

MAPPING THE PROPAGANDA AND ACTIVITY OF “THE TRINITY OF TERROR” IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The “trinity of terror” – salafi-jihadism, right-wing and left-wing terrorism - have been feeding on each other’s propaganda, strategy and means, in a symbiotic relationship. Strategic enemies at surface, the three become rhetorical allies through a mutually reinforcing hate speech, using fear to divide communities and gain new members. The current terrorist threat in Europe has evolved beyond the general ideological classification, creating the need to use a different set of spectacles to understand the generic and context-specific dynamics of the violent radicalization among individuals and groups. The traditional perspective of analysis based on radicalization causes and patterns, multiple trajectories, effects, and consequences should be adapted to a new understanding of terrorism as a transcending phenomenon. The current research proposal aims to map, underline, and explain the evolution of the relation between the three ideologies’ speech and their symbiotic relation in and beyond the European geographical, social, political, and cultural context.*

Keywords: *terrorism; “trinity of terror”; propaganda; radicalization; Europe*

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is currently witnessing increasing unrest and turmoil, facing unprecedented security threats that are harder to predict, understand and tackle. Our society is exposed to hybrid challenges, most of which can no longer be treated separately, but rather contextually understood as “transboundary wicked issues” (Head & Alford, 2015). A vast majority of the security threats of today have the potential to pass borders and boundaries, developing in transnational spaces, controlled by

overlapping jurisdictions, interlinked policy spheres, fuzzy or ambivalent ethical standards, and much contestation, threat, aggression, emotion and fear, as well as time pressure (Noordegraaf *et al.*, 2017).

This paper is based on the perspective that terrorism is a “transboundary wicked issue”, no longer limited by space delimitations such as local and global, cause and effect framework, static knowledge, and stubborn belief systems.

The current global terrorist phenomenon has developed beyond its initial classifications based on elements such as chronological evolution, geographical influence, ideological background, modus operandi, and social network. As a transboundary wicked issue, today’s terrorist threat forces us to adapt faster to the increasing need of using a different set of spectacles to understand the generic and context-specific dynamics of the violent radicalization among individuals and groups.

Focusing on the “trinity of terror” – Salafi-jihadi, right-wing, and left-wing violent extremism, the main aim of this research is to map, underline and explain the current transcendence of the terrorist threat beyond the limits imposed by the specific boundaries of each branch, into a symbiotic relation developing within and beyond the European space, acknowledging the global implication.

In order to fulfil its aim, this paper is structured in three main parts: firstly, it provides an overview of the “trinity of terror” concept and the branches of Salafi-jihadi, right-wing and left-wing violent extremism; secondly, it describes the current trends of the phenomenon witnessed within the European context through the analysis of online and offline activity of the representative groups; thirdly, it points out towards the main strengths and weaknesses in the European countries’ response to the phenomenon. Based on the correlation of the research findings described in the three main parts, the paper will finally elaborate recommendations to serve the counterterrorism strategy development of the institutions and stakeholders that are active in this field.

2. THE “TRINITY OF TERROR”

As implied by the “transboundary wicked issue” perspective, the terrorist phenomenon is deeper and more complex than its internal ideology or motivation-based categorization.

Still, this paper uses the concept of “trinity of terror” to reflect the symbiotic relation between the most dominant ideologies in Europe and, at the same time, to emphasize the transcendence of the threat beyond any type of classic boundaries.

Moreover, the “trinity of terror” highlights that, disregard any kind of differentiating or separating element such as background, motivation, or ideology, all the three actors are ‘beyond’ equal: they are the representation of the same ‘one’ terrorist threat. In this way, the paper positions itself, from the very beginning, against the hypocritical and subjective understanding of terrorism.

Unfortunately, ever since the emergence of the Salafi-jihadi branch of terror, the modern society, in this case – Europe, has proved double-standards in its counterterrorism strategy and failed in acting equally towards all the three personas within the “trinity of terror”. Often, within the European context, the Salafi-jihadi terrorism has been treated as the “alien” or the outside threat. Meanwhile, the other two branches have been given credit for their common internal roots – “the threat among us” or “the threat that we know”. To leave behind this absurd understanding of the terrorist threat, the paper uses the “trinity of terror” to reflect that terror today should be tackled disregard any prejudice.

Still, some might argue that even this terminology is not fully encompassing all types of terror active on European soil, focusing mostly on the ideological background. Although ethno-nationals and separatist violent extremism is also present among the terrorism map within Europe, the focus on the “trinity of terror” is motivated by the possibility to see the transcendence of terror beyond the ideological background, with groups feeding on each other’s online and offline strategy in a perfect mutual symbiotic relation.

Further on, the paper will provide a short overview of the three branches within the “trinity of terror”. It is common knowledge that each of these has its own origins, evolution, and characteristics. However, in the current post-pandemic context, the common platform between them has grown wider, providing the opportunity for ‘indirect cooperation’ or share of means and tools based on the other’s experience.

2.1. The Salafi-jihadi branch. As jihadism is identified as a violent sub-current of Salafism, the term ‘Salafi-jihadi’ represents a movement that rejects the modern values such as democracy and elected parliaments and promotes the instauration of an Islamic state that is governed entirely by a subjective twisted interpretation of the Islamic law (Shari’a). While the major group identified with this

branch has initially been al-Qaeda, in the past decade a new group occupied the scene, challenging the al-Qaeda’s status – Daesh. In the context of the Arab Spring, vital to the formation of Daesh, it was not al-Qaeda that re-emerged in Daesh, but the jihadist movement, or Sageman’s “global neo-jihad” (Sageman, 2016). This movement has reinvented itself and adapted its instruments to the modern society, thus succeeding in gaining followers and imposing itself in a new form. Al-Baghdadi and his team of former important army and intelligence officers of Saddam Hussein, in front of al-Klifawi, saw the opportunity represented by the chaos created by the population uprisings and used the context in favour of and ISI strategy - the first form of Daesh. On the other hand, Osama Bin Laden’s successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was taken by surprise by the uprisings in the Arab world, and al-Qaeda has lost the train towards the leadership of a new wave of jihadism.

At present, Daesh still controls small territories in north-eastern Syria and the Middle Euphrates River Valley along the Iraqi border. In Iraq, Daesh continued its underground activities by reintegrating into the population and reuniting in some provinces such as Anbar, Diyala and Salah al-Din and conducting guerrilla attacks. At the same time, official sources point to some 30,000 Daesh members still alive in the region, while the number of returnees to their homelands is difficult to estimate. There is also a high number of Daesh fighters that were redirected to other conflict zones, such as Libya and Afghanistan.

The global brand created by Daesh has survived due to an unknown number of terrorist partners and sympathizers around the world. Virtual interaction remains an important activity of the group, which continues to recruit supporters through online propaganda. On the internet, the terrorist militia is inspiring a new generation of jihadists, making Daesh a lingering threat. Daesh has never limited itself to territorial organization in Iraq and Syria but is a transnational expression of Salafi Jihadism and a developed form of a global neo-Jihad wave as defined by Sageman; it may lose power and territory, but it does not end there.

2.2. The right-wing branch. To begin with, violent right-wing extremists do not belong to a homogeneous movement. On a general basis, right-wing terrorism refers to the use of terrorist violence by people with extremist views such as neo-Nazism, neo-fascism, and ultra-nationalist formations (Bjorgo & Ravndal, 2019). Similarly to Salafi-jihadism, right-wing terrorism seeks to change the entire political, social and economic system, not to a religious

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interpretation of law, but to a right-wing extremist model that includes the following ideas and values: supremacism or the perception that a certain group of people, unified by a certain element such as nation, race, or culture is in a supreme position, and has a natural right to dominate the rest of the population; hateful sub-cultures, commonly fighting back against diversity in society and equal rights of minorities; racism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, misogyny and hostility to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) communities and immigration are also common attitudes among right-wing extremists (Bjorgo & Ravndal, 2019).

In the context of Europe, right-wing terrorism appears in various forms incorporating ultranationalist, racist and anti-Semitic elements to different degrees and pursuing correspondingly different objectives. The right-wing violent extremist and terrorist threat often comes from lone actors, small cells, or very small groups (Gill, 2015). Right-wing extremism has been witnessed intensively after 2006 (Taylor *et al.*, 2013; Hemmingby and Bjorgo, 2016).

Unfortunately, due to the long-term international and scholarly focus on salafi-jihadist terrorism, there is a gap in research regarding the topic of violence and extremism from the extreme right – in particular, on target selection, perpetrators, patterns of action, and facilitating conditions (Bjorgo, 1995; Hemmingby and Bjorgo, 2016; Gill, 2015; Laquer, 1980; Rapoport, 2003; Wilkinson, 1974; Wilson, 2020). The current increasing trend provided a sufficient motivation for this gap to be filled, but there is still much work to be done and many elements of this phenomenon are to be understood as the events are developing. Attacks in Western countries such as Norway, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and New Zealand, as well as foiled attacks in France, have shown that there is a need to further strengthen the EU approach in tackling right-wing extremist violence: Right-wing violent extremism and terrorism in the European Union: discussion paper, 11756/19, Council of the European Union.

2.3. The left-wing branch. Left-wing terrorism, also known as far left, have presented significant definitional challenges both for researchers and policymakers “due to the malleable nature of what a leftist ideology was, what it came to be, and what it is considered today” (Carson, 2016:310). On a common basis, like in the case of the previous two branches in the ‘trinity of terror’, the left-wing terrorist groups aim to bring an end to the political, social, and economic system of a state, to introduce socialism

and eventually establish a communist and a classless society (Carson, 2016).

During the 1960s, opposition to the Vietnam War, combined with varying influences from socialist/communist ideologies, produced a wave of ‘New Left terrorism’. The Marxist-Leninist-Maoist political agendas backed by demands for social justice have motivated groups around the globe to pursue campaigns of political kidnappings, assassinations, and bombings for achieving their aims (Orsini, 2015).

While seeing themselves as the vanguards for minorities and marginalised groups within their societies and in the Third World, many of these groups are supporters of Lenin’s ‘vanguard strategy’: the belief that revolutionary conditions will rarely occur spontaneously from within the exploited lower classes or group. Therefore, revolutionary conditions must be created by a committed and disciplined revolutionary movement, which will build a generalised climate of change (Carson, 2016).

In current times, left-wing extremists use the online environment to attack their opponents, using a method called ‘doxxing’ to release personal information about their adversaries that could endanger their livelihood and safety (Orsini, 2015).

Throughout time, although little research has been done in comparison with other extremist groups, left-wing terrorist groups have been generally inspired by anti-government, anti-police, anti-capitalist, and anti-conservative ideology. Most recent activity of the left-wing terrorist groups reflect a focus on opposing governments in their country of origin, that they perceive as fascist or against their leftist ideals. Recurrent themes such as concerns of climate change and animal cruelty are also present in the extremist left-wing doctrine: environmental militancy, particularly, uses civil disobedience, economic sabotage, and guerrilla warfare to stop what they perceive to be the exploitation and destruction of the environment.

3. EUROPE AND THE TRANSCENDING TERRORIST THREAT

In the shadow of 9/11, the terrorist groups have enlarged their strategy and modus operandi, targeting regions outside the US territory. Although seen as a secondary chessboard for the terrorist game, Europe has been reflecting most of the global trends in the terrorist phenomenon. Moreover, due to several geopolitical events such as the Arab Spring and the civil wars that followed it in the Middle East and North Africa and the war in Ukraine (2014 and

2022), Europe is today at the crossroads of the ‘trinity of terror’, witnessing a historical transcendence of violent extremism beyond the ideological, political, social, cultural, ethnic, or geographical borders. The current times bring within a ‘karmic’ effect, pushing the European counterterrorism strategy to face its own hypocrisy: the double-standard.

Bearing in mind that Europol has not yet released its yearly report of the terrorist threat in Europe for 2022, this paper will assess the most current one available - the 2021 Europol Report on the European Union Terrorism Situation (TE-SAT). According to Europol, in 2020 a total of 57 terrorist attacks were reported in six member states, compared to 55 in 2019 and 69 in 2018 (Europol, 2021). Attacks conducted by Salafi-jihadi perpetrators, mostly related to Daesh, have dominated the Europol’s reports ever since the auto-proclamation of the so-called “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq. In the same way, the developing European counterterrorism narrative has been focused on the Salafi-jihadi threat, losing from sight the other growing terrorist groups within its own borders. According to the TE-SAT 2021 report, in 2020, Salafi-jihadi terrorism has no longer caused the highest number of attacks in the EU countries. In 2020, 14 attacks were related to Salafi-jihadi terrorism, while left-wing and anarchist-inspired attacks came first with 25 attacks. Ethno-nationalist and separatist-inspired groups were also responsible for 14 attacks, while the remaining 4 were attributed to right-wing militants (Europol, 2021).

Moreover, based on the personal database of Salafi-jihadi related terrorist attacks in the European context, only three Salafi-jihadi motivated attacks took place in Europe in 2021. This is the lowest number of religiously motivated attacks in Europe since 2014 and represents a 80 per cent decrease when compared to the 14 attacks recorded in 2020. Based on this preliminary analysis of the personal database, the Salafi-jihadi predominance of the terrorist scene in the European context is in a continuous decrease. However, this only leaves the place for transcending threat in the form of the ‘lone wolf’ phenomenon – harder to predict, prevent and counter. The ‘lone wolf’ is, at the same time, one perfect reflection of the developing transboundary identity of the ‘trinity of terror’: most of the recent terrorist attacks come mainly from lone wolves, who set a “role model” for other aspiring attackers. For instance, the Halle attacker declared during his court trial that Brenton Tarrant, the far-right terrorist responsible for the death of 51 Muslims in 2019 in Christchurch, New Zealand, inspired him, while Tarrant himself, was said to be inspired by Andres

Behring Breivik (Bjørge and Ravndal, 2019). The latter committed two attacks in Norway in 2011 killing 77 people (Bjørge and Ravndal, 2019).

Still, this is just the peak of an iceberg that continues to grow deeper, in the dark. While the Arab Spring and the connected civil wars created the perfect context for a Salafi-jihadi dominated flow of foreign terrorist fighters, the current war in Ukraine sets a similar scene, but this time with a right-wing extremist dominance. In fact, the scene for today’s events was set back in 2014, when several reports of scholars, counterterrorism practitioners and journalists on the ground warned of an increasing number of foreign terrorist fighters travelling to Ukraine from Europe or from conflict zones in the Middle East and North Africa (Bustikova, 2018; Centre for Global Policy, 2020; Ishchenko, 2016; Shekhovtsov & Umland, 2014; Umland, 2019).

Today Europe is facing an evolving transboundary terrorist threat: a complex mix of classic and hybrid threats, the “Pandora box” of uncontrolled migration from conflict zones, low and medium scale attacks with lone-wolf perpetrators, and highly dangerous plots. Progressively visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, the most recent cases of terrorist attacks are a mix-and-match combination of blurred ideology, superficially assessed motivation, psychological issues and neurological misfunctions, easy-access modus operandi and, nevertheless, the online cradle of extremist inspiration and support. Still, all these elements and much more, aim at the heart of an increasingly debated European identity and ideals, challenging the stability and security of a region that has struggle for a long time to hide the dust of unsettled migration and political polarization under the carpet. While the pandemic became the central subject since the end of 2019, the spread of the virus has not erased any of the existing threats faced by the European countries, but rather exacerbated them and our society’s vulnerabilities, forcing people into the online environment, and further exposing them to extremist content that came only as a perfect fit to the emotional, psychological, and mental effects of the pandemic. And the ‘trinity of terror’ was the first to strive in the newly created environment: Salafi-jihadi, right-wing, and left-wing extremist groups moved to an online-based mutual symbiosis.

In modern history, left-wing and anarchist terrorist organizations have been active in countries such as Italy, France, Spain, Greece, and Germany. Although traditionally these groups deal with anti-fascism, anti-racism, and state repression ideas, they have added to the changing political regional and global trends, adding to their narrative elements

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related environmental issues, distrust towards technological and scientific developments, and, in the context of the pandemic, the COVID-19 restriction measures (Europol, 2021). In the same way, both the Salafi-jihadi and the right-wing violent extremist propaganda has used every opportunity as a tool to develop their strategy and propaganda, while the online environment provided the perfect scene with an enlarging audience.

The 'trinity of terror' has a strong symbiotic presence on the Internet, using social media platforms to spread the extremist message, hold meetings, radicalize target crowds, publish manifestos, gather funding, pre-announce attacks, and even live-stream them or upload their videos afterward. An example of this would be the Halle terrorist, who recorded the attack from a camera strapped to his helmet and posted his manifesto online just before the onslaught, stating that he chose to attack Jews, instead of Muslims, as “they posed a greater threat” (Schuetze & Eddy, 2019).

On a common basis, scholars and practitioners in strategic communication and countering violent extremism have pointed towards the reciprocal accessibility between the online extremist propaganda and the vulnerable audience. This accessibility has also benefitted from the Covid-19 lockdowns that, not only created the opportunity for further propaganda, but also weakened the audience's resilience to the extremist attractions. In this way, adopting terrorist ideologies has become more facile and empowered the connection between the extremist group and the vulnerable potential recruit. The online context gives the chance to a second life or alternative reality, where anyone can choose or tricked into choosing who they want to be. Nevertheless, the web can provide an unlimited source of resources for taking a step further from interaction and sympathetic flirt to real action. For instance, in 2021, a 26-year-old French citizen was arrested for allegedly trying to source uranium powder on eBay, as part of a plan to incorporate the material into pipe bombs that he had already built at home. When police raided his studio in Rouffach, France, they found “Nazi badges and a complete Ku Klux Klan outfit in sight on a mannequin.” (Pantucci, 2022) In line with the previous discussion on the psychological and neurological issues related to the current terrorist threat, the ‘uranium seeker’ was also reported to have suffered from undefined “psychiatric disorders” (Pantucci, 2022).

Another worrying trend of the terrorist threat in the European context is a different type of transcending borders – this time, the ones between law enforcement and conviction. While examples

have come from the entire spectrum of the ‘trinity of terror’, the extreme-right wing groups tend to attract several members from European security forces to their side. In Belgium, a large network linking politicians, soldiers, and activists was discovered in 2021. In the UK, a policeman was jailed for membership in a neo-Nazi group, while a special forces unit in Frankfurt had to be disbanded in June 2021. In other parts of Germany, groups of police officers were detained on similar charges (Flade, 2021).

The 'trinity of terror' is a symbol of the transboundary wicked terrorist threat in Europe. As the Salafi-jihadi branch has been considered central and most dangerous in the past, turning a blind eye to the right-wing and the left-wing terrorist groups can no longer be an option. It is even a bigger mistake to naively believe that any of the three is currently more dangerous than the other. Both the context and the threat has changed together with the current developments on the regional and global level. Although trying to pose as more united than ever, the European countries have never been as divided as they are today, both at national and continent scale. The war in Ukraine has the potential to detonate ideological, geopolitical, social, ethnic, cultural, and economic mines that have been deeply planted at our proud European roots.

The current landscape of violent extremism in Europe, symbolically named as the ‘trinity of terror’, is characterised by a hybrid dimension that calls into question the traditional conceptual and practical boundaries of counterterrorism.

4. ACTION vs. REACTION: THE EUROPEAN RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

As publicly declared on the European Commission internet page, all relevant European Union, and national actors, within the lines set by their responsibility for upholding the national law and safeguarding internal security, should work together to counter terrorist threats emanating from home-grown or foreign terrorists, acting alone or in a group and regardless of the ideology that is being pursued by terrorist means. Bearing in mind that the current terrorist threat that was previously discussed has a transboundary wicked nature, the European countries should adapt its strategy and tools to the rocky security landscape that is about to get take shape.

In 2005, the EU Counterterrorism Strategy was adopted as the first step towards a common European action against the terrorist threat, in line with the values of the human rights and allowing its citizens to

live in an area of freedom, security and justice. However, the strategy has not proved efficient enough to stop the rising number of foreign terrorist fighters leaving for the battlefields of Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and other conflict zones. Nevertheless, the strategy was not bounding enough to provide the common platform among the European states for the vital exchange of intelligence that could have prevented the attacks that were to hit the continent since 2011. Following the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack, understanding the gravity of the situation and the lack of preparedness on its side, the European Commission proposed in its Agenda on Security to establish a European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC). This step aimed to improve the exchange of information and the operational support to Member States' investigators. Within Europol, the EU Agency for law enforcement cooperation, the ECTC pools specialized resources, expertise and information on foreign terrorist fighters, explosives, firearms, financial intelligence, and online propaganda to support Member States' law enforcement counterterrorism units. Although this represented a progress towards a better understanding of the unfolding terrorist phenomenon, it was not sufficient to help the European states adapt fast to the changing security environment.

On 15 March 2017, the EU adopted the 'Directive on combating terrorism', reinforcing the legal framework to more comprehensively cover conducts related to terrorism. All EU countries had to ensure that they criminalize conduct such as training and travelling for terrorism, as well as terrorist financing. Aware of the gaps within their common counterterrorism perspective and strategy, the EU states put their efforts in harmonising definitions of terrorist offences serve as a benchmark for cooperation and information exchange between national authorities.

Further on, in 2020, one of the four priorities of the newly adopted EU Security Union Strategy was "Protecting Europeans from terrorism and organised crime". The Strategy announces the adoption of a Counter Terrorism Agenda for the EU, together with renewed action to prevent and counter radicalisation. Most recently, in April 2021, the EU adopted a regulation to prevent the dissemination of terrorist content online by allowing competent authorities of the Member States to require hosting service providers to remove terrorist content (Regulation 2021/784). In terms of exchanging data information, a Directive was adopted in 2016 on passenger name record (PNR) data during flights as a countermeasure to the foreign fighters' phenomenon (Directive 2016/681).

Lastly, combating the financing of terrorism has been one of the EU's top priorities. EU's efforts on cutting terrorist financing include additional legal measures with non-EU countries lacking an efficient anti-money laundering prevention system (Directive 2015/849) and the fifth anti-money laundry directive adopted in 2018 aiming to improve transparency, the cooperation between financial intelligence units, and transaction checks on high-risk third countries (Directive 2018/843).

While the legislative narrative has followed its path and reflected common European effort towards counterterrorism cooperation, most of the strategy has been based on reactive measure, that were mostly focused on the 'outside threat' – the Salafi-jihadi terror. Even so, due to the complex bureaucratic processes at both national and EU level, the European states have never been able to adapt and react to the fast-changing security landscape withing and outside the borders.

Moreover, the existing documents, presented chronologically above, have deepened the gap between the focus on one side of the threat, while leaving aside the other two: the right wing and the left-wing violent terrorism. Despite its effort, the Europe, and the EU as an entity, has reached structural limits about broad, all-of-society efforts to curb extremism and prevent terrorist violence – in all its forms. Most importantly, in a 'karmic' domino, Europe is facing a threat that it can hardly understand and accept - the 'trinity of terror'.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Bearing in minds the shifting sands in the current multidimensional and volatile security landscape at European and global level, this paper aimed to provide an assessment of the current terrorist threat that is part of this context. In this regard, the concept of "trinity of terror" was used with the direct purpose to reflect the transboundary wicked nature of terrorism, at a time when most of the problems faced by our world are bond in most complex, yet logical manners.

As the European policy measures have remained vague and disperse, suffering from increasing fragmentation and lack of common sight, the current trend of violent extremism, symbolically named as the 'trinity of terror', is characterised by a hybrid dimension that calls into question the traditional conceptual and practical boundaries of counterterrorism.

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