The Age of Incoherence?
Understanding Mixed and Unclear Ideology Extremism

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Introduction

In May 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued an intelligence bulletin that included one of the first official acknowledgments of what they and other similar agencies in the West identified as an emerging violent extremist threat. It warned that "anti-government, identity based, and fringe political conspiracy theories" were playing an increasing role in motivating domestic extremists to commit criminal, sometimes violent, acts.[1] Since then, officials have also noted the emergence of individuals acting based on "salad bar ideology" extremism, a term used in 2020 by FBI Director Christopher Wray to describe the nature of some of the recent violent extremist threats. Their ideologies, according to Director Wray, "are kind of a jumble…a mixture of ideologies that don't fit together." He went on to say that some extremists "take a mish mash of different kinds of ideologies often that don't fit coherently together, and sometimes are even in tension with each other, and mix them with some kind of personal grievance," to justify their attack. Director Wray concluded that "it's more about the violence than it is about the ideology."[2]

In the years since the FBI's warning, other Western countries have expressed similar concerns about this evolution of the terrorist threat. In the United Kingdom (U.K.), the government's Channel project has seen a spike in referrals of individuals classified as having a "mixed, unstable or unclear ideology" since 2020.[3] This category now represents the majority of referrals, and includes individuals who "show an interest in multiple extremist ideologies at the same time" or who "switch from one ideology to another over time."[4] New Zealand has also begun to identify this as a policy concern, noting in its 2021 counterterrorism strategy that "violent extremism is an evolving threat, driven by increasingly complex and convoluted ideologies."[5]

Academics and analysts have also warned of the emergence of "ideological convergence," coining the term "fringe fluidity" to describe those who transition from one extremist ideology to another or who take inspiration from a "salad bar [of] ideologies" as first identified by Director Wray.[6] There are several

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[1] Federal Bureau of Investigation and U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Strategic Intelligence Assessment and Data on Domestic Terrorism. May 2021. https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/fbi-dhs-domestic-terrorism-strategic-report.pdf/view.

[2] Wray, Christopher. Statement by Director Christopher Wray before the House Select Intelligence Committee Hearing on Global Threats. *C-SPAN*, April 15, 2021. https://www.c-span.org/video/?510634-1/house-select-intelligence-committee-hearing-global-threats&live=.

[3] The Channel project is a referral-based, counter-radicalization, one-to-one intervention program. Government of the United Kingdom's Home Office. Official Statistics: Individuals Referred To and Supported Through the Prevent Programme, April 2019 to March 2020. November 26, 2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2019-to-march-2020/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2019-to-march-2020.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Government of New Zealand's Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. New Zealand's Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy. June 2021. https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-10/New%20Zealands%20Countering%20Terrorism%20and%20Violent%20Extremism%20Strategy.pdf.

[6] Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed and Madeleine Blackman. "Fluidity of the Fringes: Prior Extremist Involvement as a Radicalization Pathway." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 45, no. 7 (January 2019): 555-578. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1531545.; Ware, Jacob and Cleary Waldo. "Ideological Leaderless Resistance in the Digital Age." Global Network on Extremism & Technology. October 26, 2022. https://gnet-

suggestions as to the cause of "fringe fluidity," including shared beliefs across ideologies like jihadism and white supremacism, the wide accessibility of extremist ideologies online that appeal to individuals seeking purpose and belonging, and the increased popularity of the lone-actor "leaderless" model of violent extremism.[7]

Over the past decade, a majority of radicalized young people under the age of 30 in the United States (U.S.) have not been part of a formal extremist or terrorist group.[8] According to the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the U.S. (PIRUS) dataset, the number of radicalized young people with no formal allegiances or ties to recognized extremist or terrorist groups has jumped 311% in the past ten years alone as compared to the past five decades.[9]

This signals a fundamental shift in radicalization in the U.S. as extremist and terrorist movements are increasingly defined by loose organizational structures, rather than rigid hierarchies. The influence and direction of activity by a particular group is often ambiguous, and online communities play a key role in radicalization and inspiring violence. Running in parallel with the shifting radicalization landscape, between 2010 and 2020, the PIRUS dataset showed a 413% increase in cases where the internet played a primary role in the radicalization process for those under the age of 30, as compared to the previous decade.

This development is directly linked to the question of mixed or unclear ideological violence. To maintain control and ideological purity, formal groups tend to police the ideas and affiliations of their members, often leaving little room for them to engage with the ideas of alternative or rival movements. As formal group affiliation has reduced in importance for terrorist and violent extremist actors, so have the barriers to engagement with other relevant, and often overlapping, ideologies. Extremists today have more freedom to merge ideas from different extremist currents which may often share several key interests and concerns.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of this emerging phenomenon by giving examples of how ideological mixing has played a role in contemporary terrorist and extremist activity. It will begin by arguing that there has been a misunderstanding of the phenomenon when it comes to

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research.org/2022/10/26/ideological-leaderless-resistance-in-the-digital-age/.; "IntelBrief: The Counterterrorism Challenge of 'Salad Bar' Ideologies." The Soufan Center. March 29, 2021. https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-29/.

[7] Ware and Waldo, "Ideological Leaderless Resistance in the Digital Age."; Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman, "Fluidity of the Fringes."

[8] Records suggest 1,028 people under the age of 30 have been radicalized to the point of violent and non-violent ideologically motivated criminal activity, as well as ideologically motivated association with a foreign or domestic extremist organization in the United States over the past 50 years (1948-2018). The Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS), the largest database of open-source information on radicalized individuals in the United States, allows researchers to understand the trajectory and scope of radicalization over time and across the country. PIRUS holds 4,000 records of individuals that were radicalized in the United States over the past 50 years. The data suggests that over the past ten years, 140 radicalized young people in the U.S. under the age of 30 had no formal ties to groups, as compared to 119 that had formal ties to a group. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) [Data file]. Accessed March 16, 2023. http://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus.

[9] *Ibid.*

cases of racially/ethnically motivated violent extremist (RMVE) terrorism partly inspired by "eco-fascism." Following this, the authors offer further conceptual clarity through the suggestion of two specific subcategories of mixed and unclear ideologies which will help improve understanding of the motivations of a range of violent actors. It will treat both mixed and unclear ideologies as a shared phenomenon.

The first category suggested by the authors is the constantly evolving overlap between RMVE and various iterations of extremist Islamist ideologies. There are signs of significant ideological, linguistic, and aesthetic overlap between these movements, both online and among some recent terror cases in the U.S. However, the nature of this mixing of ideologies is not random or incoherent – they both share similar reactionary and virulently anti-liberal politics and an interest in the unraveling of liberalism around the world. This section will draw on a corpus of 5,467 memes and 3,524 videos from Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter, as well as messaging-based applications such as the encrypted platform Telegram and the closed platform Discord, to show how far-right white nationalists are appropriating jihadist tactics and rationale, such as *fiqh al-dima* (the jurisprudence of blood), and Salafi-jihadists are appropriating the language and aesthetics of Neo-Nazis and far-right trolls, referring to themselves as National-Socialist Salafis.[10]

The second category of extremist activity which we argue fits into the mixed and unclear phenomenon is what the authors term "conspiracy extremism," which appears to be both novel and on the increase as highlighted by the FBI in 2019. Because this type of extremism lacks clear ideological underpinnings, it attracts people from a wide range of social and political backgrounds and is therefore easily adopted by a range of actors. Despite this, the conspiracy theories which have driven the most acts of violence, extremism, and criminality in the U.S. over the last decade often overlap with right-wing and anti-government concerns, including animosity and distrust towards what is considered the "liberal establishment" in media, science, and politics. Drawing on a unique database of incidents of conspiracy extremism-driven violence and criminality, this section will contribute quantitatively to understanding this phenomenon in the U.S. and analyze how to understand the motivations of those engaging in it.[11]

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[10] The data was collected as part of a previous research project on Gen-Z Salafi and alt-right subcultures. The data collection for this work was not a part of this study. Data collection was done by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in 2021. All data was anonymized, and no personal data was collected during the process.

[11] This data was collected using open-source court documents and media reporting only. There was no collection of online social media accounts or content.

Eco-Fascism: Seeking Conceptual Clarity around Mixed Ideologies

Director Wray's "salad bar ideologies" concept is a useful starting point as one of the first official recognitions of an emerging trend of extremism in the U.S., and because it demonstrates some misunderstanding about the nature of these emerging threats. While there is evidence of individuals being motivated by mixed and unclear ideologies, in many cases there is a logical reason for the ideological overlap, but in others, there is no ideological mixing at all.

During his testimony, Director Wray offered two cases as examples of people acting on ideas and motivations that "do not fit logically together." These cases included two members of the Boogaloo Boys who attempted to provide material support to Hamas and RMVE terrorist Patrick Crusius who killed 23 in a mass shooting in El Paso, Texas and expressed concern for the environment in his manifesto. However, the following analysis will show that neither instance demonstrates any signs of mixed nor overlapping ideologies.

The Boogaloo Boys case was likely a practical and mutually beneficial agreement with no ideological component. The two members of the Boogaloo Boys believed they were entering into a purely material transaction with Hamas, a group with which they shared a mutual distrust of the U.S. government.[12] The Boogaloo Boys members offered to conduct attacks in the U.S. in return for money from Hamas. The FBI agents posed as Hamas members throughout the investigation likely to create the possibility of charging the two Boogaloo Boys with international terrorism because there is no domestic terrorism law in the U.S.[13]

In the case of Patrick Crusius, who specifically targeted Hispanic Americans in his attack, the expression of concern for the environment in his manifesto contributed to a growing assumption that the extreme right has begun to adopt elements of leftist environmentalism via the ideology of "eco-fascism." He was not the first RMVE terrorist to mention support for eco-fascism. A few months before Crusius' attack, Brenton Tarrant killed 51 Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, and described himself as "an eco-fascist by nature" in his manifesto.[14] Tarrant's attack functioned as an inspiration for several subsequent RMVE mass shooters, two of which - Patrick Crusius and Payton Gendron - used part of their manifesto to discuss the threat humans pose to the environment. Three years after Crusius' attack, Gendron killed ten people in a mass shooting targeting a supermarket he associated with a local Black community in Buffalo, New York. Like Tarrant, Gendron described himself as an eco-fascist in his

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[12] "Member Of "Boogaloo Bois" Pleads Guilty To Conspiracy To Provide Material Support To Hamas." Department of Justice Press Release. December 16, 2020. https://www.justice.gov/usao-mn/pr/member-boogaloo-bois-pleads-guilty-conspiracy-provide-material-support-hamas.

[13] Hughes, Seamus and Jon Lewis. "Why the FBI Had to Pretend Hamas Wanted to Plot With 'Boogaloo Boys'." *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/09/09/fbi-boogaloo-hamas-terrorism/.

[14] Tarrant's self-published manifesto.

manifesto. This concern for the environment, commonly associated with left-wing activism, by RMVEs understandably caused some confusion and inspired new claims about the mixing of ideologies.[15]

However, concepts of racial supremacy and purity have been, in certain circumstances, related to concerns about the preservation of the environment since at least the mid-20th century. Eco-fascism is a term that Peter Staudenmaier says is used to describe "the preoccupation of authentically fascist movements with environmentalist concerns."[16] Staudenmaier, whose work is considered by some as one of the definitive contributions to the topic of eco-fascism, describes a "green wing" of German Nazism and argues that the ecological components of Nazism were central to the movement's ideology and belief in an absolutist "natural order."[17] These components included a type of Romanticist nature mysticism, along with "anti-humanism, and a mythology of racial salvation through a return to the land." In this view, the social and political order should be organized around the laws of nature and biological determinism - the belief that race is the main influence over an individual's behavior and intellectual capacity. This linking of the laws of nature with the laws of man and the organization of society connects environmental purity with racial purity. In broader fascist and white supremacist ideology, the "blood and soil" bond between an ethnic group and their land, and the connection between "naturalism and nationalism," is a sacred one which must be preserved - often by ethnic cleansing and the conservation of nature.[18]

This remains the case today with RMVEs seeking to maintain linkages to their forebears by updating these environmental views to fit with what they see as threats to the environment emanating from aspects of modernity, including corporate destruction of nature, migration, and "unnatural" (and therefore against the "natural order") ethnic mixing.[19] With this in mind, it is not surprising to read in Tarrant's manifesto about his belief in "ethnic autonomy for all peoples with a focus on the preservation of nature, and the natural order." For Tarrant, Crusius, and Gendron, low birth rates of white people, who they believe are the only people with the mental capacity to preserve nature and maintain healthy population rates, along with the white race's "replacement" by non-white migrants whose high birth they believe rates are leading to overpopulation, are the main reasons for the destruction of the environment.

While the use of environmentalist language may also represent an effort by the extreme right to co-opt popular and mainstream issues, any claims of ideological mixing overlook long-standing fascist and

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[15] "IntelBrief: The Counterterrorism Challenge of 'Salad Bar' Ideologies."; Miller-Idriss, Cynthia and Brian Hughes. "Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism. *Lawfare*, December 19, 2021. https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism /.; Ware and Waldo, "Ideological Leaderless Resistance in the Digital Age."

[16] Staudenmaier, Peter. Fascist Ecology: The "Green Wing" of the Nazi Party and its Historical Antecedents. Marquette University. January 1, 2011. https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1155&context=hist_fac.

[17] Hughes, Brian, Dave Jones, and Amarnath Amarasingam. Ecofascism: An Examination of the Far-Right/Ecology Nexus in the Online Space. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34 (June 2022). https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2022.2069932?scroll=top&needAccess=true&role=tab.

[18] Staudenmaier, "Fascist Ecology."

[19] Biehl, J. ""Ecology" and the Modernization of Fascism in the German Ultra-Right." In *Ecofascism Revisited: Lessons from the German Experience*. Porsgrunn: New Compass Press, 2011: 43–88.; Hughes, Jones, and Amarasingam, "Ecofascism."

white supremacist interests in nature and conservation efforts. Therefore, categorizing eco-fascism within the realm of a mixed ideology and presenting it as a novel threat is a misreading of the ideological underpinnings of modern violent white supremacism.

The Extreme Right and Islamism

On 10 November 2022, an 18-year-old from New Jersey named Omar al-Kattoul was arrested for allegedly making threats to synagogues. His case is among the first to embody mixed ideological radicalization. His online footprint suggests that he supported the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda (AQ), two oppositional Salafi-jihadist forces interlinked by a shared history, but also that he venerated white supremacist mass shooters.[20] In early November, al-Kattoul went as a far as to create and share a manifesto complete with a question-and-answer section detailing his motive as "an attack on Jews." The al-Kattoul case files, containing messages from Telegram, detail his radicalization in his own words. Two months after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, al-Kattoul described how he was in an "Iran enjoyer phase," but had become a "Taliban supporter and Iran supporter at the same time." He then transitioned saying, "December-February I started [to] support al-Qaeda and thought ISIS were *khawarij* (secessionists)," and then by March 2022, "I fully supported them [ISIS]."

Al-Kattoul seemed to have radicalized over the year, but often contradicted himself or claimed that he was "role playing." He was using both Discord and Telegram to relay his plans and engage others, who in his words, were "LARPing," or live-action role-playing, as "terrorist/jihadis." A week before his bail hearing, he sent a Telegram message stating he wanted "to kill all the freshman in my school." He similarly created and shared montage-style videos of Dylann Roof, the RMVE perpetrator of an attack on a Black church in South Carolina resulting in the deaths of nine people. Al-Kattoul believed that the churchgoers killed by Roof were "Christcucks", a term borrowed from RMVE online discourse, and that "Muslims in the west should learn from him [Roof]." Almost in direct contradiction of these murderous sentiments, al-Kattoul claimed that his planned attack was in retaliation for the Christchurch Mosque mass shooting perpetrated by white supremacist Brenton Tarrant who asked that people read the "writings of Dylann Roof and others" in his manifesto.

Al-Kattoul was linked to another young man, Christopher Raymond Joseph, who was charged with destroying evidence linked to the federal investigation into al-Kattoul on November 5, 2022. Joseph, a University of South Florida student, told investigators that he used the same applications as al-Kattoul to "LARP" about "racist stuff," and to follow pro-Islamic State channels that included videos encouraging others to join the group. Al-Kattoul would eventually share his manifesto and plans to conduct an attack with Joseph who advised and shared information with al-Kattoul on weapons. Both al-Kattoul and Joseph repeated a similar refrain when confronted with these allegations by law enforcement - they were "LARPing." Al-Kattoul and Joseph were plotting real-world harm but fell back on the old internet adage: nothing online is real.

Similar cases go back more than a decade in the U.S. Prominent among them is that of Nicholas Young, a former District of Columbia Metro Transit Police Officer and acquaintance of the convicted al-Qaeda

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[20] al-Qaeda has a shared history and tie to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) but are now firmly oppositional forces in the sense that they have competing visions of how to achieve Salafi-jihadist goals.

supporter Zachary Chesser. Young believed that he was aiding Islamic State supporters' travel to the declared Caliphate, including sending $245 worth of gift cards to an FBI confidential informant.[21] Young, eventually found guilty of providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization, had a tattoo of a German eagle on his neck, an SS unit logo on his arm, collected Nazi memorabilia, and dressed up as "Jihadi John" complete with a faux beheaded hostage for Halloween. He had bookmarked over 36 websites, a mix of Salafi-jihadist propaganda and Nazi and antisemitic sites. An avid video game player, Young had set up an account on Facebook in the name of a *Warhammer 40,000* character and shared photographs of the former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Haj Mohammed Amin al-Husseini meeting with Adolf Hitler and saluting Nazi troops.[22] Young has claimed entrapment by federal agents in his case and continues to deny his terrorist links.

Like Young, Emerson Begolly was enamored with Nazis and the Third Reich, as introduced to him as a child by his father, and similarly engaged Zachary Chesser and another notorious al-Qaeda recruiter, Collen LaRose, or "Jihad Jane," online. Begolly was an administrator on a well-known Salafi-jihadist forum where he encouraged attacks, posting "a successful lone-wolf attack, when even kills 1 or 2 or 3 of the kuffar is BETTER THAN and [sic] UNSUCCESSFUL massive attack which also results in your own arrest." At the time, prosecutors trying the Begolly case noted, "We now find ourselves in an era where one of the greatest innovations of the modern era—the Internet—is being utilized by radical jihadists who seek to use that medium to endanger American lives." What prosecutors were unable to see at the time, however, was the ability of the internet to ultimately unite disparate islands of ideologies and ultimately create a "brand" of extremism that serves more than just "radical jihadists."

While the al-Kattoul, Joseph, Young, and Begolly cases may seem like outliers in terrorism-linked investigations nationally, it is indicative of a larger series of trends online and in the real world where the two spheres of RMVE and Islamism are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. How this happened requires understanding the content continuum in the extremist milieus that have long existed online, and similarly, the evolution of the internet and the content that has been shaped by both mainstream and fringe communities in parallel.

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[21] "Criminal Complaint." United States of America v. Nicholas Young. United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. Case: 1:16-mj-355. August 2, 2016. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Young%20Complaint%2C%20Signed%20Affidavit.pdf.

[22] Doyle, Paulie. "The culture wars have reached Warhammer 40K." *Vice*, 2020. https://www.vice.com/en/article/9358ke/warhammer-40k-alt-right-culture-wars. "It's easy to see why some players have a fascist reading of Warhammer 40k. Partially written as satire in response to the exceedingly optimistic sci-fi of the 1970s, the game takes place in a hopeless, dystopian galaxy where murderous armies run rampant. There's a conscious borrowing of fascist iconography, structures and practices. For instance, perhaps the most famous group from 40k's lore, the Imperium of Man, is a bloated, theocratic ethnostate that traverses the galaxy, purging heretics and alien races. "In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war," reads the game's tagline."

The Dimensions of Idiosyncratic Terrorism and Terrorist Content Online

The authors have developed a preliminary framework to understand these emerging communities of shared ideological precepts, animus, martyrs, tactics, and strategies. This framework builds on ethnographic research while immersed in these communities, theoretical discussions around the historical waves of terrorism, and underdefined or undertheorized elements of terrorist support online.[23] The authors analyzed 9,000 memes and meme videos from Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter, as well as messaging-based applications such as the encrypted platform Telegram and the closed platform Discord.[24] The memes and videos were collected between 2020 and 2022. Previously published research using this dataset analyzed the aesthetics and narratives of Gen-Z Islamist communities, highlighting "an emerging global ecosystem of young Salafis defined not by ideological rigidity, but rather an ideational elasticity that allows these communities to draw on seemingly oppositional alt-right and far-right tropes."[25]

Frameworks reliant on an understanding of terrorism in terms such as "salad bar extremism;" "mixed, unclear, or unstable ideologies;" "reciprocal radicalization;" "ideologically fluid;" "hybrid ideologies;" or composite violent extremism," have been best described, as "idiosyncratic terrorism."[26] Or, in other words, weird. A definition and framework for idiosyncratic terrorism was initially introduced by the academic Jesse Norris in 2020 and identified four dimensions to idiosyncratic terrorism: "idiosyncratic ideologies, tactics, strategic thinking, and motives."[27] Norris noted that idiosyncratic terrorism "can be defined as a violent attack motivated in some way by ideology, and which is idiosyncratic in at least

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[23] The data was collected as part of a previous research project on Gen-Z Salafi and alt-right subcultures. The data collection for this work was not a part of this study. Data collection was done by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in 2021. All data was anonymized, and no personal data was collected during the process.

[24] Ayad, Moustafa. "Islamogram: salafism and alt-right online subcultures." Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2021. https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/islamogram-salafism-and-alt-right-online-subcultures/.

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Salad bar ideology has been described by Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Christopher Wray as "weird hodgepodge blend of ideologies." Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed. "Will 'salad bar extremism' replace 'old-world terrorism?" Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. 2022. https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/07/15/salad-bar-extremism-old-school-terrorism/.; Mixed, unclear, or unstable ideologies has been described by the United Kingdom's Home Office as "instances where the type of concern presented involves a combination of elements from multiple ideologies (mixed), shifts between different ideologies (unstable), or where the individual does not present a coherent ideology yet may still be vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism (unclear)." United Kingdom Home Office. "User guide to: individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, England and Wales." 2023. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales#:~:text=Definition%3A%20This%20category%20reflects%20instances,to%20being%20drawn%20into%20terrorism%20.; Reciprocal radicalization has been described by the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) as "the idea that extremist groups fuel one another's rhetoric and/or actions, including violence." Knott, Kim, Simon Copeland, and Ben Lee. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST). 2018. https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/reciprocal-radicalisation/.; Gartenstein-Ross, D. et al. "Composite Violent Extremism: Conceptualizing Attackers Who Increasingly Challenge Traditional Categories of Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (March 2023). https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2194133?scroll=top&needAccess=true&role=tab&aria-labelledby=full-article.; Norris. Jesse T. "Idiosyncratic terrorism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (June 2020): 4. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918296#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[27] *Ibid.*

one dimension. Some terrorists may only be idiosyncratic in one way, while others are idiosyncratic across all dimensions. Idiosyncrasy is not a binary, either/or concept, but a matter of degree: for each dimension, terrorists can range from not idiosyncratic at all to highly idiosyncratic."[28]

Idiosyncrasies abound in a range of individual terrorism cases across the U.S., but similarly in what has been described as hierarchical terrorist organizations. Rather than simply understanding mixed, unstable, or unclear ideologies and focusing on the ideological elements of "salad bar" or "hybrid" ideologies, the framework for idiosyncratic terrorism went further by also classifying tactics, strategic thinking, and motives. Missing from this discussion, however, was content and the role of idiosyncratic content as a part of tactics or strategic thinking. Content plays a central role in defining, and even creating, new idiosyncratic ideologies, especially online.

Using the same framework developed by Norris and applying it to a range of content in the digital space reveals the idiosyncratic dimensions of online terrorist communities. To this end, we have classified the jihadi-RMVE hybrid content collected over 2020-2022 into idiosyncratic terrorism dimensions. The authors have identified several support communities online that could be traditionally defined as neo-Nazis (which will be broken down according to Nazi-Salafi and Nazi-Shia distinctions), al-Qaeda, Islamic State, or Iran-backed militia hubs that have intra-group idiosyncrasies which ultimately influenced the development of their communities, ideologies, tactics, strategic thinking, and motives.
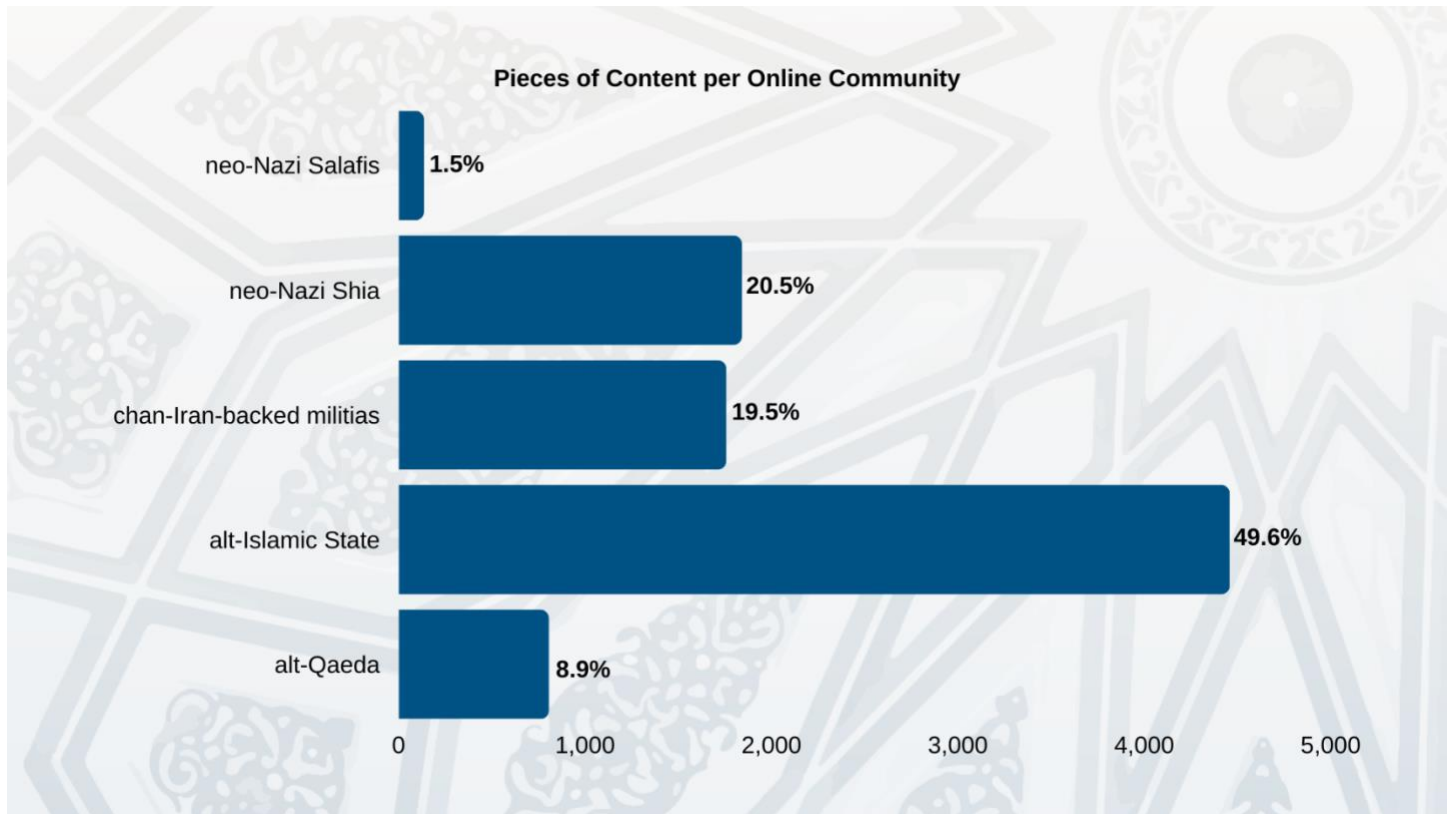
The authors have defined these groups of supporters as neo-Nazi Salafis, neo-Nazi Shia, alt-Iran-backed militias, alt-Islamic State, and alt-Qaeda to create a distinction between them and others that inhabit the same ideological ambit[29]. In previous writings, the authors have referred to these fringe communities as part of a larger movement, simply dubbed "alt-jihad."[30] This grouping of alt-jihadist is a microcosm of multiple fringe communities, often at odds with one another, yet united in their use of idiosyncratic terrorist content. The grouping also includes a series of what would be described as "mixed, unclear and unstable" ideologies, appropriating aesthetics and narratives from oppositional groups such as white supremacists, Iran-back militias, or Salafi-jihadists. These communities not only build on a legacy of content and fringe content creation within their respective spheres, but also create new genres of content through their production of memes and meme videos that shape their respective idiosyncratic behaviors online.

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[28] *Ibid.*

[29] As in those that are either clearly ideologically linked to groups of Salafi-jihadists or neo-Nazis that would not be considered as exhibiting "salad bar extremism."

[30] Ayad, Moustafa. "An 'alt-jihad' is rising on social media." *Wired*, 2021. https://www.wired.com/story/alt-jihad-rising-social-media/.

Figure 1. Proportions of dataset content produced by each of the defined online communities.

Pieces of Content per Online Community

- neo-Nazi Salafis — 1.5%
- neo-Nazi Shia — 20.5%
- chan-Iran-backed militias — 19.5%
- alt-Islamic State — 49.6%
- alt-Qaeda — 8.9%

While these online communities are primarily spread across Telegram, they are also frequently using closed platforms, such as Discord, to share content. Most notably, and similar to claims made by al-Kattoul, these online community members often claim that they are in fact "LARPing" to obfuscate their true ideological leanings and motives.[31] The authors have previously delved into the dataset of memes and videos (1,727) supportive of Islamist groups including Hamas or the Taliban, and Salafi-jihadist organizations such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, al-Qaeda, or the Islamic State.[32] However, the authors have not provided a theory-based classification framework for all of the content collected during the previous study by the authors. The preliminary framework described by the authors below seeks to do this, and to highlight the intra-sectarian development of similar communities of small but burgeoning neo-Nazi Shia supporters and chan-Iran-backed militia supporters. Both communities typically have larger followings in English and Farsi and are supported by young people in Iraq and Iran. More than 40% (3,596) of the content analyzed from the dataset of memes and meme videos were from neo-Nazi Shia and chan-Iran-backed militia communities on Telegram. The least prolific content producers were

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[31] *Ibid.* "The aesthetic and narrative convergence of extremist groups around the world makes it clear that the future of online extremism will be even more ideologically murky. It will only become more difficult to identify an immediate call to arms versus a troll powerplay—and our systems are not prepared for the next wave of extremism, simply because we haven't adapted, or haven't yet learned our lessons."

[32] The data was collected as part of a previous research project on Gen-Z Salafi and alt-right subcultures. The data collection for this work was not a part of this program. Data collection was done by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in 2021. All data was anonymized, and no personal data was collected during the process.

self-professed neo-Nazi Salafis, but this community also provided the most idiosyncratic content in terms of its guiding doctrine.

We found that idiosyncratic commonalities run through all these communities, namely the appropriation of chan culture's aesthetics and language, ideological precepts and doctrines, and definitions of in-groups and out-groups.[33] The communities surveyed by the authors were firmly steeped in chan culture, using English words in Arabic chats, such as the term for wife (*wifu*) referring to each other as "chads," and referring to enemies as "cucks". This appropriation of chan culture language was idiosyncratic for all the communities defined by the authors, and therefore key to the development of idiosyncratic content unique to each community. Chan culture has its own history that has been leveraged by extremist groups across a spectrum of ideologies for quite some time. However, there was very little in terms of the appropriation of chan culture to support traditional groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, or Iran-backed militias. The adoption of the same aesthetic and language by ideologically different groups such as RMVEs and Islamists is similarly idiosyncratic, it is also emblematic of two central environmental factors: the global spread of chan culture and a younger generation of supporters.[34]

What makes these online communities idiosyncratic lies in their use of chan culture content to relay both ideological precepts and doctrine, and their veneration of oppositional ideologues that either further their primary ideological leanings or integrate into their existing set of "normative beliefs about the world – the way it is and the way it should be."[35] What is not novel within this phenomenon is the use of antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and precepts shared between Salafi-jihadist and RMVE communities.[36] These specific tropes are central to both ideologies and intersect with one another, often using the same language.

Beyond shared antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and precepts, there have been limited instances of cross-over ideological content. Perhaps most relevant to this discussion is the use of limited doctrine and propaganda, originally created by Salafi-jihadists, by RMVE accelerationists. For instance, supporters of the Order of Nine Angles, Attomwaffen Division, and the remnants of the Iron

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[33] For more on chan culture see: Crawford, Blyth. "Chan culture and violent extremism." Global Network on Extremism & Technology. 2019. https://gnet-research.org/2019/12/31/chan-culture-and-violent-extremism-past-present-and-future/.; Keen, Florence, Blyth Crawford, and Guillermo Suarez-Tangil. "Memetic irony and the promotion of violence with chan culture." Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. 2019. https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/memetic-irony-and-the-promotion-of-violence-within-chan-cultures/.

[34] Beale, Stephane J., Lewys Brace, and Travic G. Coan. "Variations on a theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun and other chans' far-right "/pol" boards." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (February 2021): 65-80.

[35] Norris, "Idiosyncratic terrorism."

[36] Vidino, Lorenzo and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens. "Islamist homophobia in the west: from rhetoric to violence." George Washington University Program on Extremism and National Counterterrorism, Innovation, Technology and Education Center. 2022. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/IslamistHomophobiaintheWest090722.pdf.; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, Blyth Crawford, and Valetin Wutke. "Rise of reactionaries: comparing the ideologies of salafi-jihadism and white supremacist extremism." George Washington University Program on Extremism and National Counterterrorism, Innovation, Technology and Education Center. 2021. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Rise%20of%20the%20Reactionaries.pdf.

March forum (known as the "Skull Mask"[37] network) have been known to share Islamic State propaganda. This includes the *Inside the Caliphate* video series which was produced by the Islamic State outlet al-Hayat Media Center in 2018 and detailed how the "media jihad" was a central pillar of support for those who could not "make *hijrah* (travel)" to the Caliphate. Similarly, occultist neo-Nazi accelerationists linked to the Order of Nine Angles have used *fiqh al-dima* (the jurisprudence of blood) as a reference point for committing widespread violence and the use of weapons of mass destruction.[38] These examples build on the historical track record of statements by white supremacists who have long envied Salafi-jihadists' ability to commit spectacular acts of terrorism and even praised jihadists for being "very brave." [39]

Research into the praise for Nazis, and even the adoption of Nazi aesthetics and doctrine, by both Salafis and Shia communities has been scant. Using Norris' idiosyncratic terrorism framework, as well as real-world online case studies in a U.S.-context, the authors have dissected each of the alt-Jihad communities to provide a more robust framework for understanding "mixed, unstable and unclear" ideologies online. What these communities show is that while they may seem outwardly "mixed, unstable or unclear," they are steeped in ideological precepts that long existed before their emergence on the internet and are essentially an extension of "hyper-tribalism" in the modern era.[40]

Neo-Nazi Salafis

While previous research has highlighted the extent to which there is crossover in the use of RMVE aesthetics in young online Salafi communities, the neo-Nazi Salafi communities the authors have analyzed specifically define themselves as "Salafist National Socialists." This fringe community within an already fringe ecosystem has existed since at least August 2021. Unlike other Salafis that pick and choose statements by Adolf Hitler in support of Islam or Muslims to spread antisemitic tropes and assert the cultural supremacy of Islam, this community has produced its own doctrine, promoting an "Aryanist interpretation of Islam." This reflects the ideas of David Myatt, the founder of the occultist neo-Nazi Order of Nine Angles who claimed to have converted to Islam, adopting the kunya 'Abdul-Aziz ibn Myatt' only to leave Islam years later. These communities tend to expound on the history of "Muslim Vikings"

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[37] Upchurch, H.E. "The iron march forum and the evolution of the 'skull mask' neo-fascist network." *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 10 (December 2021). https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-iron-march-forum-and-the-evolution-of-the-skull-mask-neo-fascist-network/.

[38] Townsend, Mark. "The core ISIS manual that twisted Islam to legitimize barbarity." *The Guardian*, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/12/isis-jihadist-manual-analysed-rebutted-by-islamic-scholar.

[39] "Extremist groups react to 9/11." Southern Poverty Law Center. 2001. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2001/extremist-groups-react-911-attacks. Rocky Suhayda the chairman of the American Nazi Party at the time said "[W]hat's wrong with just ACCEPTING the FACT that a HANDFUL of VERY BRAVE PEOPLE were WILLING TO DIE FOR 'WHATEVER' THEY BELIEVED IN ... and DID IT?"

[40] Costa, Christopher P. "Hyper-tribalism and the US domestic terror threat." The Atlantic Council. 2021. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/article/hyper-tribalism-and-the-us-domestic-terrorism-threat/. The author notes "tribalism and accelerationism are two sides of the same coin. A hyper-tribalized United States means that a number of racially motivated extremists on the fringes will inexorably come together as jihadists have for decades, because of a 'fictive kinship' dynamic, whereby many far-right extremists perceive their world is under siege."

and the original Aryans being Iranian despite clear theological differences they may have with Shia Muslims.

While the self-professed neo-Nazi Salafis may partially draw on Myatt and the ideological precepts of the Order of Nine Angles, it is idiosyncratic in the development of its own interpretation of the historical legacy of Islam and its "Aryan underpinnings." This doctrine frames and dictates its content to be a mixture of neo-Nazi tropes and aesthetics as well as Islamic doctrine, interpreted to suit the "mixed" nature of the ideology. Neo-Nazi Salafis shared some 89 memes and 45 meme videos, representing the smallest amount of the overall sample, roughly 1.5% of all the content as depicted in Figure 1. The community similarly had the smallest following of any of the communities analyzed for this paper.

This specific community has a deep animus towards the Order of the Nine Angles despite sharing some of its founding doctrine, and its members have launched Telegram-based raids of channels linked to the Order of the Nine Angles. The administrators of the neo-Nazi Salafis community referred to the Order of Nine Angles as pedophiles, "glowni**ers [redacted]," – a racist internet parlance in RMVE circles for undercover federal agents - and *munafiqeen* (religious hypocrites). By engaging in a conflict over the legitimacy of a "mixed" ideology community, neo-Nazi Salafis were exhibiting idiosyncratic terrorism through the development of their own unique and novel doctrine (despite some linkages to previous iterations of similar doctrine), content, and narratives. This dynamic indicates that neo-Nazi Salafis may fall into the mixed ideological space. However, there are fringe groups that are rejecting the 'traditional' poles of mixed ideological trailblazers and are developing their own idiosyncratic doctrine, content, and narratives. The threat to larger society from neo-Nazi Salafis has yet to be felt, but the ability to maintain their community for several years suggests sustainability of the community while attacking other online communities with larger bases that seem to be, at least on the surface, ideologically aligned.

Neo-Nazi Shia

Like neo-Nazi Salafis, the neo-Nazi Shia communities have developed an idiosyncratic doctrine that goes beyond Nazi Germany, and includes influences from the Iranian SUMKA Party and Zoroastrianism which is often supportive of the former Iranian monarchy. They are by far the largest of the "mixed, unstable, and unclear" ideological communities on Telegram, with 21 channels and some 21,761 subscribers. They propagate their ideology for both American and Iranian audiences, and use both English and Farsi to do so. This online community produced 1,840 memes and 984 meme videos, drawing on both chan culture and neo-Nazi propaganda repurposed for their respective audiences.

The SUMKA Party is the National Socialist Workers Party founded in Iran by Davud Monshizadeh, allegedly supported by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).[41] The SUMKA Party of the past has an outsized role in the digital SUMKA ecosystem of today. Its philosophy views Persians as the original

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[41] Rahnema, Ali. "Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers and Spooks." Cambridge University Press. Cambridge: 2015.

Aryans and reveres the former Shah of Iran. Some members of the Shah's government attended SUMKA events during its heyday. Neo-Nazi Shia doctrine claims that they are descendants of the 'original people,' or 'authentic Aryans,' as they sometimes call themselves. Their ancestors, they believe, created numbers, mathematics, and science, and built the first great civilizations upon which modern society now stands. According to the neo-Nazi Shia narrative, these storied legacies were ultimately destroyed by an alliance of neo-liberal democracies hellbent on keeping their countries and countrymen under the "imperial" thumbs of neo-liberal democracies. This neo-liberal threat, in their eyes, has now infected their countries' civil society and civic activists and must be fought.

The Third Reich and revivalism are central pillars of SUMKA ideology. The SUMKA Party has adopted its own Swastika-like symbol which delineates it from other regional Nazi groups. Much of the propaganda used by supporters of SUMKA is of a historical nature, and they use this to cloak their true intentions. By claiming to be historically linked, the neo-Nazi Shia communities use the legacy of the Third Reich to fawn over ideologues such as Hitler, Goebbels, and Himmler on popular platforms such as Facebook or YouTube and use Telegram to organize and build out their communities. The idiosyncratic nature of this community lies in its support for the security services of Iran despite their linkages and patronage to the theocratic regime which some within the community identify with and others eschew because of the overtly religious nature of the state. Therein lies another set of idiosyncratic behaviors, where primary allegiances are linked to the power and mythology of the Iranian state but are also fused with indigenous Nazi beliefs.

Chan-Iran-backed Militias

Young supporters of Iran-backed militias and the Islamic Republic have developed their own ecosystem of alt-right-infused aesthetics which draw on racist tropes of Arabs, as well as sectarian tropes of Sunnism, often attacking Salafis due to the latter. Central to this online community is the use of chan culture to venerate its heroes as well as attack its enemies. At the heart of this community is support for the Iranian regime, but also regional allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, often creating bespoke media, such as "Assadwave," in the process.

This community produced 1,756 memes and 1,200 meme videos during the two-year timespan of the analysis. Its terrorist idiosyncrasies stem from the use of aesthetics and narratives that tie in regional geopolitics linked to Iran and Iran-backed militias with chan culture tropes around "Sunni cucks" and support for Hitler for orchestrating the Holocaust. Part and parcel of this community is fervent support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad because he has outlasted his detractors. One of the key content-based idiosyncrasies of this community is the likening of Sunnis to Jews, based on fervent antisemitism but also anti-Arab sentiment and recent geopolitical events that include the diplomatic thaw and economic ties forged between Gulf states and Israel.

Within this online community, Qasem Soleimani, the former Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps leader who was killed in a drone strike in Iraq, is considered a "chad," or in non-chan culture parlance, an

alpha male. Soleimani is not just venerated, his actions and words are considered in many respects as central to the survival of the Iranian theocracy in the face of Western liberal hegemony. This trope is not only imbued with chan culture aesthetics, but also has crossover in far-left circles which similarly venerate the legacy of Soleimani, illustrating a unique element of this sub-culture and its ability to draw on both far-right and far-left tropes to further its reach online.

Alt-Islamic State

As previous research by the authors into online Gen Z Salafi communities indicated, support for the Islamic State in these digital ecosystems is rife with contradictions. The Islamic State's violence was applauded by alt-Islamic State supporters, but the ideological precepts were often rejected, highlighting an internal idiosyncrasy that exists within these communities. Much of the content — 1,727 memes and meme videos — supportive of the Islamic State was infused with RMVE aesthetics and included genres of content such as 'dawlawave,' the production of Islamic State content influenced by 'fashwave' which is an online aesthetic used by modern fascists and white nationalists. The Islamic State's content was similarly extended to meme characters that, while not beginning as RMVE symbols, have become so, such as Wojacks and Pepe the Frog.

Idiosyncratic content in support of the punishments for Shia and LBGTQ+ community members was the most prevalent within this sub-community of support for the Islamic State. By mixing what has been demarcated as RMVE aesthetics and discourse with support for the Islamic State, supporters in the alt-Islamic State community were infusing two surface-level oppositional forces. However, on closer review of the narratives, the alignment between chan culture and its denigration of feminists and those within the LBGTQ+ community forms a mutual foundational series of precepts for support within both the alt-right and the Islamic State. The ability of a younger generation of supporters to take these elements and blend them into content highlights an element of strategic thinking that seeks to unite disparate forces in the face of "common enemies."

The content itself, due to its idiosyncratic nature, involves inherently weird mashups which can then be argued forms a 'LARP' genre. As demonstrated in the cases of U.S. terrorism analyzed earlier, content as a form of 'LARP' is a central claim of those intermingling RMVE precepts, content, and discourse with Islamic State support. Similarly, many supporters of these communities inhabit digital spaces used by supporters of RMVE causes alongside well-established Salafi-jihadists' digital spaces. This means the language, ideological precepts, and strategic thinking of both groups inherently influence the other. Illustrating another idiosyncratic dimension of this online alt-Islamic State community is the adoption of *takfir* principles of labeling others, specifically enemies of these movements, as pedophiles - which itself has been stripped from conspiracy communities such as QAnon in the United States.[42] Thus*,* while the

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[42] Takfir refers to the "pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (kafir) and no longer Muslim. Takfir is used in the modern era for sanctioning violence against leaders of Islamic states who are deemed insufficiently religious."
https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803101936564?rskey=fKcydq&result=8.

content is inherently idiosyncratic, it builds on a continuum of content production that has been at play across numerous online groups and movements.

Alt-Qaeda

Support for al-Qaeda in the dataset was less of an alignment with the precepts of the ideological components central to the group, and more about their ideologues, such as Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki. These prominent ideologues were featured in 803 collected memes and 554 meme videos and often referenced them as 'alpha males,' language and imagery stripped from red pill communities within the alt-right milieu.[43] The now-deceased Aymenn al-Zawahiri was non-existent in this dataset, illustrating a clear divide in support between ideologues viewed as charismatic and those seen as the Salafi-jihadist equivalent of bureaucrats.

The content of this community was idiosyncratic for its use of music, such as trap rap genres to animate historical footage of bin Laden and the occasional juxtaposition of bin Laden and al-Awlaki with meme characters such as Gigachad and Trollface. These characters would be overlaid on both ideologues' bodies and used to illustrate the ultimate troll they perpetrated, namely terror attacks on the West.

Unlike the Islamic State, bin Laden was viewed favorably by all the communities in the study except for neo-Nazi Shia and alt-Iran-backed militia supporters. Despite those communities' idiosyncratic support for anyone or any organization that violently attacked the West, bin Laden and al-Awlaki were still seen with disdain and scorn online. What ultimately differentiated alt-Qaeda from traditional supporters of al-Qaeda online was its use of RMVE aesthetics. Alt-Qaeda content producers, due to their focus on ideologues rather than the group message or operations, were more likely to get widespread support from other Salafi-jihadist channels by mixing their content and discourse with that of RMVEs. This strategic positioning illustrates an idiosyncratic understanding of online extremist affinities as well as the current state of play within al-Qaeda itself. With no "charismatic" leadership at the helm, supporters have taken to the outsized influence of its legacy ideologues, imbuing them with mythical powers.

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[43] "The 'Red Pill,' a term that comes from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, has become a framework for individuals to describe their awakening to some previously hidden supposed reality. The major contemporary secular male supremacist movements—PUAs, men's rights activists, The Red Pill, and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)—all use this terminology to describe their "realization" that men do not hold systemic power or privilege." Kelly, Megan, Alex DiBranco, and Dr. Julia R. DeCook. "Misogynist incels and male supremacism." New America. 2021. https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/misogynist-incels-and-male-supremacism/.

Table 1. The Norris framework for "idiosyncratic terrorism" used by the authors to code the content and narratives created by "mixed, unstable and unclear" ideology communities online.

		neo-Nazi Salafis	neo-Nazi Shia	chan-Iran-backed militias	alt-Islamic State	alt-Qaeda
Terrorism Type	Group-based	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	Lone-actor	✅	❌	✅	✅	✅
Dimensions of Idiosyncrasies	Ideology	✅	✅	❌	✅	❌
	Tactics	❌	✅	✅	✅	✅
	Strategic thinking	❌	✅	✅	✅	✅
	Motives	✅	❌	✅	✅	❌
Sources of Idiosyncrasies	Doctrine	✅	❌	❌	❌	❌
	Content	✅	✅	✅	✅	✅
	Narratives	✅	✅	✅	✅	❌

Conspiracy Theory Extremism and Violence

Within the evolving landscape of modern idiosyncratic extremism and terrorism, the mixing of Islamist ideologies with RMVE ideas and aesthetics is occurring alongside the growth of conspiracy theory extremism, violence, and terrorism. Our findings suggest that conspiracy theories alone can act as direct motivation for violence without the need for a clear or coherent ideology or political program. All that is needed is a deep distrust of authority or wider society, a theory or set of theories that identify an impending threat, and the adherent's belief that the theory's threat is either ignored or rejected by a misled mainstream majority. This lack of clear ideological influence also means that some of the more popular extremist conspiracy theories can be adopted by a range of ideological actors and adapted to fit within their pre-existing ideology. As this section will demonstrate, the violence and other criminal acts committed by conspiracy extremists in the U.S. differs from what is traditionally understood as terrorism, yet it ultimately poses a similar threat that should concern counterterrorism authorities.

Standalone conspiracy-driven attacks, such as those the FBI warned of in 2019, are arguably more difficult to identify or prevent than other categories of extremist violence and should be categorized as "mixed or unclear ideology" attacks. Calling their motivations ideological may, however, be overstating the case. These acts of violence are the result of the attacker's embrace of one or a collection of fringe conspiratorial views surrounding major events, such as the election and attempted re-election of Donald Trump or the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Sunstein and Vermuele, conspiracy theories are "an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)."[44] Butter and Knight also write that conspiracy theories "assume that everything has been planned and nothing happens by coincidence; they divide the world strictly into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot; and they claim that the conspiracy works in secret and does not reveal itself even after it has reached its goals. […] nothing happens by accident; nothing is as it seems; and everything is connected."[45] Beyond this shared view of how the world works, conspiracy theories alone generally lack ideological coherence.

For many terrorist movements, a conspiracy theory acts as the diagnostic component of a coherent ideology – it identifies the causes of the perceived ills of their in-group and who is to blame. The Great Replacement and War on Islam, for example, are conspiracy theories that drive the two most deadly terrorist movements in the West today. However, reducing RMVE and Salafi jihadism to conspiracy theories overlooks the wider ideologies and political programs which these movements and their followers pursue. Unlike fully-fledged extremist ideologies which inspire violence, the conspiracy theories which have begun to inspire an identifiable category of modern extremists in the U.S. are rarely

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[44] Sunstein, Cass R. and Adrian Vermeule. "Conspiracy Theories." Chicago Unbound. 2008, 205. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1118&context=law_and_economics.
[45] Butter, Michael and Peter Knight. "Introduction." In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

coherent and do not offer a clear or detailed political program designed to transform or improve society, nor a direct call for violence.

While the conspiracy theories covered in this study are not attached to a coherent ideology, or system of ideas based on any clear or recognized political theory, they often mix with and reinforce wider right-wing concerns. The ideas and claims which drive conspiracy theories can be loosely described as right-wing due to their interest in "preserving" certain social structures, and the distrust of supposed liberal left-leaning authorities in science, media, and government. While there remains some debate around this, research on the political leanings of people who believe in conspiracy theories suggests that those on the right of the political spectrum are more likely to endorse and believe in conspiracy theories.[46] Research inspired by Richard Hofstadter's claims that conspiratorial thinking in the U.S. is usually found "among extreme right-wingers," for example, has suggested that political conservatism "was strongly and positively associated with…conspiratorial thinking" and distrust of officialdom.[47]

Lacking a clear ideology beyond loose connections to right-wing thinking, many people in the U.S. who commit acts of violence or criminality in the name of a standalone conspiracy theory are motivated by a moral crusade combined with distrust of authority, especially during times of perceived uncertainty and crisis.[48] Conspiracy theories act as an explanation for the problems or crises these individuals or their communities face. In offering explanations for often disturbing or confusing events, conspiracy theories can provide people with a much sought-after sense of control over an inherently chaotic world.[49] Violence, an ultimate act of taking control, is conducted as a direct response and solution, rather than to further a clear set of political goals or an alternative political system. The attacks are usually aimed at directly investigating, uncovering, or stopping the conspiracy the attacker has come to believe. Thus, while terrorism is traditionally understood as an act of symbolic political and revolutionary violence, this form of conspiracy-theory-driven violence is often more utilitarian than symbolic.[50]

The last decade has seen the emergence of conspiracy theory violence and criminality in the U.S. inspired by a collection of conspiracy theories related to the QAnon movement. QAnon is described by Amarasingham and Argentino as a "bizarre assemblage of far-right conspiracy theories" which are centered around the claim that Donald Trump is leading a "secret war against an international cabal of

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[46] Thorisdottir, Hulda, Silvia Mari, and Adre Krouwel. "Political ideology and political behaviour." In Michael Butter and Peter Knight (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Routledge, 2020: 308-313.

[47] Van der Linden, Sander, Costas Panagopoulos, Flávio Azevedo, and John T. Jost. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics Revisited: An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking." *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1 (February 2021). https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12681.

[48] van Prooijen, Jan-Willem and Nils B. Jostmann. Belief in conspiracy theories: The influence of uncertainty and perceived morality. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 43, no. 1 *(February 2013):* 109–115.

[49] Srol, Jakub, Vladimira Cavojová, and Eva Ballová Mikusková. "Finding Someone to Blame: The Link Between COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs, Prejudice, Support for Violence, and Other Negative Social Outcomes." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (January 2022). https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.726076/full.

[50] For more on terrorism as propaganda see: Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.; Schmid, Alex. "Terrorism as Psychological Warfare." *Democracy and Security* 1, no. 2 (August-December 2005): 137-146.

satanic pedophiles" often referred to as the "deep state."[51] It is often referred to as a far-right conspiracy movement due to its emergence in right-wing, anti-liberal online circles, and its dissemination of anti-migrant, antisemitic, and homophobic right-wing tropes.[52] Due to its lack of a clear ideology, however, it has attracted a wider range of often apolitical and esoteric left-leaning followers who reject mainstream thinking on a range of topics, including science, health, and medicine, and who often follow pseudoscientific beliefs or embrace various forms of fringe spiritualism.[53] QAnon's focus on child trafficking and hijacking of slogans such as "Save the Children" has also led online groups of concerned parents, especially mothers, to embrace the QAnon movement in the belief that it is the only way to protect children.[54] Thus, the QAnon movement has attracted and mobilized a range of conspiracy theorists and 'alternative thinkers' whose existence predates QAnon's emergence as a "big tent conspiracy," successfully subsuming several long-standing conspiracy claims.[55] While people have long committed acts of violence or criminality based on fantastical conspiracy beliefs, QAnon may now be acting as a focal point around which they can bolster their beliefs and build communities.

The relative urgency of this issue is also reflected in the findings of the second database relied on for this study which tracks recent acts of conspiracy-driven violence and criminality in the U.S. The database collection dates run from the 4 December 2016 "Pizzagate" attack to December 2022. It only includes individuals who committed an act of violence or criminality that was inspired directly by a conspiracy theory, but who are not connected to any known extremist or terrorist groups and movements. The conspiracy claims that have inspired violence and criminality in the U.S. over the last six years are almost all linked to beliefs about ongoing or imminent threats to children, and an existential threat to the freedom and lives of American citizens emanating from official responses to the pandemic and the 2020 presidential election.

One of the first incidents, and a watershed moment for violence related to conspiracy extremism in the U.S., was a 2016 attack on a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. inspired by the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory. The authors have found that since the 2016 Pizzagate attack there have been at least 52 incidents in the U.S. where an individual planned, conducted, or threatened violence or engaged in criminality based on beliefs derived from one or more conspiracy theories now commonly linked to QAnon.[56] The majority of these cases (19) involve individuals directly motivated by child abuse

[51] Amarasingam, Amarnath and Marc-André Argentino. "The QAnon conspiracy theory: A security threat in the making?" *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 7 (2020): 37–44. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making/.

[52] "QAnon." Anti-Defamation League. Published May 4, 2020. Last updated October 28, 2022. https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/qanon.

[53] Argentino, Marc-André. "Pastel QAnon." Global Network on Extremism & Technology. March 17, 2021. https://gnet-research.org/2021/03/17/pastel-qanon/.; Bleakley, Paul. "Panic, pizza and mainstreaming the alt-right: A social media analysis of Pizzagate and the rise of the QAnon conspiracy." *Current Sociology* (July 2021). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00113921211034896.

[54] Benton, Bond and Daniela Peterka-Benton. "Truth as a Victim: The challenge anti-trafficking education in the age of Q." *Anti-Trafficking Review* 17 (2021): 113-131. https://www.antitraffickingreview.org/index.php/atrjournal/article/view/579/436.

[55] Zuckerman, Ethan. "QAnon and the emergence of the unreal." *Journal of Design and Science* 6 (July 2019). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335026905_QAnon_and_the_Emergence_of_the_Unreal.

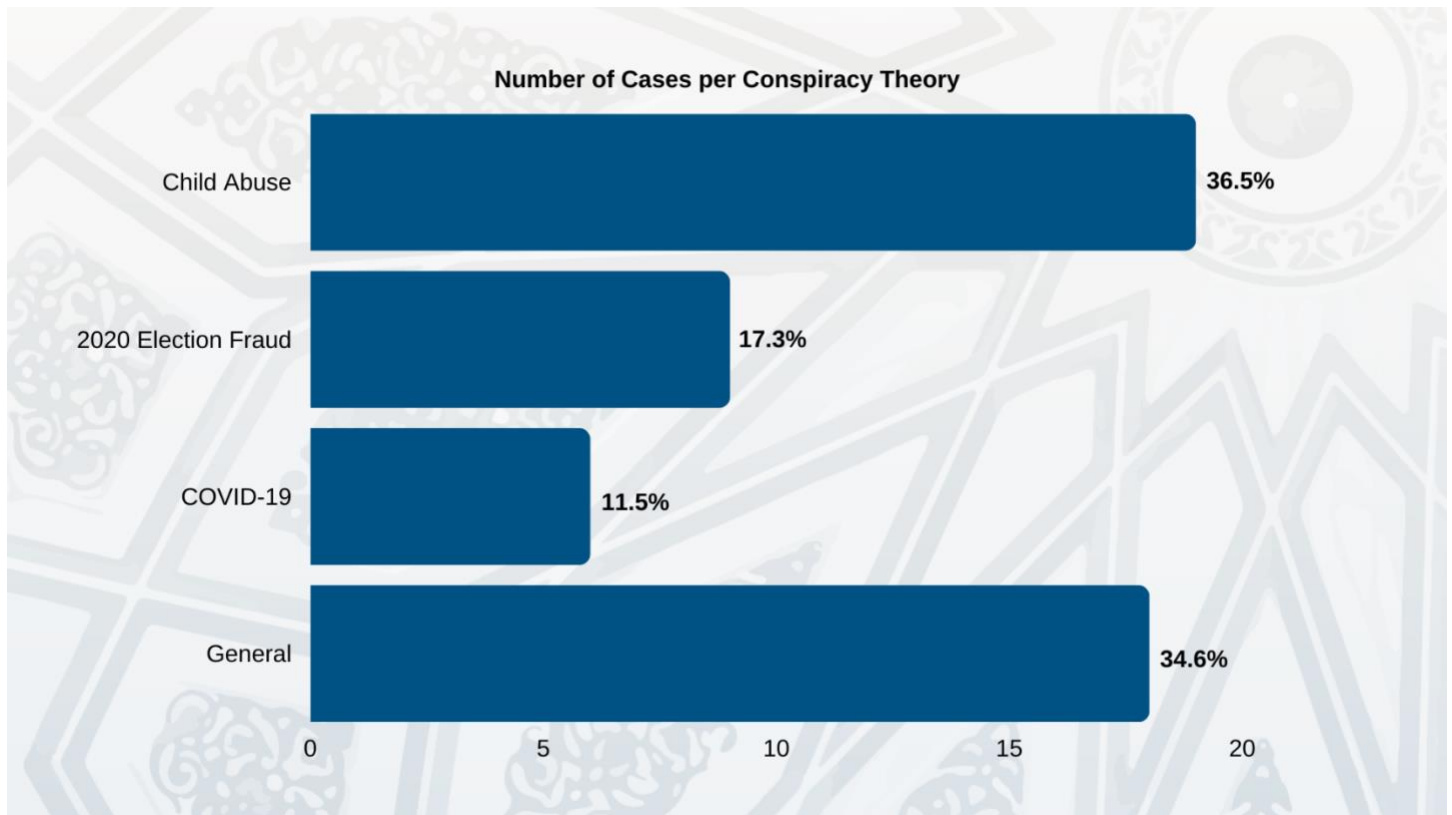[56] This number included the Pizzagate attack.

claims. A further nine were inspired by a belief that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump by the deep state, and six were linked to reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and official measures to mitigate the public health crisis. The remaining 18 were driven by general conspiratorial paranoia towards the government or established systems, which in some cases, was also linked to QAnon.

In 16 of the cases, there are suggestions or confirmed reports that the individual in question suffered from some form of mental illness. In two of these, the individuals were found mentally unfit to stand trial.[57] However, these 16 cases have all still been included because of the likelihood that these individuals' illnesses only led to violence or criminality after being introduced to online conspiracy fantasies which exacerbated, and perhaps confirmed, their pre-existing delusions. Multiple studies have already demonstrated that belief in conspiracy theories can be associated with personality disorders, including those associated with schizophrenia, paranoia, and paranoid ideation.[58] The existence and increased availability of these paranoid conspiracy theories may act as triggers for emotionally vulnerable individuals, provide a framework for them to make sense of their delusions, and help them identify specific targets to blame. In any event, the conspiracy belief had an undeniable influence on the actions and choice of target in these cases.

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[57] The conditions for determining the mental fitness of a person to stand trial vary from state to state.

[58] Furnham, Adrian and Simmy Grover. "Do you have to be mad to believe in conspiracy theories? Personality disorders and conspiracy theories." *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 68, no. 7 (July 9, 2021). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00207640211031614?casa_token=_GAn3VbJFUMAAAAA%3AplF4e7qPC mR2X5P060jFjO7BDsucVeopBeAFtfYdhlAJJltyqaTwh8-0brJkUQT6c7aIcVA6W51eEA; Bruder, Martin, Peter Haffke, Nick Neave, Nina Nouripanah, and Roland Imhoff. "Measuring individual differences in generic beliefs in conspiracy theories across cultures: conspiracy mentality questionnaire." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (April 2018): 225. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225/full.;
Darwin, Hannah, Nick Neave, and Joni Holmes. "Belief in conspiracy theories. The role of paranormal belief, paranoid ideation and schizotypy." *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 8 (June 2011): 1289–1293.

Figure 2. Motivations of individuals involved in conspiracy-inspired terrorism, violence, and criminality from the dataset.

Number of Cases per Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy Theory	Percentage
Child Abuse	36.5%
2020 Election Fraud	17.3%
COVID-19	11.5%
General	34.6%

Threats to Children

Violence and criminality related to a belief in the existence of satanic pedophile rings represent most of the cases in the dataset. Before analyzing the cases, it is important to first offer some context to these beliefs and their roots in American history. QAnon emerged from a pre-existing conspiracy claim about satanic child abuse amongst political elites, "Pizzagate." As modern U.S. politics entered one of its most tumultuous phases during the 2016 presidential election, a claim was invented in online right-wing circles before the election that alleged Donald Trump's opponent, Hillary Clinton, and other senior Democrats were involved in satanic ritual abuse and a child sex trafficking ring. The primary goal of this abuse was to harvest and consume adrenochrome, believed to have life-extending qualities, from the blood of children.[59] One of the headquarters of this alleged cabal was identified as a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C. This identification of a specific, unguarded, and therefore vulnerable, location played a role in encouraging the emergence of a new form of conspiracy-driven violence in the U.S. In late 2016, Edgar Maddison Welch fired three shots from his AR-15 rifle at the front of the restaurant as part of his attempt to "self-investigate" the location and rescue the children he believed were being held

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[59] Bleakley, "Panic, pizza and mainstreaming the alt-right."

there. This was the first of three attacks or threats aimed at pizza restaurants thought to be part of the pedophile ring.

The core themes of distrust in an establishment bent on enslaving humanity and secret ritualistic child abuse have proven popular among American conspiracy theorists for generations.[60] In this sense, the roots of the QAnon claims are not new but have been repackaged for the current era. The paranoid belief in a secret cabal of elites taking away rights or otherwise harming ordinary citizens has been a building block of American conspiracy thinking since it was first identified and analyzed by scholars like Richard Hofstadter. Hofstadter dates this type of thinking to the late 1700s and links it to Christian fears of Freemasons, Jews, and Catholics.[61] Some scholars date American conspiracism back even further. Michael Butter argues that European Puritan colonists from the 16th century brought their "conspiracist suspicions" with them, inspired by their beliefs in a "cosmic struggle between God and the devil."[62] This form of Christian dualism is prone to conspiratorial thinking, which itself is based on a view of human events and history as shaped by a simplistic struggle between hidden and powerful evil forces, and good, often weaker, victims.[63]

This is also relevant to the often-overlooked Christian evangelical roots of modern QAnon beliefs that can be directly linked to Christian dualism, long-standing Christian fundamentalist moral panics about Satanists and the ritual abuse of children.[64] The child blood ritual myth is rooted in medieval antisemitic tropes related to the "blood-libel," and has survived and evolved as a trope for conspiracists ever since. This includes a form of Christian activism seen in the U.S. since at least the 1980s, during which the first modern "satanic panic" about the abuse of children in daycare centers by Satanists took place.[65] In this sense, current QAnon claims about child abuse are a variation of a theme that runs deep in the history of American conspiracy thinking, with strong links to Christian evangelical fundamentalism.[66]

While it has most recently been used to serve the political purpose of attacking prominent Democrats to help Donald Trump's presidential campaign, the threat to children from Satanists has a deeper moral crusading component. It is hard to ignore the inherently Christian fundamentalist roots and nature of these claims. In the U.S. in particular, antisemitic accusations of Jewish blood libel killings of Christian children and satanic ritualistic rapes of children emerge from, and are commonly associated with, right-

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[60] Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Harper's. November 1964.; Best, Joel, David G. Bromley, and James T. Richardson. *The Satanism Scare.* New York: Routledge, 1991.; Frankfurter, David. *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Ritual Abuse in History.* United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2008.

[61] Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Harper's. November 1964.

[62] Butter, Michael. "Conspiracy Theories in American History." In Michael Butter and Peter Knight (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories.* New York: Routledge, 2020: 649.

[63] Silva, Bruno Castanho, Federico Vegetti, and Levente Littvay. "The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 4. (December 2017): 423-443.; Vrzal, Miroslav. "QAnon as a Variation of a Satanic Conspiracy Theory: an Overview." *Theory and Practice in English Studies* 9, no. 1-2. (2020): 45-66. https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/handle/11222.digilib/143485.

[64] Miroslav, "QAnon as a Variation of a Satanic Conspiracy Theory: an Overview."; Victor, Jeffrey S. "The Satanic Cult Scare and Allegations of Ritual Child Abuse." *Institute for Psychological Therapies* 3 (1991). http://www.ipt-forensics.com/journal/volume3/j3_3_1.htm.

[65] Victor, "The Satanic Cult Scare and Allegations of Ritual Child Abuse."

[66] Miroslav, "QAnon as a Variation of a Satanic Conspiracy Theory: an Overview."

wing Christian fundamentalist groups and movements.[67] Surveys and other studies have shown that American evangelical Christians today are especially open to conspiracy theories. In 2021, the American Enterprise Institute found that 29% of white evangelicals in the U.S. believed that Donald Trump was secretly fighting against a cabal of Democratic and Hollywood elite child sex traffickers.[68] A majority also believed in QAnon's claims about the existence of a deep state working against Trump and the interests of the American people.[69]

This has important implications for research and policy on extremism and political violence in the U.S. While these violent and criminal actors may not all be traditional church-going Christians, they have been influenced by components of American Christian fundamentalism that, in turn, influence their belief in conspiracy theories. The role this worldview plays in motivating acts of violence and criminality should receive more scholarly attention. In addition, policy related to countering violent extremism (CVE) work may need to consider a more systematic focus on these elements of Christian fundamentalism, and how their appeal to conspiratorial thinking may be reduced. Importantly, this is not only a concern in the United States. In Australia in December 2022, two police officers were killed and another injured in what the government described as a religiously motivated Christian fundamentalist terrorist attack. The three perpetrators were family members who believed in the impending coming of Christ and were engaged in online conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic, vaccines, and anti-government sentiment.[70] They were also in contact with an influential American conspiracist in Arizona, to whom they sent an online message following the murders.[71]

Given the emotions that stories of child abuse can provoke even among mainstream and stable individuals, it is unsurprising that extremist violence and criminality related to a belief in the existence of satanic pedophile rings represents the majority of cases in the dataset. These cases can be further divided into two sub-categories: acts by individuals targeting people or places they have associated with the conspiracy, and acts by people who believe the only way to protect their children from abuse is to kill them.

The most notorious example of the first sub-category remains the 2016 Pizzagate attack by Edgar Welch cited earlier. This inspired at least two other incidents, including an arson attack on the same restaurant by Ryan Jaselskis. In January 2019, Jaselskis entered the restaurant carrying lighter fluid that he used to douse a set of curtains before setting them on fire to burn the building down with no

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[67] Victor, "The Satanic Cult Scare and Allegations of Ritual Child Abuse."

[68] Cox, Daniel A. "Rise of Conspiracies Reveals an Evangelical Divide in the GOP." American Enterprise Institute. February 12, 2021. https://www.aei.org/articles/rise-of-conspiracies-reveals-an-evangelical-divide-in-the-gop/.

[69] *Ibid.*

[70] Hinchliffe, Joe. "Wieambilla shootings labelled Australia's first Christian terrorist attack." *The Guardian*, February 16, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/feb/16/wieambilla-shootings-australia-christian-terrorist-attack-queensland-police.

[71] McGowan, Michael and Eden Gillespie. "US religious conspiracist linked to Queensland police killers Gareth and Stacey Train." *The Guardian*, December 16, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/dec/16/us-religious-conspiracist-linked-to-queensland-police-killers-gareth-and-stacey-train.

concern for the customers and staff who witnessed inside. An hour earlier, he posted a Pizzagate-inspired video on his parents' YouTube page.[72]

In other cases, parents assaulted or killed people they believed to be part of the pedophile cabal and planning to take their children. In March 2020, Neely Petrie-Blanchard allegedly kidnapped her twin daughters who were in the legal custody of her mother. A QAnon follower, Petrie-Blanchard sought advice from Christopher Hallett who ran a sovereign citizen-influenced legal organization called E-Clause that offered help to citizens facing legal action from the government.[73] She was arrested soon after the kidnap plot in a hideout that was reportedly provided by a group of sovereign citizens. While out on bail she continued to receive advice from Hallett on how to recover custody of her children, whom she had come to believe were being held as part of a government conspiracy to traffic children. However, as Hallett repeatedly failed to win any cases on her behalf, she grew increasingly suspicious that he was a Satanist and secretly involved in trafficking children. Finally, in November 2020, she shot and killed Hallett while at his Florida home discussing the case and, according to police records, claimed he was part of a conspiracy to steal her children.[74] Other less violent examples from this category include Sean Case McGinley who was charged in February 2021 with interstate threats involving explosives after he made bomb threats to three schools and a hospital in Oregon which he believed were involved in a child sex ring.[75]

The second sub-category, parents who kill or otherwise harm their own children to protect them from abuse, is the most complicated and difficult to explain. The killing of family members of course predates QAnon and is not usually associated with conspiracy beliefs. A mother killing her children is also often associated with mental health crises related to post-partum depression. There are two cases of this in the dataset. One of these is from April 2021, when Liliana Carrillo, who reportedly suffered from post-partum depression, killed her three children to protect them from being "further abused."[76] Speaking to a news reporter from her jail cell, she added that she "prefer them not being tortured and abused on a

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[72] Zadrozny, Brandy and Ben Collins. "'Pizzagate' video was posted to YouTube account of alleged arsonist's parents before fire." *NBC News*, February 14, 2019. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/pizzagate-conspiracy-video-posted-youtube-account-alleged-arsonist-s-parents-n971891.

[73] For details on the Sovereign Citizen movement see: "Sovereign Citizens Movement." Southern Poverty Law Center. Accessed March 16, 2023. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/sovereign-citizens-movement.

[74] Wells, Georgia and Justin Scheck. "How a Custody Fight Plus QAnon Turned Deadly." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 2, 2021. https://www.wsj.com/articles/when-online-conspiracies-turn-deadly-a-custody-battle-and-a-killing-11617376764; Sommer, Will. "QAnon Promotes Pedo-Ring Conspiracy Theories. Now They're Stealing Kids." *The Daily Beast*, August 16, 2020. https://www.thedailybeast.com/qanon-promotes-pedo-ring-conspiracy-theories-now-theyre-stealing-kids.; Anderson, Curt. "Police: Florida man who questioned government powers slain." *AP News*, November 17, 2020. https://apnews.com/article/georgia-ocala-florida-arrests-shootings-66b87bf526619674e3fcf5d40123d6cd.

[75] "Local Man Faces Federal Charges for Hoax Bomb Threats Directed at Multiple Schools and a Hospital." Department of Justice Press Release. December 2, 2021. https://www.justice.gov/usao-or/pr/local-man-faces-federal-charges-hoax-bomb-threats-directed-multiple-schools-and-hospital.

[76] Hamilton, Matt and Richard Winton. "Mother unravelled in depression, QAnon-style conspiracies in months before she killed 3 kids." Los Angeles Times. April 17, 2021. https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-04-17/mother-unraveled-in-depression-qanon-style-conspiracies-in-months-before-she-killed-3-kids.

regular basis for the rest of their life."[77] Her online activity before the murders showed that she had come to believe that the town of Porterville, California was at the center of a child sex trafficking ring.

One of the most infamous cases in the second sub-category is that of Matthew Taylor Coleman, a QAnon follower who in 2021 took his two children to Mexico and killed them, later claiming he did it to prevent his children from "growing into monsters" because they inherited their mother's reptilian DNA. Belief in a cabal of lizard people who run the world is a long-standing conspiracy theory developed by British conspiracy propagandist David Icke that some QAnon followers have also adopted. Similar to other cases like this, it has been reported that Coleman likely suffered from an undiagnosed mental illness.[78]

This type of paranoid delusion associated with parents who kill their children may mean that such cases could be excluded from the dataset and explained simply as acts of mentally ill people. However, they have been included because of the possibility that the illnesses suffered by these parents only led to murder when they encountered online conspiracy fantasies which exacerbated, and perhaps, confirmed their pre-existing delusions. Thus, the existence and increased availability of these ideas may act as triggers for emotionally vulnerable individuals, and act as a framework for them to attach their delusions, make sense of them, and help them identify specific targets to blame. Studies have shown that belief in conspiracy theories can be associated with personality disorders including those associated with schizophrenia, paranoia, and paranoid ideation. Lessons can also be taken here from the literature on "family annihilators" which provides some insight into why men kill their own children. In the most extensive study on the topic, family annihilators were divided into four categories, one of which is the "paranoid killer" who kills family members to protect them from a perceived threat.[79]

Stolen Election

During the build-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election and its aftermath, one claim that was added to the QAnon conspiracy theory was that the election results were rigged against Donald Trump. Claims of a "stolen election," legitimized and perpetuated by Trump himself, have animated a range of actors from fringe conspiracy theorists to Republican elected officials. Despite its seemingly modern nature, this claim too is a variation of a long-standing right-wing trope of American conspiracism related to the idea that the control of the country is being taken away from those who believe they are its rightful owners. This sense of dispossession, combined with extreme notions of an urgent and existential threat emanating from a secretive cabal who have infiltrated American democracy, has unsurprisingly acted as a trigger for some QAnon followers and other anti-government conspiracists to respond with violence or criminality.

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[77] Stallworth, L. "'I drowned them': Reseda mother says she killed her 3 young children to protect them from their father". ABC News. April 18, 2021. https://abc7.com/mother-reseda-drowned-children/10519583/.

[78] Gilbert, David. "A Year After QAnon Surfer Killed His Kids, Members of His Church Fear More Violence." *VICE News*, August 15, 2022. https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvmjzq/matthew-taylor-coleman-santa-barbara-qanon.

[79] "Characteristics of family killers revealed by first classification study." Birmingham City University. Last Updated August 22, 2013. https://www.bcu.ac.uk/news-events/news/characteristics-of-family-killers-revealed-by-first-classification-study.

The most egregious example of the power of these claims to inspire violence is the January 6th, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. by a mix of anti-government militias and conspiracy theorists. While the most organized, dangerous, and violent components of this mob were made up of members of militias liks the Oath Keepers, QAnon followers have also been charged and/or convicted for their involvement.[80] This group of QAnon followers is not included in the data for this study as they are being treated as part of a single mass event.

Stolen election claims have inspired at least nine Americans to carry out attacks or other criminal acts aimed at either overturning the election result, preventing the certification of the election, or investigating supposed election fraud they believe was carried out by the deep state during the election. This includes a former police captain, Mark Anthony Aguirre, who became convinced that an air conditioning repair man was using the job as a cover to commit voter fraud during the postal ballot period of the 2020 presidential election. Aguirre began investigating the repair man and concluded after days of surveillance that he was committing voter fraud by collecting 750,000 mail-in ballots from Hispanic children and keeping them in his work van. In October 2020, Aguirre rammed his truck into the repairman's van and held him at gunpoint before physically restraining him. There was no evidence of voter fraud, and no ballots were found in the van.[81]

Aguirre's investigation was funded by a Christian organization devoted to voting fraud claims called the Liberty Centre for God and Country. Its website states that: "We believe in restoring our nation's Godly heritage and following the strategy that our pilgrim forefathers, gave us, which is to love God, and to place our hope and faith in the God of the Bible and His Word, and in the Lord Jesus Christ."[82] The group also claims that "civil law must be derived from God's law." The Liberty Center reportedly provided Aguirre with a total of $266,400, including $211,400 one day after the attack.[83]

Two years after Aguirre's attack, one of the heads of the Liberty Center, Steven Hotze, was charged in connection with funding Aguirre's actions because of his knowledge of Aguirre's intent to commit the offense. A transcript of a phone call involving Hotze two days before the attack alleges that Hotze said: "We've surveilled them for the last two nights and still…Mark Aguirre, he said he wants to capture them when they bring (the ballots) out and leave tonight to deliver them but he needs a federal marshal with him…In fact, (Aguirre) told me last night, hell, I'm gonna have, the guy's gonna have a wreck tomorrow. I'm going to run into him and I'm gonna make a citizen's arrest."[84]

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80 "'This is Our House!': A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Siege Participants." George Washington University Program on Extremism. March 2021. https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/This-Is-Our-House.pdf.

81 Luperon, Alberto. "Ex-Police Captain Indicted for Holding Man at Gunpoint Under False Belief That 'Hispanic Children' Signed 750,000 Fake Ballots." *Law & Crime*, December 15, 2021. https://lawandcrime.com/crime/ex-police-captain-indicted-for-holding-man-at-gunpoint-under-false-belief-that-hispanic-children-signed-750000-fake-ballots/.

82 Liberty Center: For God & Country. Accessed March 16, 2023. https://libertycgc.com/.

83 Luperon, "Ex-Police Captain Indicted for Holding Man at Gunpoint Under False Belief That 'Hispanic Children' Signed 750,000 Fake Ballots."

84 McGuinness, Dylan. "Hotze discussed plan to cause wreck, make 'citizen's arrest' of A/C repairman, transcript shows." *Houston Chronicle*, May 6, 2022. https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/houston/article/In-transcript-Hotze-tells-then-U-S-attorney-17155001.php.

Other individuals have allegedly attempted to investigate voter fraud by illegally tampering with or accessing electronic voting machines which conspiracy theorists claim were programmed to be rigged against Donald Trump. In March 2022, Tina Peters, the county clerk in Mesa County, Colorado, was indicted by a grand jury for her role in providing access to electronic voting machines to an unauthorized person who later published confidential details from the machines, including logins and images of their hard drives, onto a Telegram channel affiliated with QAnon.[85] According to her deputy, who agreed to cooperate in the investigation in a plea deal, Peters devised an elaborate scheme to grant access to secure areas of her office to a fellow conspiracy theorist, including printing a fake ID badge for the unauthorized person.[86]

The belief that elections in the U.S. are irredeemably corrupt and rigged against the American public's interests now runs deep within American conspiracy theory circles. It will likely continue to influence part of conspiracy theorists' activities in the near future but may not hold the same power or influence as the conspiracy theory did during and immediately after the 2020 election without the endorsement of such claims by a presidential candidate.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic supercharged conspiracy theories and attracted countless numbers of people to paranoid thinking. A combination of the threat and uncertainty surrounding the virus itself, along with official mitigation measures such as lockdowns and rapid vaccine rollouts, provided ammunition for a range of popular conspiracy tropes.[87] The existence of the virus itself has been questioned, with some arguing that the claims were fabricated to grant the government further powers to control the lives of citizens.[88] Others accept the virus as a reality but believe it was deliberately engineered with the intent to release it for purposes of population control.[89] Within this category are claims that the health effects of the virus on humans are caused by signals emanating from 5G cellphone towers as part of an effort to weaken and kill people, and to justify governmental measures to further control people's lives.[90]

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[85] Harlan, Jeremy. "Colorado clerk Tina Peters pleads not guilty in election security breach case." *CNN Politics*, September 7, 2022. https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/07/politics/tina-peters-pleads-not-guilty-colorado/index.html.

[86] *Ibid.*

[87] Douglas, Karen M. "COVID-19 conspiracy theories." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 2. (March 2021). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1368430220982068.

[88] Imhoff, Roland. "A Bioweapon or a Hoax? The Link Between Distinct Conspiracy Beliefs About the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak and Pandemic Behavior. *Social Psychology Personal Science* 11, no. 8 (November 2020): 1110-1118. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7342934/.

[89] Farhart, Christina (ed.). "Different Conspiracy Theories have Different Psychological and Social Determinants: Comparison of Three Theories About the Origins of the COVID-19 Virus in a Representative Sample of the UK Population. *Frontiers in Political Science* 3 (2021). https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2021.642510/full.

[90] Douglas, "COVID-19 conspiracy theories."

Related to this, the anti-vax conspiracy movement has gained significant ground and taken on new followers since the pandemic.[91] As vaccines began to receive unprecedented levels of public interest and scrutiny, new audiences became available to those individuals whose efforts to cast doubt and sow fear about vaccines predated COVID-19. Anti-vax conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines mostly claim that they are either intentionally harmful or deadly, or that they contain microscopic tracking devices. Some also believe that the virus does not exist and the public is being deceived, or that a real virus was intentionally released to justify a pre-planned vaccine rollout to either control or cull the global population.[92]

Similar to claims about child trafficking, anti-vax conspiracy theories have an appeal across (and outside of) the political spectrum as they play on the fears of ordinary people, especially parents of young children. Among the most likely population to research vaccines online, parents of young children are especially vulnerable to the extensive internet activism of anti-vax conspiracists. Thus, the anti-vax movement has seen significant inroads among online parent communities, a growing number of whom have come to distrust all vaccines which are recommended for their children.[93]

Conspiracy theories feeding on uncertainty and fear about the virus, lockdowns, and vaccines have also inspired various acts of violence and criminality. At least five Americans have committed violence, including serious assault, or pursued other criminal activities in response to their belief in a conspiracy theory related to the pandemic. Like most forms of conspiracy theory extremism, the aim was to either investigate and expose the conspiracy, or to directly stop those believed to be a part of it.

One of the earliest examples of this was on 31 March 2020, when California-based cargo train operator Eduardo Moreno derailed his train near the USNS Mercy Hospital ship in the Port of Los Angeles.[94] The ship was being used to help alleviate the strain faced by hospitals in the region which were filling up with COVID-19 patients. By this time, conspiracy theories about the pandemic were already spreading online and the evidence suggests that they had an impact on Moreno.

After the incident, Moreno claimed that he derailed the train and crashed it into a concrete barrier because he wanted to expose the government's activities related to the pandemic.[95] He told the

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[91] Gallegos, Miguel, Viviane de Castro Pecanha, and Tomás Caycho-Rodríguez. "Anti-Vax: the history of a scientific problem." *Journal of Public Health* 45, no. 1 (March 2023). https://academic.oup.com/jpubhealth/advance-article/doi/10.1093/pubmed/fdac048/6569155.

[92] Lewis, Tanya. "Nine COVID-19 Myths That Just Won't Go Away." *Scientific American*, August 18, 2020. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/nine-covid-19-myths-that-just-wont-go-away/.

[93] Jolley, Daniel and Karen M. Douglas. "The Effects of Anti-Vaccine Conspiracy Theories on Vaccination Intentions." *PLoS One* 9, no. 2 (2014). https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3930676/.; Nguyen, Kimberly H., Anup Srivastav, Megan C. Lindley, Allison Fisher, David Kim, Stacie M. Greby, James Lee, and James A. Singleton. "Parental Vaccine Hesitancy and Association With Childhood Diphtheria, Tetanus Toxoid, and Acellular Pertussis; Measles, Mumps, and Rubella; Rotavirus; and Combined 7-Series Vaccination." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 62, no. 3 (March 2022). https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8867922/.

[94] "Criminal Complaint By Telephone Or Other Reliable Electronic Means." United States of America v. Eduardo Moreno. United States District Court for the Central District of California." Case: 2:20-mj-01480-DUTY. April 1, 2020. https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.cacd.778359/gov.uscourts.cacd.778359.1.0.pdf.

[95] *Ibid.*

highway patrol officer who arrested him that "You only get this chance once. The whole world is watching. I had to. People don't know what's going on here. Now they will. At night, they turn off the lights and don't let anyone in. I'm going to expose this to the world."[96] In subsequent interviews with detectives, Moreno provided further details about his motivations, stating that he believed that the ship was part of an effort to segregate citizens and imprison them. Through his actions, Moreno hoped to "wake people up" to the truth that "the ship is not what they say it's for," and was, in fact, part of a government takeover.[97] He also discussed various conspiracy theories he had come across during his online research about the pandemic and noted materials related to the "X22 Report," "Great Awakening," and "Q." The X22 Report is a QAnon-aligned conspiracy theory podcast known for spreading various conspiracy fantasies including those linked to COVID-19 and the 2020 election. Spotify removed it from their platform in late 2020.[98] The Great Awakening is a popular QAnon slogan referring to the process of military and government insiders leaking secret information to the public to reveal the reality of the deep state and the threat it poses.

Moreno pled guilty in December 2021 to committing a terrorist attack and was later sentenced to three years in prison.[99] He is one of three in the database who faced terrorism-related charges. However, the judge also accepted that Moreno was experiencing a psychotic episode at the time of the train's derailment and suffered from an untreated bipolar disorder. The judge, therefore, chose not to apply the terrorism enhancement sought by the prosecution which would have led to a 77-month sentence.[100]

While Moreno committed a terrorist attack, there did not appear to be any intent to directly harm people. Conspiracy theories about vaccines, however, have thus far inspired some of the most violent behavior related to the pandemic. In December 2021, for example, Thomas Apollo entered an outdoor vaccine clinic tent in California and violently assaulted staff, hospitalizing one.[101] After being asked to wear a mask, he began accusing staff of being "murderers" who were the cause of the pandemic before violently assaulting them. He currently faces charges of battery and resisting arrest. In May 2021, Tennessee resident Virginia Christine Lewis Brown drove her SUV at speed through a vaccine clinic

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[96] *Ibid.*

[97] "Sentencing Memorandum." United States of America v. Eduardo Moreno. United States District Court for the Central District of California. Case: 2:20-cr-00209-PSG. March 24, 2022.
https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.cacd.783979/gov.uscourts.cacd.783979.75.0.pdf.

[98] Greenspan, Rachel E. "Spotify removed QAnon-related podcasts after an investigation found the conspiracy theory had a presence on the audio platform." *Business Insider*, October 20, 2020.
https://www.businessinsider.in/thelife/news/spotify-removed-4-qanon-podcasts-after-an-investigation-found-the-conspiracy-theory-thriving-on-the-audio-platform/articleshow/78758807.cms.

[99] Pettersson, Edvard. "Engineer gets 3 years for derailing train near Navy hospital ship in early days of pandemic." *Courthouse News Service*, April 13, 2022. https://www.courthousenews.com/engineer-gets-3-years-for-derailing-train-near-navy-hospital-ship-in-early-days-of-pandemic/.

[100] *Ibid.*

[101] "Thomas Apollo of Poway Charged With Attacking Workers at Tustin Vaccine Clinic, Groping Nurse Trying to Treat Him." *CBS News*, January 19, 2022. https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/thomas-apollo-poway-charged-workers-attacked-tustin-vaccine-clinic-groping-nurse/.

tent yelling "No vaccine." She narrowly missed several bystanders and now faces reckless endangerment charges.[102]

In the cases of the stolen election and COVID-19 related violence and criminality, it is important to note that most incidents were grouped around dates related to when both events were receiving the most attention in the media and political spheres. Of the eight events in the database related to the stolen election, six took place between October 2020 and January 2021. Similarly, the attacks on the vaccine centers took place at a time when receiving the vaccine was the main feature of political discussions and media coverage. This is unlikely to be a coincidence and suggests that conspiracy violence and criminality are more likely when attention is at its highest on issues of most concern to American conspiracists.

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[102] Winsor, Morgan. "Tennessee woman arrested for speeding through COVID-19 vaccination tent in protest, authorities." *ABC News*, May 27, 2021. https://abcnews.go.com/US/tennessee-woman-arrested-speeding-covid-19-vaccination-tent/story?id=77937352.

Conclusion

This study represents one of the first attempts to add conceptual clarity to mixed and unclear ideology extremism and violence which governments in the West have begun to identify as an emerging security concern. We argue that two of the most prevalent and threatening examples of this phenomenon are the mixing of forms of Islamism with extreme right-wing ideologies and the growth of conspiracy theories that inspire violence but lack clear and coherent ideological motivations. Both threats are inherently idiosyncratic, and thus, present a novel challenge to those tasked with identifying and preventing the violence they have inspired.

In the case of the mixed ideology communities identified in the first section, they exist on an internet-based continuum of extremist content that has been long in the making, and that has now begun to play a role in the language and targeting decisions of real-world terrorists. The ability of a younger generation to latch onto the "traditional" ideological precepts of designated and already defined hierarchical groups plays only one role in their existence online. While current research often focuses on one community within the overall alt-jihad milieu, numerous communities within its ranks feed off one another, attack one another, and ultimately create new idiosyncratic content to support their worldviews. Just what effect this has on consumers of this content remains unknown. While much of the content is chalked up to be "LARP," or "irony," they are firmly positioning their content, their ideologies, and their tactics for more mainstream consumption, going beyond traditional audience bases in a novel and idiosyncratic strategy for dissemination. Discussions on how best to counteract the impact of these communities, however, have stayed relatively the same, likely because these online communities still inhabit the fringes of the extremist ecosystem.

Unlike the alt-jihad communities, conspiracy theories that help motivate violence and criminality in the U.S. are readily available and widely shared on mainstream online platforms, including by some elected officials and influential media figures. In the U.S., there is also a worrying overlap between certain forms of Christian fundamentalism and conspiracy theories that has inspired violence and criminality, including beliefs in demonic child abuse rings and the "stolen" 2020 election.

While not inherently violent, these conspiracy theories make claims about existential threats faced by a largely unsuspecting or ignorant American public. Those who have acted because of their engagement with, and adoption of, such conspiracy theories seek to either directly stop the conspiracy in its tracks or to investigate and expose it. While this is not quite the propaganda of the deed approach which traditionally defines terrorism, the desire to use an attack to expose a hidden threat may be considered a new form of conspiracy theory-driven terrorism or violent extremism.

Beyond this, such individuals rarely express a desire to pursue a specific political program beyond a general sympathy for right-wing concerns related to issues such as immigration and a distrust of what they perceive as the liberal elite. This suggests that a coherent and fully-fledged ideology that includes direct calls for violence may no longer play as central a role in motivating violent extremism and terrorism in the U.S. as it has in the past.

This intersection of ideologies and aesthetics, alongside the spread and dissemination of conspiracy theories that claim that the world faces a range of impending existential threats, represents a new front in the "war on terror." Extremist and terrorist movements online play a key role in radicalization and inspiring violence and are becoming defined by loose organizational structures rather than rigid hierarchies, where the influence and direction of activity by a particular group is often ambiguous. As a society, we are unprepared to deal with the nebulous and multifaceted elements of "mixed, unclear or unstable" ideologies. While it may seem incoherent, unclear, and confused, there is coherence to these adherents of disparate movements in their content. It logically builds off other extremist groups that share the same enemies, the same disdain and distrust for modern society, and the development of "hybridized" content central to their online existence.

The internet thus presents both opportunities and serious pitfalls for disruption and disengagement during the radicalization process. While disengagement is the primary objective, most programming is focused on disruption, often with ill-thought-out modes of supportive interventions after initial disruption. While there are more people than before being radicalized solely online in the U.S., there is still a need to similarly disrupt the radicalization process offline as well. Previous research and pilot programs have sought to address this specific challenge, indicating that more accredited intervention providers are needed if post-disruption engagement is to succeed.[103] In the same vein, platforms leveraged by the full spectrum of extremists are now abundant. Fringe and closed platforms such as Discord, Telegram, and Odysee, require new modes of thinking to the decades-old challenge of radicalization.

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[103] Davey, Jacob, Jonathan Birdwell, and Rebecca Skellett. "Counter conversations: a model for direct individuals showing signs of radicalisation." Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 2018. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Counter-Conversations_FINAL.pdf.