to the highest possible level of martyrdom" (Post 2009, 382). Even if an attack is ultimately unsuccessful, it still stands as a profound demonstration of one's commitment.

My central argument in this section is that social media has facilitated a Jihad-like culture of martyrdom that had spread throughout far-right extremist circles, and that one consequences of this evolution is the shift in targeting-tactics among far-right terrorists. Specifically, the proliferation of manifestos, as well as livestreamed attack videos, pushes would-be far-right terrorists to attempt the most spectacular, performative attack types possible. This builds on Lewis Rarm's theory that livestreamed attacks "rely on repugnance as spectacle" to be shared and circulated online, as well as Jacob Ware's argument that terrorist manifestos reveal the importance of rhetoric and chains of inspiration in far-right communities (Rarm 2023, 427; Ware 2020). The social-media induced shift seen in far-right terror tactics has occurred alongside a similar development in Jihadist media use, largely as a consequence of ISIS-produced media content. This dual process can provide yet another

explanation for the tactical convergence between these two groups as noted elsewhere in this thesis.

Once a terror attack becomes performative it also becomes more reliant on the participation of its intended audience, and not just through the terror-diffusion dimension. As demonstrated by the raft of ISIS-produced videos that circulated in the mid 2010s, recorded acts of violence play a uniquely aesthetic role (Chouliaraki and Kissas 2018, 25). Violence in these instances seeks to horrify, not terrorize, through the sheer intimacy and brutality of the act itself. The fear stems not just from the fact that a person or a group of people were killed, but from the fact that their death has now become a concrete, visceral symbol for the person or group that killed them. When the Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh was captured by ISIS, multiple hashtags, such as "#SuggestAWayToKillTheJordanianPilotPig," began to trend on Twitter, and were eventually shared over 16,000 times (Carter Center 2017). In the end, al-Kasasbeh was burned alive and the video of his death can be easily found online. Within this new context, traditional modes of terroristic violence, such as bombing or hijackings, may lack the shock value needed to demand an audience's attention and seem almost antiquated. Without a recording they appear too remote in the aesthetic sphere of social media, and are therefore less likely to spark terror. As Rarm writes, a recording also makes an act of intense violence "consumable," because it makes access to that attack readily available, sharable and re-watchable (2023, 426). For purposes such as recruiting and gaining peer admiration, a consumable recording of an attack can serve a community-building role, and fill the face-to-face gap left open by online spaces (Kupper et al. 2022, 9).

Additionally, I would like to expand on these theories by suggesting that recordings of terror attacks and terror-related violence can serve a similar role, across ideology, to the one that manifestos occupy in far-right circles. As Ware notes, the manifestos produced by far-right attackers almost universally portray their authors as "reluctant warriors," driven by

desperation and only entertaining such violence as a last resort (Ware 2020, 6). This rhetoric can be traced back to Louis Beam, a former leader of the KKK and several anti-government militias, in addition to being one of the first modern far-right ideologues. In an essay first written in 1983 but updated following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beam says that members of the far-right are "...a band of brothers, native to the soil gaining strength one from another as we have rushed head long into a battle that all the weaker, timid men, say we cannot win" (1992, 1). Manifestos like Beam's, which nowadays are by the likes of Tarrant and Breivik, obviously serve the purpose of making violence and extremist ideology more appealing and acceptable. They explain and they radicalize, but they also justify a particular level of violence. If a terrorist believes they are only doing what they're doing as a last resort—fighting against the injustice of society on society's behalf—then a certain amount of violence, collateral damage and destruction is necessarily going to be warranted in their eyes. This is how acts like martyrdom become appealing, because they are perceived to be necessary.

Recorded acts of violence have the similar potential to encourage and desensitize but, crucially, they also dehumanize their targets in a way manifestos cannot (Pfundmair et al. 2022, 62). This is perhaps most evident in Payton Gendron's manifesto, released shortly before his attack on a predominantly black supermarket in Buffalo, New York. "Brenton's livestream started everything you see here," Gendron writes, "Brenton started my real research into the problems with immigration and foreigners in our White lands, *without his livestream I would likely have no idea about the real problems the West is facing*" (accessed through hoplofobia.info; italics added). Throughout his manifesto, Gendron refers to ethnic minorities and immigrants to the United States as "replacers." In Palmeter's manifesto, he likewise calls Tarrant as the "main inspiration" for his methods, and repeatedly uses derogatory and dehumanizing language to refer to women, ethnic and sexual minorities while

demeaning their very existence (accessed through the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office). The continued existence of livestreamed content on the internet can "elongate processes of networked suffering" (Rarm 2023, 430). In a sense, this prevents an attack from ever truly being finished—in the same way that a manifesto, once disseminated, prevents a terrorist's ideas from ever completely being eradicated.

This process of dehumanization through the visual and rhetorical destruction of the "other" is also present in Jihadist content. The intimate violence of many ISIS-produced videos, scholars have argued, entails no "life-affirming" promises and adopts a fiercely "anti-humanist" stance towards the bodies and lives of the group's perceived enemies (Chouliaraki and Kissas 2018, 36). Khairi Saadallah, who in a 2020 stabbing killed three people in Reading, UK, was found by police to have ISIS beheading videos featuring the British-accented "Jihadi John" on his phone at the time of his arrest (Gardham 2021). In France, there have been two cases of lone actor Jihadists beheading victims—a tactic previously absent from western Europe—after ISIS videos of similar acts began flooding social media in 2014 (Cengiz 2021, 8). As in far-right digital spaces, such content dehumanizes the other—but it can also disparage tactics that are less violent, or in another sense, less worthy of being consumed by others. A continual "upping of the ante" may account for the increased brutality of many far-right and Islamic terror attacks in recent years, especially of those attacks that are recorded. Larossi Abballa, the man who started a livestream after taking the child of two police officers he had just killed hostage, may have realized the shock value inherent in such an extreme tactic. Operating in social media spaces where they want to be remembered and celebrated as martyrs, terrorists seem to appreciate that the ability to distinguish themselves through the sheer brutality of their tactics can go a long way in achieving these goals. As Aristotle Kallis writes about ideological contagion more generally, "A taboo successfully broken in one place may cognitively liberate others" (2013, 235).

Where in the past manifestos were the primary way for terrorists to share their ideas and methods, video recordings of attacks have since picked up the mantle. While far-right manifestos, for instance, dehumanize and otherize target populations, they do so without the immediacy and intimacy of a live or recorded video. And while manifestos serve to normalize extremist ideas and narratives, they lack the aesthetic power that videos have to normalize new tactics and benchmarks for admissible levels of violence. In fact, the continuing existence of terror videos in online spaces quite literally means that, for any new content to assert itself, previous recordings must be muscled out for new ones to gain traction. Supplanting and surpassing recordings of prior terror attacks is, logically, easier for content that depicts forms of violence more extreme than what came before it.

To summarize this section and return to the phenomenon of convergence, social media has radically altered how terrorists perceive themselves and their acts of violence. In far-right circles, it has created a culture that, like the culture of martyrdom that exists within Jihadism, promotes self-sacrifice. As the writings of far-right terrorists show, this creates a zero-sum game in which attackers seek to achieve the maximum number of casualties possible, including themselves, in the hopes that this can lend credibility and attract respect for their actions, and thus elevate them to the same rank as their heroes. There is also a belief among far-right terrorists that, similar to the view of suicide bombers, the best way to inspire future attacks is through sacrifice of one's own life. This shift is evident in terrorists like Ryan Palmeter and Chris Harper-Mercer, neither of whom had any intention of surviving after their attacks. Moreover, the advent of recorded acts of violence shared on social media has fundamentally transformed terrorism across ideology into an explicitly performative act with a definite aesthetic dimension. Social psychology research has consistently demonstrated that repeated exposure to violent content makes subjects more aggressive and less empathetic (Krahé et al. 2011; Bushman and Anderson 2009), but within the theater of

34

social media, it also ups the ante for what is and isn't considered shocking, horrifying and terrorizing. Such recordings also represent the first time in history that entire attacks, from start to finish, are available for consumption and for potential terrorists to copy—look no further than the emergence of beheadings as a tactic in France, or Payton Gendron's explicit replication of nearly all the fundamental aspects of Brenton Tarrant's attack in Christchurch. Social media has brought the culture of far-right terror closer to that of Jihadism, while fundamentally how attacks are consumed by privileging the violent and horrific.

5 CONCLUSION

"*In this regard, the power of the Internet, or the video cassette aired on Al-Jazeera, was ruthlessly taken advantage of..." — (Cruickshank and Ali 2006, 2)*

In his 2013 book Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat, Jeffrey D. Simon proposes an update to Rapport's original model of The Four Waves of Terrorism. The modern era, Simon argues, will be dominated by a Technological Wave in which "No single type of terrorist ideology will dominate," as technological advances make "for a more level playing field among terrorists with different ideologies and agendas." (Simon 2013, 27). Not only has technology leveled the playing field, it has essentially put terrorists on the same team—or at least given them the same playbook. This is also where ten years of hindsight comes in handy. Writing at the outset of this new "Technological Wave," Simon concluded that internet-enabled lone wolves would be "Free from 'the herd' or any type of group or peer pressure" and able to "march to their own beat" (2013, 255). Here, Simon correctly identifies that the line which previously separated tactics and ideology would become less important as a result of technological diffusion. However, the notion that lone actors would come to operate within a vacuum, as this thesis has shown, is simply not supported by the last decade of far-right and Islamic terror attacks in North America and Europe. Since 2014, clear trends

have emerged in each of these cohesive movements. By identifying them, the new playbook that terrorists from across the ideological spectrum draw upon can be identified.

The convergence of far-right and Islamic terror tactics is a result of several factors, working across several levels, but they have all been precipitated by the rapid proliferation and adoption of internet-based social media platforms. However, despite this homogenization, it's worth noting that some fundamental differences still remain. For instance, high fatality terror attacks carried out by perpetrators working within small cells that receive direction from a larger trans-national group—such as the 2015 Paris attacks, 2016 Brussels bombing and 2024 Crocus City Hall attack—are markedly more common amongst European Jihadists than North American far-right extremists, and have been for some time (Nesser et al. 2016, 3). Moreover, as I demonstrated through an analysis of fatal vehicle-ramming attack data, certain methods do seem to be significantly deadlier depending on the ideology of the assailant. No North American car attacker has come close to replicating the carnage seen during the 2016 Nice truck attack. Meanwhile, no lone acting European Jihadist has carried out a shooting with more than seven fatalities since Mohammed Merah in 2012, while that is a common MO among North American far-right attackers.

Still, three distinct and corresponding changes have occurred in the tactics of both Islamic and far-right violent extremists since Merah's 2012 attacks ushered in the age of social media-dominated terrorism. First, online communities have radically facilitated the emergence of lone actors, or "lone wolves," and empowered individuals to act without the material and strategic support of wider, better-networked groups. The implications of this development are severalfold, but the change is perhaps most relevant on a tactical level. Acting alone, single actor terrorists are keenly aware of their own limitations. But they are also aware of the potential damage that a single actor can accomplish with a simple but effective plan. Indiscriminate, car-based attacks against soft targets were previously non-

existent in both far-right and Islamic terrorism, but they have proliferated across Europe and North America in recent years. For individuals who are radicalized and encouraged online, cars offer a readily available means to potentially kill scores of people, and strike in highly public locations, without the strategic support common to terrorists in the pre-internet age. The fact that single actors, regardless of ideology, have increasingly adopted this tactic suggests that, while ideology is not unimportant, other factors are conditioning weapon-type and target selection among terrorists. Patrick Crusius' admonition that "it is not cowardly to pick low hanging fruit," could be the mantra for ISIS-inspired attackers, as well (accessed through https://randallpacker.com/).

Second, the emergence of "grab-bag" ideologies, the proliferation of conspiracy theories and the increasing prevalence of mental illness amongst lone actor has also contributed to a tactical convergence among far-right and Jihadist attackers. Single actors have fewer constraints when it comes to targeting and methodology because they are perhaps less concerned about their wider legitimacy, their reception by the public, or their ability to immediately achieve any specific political goals. Instead, they are more focused on how they will be perceived within their narrow online communities, and in demonstrating their grievances with, in many cases, society as a whole. Moreover, the specific nexus of conspiracy theories and mental illness has promoted a type of violence that does not discriminate in its targeting, and as such locations chosen for attacks are often public places where an entire demographic, ethnic group or any member of society can be found in abundance. Often, the main political goal of such attacks is solely to inspire more such incidents, and this further promotes the targeting of soft targets and the use of particularly violent and, importantly, readily accessible methods of attack, such as shooting and stabbing. The new archetype of the internet-radicalized lone actor is very much that of the "social loser." This person who receives support and encouragement in online spaces, or through the

consumption of social media radical content, and is then empowered to channel their vague, sometimes contradictory grievances into violence against the society they feel marginalized by.

Finally, as the far-right's recent online infatuation with Osama bin Laden suggests (Makuch and Lamoureux 2019), social media has contributed to the lionization of martyrdom and the perceived value of brutality across terrorist ideologies. In certain cases, like that of Elliot Rodger, incels even add epitaphs like "PBUH" (or Praise Be Upon him) after mentioning the name of dead attacker (Branson-Potts and Winton, 2018). The ability to record, livestream or otherwise share and justify acts of violence across social media has, in a sense, devalued acts of violence writ large. This has been the driving force behind a marked escalation in violence as far-right and Islamic terrorists to employ tactics and methods that increasingly horrify in addition to terrorize, in an effort to draw attention to and distinguish themselves in a crowded media environment. Again, the self-reinforcing nature of online spaces has also allowed terrorists of various ideologies to dehumanize their enemies, and strip them of any form of protection or dignity. Moreover, the canonization of far-right attackers and martyrs in online circles has driven the movement to adopt a culture of self-sacrifice, similar to that seen amongst Jihadists. This has also contributed to the marked convergence in tactics between these two groups.

For counter-terror practitioners the convergence of far-right and Jihadist terror tactics poses several challenges, but it also creates several new opportunities. For one, lone actors almost always exhibit warning signs, whether that means symptoms of mental illness, membership to an online extremist group or the consumption of terrorist-produced digital content. Unlike cells, which often go out of their way to disguise themselves, or well networked groups, which have the resources to circumvent detection, the far-right and Islamic extremist perpetrators who act on their own are often not shy about their views. They

tend have either criminal histories or have themselves posted or shared extremist content online. Shifting to strategies of counterterrorism that more effectively take advantage of internet-based surveillance opportunities, such as tracking certain content online and monitoring those who engage with it, could prove fruitful in identifying would-be terrorists prior to potential attacks.

Moreover, the convergence of terror tactics and actor archetype across ideology suggests that a coordinated or unified approach to countering far-right and Islamic extremism could be viable. If, as they are, far-right and Islamic terrorists tend to be single actors who attack soft targets and primarily congregate on social media platforms, while employing basic, accessible and often low-cost weaponry, then the strategies used to counter the one group should also prove effective against the other. In this sense, the "Technological Wave" has created something of a shared philosophy across terrorist ideologies. This is a philosophy of tactics, methods, rhetoric and style that may be just as important for counter-terrorism experts to understand as ideology itself.

Going forward, scholars would be well-advised to continue investigating the growing role that mental illness plays across all strains of terrorism. As I've shown, it has become an increasingly common trait amongst terrorists involved in far-right and Islamic extremism. Other potentially fruitful avenues of research could incorporate broader emergent trends as a result of the social media-violence nexus. Some potential connections have yet to fully reveal themselves in terrorism studies owing the relatively limited sample size of successful terror attacks. The increasingly unclear line between acts of terrorism and other acts of violence— and the increasingly unclear line between personal grievances and political ones—may open the door for more interdisciplinary approaches to be applied to terrorism studies. Finally, although "grab-bag" extremists and unstable ideologies have been investigated as a new dynamic within far-right terrorism, few if any studies have applied this lens to Islamic

extremism. As the cases covered in this thesis have sought to demonstrate, Jihadist ideology may not be as stable or cohesive as it was previously conceptualized to be. All of these threads suggest that the next decade of terrorism studies will be a pivotal crossroads for the field. The future will likely see more attacks that challenge the traditional notions and definitions of terrorism. Existential questions about what it means for an act of violence to be terrorism, or for the perpetrator of an act of violence to be a terrorist, will likely continue and appear with greater frequency. In all likelihood, the "Technological Wave" identified by Simon will prove to be the lest centralized, most documented and paradoxically enigmatic stage yet in the evolution of terrorism and terror tactics.

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