Intersections of Extremisms
White Nationalist/Salafi-Jihadi Propaganda Overlaps and Essentialist Narratives about Muslims

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This research note examines the intersection of ethno-nationalist and Salafi-jihadi propaganda content across ideological boundaries: the toxic relationship between supporters of these ideologies is highlighted through an analyses of case study examples of the Christchurch, New Zealand terrorist attack, official as well as unofficial Islamic State propaganda, and data gathered from white nationalist chatter online. The research note also notes how these groups create essentialist narratives about Muslims and Islam as part of their wider efforts to establish rigid worldviews. Finally, it discusses the presence of anti-Muslim prejudice in mainstream public spheres and suggests areas of opportunity for further research.

Keywords: terrorism, propaganda, ethnonationalism, white nationalism, jihadism, violent extremism, Telegram

INTRODUCTION

Extremists across ideologies promote narratives that seek to establish in-groups and out-groups accompanied by exclusionary worldviews (Berger, 2018, p. 53). Narratives from white nationalists and Salafi-jihadis, in particular, essentialize Islam in attempts to erode the diverse realities of Muslim identities and communities. It is crucial to state that

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the term "Salafi-jihadi" refers to "adherents of violent-rejectionist grouping" as defined by Shiraz Maher (Maher, 2016, 11). This research note will examine some of the various ways in which white nationalists and Salafi-jihadis attempt to create strictly defined identities, the toxic symbiotic relationships between the two groups that are often reflected in unofficial propaganda networks, and points of convergence in both their propaganda content and respective narratives about Muslims. Finally, it will discuss the mainstreaming and amplification of anti-Muslim prejudice in mainstream public spheres.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: CONVERGENCE OF NARRATIVES AND PROPAGANDA CONTENT

The March 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack is a more recent example that demonstrates overlapping complexities. In his 74-page manifesto, Brenton Tarrant promoted a number of anti-Muslim tropes: Islam is inherently violent, Muslim men are sexual predators, and Muslims are invaders (Beutel, 2019). During the attack, his livestream featured a Serb-nationalist song from the Bosnian War, called "Karadzic, Lead Your Serbs," which has since become "an anthem for the global far right, under a new name: 'Remove the Kebabs'—'kebab' meaning Muslims" (Karcic, 2020). In addition to the manifesto and song, he wrote, in white lettering, numerous dates and names on his gun, referencing figures such as Adolf Hitler and historical events reaching back to the Middle Ages (Brockell, 2019). The images of his weapon circulated widely on white nationalist platforms with posts celebrating him as a "saint." Every one of these components, including the title of his manifesto, had been selected by Tarrant to paint an image of Muslims as an existential threat and position himself, as well as other white nationalists, as defenders of Europe taking their revenge and protecting the homeland (Davey & Ebner, 2019, p. 7).

Although Tarrant's manifesto, "The Great Replacement," included a more unique structuring of elements such as a mock interview with himself and explanations of his motivations with sarcasm and in-joke trollish humor sprinkled throughout, its well-established anti-Muslim propaganda narratives reflected two notable elements: (a) centuries-old Orientalist tropes constructed during colonialism that have positioned Muslims as the uncivilized Other, and (b) themes centered on hatred for Muslims that cycle continuously in "sub-cultural online environment" echo chambers (Macklin, 2019, p. 26). It is through this process where, as J. M. Berger

highlights, "this collection of details begins to congeal into a historical and contemporary narrative" becoming a "powerful tool for establishing legitimacy and group cohesion" (Berger, 2018, p. 56).

On March 16, 2019, one day following the terrorist attack, Islamic State supporters posted images of their own on Telegram, a messaging app with end-to-end encryption capabilities that remains popular among white nationalists and Islamic State supporters: they displayed guns with names such as "Osama Bin Laden" and historical dates referencing Muslim victories of the past in a purposeful mimicry of Tarrant's propaganda (TA, 2019). In addition, they included lengthy messages about historical events as told through their own lens. One Telegram channel, named after Anwar Al-Awlaki, shared an extensive point-by-point list explaining each date and name that Tarrant had written on his weapons, "This weapon has been covered with extremist Christian bigotry.… Now what do these writings actually mean? Let's go through one by one" (TA, 2019). Other messages promised to take revenge and wage religious wars on a global scale (TA, 2019). More recently, a propaganda video released by an unofficial pro-Islamic State media source featured images of neo-Nazis at rallies and incorporated segments of Tarrant's attack footage with the overlayed text of "The Crusader Kaffir Crime in New Zealand" (TA, 2020). Despite the evident visual and textual parallels, these attempts demonstrate how supporters from one ideology quickly produced counter narratives and threats in response to a violent extremist of a separate ideology. The symbiotic nature that exists between these extremists is made apparent via the repackaged reproduction of Tarrant's gun on the part of pro-ISIS supporters and other Salafi-jihadis as well as through the incorporation of photos of neo-Nazis and Tarrant's livestream into unofficial ISIS propaganda.

The presence of historical revisionism, nostalgia for an imagined era of utopic domination, and promises of violence on display in these propaganda messages relied significantly on the continuation of the myth of a "clash of civilizations" between Muslims and the so-called West. Imagined mythologized pasts and idolized historical figures contributes to what Cynthia Miller-Idriss refers to as "fantastical thinking that elevates individuals above the tedium of their ordinary existence" (Miller-Idriss, 2017, p. 86). In turn, these mythologized pasts and modes of fantastical thinking allow supporters from these ideologies to see one another and the greater world as being in a state of eternal conflict where the complexities of reality are not permitted to exist; a dynamic further solidified by narratives and actions that are disseminated from the opposing extremist group(s).

A section in the February 2015 issue 7 of the Islamic State English-language magazine *Dabiq* titled "The Extinction of the Gray Zone" is another prime example of this codependent dynamic: "Muslims in the crusader countries will find themselves driven to abandon their homes for a place to live in the *Khilafah,* as the crusaders increase persecution against Muslims living in Western lands.… The World was now divided further between the *Khilafah* on one side and the crusaders with their apostate agents on the other" (Dabiq, p. 62 & 66). As stated in the magazine, this propaganda message directly references anti-Muslim hatred and views it as being integral, and even necessary, to their efforts in eliminating "the gray zone".

White nationalist Telegram channels and chats reveal an additional layer of overlap with Salafi-jihadis. During a 2019–2020 period of observation of white nationalist Telegram, the author noted three primary areas of propaganda convergence where white nationalists co-opted Salafi-jihadi themes: imagery, attack manual instructions, and terminology.

Despite their usage of anti-Muslim rhetoric, some white nationalists recycled Islamic State imagery and repurposed them for their own messaging (Makuch & Lamoureux, 2019). In some cases, they directly shared Islamic State *anashid* and gifs of Islamic State members beheading prisoners (TA, 2019). Most importantly, several videos were forwarded directly from pro–Islamic State private groups and accounts proving that these white nationalists definitively knew how to access Islamic State networks on Telegram (TA, 2019). On a surface level, this may seem surprising, but the attention-grabbing shock value of copying Islamic State aesthetics and a certain degree of admiration for destabilizing violence at societal levels displayed in Islamic State content are possible motives behind this. As one Telegram white nationalist group member commented, "There are also more shared values, specifically 'the collapse of the current system,' with IS (Islamic State) than with normies" (TA, 2019). Tellingly, another channel shared their edited versions of Islamic State imagery accompanied by the text "you only die once, why not make it martyrdom" as a publicity strategy and asked for supporters to spread the propaganda widely on various social media sites in order to "get our name out there and our message" (TA, 2019).

Multiple white nationalist chats and channels also posted attack manual instructions from Al Qa'ida and Islamic State sources containing information on how to construct pipe bombs and produce the explosive TATP (TA, 2019). Finally, accounts in far-right and white nationalist groups employed the usage of terms such as "white jihad," "white sharia,"

and "infidel" in a tongue-in-cheek manner for their in-group amusement. While these terms are not, and should not, be exclusively associated with Salafi-jihadis' violent aims, the individuals appropriating these terms did so with this reductionist view in mind.

Although these overlaps are not a frequent phenomenon compared to the typical activity displayed by white nationalists on Telegram, it is nonetheless important to note when intersections of content *do* occur. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman examined the implications of what they termed "fringe fluidity" between neo-Nazism and Salafi-jihadis (Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman, 2019, p. 18):

> As multiple factors—state weakness, technological developments, advances in communication technology, ecological challenges, and erosion of tradition forms of collective identity—seem to be propelling us into a new age of extremism, the importance of developing a better understanding of the various journeys through which people embrace violent extremism will increase. Future research into fringe fluidity can examine what factors are *necessary* for this fluidity to exist between two extremist ideologies.

Gendered aspects are also inherent in both ethno-nationalist and Salafi-jihadi narratives about Muslims: while some ethno-nationalists assert the need to protect "their" women and, by extension, their future lineage from the threat of "Muslim invaders" as well as other threats to the white race (Lokmanoglu & Veilleux-Lepage, 2020, p. 197), Salafi-jihadis produce similar narratives that center Muslim women as "delicate pearls" in need of protection from the *kuffar* (Criezis, 2020). In these examples, Muslims become archetypes characterized as either a threat to racial purity or, in the case of Muslim women, individuals with a fixed status determined by their gender. More generally speaking, these narratives portray women as lacking agency, having a static place in a hierarchy that views their value in terms of purity-based worth, and representing an "ultimate reward" fantasy waiting to be obtained (Kimmel, 2018, p. 13).

CAPITALIZING ON THE PANDEMIC

Currently, the coronavirus pandemic has added yet an additional opportunity for supporters of these ideologies to build upon older narratives as well as construct new ones that are consistently calibrated to maintain relevancy. Julia Ebner highlights the long-running pattern behind this process: "By telling appealing stories and skillfully linking current events to historical grievances, extremists have been able to reinforce their binary world views" (Ebner, 2017, p. 29).

Far-right supporters in the UK and Hindu nationalists in India have consistently blamed Muslims for spreading the virus. In a toxic mix of disinformation campaigns, conspiracies, and anti-Muslim rhetoric, #CoronaJihad began trending on Twitter as Hindu nationalists asserted the false narrative that Indian Muslims hatched a plot to purposely spread COVID-19 (Desai & Amarasingam, 2020, p. 3). On a brief note, it is also worth mentioning a parallel penchant for coronavirus-based conspiracies in pro–Islamic State online spaces: they shared similarly structured speculations about the *kuffar* purposely spreading the virus among Muslims (Daymon & Criezis, 2020, p. 28).

ANTI-MUSLIM BIAS AND COUNTERING PREJUDICE

Although this research note has focused on extremists' propaganda patterns, it is important to note that anti-Muslim narratives have been, and continue to be, an integral part of far-right political parties' platforms and publicity in both Europe and North America. The contexts that fostered the growth of anti-Muslim bias vary from country to country, but these narratives are similar and have overarching themes. As Ebner states, "[T]oday's far-right [as well as white nationalist] landscape consists of an eclectic mix of traditional and novel ideological elements" (Ebner, 2017, p. 58), and they often find themselves united in mutual agreement that Muslims pose an existential threat (Koch, 2017, 20).

Their "fixation on naming radical Islam" and their injection of "essentialist mysticism of the oral/postliterate discourse" reaches a far wider audience than the more obscure hardcore white nationalist Telegram channels ever could (Hughes, 2020, p. 7). A certain mainstreaming effect of anti-Muslim rhetoric in mainstream spheres has allowed for anti-Muslim bigotry to gain wider traction and legitimacy. Racial and religious prejudice also remains an issue for the "mainstream discourses of counter-extremism" where "racial thinking and racism continues to subliminally structure counterterrorism intelligence" (Abu-Bakare, 2020, p. 14). Amal Abu-Bakare writes, "The often-violent colonial frameworks within which the study and deployment of counterterrorism grew are sometimes still obfuscated by scholars, particularly when the practice of counterterrorism itself speaks to a universalist normative agenda that few … want to question" (Abu-Bakare, 2020).

On a final note, thinking about ways to effectively counter anti-Muslim bigotry, as well as other forms of prejudice, has the potential to create

positive impact. Shehnaz Haqqani proposes a number of strategies in regard to Islam and Muslims: historicize and complicate current prevailing attitudes about Islam to encourage people to question reductive inquiries that "ignore the diversity of Islamic tradition" such as "What does Islam say about X?" and highlight "every day and lived Islam" to "illustrate the diversity that is inherent not just to Muslims but all communities of faith" (Haqqani, 2019, pp. 204, 207, 210).

CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research note examined areas of overlap between white nationalist and Salafi-jihadi propaganda, the codependent toxic symbiotic relationship that exists between these ideologies, their narratives about Islam and Muslims, and the presence of anti-Muslim bigotry in more mainstream public spheres. The propaganda narratives, historical revisionism, and utopic ideals that extremists sell to "true believers" are a part of the stories that they tell themselves; stories that reverberate in echo chambers and attempt to attract potential future recruits with promises of satisfying grievances, filling the need for meaning and belonging, and engaging in battle against a perceived enemy (Ebner, 2017, p. 22). Whether far-right, white nationalist, or Salafi-jihadi, each uses Muslim identity as a playing card in their propaganda, which is why it is important to critically think and challenge any form of essentializing narratives that seek to obscure the complexities of reality. It is equally crucial to recognize the various areas of intersection where parallel narrative structures, propaganda aesthetics, and operational attack information cross ideological borders. Future research could focus on identifying propaganda overlaps in unofficial and official propaganda of various extremist groups, comparing the ways in which various extremist groups construct hateful narratives about specific groups such as antisemitic tropes, and identifying the sharing of terrorist tactics among extremists.

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