

Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and the War in Ukraine



Program on Extremism || May 25, 2022

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In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, terrorist and violent extremist groups around the world have opined on the conflict in statements, media releases, and propaganda. In addition, certain extremist actors are participating as combatants in the conflict. As the war in Ukraine continues, its long-term effects may also entail significant ramifications for the future of violent extremism in the broader region.

To address these evolving dynamics, the Program on Extremism held a [virtual event](#) to discuss the reactions and perceptions of global terrorist and violent extremist movements to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This panel, moderated by Program senior research fellow **Haroro J. Ingram**, brought together three distinct viewpoints covering different aspects of the war. **Mina al-Lami**, Editorial Lead for the BBC’s Jihadist Media Monitoring Team, covered the jihadist response to the war in Ukraine. **Kacper Rekawek**, postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Research on Extremism at the University of Oslo, offered insights on white supremacist and far-right involvement in the conflict. **Bennett Clifford**, senior research fellow at the Program on Extremism, concluded with details on Russian jihadist responses.

Together, these three experts provided sobering and nuanced assessments of violent extremist reactions to and involvement in the ongoing conflict.



Click this image to view the event recording.

The Jihadist Response to the War in Ukraine

Mina al-Lami opened the panel with remarks on the differing positions of jihadist actors across the world regarding the war in Ukraine, and how the jihadist movement has responded. She split jihadist positions on the war into two categories: pragmatists who believe in allowing ideological flexibility for survival, and hardliners who call for uncompromising adherence to Salafi-jihadist principles. For pragmatists like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—a former al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist group operating in Syria—offering support to Ukrainians as fellow victims of Russian imperial aggression is essential. Like other jihadist pragmatists, HTS asserts that Muslims are obliged to support repressed peoples no matter their religion. This camp holds that [crimes of aggression](#), [war crimes](#), and other crimes perpetrated against innocent civilians by regimes like Russia’s must be met with sympathy, support, and solidarity for their victims. In contrast, hardliners like the Islamic State have embraced the war in Ukraine with jubilation, gloating that this “crusader-on-crusader” conflict (i.e. Russia vs. Western-



Image 1: A Video Released by HTS in early March 2022 decries Russia's role in foreign conflicts. Available at: Jihadology.net

backed Ukraine) provides vulnerabilities and distractions from other conflict zones that must be exploited by purist jihadist groups like the Islamic State and their international supporters. Ideologues within this hardliner camp have ruled it impermissible for true believers to show support or become involved in the war on behalf of either side. As a result of their uncompromising belief system, these hardliners have condemned any Muslim involvement on either side of the war in Ukraine.

While al-Lami differentiated the viewpoints of pragmatist and hardline jihadists with regard to the Ukraine war, she also outlined their varying responses. She split groups into two categories: those who call indirectly for exploiting Western distractions, and those who provide direct operational instructions for jihadist supporters to travel to Ukraine and join the conflict. Regarding the former, numerous jihadist ideologues and supporters have issued indirect calls for jihadists in Muslim-majority countries to leverage Western distractions and reinvigorate the global jihad. Others, including senior Islamic State leadership, have issued new statements inciting attacks in the West, and implored their followers to take advantage of distracted Western security agencies. However, jihadist responses that provide direct operational instructions for jihadists to travel to Ukraine have been much more limited. One prominent example is the pro-al-Qaeda magazine, *Wolves of Manhattan*, which in an issue from early April called on Muslims in the West to travel to Ukraine and exploit relaxed travel restrictions and borders. The piece’s authors encouraged jihadist supporters to use Ukraine’s relatively open borders and welcoming policies for foreign fighters as an opportunity to travel in small cells, join

up, obtain weapons and training, and then stage attacks against “Crusader” targets in Ukraine, Russia, or upon return to their countries of origin.

Al-Lami concluded with observations that the general view held by jihadists across the world is that the West is in retreat from Muslim-majority lands. Proponents of this view point to developments like the U.S.-led [withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) and the downscaling of [France’s involvement in the Sahel](#) to support their assertions. The general jihadist sentiment concerning the U.S. specifically is that the West’s leader remains preoccupied with the COVID-19 pandemic and race protests, which jihadists view as signs of apocalyptic divine punishment. In short, the West’s re-focusing on multiple crises including the war in Ukraine provides jihadists worldwide time to regroup and expand.

White Supremacist & Far-Right Involvement

Kacper Rekawek followed with a discussion about white supremacist and other far-right involvement in the war. Like al-Lami, he proposed differentiating between far-right online discussions regarding the war—whether about travel, fundraising, offering verbal support, or otherwise—and the realities on the ground in Ukraine.

There have been significant levels of online far-right extremist chatter largely expressing pro-Ukraine and anti-Russia sentiments. According to Rekawek, two major narratives are driving these sentiments. First, Russia’s outright invasion of Ukraine has bolstered far-right nationalist support for the defense of a sovereign nation. Second, far-right supporters online have decried Russian decisions to field non-white soldiers against what they view as a “white nation”, including by deploying Muslim soldiers and troops from Russia’s [Eastern Military District](#). White supremacist and white nationalist online supporters view these decisions as destructive to the white race, and they have also denounced Russian troops flying the Soviet flag. In Rekawek’s view, pro-Ukrainian sentiments among the far-right milieu online appear to be driven predominantly by these anti-Russia sentiments, and less so by any deeply-held ideological support for Ukraine.

However, the total numbers of white supremacists and other far-right extremists who have [traveled](#) to Ukraine so far have been limited. The highest estimated number of travelers from any single country is 20-30 individuals, a stark difference from travelers to the Islamic State’s so-called “caliphate” during its key mobilization years. Nevertheless, these relatively few cases in Ukraine have still garnered significant international attention. Whereas the involvement of white supremacist, far-right, and even far-left actors in the previous 2014 Ukraine war was more covert, foreign and domestic extremist involvement in today’s war is far more overt. Rekawek attributed this shift both to increased coverage

of the war by international media outlets and to the Ukrainian government's [formal call](#) for international volunteers to join its territorial defense forces. As a result, the Ukrainian government has been able to collect travelers' personal information during in-processing upon their arrival, making them much easier to identify and track. Both increased international reporting on the conflict and the Ukrainian government's formal calls for foreign volunteers, Rekawek argued, have created the perception of an environment that is openly permissive for far-right extremists.



Image 2: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy delivers an address following the Bucha Massacre. Photo: Presidential Office of Ukraine.

The reality on the ground is more complex. Some units, including those belonging to the [widely-covered Azov movement](#) are publicly denouncing foreign volunteers, refusing to host them when they arrive, and keeping their communications channels strictly in Ukrainian. Although other smaller units have made subtle overtures to potential travelers, the amount of support travelers are actually receiving upon arrival appears to be mixed. These dynamics tend to be overlooked in international reporting on the foreign fighter phenomenon in Ukraine, and could have unintended policy implications. Nonetheless, the situation continues to evolve. The recent [announcement](#) by the Russian Imperial Movement—a white nationalist organization [designated](#) by the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization—that it will fight alongside Russian troops shows how the war in Ukraine continues to inspire foreign extremist involvement, and how a prolonged conflict could provide ground for such involvement going forward.

Russian Jihadist Responses

Bennett Clifford concluded panelist remarks with a discussion of how Russian jihadists have responded to the war in Ukraine. He focused predominantly on the North Caucasus, where the jihadist movement in Russia historically has been most pronounced. According to Clifford, Russian jihadist responses to the current war in Ukraine must be viewed through an historical lens to understand immediate, second, and third order effects going forward.

Starting in the early 2010s, the decades-long insurgency in the North Caucasus, which developed a jihadist tenor primarily through the establishment of local al-Qaeda affiliate, [Imarat Kavkaz](#), came to a close. The advent of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 and subsequent travel of several thousand jihadist

fighters to join the conflict—oftentimes facilitated by FSB agents who hoped to remove them from Russia—deprived the insurgency of its critical mass. Shortly afterwards, a string of Russian federal security service (FSB) operations from 2013 to 2015 killed or captured the remaining jihadist



Image 3: A propaganda video released by the Islamic State-Qawqaz province (IS-Q). Available at: Jihadology.net

insurgents, including senior Imarat Kavkaz leadership. These two developments constrained jihadist activity in the North Caucasus to the cell and small network level. Even the Islamic State's efforts in 2015 to establish an official province in the region, [wilayat Qawqaz \(IS-Q\)](#), amounted to a province in name only; the organization had little to no command and control, and its only leader was killed in Dagestan shortly after his announcement as leader.

As a result, the locus of Russian jihadism today is in Syria, not Russia, and that locus is dwindling following years of sustained counter-Islamic State operations. The culmination of these historical factors, Clifford argued, has left Russian jihadists with little incentive to join and limited ability to impact the war in Ukraine. To date, Russian jihadists have not openly encouraged travel to the conflict, but there are substantial numbers of Chechens fighting on both sides. Those fighting on the Ukrainian side are largely individuals who were involved with Chechen separatist and nationalist movements of the 1990s, and those fighting on behalf of Russia are largely the personal militia of [Ramzan Kadyrov](#)—the Putin-appointed Head of the Chechen Republic.

However, Clifford pointed out the long-term implications of the simmering radicalization problem in the North Caucasus, one which remains largely unaddressed. A confluence of political, demographic, and socio-economic factors sustains the jihadist scene in Russia today, and since the announcement of IS-Q in 2015 there have been approximately two-dozen IS-claimed attacks in Russia. The Russian response overwhelmingly relies on counterterrorism operations to arrest and kill targets with little regard for collateral damage. The result is the short-term containment of jihadism in Russia while leaving its long-term drivers unaddressed, ones that could kindle a resurgent jihadist conflict in Russia in the future.

In assessing the effects of the Ukraine war on the Russian jihadisphere, one of the most important factors to consider is the security situation in the North Caucasus. Security forces from the North Caucasus are being disproportionately deployed to Ukraine, including the Kadyrovist militia, Russian special police units, and military units. They are also overrepresented in [current casualty figures](#). Depending on how the war progresses, there is significant potential for additional police and military

units from the North Caucasus to be deployed to Ukraine given their extensive experience running counterinsurgency operations over the past few decades compared to other elements of the Russian security apparatus. As Ukrainian forces degrade Russian military, intelligence, and law enforcement capabilities, Russian jihadists and sympathizers have been cheering on the violence from afar.

Another important factor to consider is the long-term socioeconomic implications of the war. The North Caucasus region is among the [poorest](#) in Russia, and its population is largely dependent on federal subsidies. Long-term economic effects of the war and related global sanctions on Russia will be felt especially hard in this region. While a crippling economic situation is not the major driver of radicalization in many settings, Clifford noted its potential to drive more numbers from the North Caucasus, especially youth, to pursue violence as an alternative in the future.

Finally, there are important political factors to consider. Putin and the allies he appointed as governors of the North Caucasus—especially Kadyrov—are politically mutually-dependent on one another. Kadyrov and others have been granted extensive liberties to suppress terrorism in the North Caucasus with support from the federal government, and in return Putin is allowed to claim success in solving the region’s terrorism problem, as well as victory over the separatist and insurgency problems Russia faced throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The more attention and resources Kadyrov and other politicians spend on Ukraine, the more opportunities will arise for jihadists to exploit political and security openings at home in the long-term.

Busting Myths

To conclude the event, each panelist was asked to identify and refute one prevalent myth about violent extremist reactions and responses to the war in Ukraine.

Mina al-Lami started by addressing the false assumption that because jihadists view Russia as their main enemy, they would therefore universally support Ukraine in the war. She argued that jihadists continue to focus on the broader enemy (the West), and view the current conflict primarily through this lens. Given their perceptions of Ukraine as part of the West, large segments of the global jihadist movement have refused to support resistance to the Russian invasion.

Kacper Rekawek sought to dispel the Russian-driven narrative that their military objective in Ukraine is ordered towards “de-Nazification,” which is often paired with faulty arguments that neo-Nazi and white supremacist units make up a disproportionate percentage of Ukrainian armed forces. He reiterated his remarks about the limited involvement of neo-Nazis and white supremacists in the

conflict, and described their recruitment of foreign extremists as comparatively paltry. To illustrate his point, Rekawek contended that the Azov movement is a Ukrainian entity focused on Ukraine. The movement's political positions are largely comparable to far-right entities in Europe, but it receives more media attention because of its paramilitary activities.

Bennett Clifford finished by issuing warnings about Russian reporting on counterterrorism statistics and operations, and called for greater scrutiny. He pointed to a recent counterterrorism operation in which the FSB planted false evidence on alleged neo-Nazi domestic plotters in attempts to link them to Ukraine. Clifford warned that such operations merit continued attention going forward, especially if the FSB and other security services try to use similar ploys to claim Ukraine is using Neo-Nazis to destabilize Russia.