

Indonesian Pro-IS supporters on social media in 2022: Surviving not thriving

Jordan Newton

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Benjamin Mok

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Muhammad Haniff Hassan



Extremist Trends and Online Narratives – Disruptions and Chaos

As COVID-19 enters an endemic phase, the threat of terrorism continues to evolve rendering its landscape diverse, complicated and more dangerous. Though the frequency of terrorist attacks has declined globally, extremist narratives have proliferated in the online space, causing disruption and mayhem. COVID-19 expedited several ongoing extremist trends. But how these expedited trends and online narratives translate into extremist threat remains an on-going concern, necessitating continuous vigilance and monitoring.

At any rate, it is evident that the current threat landscape is chronic and fragmented. Simultaneously, the declining but resilient wave of religious-based terrorism is co-existing with a resurgent wave of ethno-nationalist terrorism involving a plethora of far-right groups in different parts of Europe, US and Asia. Against this backdrop, this June issue of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses (CTTA) features four articles covering different dimensions of this fragmented landscape.

In the first article, **Jordan Newton** examines the online activity of pro-Islamic State (IS) supporters in Indonesia. In comparison to the height of its caliphate operations in the early 2010s, when IS' formidable propaganda machine used social media to amplify the group's public presence, pro-IS voices in Indonesia, while active across a range of platforms, are presently smaller, weaker and more contested. According to the author, this decline accrues primarily to years' long efforts by the government, social media platforms and civil society to tamp down extremist propaganda. This has transformed a once open and permissive online environment for pro-IS supporters into one which is now increasingly narrow, watchful and hostile. Still, Indonesia's pro-IS community retains solid fundamentals which could be built upon to regain some ground online.

The second article by **Benjamin Mok** explores an online subculture of the Hindutva movement termed as 'trad,' which mainly operates within the online digital ecosystems. "Trad" refers to an extreme fringe within the Hindutva spectrum that derides mainstream Hindutva proponents as being soft on different Indian religious minorities, particularly Muslims. According to the author, trad communities are distinguished from mainstream Hindutva communities via three core traits: their use of vulgar humour to trivialise extremism, coded language to form an 'in-group', and uncompromising distrust of any 'out-groups.' These core traits work together to encourage radicalisation of those exposed to extremist content, and to ensure that these communities are not beholden to mainstream ethical norms.

Next, **Raffaello Pantucci** assesses the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on terrorist threats across the ideological spectrum. According to the author, this threat has resonated particularly among the extreme right wing in Europe, where longstanding radical communities, in similar vein to their American counterparts, have absorbed anti-pandemic sentiments, chosen symbolic state targets and sought to launch terrorist attacks against them. Over the past year, a notable number of large-scale disruptions involving networks of radicalised individuals, often with military training and inspired by extreme right ideas, have been observed in parts of Europe. In the near term, the pandemic response of greater state control, alongside the likely impoverishment of large populations in the wake of the pandemic and the fall-out from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, potentially point to a context in Europe where the violent extreme right can worsen.

Finally, **Dr Muhammad Haniff Hassan** examines the notion and practice of *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* (pledge of death) among contemporary jihadist groups through the lens of Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition and security studies. His work has three important implications for the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) initiatives. The author notes that conceptually and theologically, *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* is not problematic from the standpoint of Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition. However, the jihadist application of *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* is highly problematic and a deep cause for security concern because: a) the pledge can only be employed by the right authority or by groups officially sanctioned; b) jihadist groups who are rebellious and cause strife do not fulfil the "right cause" criterion for waging armed jihad in the Sunni tradition; and c) jihadist groups employ this concept for suicide operations, in contrast to the conventional understanding of "fight till death" and "no retreat/surrender" (i.e. daring missions where death is probable but not certain). The author suggests that P/CVE stakeholders work towards mainstreaming the understanding of the pledge as defined by the Prophet's companions as a means to counter the jihadist groups' blatant misinterpretation.

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Indonesian Pro-IS supporters on social media in 2022: Surviving not thriving

Jordan Newton

Indonesian supporters of the Islamic State (IS) on social media are in survival mode in the face of successive waves of pressure from the government, tech companies and civil society. Though still active across a range of platforms, pro-IS voices are smaller, weaker and more contested than ever before. Beyond occasional spikes of activity, Indonesian IS supporters have lost their narrative punch on social media and are struggling to produce new, attractive content as their leaders and propagandists have been arrested. Social media will still provide opportunities for pro-IS supporters, but an online revival is unlikely unless the multi-pronged pressure on extremists is eased.

Introduction

The Islamic State (IS) revolutionised the use of social media and the internet for terrorism when it first emerged in 2014. Building on the online foundations laid by its jihadist forebears, particularly Al Qaeda (AQ), IS' formidable propaganda machine used social media to amplify the group's public presence by distributing flashy propaganda, grisly execution videos and speeches by its various leaders across platforms like Telegram, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Indonesian pro-IS supporters were part of the group's skyrocketing social media fortunes as it peaked from 2014 to 2017. Though pro-IS supporters comprise a tiny proportion of the Indonesian population either online or offline¹, social media platforms have provided them with broad reach to have an outsized public voice. During the height of IS' physical and virtual 'caliphate' (state), thousands of Indonesian supporters set up vibrant communities across various social media platforms – including Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, Google+ and Instagram² – triumphantly lauding IS' conquests in the Middle East and confidently predicting its reach would extend to Indonesia.

But over the past five years, Indonesian pro-IS supporters' online presence has been gradually reduced and is now arguably at its lowest ebb. Following repeated clampdowns by authorities, pro-IS Telegram groups and channels which once had several thousand members are now a fraction of their former sizes and supporters are under constant threat of bans across all platforms. IS' narrative has suffered due to battlefield losses, with dreams of a worldwide caliphate replaced by calls to hold firm in the face of seemingly never-ending adversity. Some pro-IS supporters have even begun turning on each other online, engaging in increasingly heated, but ultimately pointless, theological debates.

This decline has been the culmination of years' long efforts by governments, social media platforms and civil society, which, while being slow to start, have transformed what was once an open and permissive online environment for pro-IS supporters into one which is now increasingly narrow, watchful and hostile. The Indonesian online environment has inevitably been shaped by global trends – particularly actions taken by Western governments and foreign tech giants – but Indonesian authorities and civil society groups have also had a critical role to play in further adding to the pressure on pro-IS supporters online.

Virtual Crackdowns: Narrowing Space Online

Initially, social media offered Indonesian pro-IS supporters the ability for their relatively tiny community to tap into mainstream audiences. The relatively free, unrestricted space offered by social media platforms enabled pro-IS supporters to control the public narrative around their activities, particularly in relation to attacks overseas³. IS' foreign fighters and supporters, including

Indonesians, were akin to modern day influencers, posting battlefield and lifestyle updates across their social media accounts⁴. Through this social media outreach, IS successfully recruited Indonesians from various walks of life, including some not traditionally associated with extremism – such as government officials⁵ and female migrant workers⁶.

But since around 2016, the space for IS online has narrowed significantly. Takedowns of IS accounts and content are now commonplace on Telegram and Facebook, which have established moderation teams to quickly and effectively remove pro-IS accounts and content. In these efforts, platforms are working hand-in-glove with some law enforcement efforts, such as Europol-led takedowns targeting IS' presence on Telegram in 2018 and 2019⁷ and collaborating with Indonesian counterterrorism officials to shut down Indonesian pro-IS accounts⁸. Wherever Indonesian IS supporters gather online, they are under constant, close watch by tech administrators, academics and authorities.

Despite initial scepticism of the 'whack-a-mole' approach to account and content moderation⁹, these crackdowns have taken a heavy toll on the Indonesian pro-IS community online with membership of Indonesian IS Telegram chat groups – generally a good gauge of the overall state of the community online – falling drastically from around 8,000 members on the most popular groups in 2015 to around 1,000 in 2017¹⁰ and now an average of just 200-300¹¹ in 2022. Some chat groups and channels have also lost administrators, leaving them dormant.

Crackdowns across social media have also gradually corralled the Indonesian pro-IS community onto a handful of platforms. Telegram still serves as a somewhat diminished focal point for the most hardcore Indonesian IS supporters, particularly to access official propaganda¹². Some IS supporters have also re-joined more established mainstream platforms, like Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram – though many would likely be active on these platforms even without their IS affiliation¹³. Meanwhile, brief experiments with more obscure platforms – TamTam, Hoop and RocketChat¹⁴ – have failed to reach a critical mass of users¹⁵, likely because they were not as user-friendly as Telegram or Facebook¹⁶ and in some cases were even more prone to taking down pro-IS accounts.

Still, the diminished Indonesian pro-IS community is maintaining a dogged presence on these platforms. At least two dozen Telegram channels and chat groups continue to actively share IS propaganda and encourage discussion among members¹⁷. Key Facebook and Instagram accounts – including those belonging to Indonesian pro-IS supporters being held in refugee camps in northern Syria¹⁸ – are frequently revived after takedowns. Supporters are also more judicious in what they post online, particularly on large platforms like Facebook, steering clear of overt references to IS¹⁹ and editing multimedia to avoid automated content bans²⁰. Survival appears to be now equally or possibly more important than proselytisation for many IS supporters.

Real-World Crackdowns: Draining Content, Suffocating Narratives, Detaining Operatives

Even as the size and reach of the Indonesian pro-IS community began to shrink online from 2016, it could still initially rely on the volume of IS' propaganda and attractiveness of the group's narrative to shore up the allegiance of existing or remaining supporters. IS' battlefield successes and the establishment of its fledgling proto state in the Middle East, alongside devastating attacks overseas, were a central feature of its propaganda²¹ and served to highlight IS' claimed value add in the jihadist realm: that it was succeeding where others (most notably Al Qaeda) had failed²². In this way, IS' virtual growth and popularity was always closely tied to its success as a terrorist group offline.

But from 2017 onwards, as Western-backed Iraqi and Kurdish forces finally began to reverse IS territorial gains and recaptured major cities, the group's success stories and propaganda releases began to dry up²³. IS' online media infrastructure was also decimated, with top propagandists killed in airstrikes²⁴. The official propaganda that remained became more monotone, with an almost exclusive focus on battlefield exploits²⁵ and very little of the state-building content that had been a

draw for many, including a large number of Indonesian supporters²⁶. IS had lost its big propaganda selling point – success – and this was directly impacting its propaganda output and online activities.

There has also been little for Indonesian pro-IS supporters to celebrate at home. Attacks, such as those in Jakarta (2016) and Surabaya (2018), largely came and went with expected fanfare but never provided momentum for a narrative of sustained success. Only the Central Sulawesi-based Eastern Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT) remained as an identifiable, organised pro-IS militant group²⁷ – and even it seemed to feature more propaganda releases commemorating the deaths of martyrs²⁸ than any tangible operational successes.

Some in the Indonesian pro-IS community have sought to plug these gaps by producing more local content. Since 2017, several local unofficial IS media outlets – Gen.554, Ash Shaff Media Foundation and An Najiyah Media Center, to name a few – have produced Indonesian versions of IS' flashy propaganda. Many of these riffed on popular IS narratives and themes, such as brotherhood of the believers²⁹, patience in the face of (increasing) adversity for the group³⁰, the fallacy of democracy³¹ and even featured further calls for 'hijrah' (migration) to Syria and Iraq³². Some also put a local spin on IS incitement by encouraging attacks on President Joko Widodo³³, government ministers³⁴, other Muslim groups³⁵ and buildings like the presidential palace³⁶ and parliament³⁷. Although these local efforts lacked the polish of official IS releases, they were still shared widely across chat groups and social media accounts.

But as with IS' military losses in the Middle East since early 2019, real-world counterterrorism operations in Indonesia are regularly shutting down these fledgling efforts. Newer and more robust counterterrorism powers have enabled Indonesian police to target jihadi propaganda producers for arrest and prosecution due to incitement and the threat they pose to national unity³⁸. Most recently, An Najiyah's operatives were rounded up in early 2022³⁹, abruptly heading off various plans the group had including forming an umbrella group with other media producers⁴⁰ and launching a jihadist-themed video streaming service⁴¹.

Still, some Indonesian pro-IS supporters who are stubbornly maintaining their presence online are also continuing to produce propaganda, albeit at an even smaller scale. Some are using platforms like Instagram to turn themselves into one-person propaganda outlets⁴², producing simple, toned-down remixes of existing IS propaganda while adding their own logos and branding to give it a more official feel. A vast pool of tens of thousands of pieces of old IS content still circulates across the IS community online⁴³, providing the base content for these remixes. Narratives have shifted in line with global IS' trends, with a focus on religious purification and longing for the return of IS' caliphate taking centre stage. These efforts arguably go some way to keeping IS supporters engaged in the community, but are still a far cry from the excitement and energy generated by IS' propaganda during its peak.

The numerous battlefield defeats and arrests of key figures are compounding the struggles already being faced by Indonesian pro-IS supporters' fenced-in communities. Not only are they no longer able to propagate and reach into mainstream audiences with the same freedom they enjoyed previously, the lack of new IS content means they are now also struggling to provide attractive and motivating imagery and narratives even for their existing follower base.

Civil society: Pushing Back, Stoking Divisions

Globally, the narrowing of the IS community online and the draining of its content pools have left it weakened and more vulnerable to competition and disruption by other groups. In addition to governments and intelligence agencies, civil society groups are becoming increasingly involved in competing with IS voices online.

IS now faces more competition than ever in shared social media spaces. Mainstream groups – from Indonesia's largest Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)⁴⁴ to start-up media groups like Ruangbrol⁴⁵ – have established their own sophisticated networks of websites, social media accounts, apps and influencers, staking out a much larger place for themselves in public

conversations on issues such as religion. Not all of this content is targeted at directly countering IS' messages, but it does provide alternative voices and content which did not exist online before or were drowned out by more hardline voices.

The relative vacuum of new pro-IS content online has also enabled some nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to spread their own material in pro-IS supporter social media spaces, reversing IS' infiltration of mainstream social media. Debintal, a police-backed NGO providing support for former extremists, has produced several videos of imprisoned senior IS figures – including leading preachers such as Aman Abdurrahman⁴⁶, Abu Qutaibah and Zaenal Al Anshori⁴⁷ – either criticising IS supporters' continued calls for violence or renouncing their ties to the group all together.

These videos have, by far, generated more discussion among Indonesian pro-IS supporters than anything that IS itself has produced recently. For example, Facebook threads and Telegram chat group discussions regarding a video of Aman Abdurrahman criticising IS supporters racked up hundreds of comments and messages in the space of several hours in early April 2022⁴⁸.

These efforts are forcing some Indonesian IS supporters online on to the defensive. Some Debintal affiliates have successfully hijacked conversations in pro-IS chat groups, drawing supporters into hours-long debates of points of IS ideology or the group's tactics, such as the targeting of civilians⁴⁹. Not only has this resulted in IS supporters being directly exposed to competing viewpoints – challenging their distorted worldview and potentially encouraging disengagement from the group – it is also probably distracting them from recruitment efforts and planning operations.

Greater infiltration of chat groups is also fostering increased distrust on pro-IS social media, prompting debilitating infighting among supporters. Debates between Indonesian pro-IS supporters over issues such as whether or not one is permitted to have an Indonesian identity card, can often end in both sides trading accusations of being part of deradicalisation programs⁵⁰. Theological differences have plagued the IS community for years⁵¹, but the presumed presence of an increasing number of deradicalisation activists, spies and researchers is exacerbating these fissures and creating an overall more petty, combative online environment for pro-IS supporters.

Bleak Future

For now, any return to IS' glory days online in Indonesia appears a long shot. Governments around the world are imposing themselves even more forcefully into the online information environment – in part to combat broader societal issues such as the rise of mis- and dis-information online but also as part of the broader evolutionary process of states in adapting to and ultimately controlling new technologies⁵². Even non-Western governments, such as Indonesia, are becoming far more savvy in accessing and exploiting data stores⁵³, creating an increasingly hostile online environment for anti-state movements like IS and its affiliate terrorist networks⁵⁴.

But Indonesia's pro-IS community still has solid fundamentals which could be built upon to regain some ground online. Though marginalised for now, IS' dogged, hardcore Indonesian supporters who are toughing out social media bans could still form the nucleus of a future online cadre of recruiters and propagandists (if they aren't arrested in the meantime). The vast stores of extremist material still circulating within their confined online spaces could also provide the building blocks for attempts to revise and update the group's ideology to be more appealing in a world where IS no longer holds territory, but where it could establish a more robust – albeit likely small – 'virtual caliphate'⁵⁵.

Any potential Indonesian IS resurgence online likely will not take the form of a mass infiltration of mainstream social media – as IS did during its peak – but it could chip around at its edges. Much as some far-right movements in the US and Europe have been able to draw on disillusioned members of conservative movements⁵⁶, IS and other jihadists could attempt to draw on conservative Muslims facing repression by the Indonesian state⁵⁷. At least some online supporters

of groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), a politically influential hardline movement, appear to be increasingly open to calls for violence⁵⁸. IS extremists have shown interest in recruiting such disaffected hardliners before⁵⁹ and may seek to again in future.

It is also likely that pro-IS Indonesians' use of social media will become normalised and much more of a complementary tool to real world outreach efforts, rather than a recruitment spearhead of its own. Even during the peak periods of IS activity online, offline recruitment efforts – through mutual connections and shared spaces like schools, mosques and prayer halls – have always played a key role in the group's growth⁶⁰. Social media will continue to be a useful means of keeping supporters who have already met in real life connected, especially as supporters continue to experiment with increasingly privacy focused encrypted messaging apps.

Ultimately, continued vigilance from governments, tech giants and civil society will be the key variable in ensuring that IS supporters are not given the chance to revive their online fortunes. Waning attention to counterterrorism – a real threat as governments pivot back to great power conflicts⁶¹ – could provide room for extremists to once again spread their wings. As IS' rise online showed, the internet can provide easy access to potential recruits. Even a sliver of breathing space might be enough to bring Indonesian pro-IS supporters out of survival mode and back to seeking modest expansion.

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³ Charlie Winter, 'ISIS Is Using the Media Against Itself', The Atlantic, March 24, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/isis-propaganda-brussels/475002/>.

⁴ Some key examples – many of whom have since had their accounts removed and/or are unable to post any further updates due to likely having been killed in fighting – include prominent jihadists such as Ummu Abdullah Azzam, Heri Kustyanto alias Adam Syam and Bahrun Naim.

⁵ Case of DWI DJOKO WIWOHO alias ABU BAKAR alias ABU KHONSAH. Indonesian Supreme Court, July 19, 2018.

⁶ 'The Radicalisation of Indonesian Women Workers in Hong Kong'. IPAC, July 26, 2017.

⁷ Laurence Binder and Raphael Guck, 'Assessing Europol's Operation Against ISIS' Propaganda: Approach and Impact', ICCT, June 18, 2018, <https://icct.nl/publication/assessing-europols-operation-against-isis-propaganda-approach-and-impact/>.

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⁹ Ben Makuch, 'Banning Islamic State Jihadists From Twitter Is Like Playing Whack-a-Mole'. Vice, August 22, 2014, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/z4mzbi/isis-twitter-whack-a-mole>.

¹⁰ 'Indonesia and the Tech Giants vs ISIS Supporters: Combating Violent Extremism Online', IPAC, July 27, 2018.

¹¹ Telegram observations, 30 April 2022. Even this is almost certainly an over-accounting of followers, as members of these channels and groups include researchers and law enforcement and intelligence

officials, while significant numbers of accounts also appear to be inactive or have been deactivated by Telegram.

¹² Amarnath Amarasingam, Shiraz Maher and Charlie Winter, 'How Telegram Disruption Impacts Jihadist Platform Migration'. CREST Research, January 8, 2021, <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/how-telegram-disruption-impacts-jihadist-platform-migration/>.

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¹⁴ Rita Katz, 'A growing frontier for terrorist groups: unsuspecting chat apps', Wired, January 9, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/terrorist-groups-prey-on-unsuspecting-chat-apps/>.

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¹⁵ Some Indonesian pro-IS channels and chat groups exist on these platforms but they are relatively small, mostly dormant and rarely advertised across other platforms (unlike links to Telegram, WhatsApp and Facebook).

¹⁶ Platforms like Rocketchat are based on users needing to create accounts on a private server to use the chat/channel client. Tutorial videos are often posted outlining step-by-step how to access the servers. This no doubt is helpful for tech savvy users, but for many regular social media consumers, it requires investment and effort which are not needed when using simpler apps like Telegram and Facebook.

¹⁷ Telegram observations, 30 April 2022. This is almost certainly an under-accounting of the total number of groups and channels on the platform. Other groups and channels exist – this can be seen from forwarded messages, though their membership is likely more tightly controlled.

¹⁸ Facebook observations, 30 April 2022. Several Indonesian women in Al Hol camp use Facebook to provide updates on their activities in the camp. One of them, Winda, has had her account shut down on at least three occasions over the past two years but she has continued making new accounts, usually advertised by the other women when she returns.

¹⁹ Examples include changing mentions of 'IS' to '15' in internet leet-speak. In Indonesian, this can also include shortening of words by removing vowels – reviving a commonly used tactic for reducing costs of mobile phone text messaging in the pre-social media age.

²⁰ Examples include horizontally inverting videos, adding filters or stickers and using video footage from one propaganda release but audio from another.

²¹ Charlie Winter's seminal work on IS' 'virtual caliphate' outlines six broad themes in IS propaganda, including: war, utopianism, belonging, mercy, victimhood and brutality. Charlie Winter, 'The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy', 2015, Quilliam.

²² Described by Haroro Ingram as 'pragmatic factors' which 'compelled its audiences to engage in rational-choice decision making', where IS was the more rational choice as it had established a functioning Islamic state while its enemies and competitors had not. Haroro Ingram, 'Learning from ISIS's virtual propaganda war for Western Muslims: A comparison of Inspire and Dabiq', ICCT, 26 July 2017, <https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2017/07/INGRAM-nato-chapter-21JUL17.pdf>.

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²³ Charlie Winter, 'Apocalypse, Later: A Longitudinal Study of the Islamic State Brand', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 35, Issue 1, January 2018, pp. 103-121.

²⁴ One of the key early initial losses for IS was the death of its first spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al Adnani, see Dan de Luce, Elias Groll and John Hudson 'Going After the ISIS Propaganda Mastermind', *Foreign Policy*, August 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/31/going-after-the-isis-propaganda-mastermind/>.

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²⁵ Charlie Winter, 'Inside the collapse of Islamic State's propaganda machine', *Wired*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/isis-islamic-state-propaganda-content-strategy>.

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²⁶ 'Empat Motivasi WNI Gabung ISIS'. *JPNN*, March 15, 2015, <https://www.jpnn.com/news/empat-motivasi-wni-gabung-isis>.

Wendy Andhika Prajuli, 'Lewat propaganda berisi fantasi ISIS merekrut anggota', The Conversation, December 4, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/lewat-propaganda-berisi-fantasi-isis-merekrut-anggota-88401>.

²⁷ In 2014, Indonesian extremists established Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) as the premier pro-IS organisation in Indonesia, complete with branches and a formalised structure. But by the end of 2016, much of JAD's nascent structure was smashed by counterterrorism operations, leaving its members and supporters operating first as largely autonomous branches and eventually devolving into autonomous cells. MIT, though small, by contrast, has maintained a persistent presence in Poso since the early 2010s to today.

²⁸ Instagram observations, *Penyebarnya Berita*, 21 September 2022. Telegram observations, *Sahabat Dunia Akhirat*, January 5, 2022. Examples of Ali Kalora and Ahmad Panjang, prominent MIT leaders', martyrdom commemoration posters.

²⁹ Telegram observations, September 27, 2021.

³⁰ Telegram observations, September 8, 2021.

³¹ Telegram observations, June 12, 2021.

³² Telegram observations, October 1, 2021. Calls in this fashion have persisted, despite IS no longer controlling significant tracts of territory in the Middle East.

³³ Telegram observations, July 18, 2020.

³⁴ Telegram observations, March 7, 2022. Current Religious Affairs Minister Yaquut Quoumas has been featured in photoshopped posters being beheaded by IS militants. Quoumas has frequently attracted controversy among jihadis and non-violent Islamists alike over his statements in defence of religious minorities in Indonesia.

³⁵ Telegram observations, August 19, 2019. Salafis are a frequent target of IS supporter incitement, owing to their strong criticism of jihadi groups. But popular mainstream Islamist preachers like Abdul Somad – who was recently refused entry into Singapore – have also been promoted as legitimate targets of attacks.

³⁶ Telegram observations, November 26, 2019.

³⁷ Telegram observations, May 20, 2019.

³⁸ Primarily the introduction of Law No. 5/2018 on Counterterrorism, but also to an extent the introduction of implementing regulations on the National Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism (RAN PE). See, 'IntelBrief: Indonesia Tries to Adapt Laws for New Terror Threats', Soufan Center, June 6, 2018, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-indonesia-tries-to-adapt-laws-for-new-terror-threats/>.

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⁴⁰ Telegram observations, February 21, 2022. In late February, five media outlets – An Najiyah, Share News OK, Tahridh Media, Berfikir Cerdas and Basyiira announced the formation of 'Anshar Productions' as a presumed umbrella group for their work. Little has been heard of the grouping since early March, coinciding with the arrests of the An Najiyah operatives.

⁴¹ Telegram observations, October 17, 2021. It's unclear what form any service would have taken – most likely an archive of jihadist videos uploaded somewhere on the web – but it does attest to how online outlets have often had big dreams cut short by policing efforts.

⁴² As an example, Instagram account *Dakwah Terasing*. Another previously active under Instagram account *shafanawulandari15*, subsequently deactivated/removed.

⁴³ Telegram observations, September 29, 2021. In some cases, supporters have wrapped up multiple editions of IS' top-tier magazines, *Rumiyah* and *Dabiq*, or collections of propaganda videos into downloadable archives. One of the main pro-IS Telegram groups currently has over 10,000 images, over 1,000 video files, 229 audio files as well as 1,400 shared links (some of which are links to video, image and audio content).

⁴⁴ NU's website and social media efforts have come along in leaps and bounds in recent years. The organisation's official website has undergone a complete overhaul with an increased focus on basic advice on religious doctrine and practices – cutting into the 'Ustadz Google' phenomenon of lay Muslims inadvertently being exposed to conservative and extremist viewpoints while searching for

information on rituals. But it is also supported by other sites run by NU members, such as Islami.co as well as a far more active social media presence from *kiais* (religious leaders) and progressive leaders.

⁴⁵ Ruangbrol.co.id is staffed by researchers and reformed extremists and frequently posts analysis of extremist ideology and counterterrorism developments for lay audiences.

⁴⁶ Telegram observations [video], April 1, 2022.

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Exploring Hindutva Online Subculture

Benjamin Mok

Recent events in India have highlighted the presence of an Extreme Right subculture in the Hindutva movement, mainly within online digital ecosystems. This subculture, whose members are known locally as 'trads', eschews the Hindutva mainstream in India, and instead promotes extremist ideology within online communities on various social media platforms. These 'trads' regularly circulate extremist content using vulgar humour, based on themes such as denigrating women, caste supremacy, and encouraging the genocide of minorities. 'Trad' communities are identified, and distinguished from mainstream Hindutva communities, via three core traits: their use of vulgar humour to trivialise extremism, coded language to form an 'in-group', and uncompromising distrust of any 'out-groups.' The core traits work together to encourage radicalisation of those exposed to extremist content, and to ensure that 'trads' are not beholden to mainstream ethical norms. The growth of this subculture presents distinct extremist threats beyond those posed by the Hindutva mainstream.

Introduction

Following its rise in the 2014 Indian general election, the right-wing Hindutva movement has been mistaken by many observers as a monolithic entity,¹ unified under the leadership of the Hindu far-right, the Bharata Janata Party (BJP) and its para-militant wing, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).² Such unity is generally thought to extend into multiple issues including national development, religious coexistence, and even socio-cultural issues such as gender and caste.³ Despite the efforts of scholars to prove that the Hindutva 'monolith' is a myth created by actors within the movement,⁴ this misidentification remains a key facet of how the Hindutva movement is defined from both within and without.⁵

However, recent events in India have shed light on the existence of Hindutva extremists who subscribe to far-right ideology so extreme that they are unable to operate even within the BJP-RSS mainstream. These extremists, identified by some observers as 'trads'⁶, are modelled after foreign Extreme Right online movements and often operate within the same digital ecosystems.⁷ While their existence had previously been largely glossed over due to narratives of Hindutva unity, the identification of two 'trads' by the Indian police as the main perpetrators of the much-publicised 'Bulli Bai' and 'Sulli Deals' criminal cases in 2021, where Muslim women were subjects of mock online 'auctions', have brought these extremists to the fore of Indian politics.⁸

Other recent events have highlighted a conflictual relationship between these extremists and the Hindutva mainstream, such as the BJP's November 2021 repeal of controversial farm laws in the face of protests in Punjab, to which extremists responded by criticising the BJP for appeasing non-Hindutva actors.⁹ These responses indicate a fracture within the Hindutva movement, highlighting the existence of an extremist subculture that presents threats different from those posed by the Hindutva mainstream.

This article highlights the existence of these 'trad' communities and provides a framework to differentiate members of these communities as separate from the Hindutva mainstream. It begins by examining the type of extremist content circulated within 'trad' online communities. Then, it highlights three core traits exhibited in such content that set these communities apart from the Hindutva mainstream. Finally, it considers the potential impact of these growing 'trad' communities within India's digital spaces on the socio-political and security landscape.¹⁰

Context

'Trad' subculture eschews the institutions of the BJP-RSS mainstream in favour of a decentralised digital ecosystem that does not owe allegiance to any political party. This digital ecosystem is both

organic and self-sustaining, resulting in a community of extremists that operates more as a subculture than a single political entity.¹¹ As with similar Extreme Right 'digital hate communities' across the world, a surface glance at this ecosystem seems to suggest that its denizens only engage in online 'trolling',¹² but a deeper examination reveals that it plays a key role in encouraging political violence offline.

This digital ecosystem comprises separate online communities, whose members are drawn together through two categories of reasons. Firstly, some of these communities are formed around non-mainstream individuals who curate extremist content online. These individuals can range from persons who go by their actual identities, such as activists who have amassed sizeable followings on their social media pages,¹³ or those who keep their identities hidden, such as the administrators of political 'meme pages' on Facebook.¹⁴ Secondly, some of these communities are formed around forums, websites, or messaging platforms focused specifically on hosting extremist Hindutva content. These digital spaces are fluid and often outlive their original hosted locations – they are able to migrate to different online platforms if their original location is shut down due to their extremist content.

These communities are varied in their reasons for existence, choice of platforms, and in most cases do not interact with one another directly. Furthermore, it should be noted that not all members of these online communities would identify themselves as 'trads'. However, many members of these communities share certain traits that identify them as part of 'trad' subculture: namely, their use of vulgar humour to trivialise extremism, coded language to form an 'in-group', and uncompromising distrust of any 'out-groups'.

Online Extremist Content within 'Trad' Communities Online

With the worldwide growth of online Extreme Right movements over the past decade, Violent Extremism (VE) scholarship has increasingly recognised the key role played by online content in enabling extremist rhetoric and narratives.¹⁵

Content circulating within 'trad' communities often focus on affecting a humorous tone to obscure extremist ideology as humour inherent to the subculture, usually in the form of picture-based memes or in-jokes. Some themes covered by such content align with extremist and far-right themes found within the Hindutva mainstream, such as Islamophobic content denigrating Islamic religious symbols¹⁶, or discourse criticising liberal culture.¹⁷ Other themes contrast with the Hindutva mainstream's less extreme stances, such as the mainstream's attempts at recognising women's rights¹⁸ and its progressive discourse on caste supremacy.¹⁹

Some of the content, while theoretically aligned with mainstream Hindutva ideology, is simply too extreme for mainstream consumption. Jokes about killing non-Hindus, particularly Muslims, are commonly circulated within these communities. On heavily moderated platforms, such content is concealed using codewords such as 'cauliflower farming',²⁰ and references to past anti-Muslim violence such as alluding to the 2002 Gujarat riots, which involved widespread violence against the Muslim community that some observers have since labelled as a pogrom.²¹

Less-moderated platforms allow for open calls for genocide and killings. This is the case with the *Indiachan.io* imageboard, which is part of the 'Chan' imageboard digital ecosystem infamous for its extremist content.²² Here, content threads are regularly created with titles such as "KILL ALL MUSLIMS"²³ or "Genocide appreciation"²⁴ and are thus structured in such a manner that encourages the circulation of pro-genocide and neo-Nazi content. Examples include memes depicting a cartoon Hindu soldier killing Indian minorities in a gas chamber²⁵ and calls for the Hindutva movement to deploy a genocidal "final solution" against Indian Muslims.²⁶

Finally, 'trad' subculture mimics foreign Extreme Right movements in its glorification of certain extremist individuals who are shunned by the mainstream for their actions.²⁷ Similarly, memes glorify similar figures in Indian history, including Nathuram Godse, Mahatma Gandhi's assassin and a Hindu fundamentalist,²⁸ Gopal Chandra Mukhopadhyay, the mastermind of anti-Muslim attacks during the 1946 Calcutta riots,²⁹ and Dara Singh, a Hindu fundamentalist who led the burning of a Christian missionary in 1999.³⁰

Trivialisation of Extremism

An examination of extremist content shared within ‘trad’ communities indicates that its members are intent on using vulgar humour as the vehicle for extremist themes – yet it begs the question as to why such a strategy is preferred. Prior to the creation of the pro-Hindutva forum bakchodi.org,³¹ one of the creators of the website responded to a series of questions on another forum, indicating that “if things get too extreme, then normal regular users will censor themselves by not participating at all,”³² or by democratically censoring such content through downvoting.³³ This approach of moderating content according to what is normalised melds with the extreme-right’s strategy of trivialising extremism, encouraging the radicalisation of communities.

In the ‘Daily Stormer Style Guide,’ Andrew Anglin, a prominent anti-Semitic activist who serves as editor for a popular extreme-right online media outlet, provides insight into this strategy.³⁴ Anglin instructs that “the unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not”, as “most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, non-ironic hatred”.³⁵ This then serves as a central “ploy” allowing the Daily Stormer to function as an outreach platform for readers “at first drawn in by curiosity or the naughty humour”, and who are then radicalised by the normalisation of the extremist content concealed behind the humour.³⁶

In the case of the Hindutva movement, while mainstream discourse on extremist themes generally focuses on the need for political action tied to the Sangh Parivar, the mobilisation of these themes by ‘trads’ instead focuses on what Baishya (2021) terms as ‘light critique’ – criticism that does not offer direct political resistance but rather uses its nature as a ‘fun’ activity to normalise content within a community.³⁷ As such, the triviality of the ‘trad’ subculture’s approach allows its discourse to push past social boundaries that the mainstream remains beholden to.

Turning back to the case of bakchodi.org, we see that this strategy thrives within platforms that practise content moderation based on a community consensus – as extremist content is increasingly circulated due to its humorous nature, what is permissible expands as the community shifts further towards the extreme. This phenomenon is repeated within other similar online platforms.

One popular meme on Indiachan warps a popular children’s cartoon in India – Chhota Beem – by depicting an alternate narrative where one of the characters develops into a caricature of Adolf Hitler named “Rajulf Hadler”, who then goes on to commit genocide against the religious minorities.³⁸ The absurdity present in this meme conceals the violent extremism inherent in such content, and it has subsequently been normalised as a continuing in-joke rather than a serious call for violence. Yet, the imagery used in the original joke has leaked into other memes that similarly call for violence against minorities, normalising them as well.³⁹ Thus, the original spread of a meme due to its humorous nature has encouraged further production of memes sharing its extremist theme – of Nazi Germany and genocide – all the while concealing the spread and normalisation of these themes as a ‘fun’ trivial activity.⁴⁰

Violence is normalised through the creation of narratives, which manufactures enemies, and the dissemination of these narratives, which manufactures consent for violence.⁴¹ Furthermore, one way iconography manufactures consent is through taking advantage of the “popular sensibilities of people in its original context.”⁴² Building in turn upon this concept, the ‘trad’ strategy of trivialising extremism creates a form of de-facto consent not built upon theoretical principles, but rather as a shared ‘fun’ activity within the subculture – thus, as a popular sensibility within the context of ‘trad’ subculture. Having manufactured consent, extremist content creators within the subculture normalise violence by ensuring that the narratives manufacture the relevant ‘enemy,’ an act that is achieved via the use of in-group/out-group dynamics.⁴³

Coded ‘In-Group’ Language

Another core trait showcased in the content circulating within ‘trad’ communities is the use of a coded language to form an ‘in-group’. Coded language not only serves as a creative method for extremists within these communities to bypass filters on platforms with content moderation,⁴⁴ but also acts as a ‘dog-whistle’ signalling and cohering the group identity of the community.⁴⁵ In doing so, the development of a coded language via memes and other vehicles for humorous extremist

content thus becomes a shared activity – “a form of laughing with a certain community of ideological peers.”⁴⁶

Members of the ‘trad’ communities explored in this study purposefully use the shock value generated by the language in their shared content – such as the use of the term “mudslimes” to indicate Muslims, or the use of the Nazi-related term “final solution” as code for genocide – as an identifier differentiating them from even the Hindutva mainstream. Such language provokes a strong reaction from outsiders who are not desensitised to its extremist connotations, serving as a gatekeeping mechanism that demands outsiders either join in the shared activity – thus radicalising themselves – or to remain an outsider.⁴⁷

Lone individuals disconnected from social institutions such as those provided by the RSS are particularly susceptible to being drawn into the subculture via these ‘in-group’ dynamics.⁴⁸ However, familiarisation with such coded language is not exclusive to such individuals. Some political figures have demonstrated adroitness in their understanding of such language, to find favour with these communities.

Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, and a politician some observers have predicted as the next Indian Prime Minister⁴⁹, is a key example of this phenomenon. Yogi, who is well-received by ‘trads’ due to his extremist position within the Sangh Parivar,⁵⁰ has been idolised by the subculture, which regularly produces memes connecting him with anti-Muslim symbology.⁵¹ Yogi, in response, has played up this symbolic connection, increasing his popularity with the Hindutva extremists.⁵² Further examples of ‘trad’ influence leaking out from its digital ecosystem and into the general political landscape of India can be expected given Yogi’s success in mobilising such coded language into political support.

Uncompromising Distrust of ‘Out-Groups’

Conversely, those in the Hindutva movement who do not accommodate the vulgar humour and coded language of these extremist ‘trad’ communities are demonised via an approach that demonstrates little compromise or nuance. This has resulted in many ‘trad’ communities exhibiting an intense distrust of ‘out-groups’ within the mainstream that support a moderate approach to Hindutva ideology.

This hostility is best represented by popular ‘trad’ memes titling Modi as ‘Maulana Modi’ due to his perceived appeasement of Indian Muslims. These memes not only attack Modi for what they perceive as appeasement of minorities to gain votes in certain states⁵³ but, at times, accuse Modi of working with non-Hindutva interests to decrease Hindu influence within Indian society.⁵⁴ For example, the BJP’s decision in June 2022 to suspend its spokeswoman Nupur Sharma for her controversial televised remarks against Prophet Muhammad⁵⁵ has resulted in significant backlash by ‘trads’ specifically targeting Modi, with some accusing him of enforcing the suspension in order to gain Indian Muslim votes and others accusing him of doing so to appease Muslim countries.⁵⁶

Similar allegations are also regularly levelled at pro-Hindutva communities operating within the mainstream – members of this political demographic are labelled by ‘trads’ as ‘raitas’⁵⁷ and are generally seen as members of the Hindutva movement who lack true commitment to the ideology.⁵⁸

What purpose then does such uncompromising distrust serve, especially considering that it comes at the cost of creating fractures within the larger Hindutva movement? In considering the motivations behind this strategy, Anglin’s “Daily Stormer Style Guide”, which contains a section titled “100% Black and White”, is useful. Here, Anglin contends that no room for nuance must be left within Extreme Right propaganda, and that it must deal with moderates by “portraying them as on our side, but at the same time prodding them to do more and go further.”⁵⁹ There is thus, consciously or otherwise, motive behind this demonisation of the Hindutva mainstream – by targeting and ridiculing its perceived placatory tendencies, Extreme Right discourse serves to push the mainstream towards extremism.

‘Trad’ Subculture – Isolated, Radicalised and Self-Sustaining

In the case of ‘trad’ subculture, manufactured consent for violence only matters within the isolated ‘fringe’ that comprises these communities.⁶⁰ Populist narratives succeed based on how their

creators define the 'majority' to which they are meant to appeal – even if this constructed 'majority' is actually a 'fringe' community.⁶¹ The definition of majority/minority is a pretence, it is in fact closer to the notion of 'in-group'. Rather than seeking the approval of the Hindutva mainstream, the 'trad' subculture's construction of itself as the 'in-group' enables it to treat the mainstream as outsiders, who are only worthy of inclusion if they adopt the subculture's shared language and extremist activities.

Herein lies a core difference between the Hindutva mainstream and its 'trad' extremists. Those operating within the Hindutva mainstream must navigate the perceptions of the national and global mainstream due to the serious nature of their discourse; they are thus constrained by their struggle with larger society over ensuring consent for their violent ideology.⁶² On the other hand, 'trads' are under no such obligation to justify their open calls for genocide and violence according to mainstream norms, due to the three core traits described in the preceding paragraphs of this article. The 'light critique' presented by the extremist content circulated by 'trads' is immune to serious criticism due to its trivial nature.⁶³ At the same time, 'trad' subculture's strong in-group identity and its distrust of the out-group ensure that any serious criticism is ridiculed as stemming from mainstream culture that does not understand the subculture.

These three core traits thus work together to form a subculture that is not only isolated and radicalised, but also self-sustaining. It does not require the political support of any one organisation to grow in its influence, nor is it subject to moderation by any one political actor – it is purely beholden to the decentralised, majority influence of the subculture's members.

Conclusion

Further research is needed to determine the actual size of this subculture in relation to the larger Hindutva movement. Some observers claim that 'trad' subculture is smaller than its online presence might suggest, as many of its members allegedly use multiple accounts to bolster its numbers.⁶⁴ On the other hand, the novelty of the internet as an ecosystem in which extremist ideology can flourish requires that Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) scholars examine more closely how 'fringe' elements interact with the Hindutva mainstream.⁶⁵ Should enough of the subculture leak into the mainstream, it might shift the movement itself more towards extremism. On the other hand, there is also potential that these isolated communities will lead to an increase in alienated and radicalised individuals willing to carry out lone actor attacks.⁶⁶

All these point to a need for increased vigilance within the PCVE space. Content moderation spearheaded by government institutions and online platforms is effective to a certain extent.⁶⁷ However, the fluid and opaque nature of this subculture also highlights a need to better understand the different aspects of its digital ecosystem and how it functions – an understanding that the framework of identification provided in this paper seeks to encourage within our PCVE efforts.

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Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism and COVID-19 – A Two-Year Stocktake

Raffaello Pantucci

As the pandemic moves into its third year, normality appears to be returning. While caution has not dissipated, there is no doubt that governments' treatment of COVID-19 has changed. As countries embrace a wider "open up" strategy, this is already being flagged as a possible opportunity for terrorists.¹ These warnings are linked to concerns that, as countries open up, the barriers erected to prevent COVID-19 from spreading will lift and make terrorist plotting easier once again. But a larger question lingers about what the actual impact of COVID-19 has been on terrorist threats at an ideological level. Given the threat has resonated in a stronger fashion on the Extreme Right, this article seeks to sketch out that impact and assess its wider implications.

Introduction

Following the onset of the pandemic, there was a rush of commentary and subsequent research trying to understand its potential impact on terrorist and extremist threats.² The conclusions drawn were fairly diverse, but few observers concluded that terrorism would be reduced as a result of the pandemic. Rather, concerns were articulated that the threats would become worse, owing to a variety of reasons – the increasing amount of time people were spending online;³ the growing isolation fostered by lockdowns;⁴ the uncertainty created by the pandemic;⁵ and the likely shrinking of counter-terrorism and P/CVE budgets.⁶ There was also divergence within the research community, with sharply dissenting voices pouring cold water on more dramatic prognostications, including that there would be a surge in online radicalisation.⁷

As it turned out, in the broadest possible terms, the two major threat ideologies diverged in their response to the pandemic. Violent Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) broadly framed the pandemic as God's providence and something followers should not worry too much about, except to celebrate how it made their enemies suffer and to maintain resilience.⁸ In some cases, they spoke of how strategic opportunities might present themselves, which followers should take advantage of,⁹ and at some lower levels, chatter was picked up that suggested people should try to weaponise the virus.¹⁰ But this was never something that the core organisations called on their followers to do.

In contrast, among the Extreme Right (violent, extremist or just Far Right), groups embraced the pandemic in their narratives to recruit and mainstream even further than they had already. Protests around pandemic restrictions were frequently adopted and promoted by extreme right-wing groups, and anti-establishment narratives absorbed pandemic resistance smoothly into their views.¹¹ Systemic conspiracy theories also ran rife, absorbing prominent figures like Bill Gates into narratives of population control through vaccination,¹² as well as broader conspiracies involving undermining indigenous communities.¹³

On the Far Left, an anti-systemic narrative also did catch on, but with far less vigour. While fears of government control could be found, their greater concern was with the resurgent far right or other acts of societal injustice.¹⁴ More confusing ideologies like the QAnon or Incel movement seemed to echo pandemic conspiracies but, for the most part, this merely fed into the wider chatter around their ideologies rather than transforming them.¹⁵ It was not clear from available research what the effect was on other faith-based extremisms – like Buddhist or Hindu extremists, for example.

Early Terrorist Action

Little of this noise translated into actual terrorist action, although there were widespread instances of civil disturbance – most prominently on January 6, 2021 when supporters of former US President Donald Trump stormed the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. This was one of many instances where large protests ended in violence and involved resistance to pandemic restrictions, amongst other motivations. In Australia, it seemed as though the Extreme Right actively took advantage of such protests to advance their ideas.¹⁶

It was not always clear the degree to which the protests were terrorist activity, nor whether the protests could be entirely placed in the ideological category to which they were often linked. For example, during anti-lockdown protests or the January 6 assault on the Capitol, there were undoubtedly many extreme right-wing leaning individuals involved, but it remains unclear if they made up the entire corpus of the protest. Nor is it clear that the protest could be described as entirely motivated by extreme right-wing ideas.

In terms of terrorist action that could be directly linked to the pandemic, the list is more limited. At the pandemic's onset, two cases in the United States seemed to suggest a direct link to the government's response to the virus – Timothy Wilson's attempted bombing of a Missouri hospital and Eduardo Moreno's train derailment targeting the US Navy's hospital ship Mercy docked in the Port of Los Angeles. Whilst clearly targeting institutions linked to the government's pandemic response, both had different origins.

Wilson, a long-standing subject of interest to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), had links to a serving US soldier stationed in Kansas who was reportedly planning to fight alongside the Azov Battalion in Ukraine.¹⁷ He had also spoken of launching attacks on multiple domestic targets, including prominent Democrat politicians.¹⁸ Reportedly, Wilson had long been planning some sort of incident, and it is possible that the pandemic simply changed his targeting choices. He had also seemingly been planning his attack with the full knowledge of the FBI, although it was not clear whether this was because of an undercover agent who turned him in, or whether he was simply under FBI surveillance.¹⁹

In contrast, Moreno was a railway worker arrested for planning an attack by himself. This involved derailing the train he was working on in the Port of Los Angeles in an attempt to draw people's attention towards the "government take-over" that he perceived was happening.²⁰ As was stated in his indictment, "Moreno believed people needed to know what was going on with the COVID-19" pandemic and the U.S.N.S. Mercy.²¹ Among other claims, Moreno stated that "they are segregating us and it needs to be put in the open."²² He was also very specific in stating that "no one was pushing his buttons" in orchestrating the attack, reflecting his desire to not have his stated motivations dismissed.²³

These two early cases received considerable attention, coming as they did in the immediate wake of the early announcements of lockdowns in March 2020, and as people sought a better sense of the pandemic's likely impact on extremism. In both cases, action involving the perpetrators took place, and some inspiration from the pandemic response was involved in the attack planning, although not necessarily in the same way. While Moreno's attack was clearly a response to the pandemic, Wilson seemed a longer-term extremist linked to Extreme Right networks who decided on a pandemic-related target relatively late in his planning cycle.²⁴

From what is known about Moreno's attack, it is possible to conclude that sans the pandemic the attack might not have happened. In contrast, Wilson's pre-existing links to other extremists and networks suggest he could have acted even if the pandemic had not taken place. The pandemic appears to have presented an interesting targeting opportunity for Wilson, with the government's response to the event reinforcing Wilson's pre-existing worldview.²⁵ This could also be the case for Moreno (he may have already held some anti-government ideas), but not enough is known about his case to draw a decisive conclusion.

In a survey of pandemic-related terrorism done in March 2021, Sam Mullins and Michael King concluded that this pattern of activity held across the extreme right-wing cases they surveyed.²⁶

Looking at a dataset of seven cases, including both Moreno and Wilson, they concluded that all the individuals, aside from Moreno and one other where it was unclear, had pre-existing extreme right-wing tendencies (mostly linked to the anti-government Boogaloo Bois movement).²⁷

The authors' conclusion was that it remains too early to conclude that the pandemic has spurred more violence. While the cases they explored largely highlighted how problems of extremism have generally gotten worse along the same trajectory as prior to the pandemic, they are less clear about the pandemic's potential accelerating effect.²⁸ A survey of wider trends a year into the pandemic concluded something very similar, though it broadly surmised that the Extreme Right seemed like it was going to be affected more than the violent Islamist community.²⁹

Trouble Spreading?

Largely, existing trends have continued and, as the pandemic ends, the expectation should be that extremist-linked activity will pick up as they had before. Consequently, parts of Europe may find themselves once again most seriously afflicted by lone-actor terrorism; the United States may face a metastasising menace of extreme right-wing and anti-government groups; Africa a sharpening terrorist threat linked to IS affiliates; the Middle East a constant threat; and Southeast Asia a threat that appears to have slowed over the past few years. Afghanistan has already started to export problems north and south of its border, suggesting the mid-2021 Taliban take-over is going to worsen long-standing terrorist problems across South Asia (and even into Central Asia). None of this brief overview seems to have been impacted notably by COVID-19.

However, there are some patterns that do appear to be worsening and can be linked to the pandemic. In particular, the extreme right-wing threat in Europe. A long-standing threat, it has in the past year shifted in a direction to resemble its North American counterpart in a way that is novel and potentially destabilising. There has been a notable number of large-scale disruptions that suggest networks of radicalised individuals, often with military training, inspired by extreme-right ideas and eager to strike targets associated with the pandemic response. Events in Ukraine have had an impact on the broader extreme right-wing in Europe, but this appears to have happened in parallel to the pandemic.

Recent cases have also put a spotlight on some worrying underlying trends. Specifically, these include the growing number of arrests of members of the security forces with links to extreme right-wing groups (something particularly noticeable in Germany); a growing number of vaccination centre bombings; and finally, spates of 5G mast attacks across Europe. The last two are not exclusively linked to the Far Right, though there are often links. All, however, point to a pent-up anger that could come to the fore in a dangerous fashion.

Two specific plots, which came a year apart from each other, underscore these trends. First, in mid-May 2021, Jürgen Conings, a radicalised soldier who was already under surveillance for his extreme right-wing links, fled with weapons stolen from his barracks, leaving behind a note for his girlfriend that claimed he was "going to join the resistance"³⁰ and did not expect to survive. He had previously expressed anger towards a prominent Belgian virologist, and there were fears he was planning on targeting the latter for murder.³¹ Conings was found dead just over a month later, having taken his own life.

As investigation into his case continued, it was uncovered that Conings was a long-standing target of authorities and had close links to other prominent figures in the extreme right-wing movement in Europe.³² Conings's case became something of a cause célèbre amongst the far-right and anti-vaccination communities in Belgium and French-speaking Europe, with thousands signing petitions and a number of protest marches organised in support of his case.³³ While it is not clear whether his case inspired others to violence, it did illustrate the depth of support that exists below the surface, as well as the very smooth interlinking of extreme-right and anti-vaccination ideologies, all alongside the notion of using violence to fight back against the government.

This worrying pattern was found again in April 2022 in Germany, when authorities disrupted a plot involving a cell of five men who were planning to kidnap the country's health minister and overthrow the government. The men had managed to obtain at least one Kalashnikov machine gun and were reportedly in advanced stages of planning their attack.³⁴ Calling themselves the "United Patriots" (Vereinte Patrioten), the group had a long history of anti-pandemic activism.³⁵ The leader had reportedly been boasting about his plans up to a year before the arrests, and the group was made up of individuals who were also active Reichsbürger members.

The Reichsbürger movement is similar to the Sovereign Citizen movement found in North America (and in parts of Europe), and is made up of a few thousand individuals who reject the German state, accusing it of being an overbearing construct imposed on the nation in the wake of the Second World War.³⁶ They are a growing concern to German authorities, who find the individuals very violent during arrests, and are often discovered to have large caches of dangerous weapons. Prominent figures have also been arrested for the murder of security officials.³⁷

What is notable about both these European cases is the high degree of similarity with earlier American cases. Long-standing extreme right-wing communities have now absorbed anti-pandemic sentiments, chosen targets and sought to launch terrorist attacks against them. The targets are often large symbols of the state, and the sort of attack being launched is a civil uprising, sometimes including a plot against a prominent politician or public leader. There is a strong strain of anti-government sentiment in these groups, with the pandemic offering the perfect context for the articulation of their anger.

This similarity may feel unsurprising but, within a European context, such large-scale anti-state activity is relatively new. While not unheard of, traditionally, European extreme right-wing groups or cells have tended to focus on nativist, white supremacist or xenophobic tropes and targets. Politicians and prominent figures have been targeted over the years (Anna Lindh,³⁸ Pim Fortuyn³⁹ and Jo Cox⁴⁰ are a few examples), but it is usually part of an assassination plan undertaken by an isolated individual rather than an attempt to overthrow the government.

Where networks of extreme right-wing terrorists have been found, they tend to be groups that have gone on the run for long periods of time, launching repeated attacks on minorities (like the National Socialist Underground in Germany). Many European countries are plagued with white supremacist, nativist political parties, with some of these individuals spilling over into violence – though these are usually one-off cases. Organised extreme right-wing groups or individuals with an intent to truly overthrow the state are relatively rare.

The pandemic, however, seems to have pushed these networks to the fore or encouraged them in new directions. Angry at governments' actions, they appear desirous of launching large-scale incidents to change the status quo. In this way, they are increasingly mirroring their American counterparts. The Patriot, Sovereign Citizen, Militia and extreme right-wing communities have a long history in North America; in Europe, these violent patriot-type ideologies are relatively new. Governments' pandemic responses appear to have acted as a perfect storm to push groups forward in terms of providing them with a source of anger and thus instilling a new sense of purpose.

It is of course very difficult to absolutely link this trend to the pandemic. It is possible that the broader raising of profile and prominence of the Far Right during the Trump administration in Washington, as well as the fallout from the migration crisis of the mid-2010s, have created a context in Europe for the Extreme Right to mature in this new direction. It is also possible that the large-scale crackdowns that took place across Europe against the Extreme Right pushed some deeper into radicalisation (and we have yet to see the fallout from the growing mainstreaming of the far-right leaning Azov Battalion in Ukraine as a result of the Russian invasion).

In France, the Interior Ministry reported that such trends of extreme-right, anti-state violence took place in the year or so before the pandemic as well.⁴¹ Now that the trend has progressed in this direction, it is unlikely to go backwards. A far-right motivated individual or group, through complicated planning to undertake anti-state violence to overthrow the government, is likely to be

an increasing norm in Europe. Old narratives of xenophobia and nativism will doubtlessly persist, but they will now be strengthened by this new expression of anti-state violence.

As such, the actual terrorist impact of the pandemic could well be gauged by the fostering of a new form of anti-state mobilisation in Europe that in part builds on prior developments (Anders Behring Breivik's attack in 2010 was an early articulation of anger against the state, specifically with regard to migration policies),⁴² but whose organisation, links to the military and growing emergence across the Continent suggest something more substantial at play. And the pandemic response of imposing greater state control, alongside the likely impoverishment of large numbers in the wake of the pandemic and the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, all suggest a context in Europe where grievances can fester. While the blame cannot entirely lie with the pandemic, it is clear that the pandemic provided a context for the violent Extreme Right in Europe to worsen, and laid the foundations for a much deeper long-term problem.

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An Analysis of *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* (Pledge of Death) in Jihadist Groups' Practice and Islamic Tradition

Muhammad Haniff Hassan

This article examines the idea and practice of Bai`ah Al-Mawt (pledge of death) among contemporary jihadist groups through the lens of Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition and security studies. The article employs library research, examines materials of jihadist groups, analyses literature by researchers of security and other relevant studies, and factors in the works of classical and contemporary Sunni scholars. It concludes that Bai`ah Al-Mawt as a concept is not problematic at theological and security levels. Instead, the threat lies in the application and practice by jihadist groups of this pledge.

Introduction

Bai`ah is an Arabic word that translates to pledge in English. In the Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition, there are two types of *bai`ah*. The first is a *bai`ah* of allegiance and obedience to a Muslim caliph. This also functions as an individual's endorsement of a Muslim's appointment as a caliph. The second is a *bai`ah* of commitment to accomplish a certain religious mission or task, or to abstain from certain things on religious grounds.¹ *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* (pledge of death) as discussed in this article falls under the second type.

A great body of academic work exists on *bai`ah* as an Islamic tradition.² Similarly, there are also works on the topic as practised by jihadist groups from a security perspective.³ However, little research has been done on the practice of *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* by jihadist groups as a sub-set to *bai`ah* in Islam. This article seeks to fill that gap in the hope of catalysing a deeper look at it from various perspectives.

The article investigates the practice of *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* by jihadist groups through the lens of Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition as well as security. It begins with a brief description of *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* by jihadist groups and the arguments they put forth. It then looks into Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition for the purpose of comparing the idea and practice of *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* between the two. The choice to solely focus on Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition is due to the constraint of space and the author's lack of expertise in Shiite and other traditions. Finally, the article offers an analysis of *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* by jihadist groups – whether it is problematic (or not) from a theological and security perspective.

For the purposes of this article, jihadist groups refer to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) and their affiliates. It is worth noting that *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* is also practised by various contemporary jihadist groups; it is not exclusive to Al-Qaeda and IS.⁴ However, *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* is mainly relevant to the aforementioned two groups as they pose a serious threat to global security.

Jihadists' Viewpoint and Practice

Jihadist groups practise *bai`ah* firstly as a declaration of allegiance to an *Emir* (leader) upon joining the group under him. It is a form of initiation rite for a person who is accepted into or has agreed to join the group. Secondly, *bai`ah* is made for the execution of a specific mission or task. It is done when a person or group of persons is assigned or voluntarily opts to accomplish a mission or task, to show their commitment to others and to strengthen their resolve.

Bai'ah Al-Mawt, which falls under the second category, varies among groups, with a few commonalities. Firstly, it is done in the name of or dedicated to Allah. Secondly, it pertains to the intent to perform a mission or task. Thirdly, it is an explicit declaration of readiness to die for the mission or task. The extract below, taken from materials produced by militants, provides a clearer understanding of the *bai'ah*:

*"We pledge to Allah and we pledge to Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah, to perform jihad in the path of Allah, and to persevere in the path of Allah. We pledge till death to protect Muslims' dignity, support the oppressed and raise the flag of this religion. May God be the witness of what we have said."*⁵

Bai'ah Al-Mawt has been made for missions or tasks such as defending a territory or hometown,⁶ raiding the enemy⁷ and carrying out suicide bombings using vehicle- or human-borne improvised explosive devices.⁸ For instance, IS reported an *inghimasi* operation – “an individual or a small group immersing themselves within a large army of non-believers in search of martyrdom or causing damage to them”⁹ – in Iraq that was preceded by a pledge of death by seven operatives in the fourth issue of its monthly English-language magazine, *Rumiyah*.¹⁰

IS justifies the pledge by citing scriptural evidence and scholarly opinion, but holds the view that the pledge is neither obligatory nor a mandatory requirement for the accomplishment of a mission. However, once the pledge has been made, it becomes obligatory for the participant to fulfil it. Non-fulfilment of the pledge without valid reason is regarded as a grave sin.¹¹ The same stance and argument can also be found in Muhammad Abdul Salam's book *Al-Jihad: Al-Faridah Al-Gha'ibah* (*Jihad: The Absent Obligation*).¹²

On its part, Al-Qaeda sought validation for the *bai'ah* from the Prophet's tradition known as *Bai'ah Al-Ridwan*, which refers to a pledge made by the Prophet and his companions in a place called Hudaibiyah. Then, the *bai'ah* was done to legitimise an *inghimasi* operation.¹³

***Bai'ah Al-Mawt* in Islamic Tradition**

Within the Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition, *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* is also known as *Bai'ah Al-Shajarah* (pledge of the tree), *Bai'ah Al-Ridwan* (pledge of divine pleasure), *Bai'ah Al-Sabr* (pledge of patience) and *Bai'ah Al-Jihad* (pledge of jihad).

Bai'ah Al-Mawt relates to an important event in the Prophet's history, the Treaty of Hudaibiyah (6H). The treaty was sealed by the Prophet and his Muslim companions with the Meccan Quraish and their pagan Arab allies to end hostilities for the duration of 10 years.¹⁴

The treaty was preceded by an *umrah* (minor pilgrimage) to Mecca made by the Prophet and 1,400 companions at a time when the city was controlled by the Quraish tribe, which was in conflict with the Prophet. From a campsite known as Hudaibiyah,¹⁵ the Prophet sent his senior companion, Uthman, to inform the Quraish about his intention to perform *umrah*, not to fight, and to negotiate the right of pilgrimage to Mecca. Uthman was held by the Quraish for a few days in Mecca, with his absence prompting speculation that he had been killed. An angered Prophet then called upon the other companions to perform a pledge with him to fight the Quraish in order to avenge Uthman's killing.

The pledge was recorded in Islamic history as *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* because it reportedly contained a commitment to fight till death, based on accounts by some of its participants.¹⁶ It was also named as *Bai'ah Al-Shajarah*¹⁷ because it was made under a tree as mentioned in the Qur'an;¹⁸ as *Bai'ah Al-Ridwan*¹⁹ to highlight its virtue in God's eye as recorded in the Qur'an; as *Bai'ah Al-Sabr* for pledging patience in facing adversity in avenging Uthman;²⁰ and as *Bai'ah Al-Jihad* for jihad against Quraish for killing Uthman.²¹

Sunni Muslim Scholars on *Bai`ah Al-Mawt*

Sunni Muslim scholars rule that a pledge of death is not obligatory and participation in it should be on a voluntary basis. However, fulfilment of the pledge becomes obligatory for those who choose to perform it.²² It should be noted that the term *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* and its underlying symbolism was contentious among the original participants. There are many hadiths (Prophetic traditions) that report that some participants disliked the *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* moniker. The most famous among them were Jabir bin Abdullah and Ma`qal bin Yasar; both were the Prophet's companions who participated in the *bai`ah*. They strongly denied that the pledge was to fight till death and stressed instead that it was a commitment to not retreat or return to Medina until Uthman's death was avenged or the mission to perform *umrah* was accomplished.²³ Another critical account can be found in a historical report from a later period, which states that a companion rejected a call to perform the pledge of death and announced that he would only make such a pledge to the Prophet.²⁴

The idea of a pledge of death became more acceptable among Muslim scholars after the generation of companions, when some of them sought to reconcile the "fight till death" and "no retreat or return until mission accomplished" accounts.²⁵

For instance, the renowned Muslim jurist and hadith commentator Imam Al-Nawawi asserted that the different accounts about the nature of the pledge were not contradictory and in fact, when taken collectively, provided holistic meaning to the pledge. Al-Nawawi argued that a pledge of no retreat is to steadfastly fight the enemy until victory is accomplished or they (Muslims) die for it, which encompasses the meanings in the pledge of death, of patience and of jihad.²⁶

However, the abovementioned reconciliation attempts are problematic because they sidestep the fact that there are numerous hadiths containing the companions' strong and explicit denial that the pledge is for death, such as:

"It has been narrated on the authority of Jabir who said: We were one thousand and four hundred on the Day of Hudaibiya. We swore fealty to him (the Prophet) and `Umar was holding the latter's hand (when he was sitting) under the tree (called) Samura (to administer the oath to the Companions). The narrator added: *We took oath to the effect that we would not flee (from the battlefield if there was an encounter with the Meccans), but we did not take oath to fight to death [emphasis added].*"²⁷

It is probable that the Prophet accepted different pledges from different individuals. Some pledged to fight, while others pledged to be patient in the face of adversity, and still others pledged to not retreat until the mission was accomplished, as reported in commentaries of the Qur'an.²⁸ This does not negate the fact that there were many who disliked or were uncomfortable with the pledge of death.

The dislike and discomfort continued among later generations of classical Muslim scholars, and into the contemporary era. This can be observed, for example, from the choice by classical Muslim scholars Al-Bukhari,²⁹ Muslim,³⁰ Al-Nasa'i³¹ and Al-Darimi³² to use a "pledge of no retreat" as the preferred title for a sub-chapter in their book of hadiths. Modern scholar Ali Al-Nadwi also reported the pledge as one of non-retreat in his book *Al-Sirah Al-Nabawiyah* (The History of the Prophet).³³ Another contemporary scholar, Al-Mubarakfuri, referred to it as *Bai`ah Al-Ridwan* in his award-winning book on the Prophet's history, *Al-Rahiq Al-Makhtum* (The Sealed Nectar), although he mentioned in passing that some companions had been willing to sacrifice their lives.³⁴

Assessment and Insights

Conceptually and theologically, *Bai`ah Al-Mawt* is not problematic from the standpoint of Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition. However, the jihadist application of this notion poses three significant problems.

First, when used for armed jihad, *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* in the Sunni tradition can only be employed by the right authority or by groups officially sanctioned by it. In contemporary times, the former refers to the government of an internationally recognised state, and the armed forces or militia groups officially affiliated to it.³⁵ Jihadist groups (as non-state actors) are neither the authority nor a legitimately affiliated group. This is especially so in the case of Al-Qaeda and IS and their affiliates.

Second, jihadist groups do not fulfil the “right cause” criterion for waging armed jihad in the Sunni tradition. They fight for rebellious reasons, causing strife and greater *dharar* (harm) to Islam and Muslims, and employ forbidden tactics such as terrorism and suicide bombings.

It must be highlighted that the “right cause” criterion for legitimate jihad applies to jihad declared by the right authority as well. However, a right authority may wage a wrongful war in the name of jihad, such as Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1992. This makes the use of *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* theologically invalid even if it is carried out by armed forces and militiae.

Thirdly, it is known that jihadist groups employ *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* in suicide operations. This is qualitatively different from the conventional understanding of what it means to “fight till death” and there being “no retreat/surrender”. The latter may involve high-risk or daring missions where death is probable but not certain and the combatants are killed by enemy fire; not by their own weapons or explosive devices, which characterise suicide operations by jihadist groups. The majority of contemporary Sunni scholars have ruled the suicide missions employed by jihadist groups as abhorred by Islam. Hence, the same ruling applies to *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* when used for such purposes.³⁶

From a security standpoint, *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* has its equivalent in military and security studies, and has been employed from ancient to modern times. History records with admiration various “fight till death” and “no retreat/surrender” incidents, such as the battle of Thermopylae where the Spartans fought till death against the superior Persian army. However, there remains an obvious security threat when the *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* is exploited by illegitimate armed groups like jihadist outfits to justify their illegitimate purposes and forbidden tactics.

Conclusion

The manipulation of *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* by jihadist groups facilitates a strict (albeit incorrect) theological validation for their violent activities. The *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* becomes a tool to consolidate jihadist power and control over followers and sympathisers by:

- providing supposed “Islamic legitimacy” that would garner Muslims’ support and endorsement;
- winning over members’ commitment in executing and performing critical missions or tasks; and
- facilitating control over members so they would not resent or resist when ordered to fight till death or carry out suicide missions.

However, when it comes to countering violent extremism (CVE), which often involves delegitimising jihadist ideology and narratives, caution is needed in order to avoid generalising *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* as a theologically abhorrent notion with absolutely no root in Islam. Such oversimplistic claims could potentially jeopardise the credibility of the highly nuanced counter-ideological work being done in the CVE space.

Rather, it may be more effective to counter jihadists’ manipulation of *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* by mainstreaming the refutation of the pledge of death by the revered first generation of Muslims, found in Islamic Sunni intellectual tradition. The companions’ robust repudiation of the *Bai'ah Al-Mawt* as a pledge of death

offers a potentially persuasive and religiously-grounded argument with which to debunk its misuse by jihadist groups.

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²⁹ See "Kitab Al-Jihad Wa Al-Siyar, Bab Al-Bai`ah Fi Al-Harb An La Yafirru," in Muhammad Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*.

³⁰ See "Kitab Al-Imarah, Bab Mubaya`ah Al-Jaysh `Ind Iradah Al-Qital Wa Bayan Bai`ah Al-Ridwan Taht Al-Shajarah," in Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi, *Sahih Muslim*.

³¹ See "Kitab Al-Bai`ah, Bab Al-Bai`ah `Ala An la Nafir," in Ahmad al-Nasa`ii, *Sunan an-Nasa`ii*.

³² See "Kitab Al-Siyar, Bab Fi Bai`atih An La Yafirru," in `Abd Allah ibn `Abd al-Rahman al-Darimi, *Sunan al-Darimi*.

³³ Ali Al-Nadwi, *Al-Sirah Al-Nabawiyah* (Jeddah: Dar al-Shuruq, 1989), 276.

³⁴ Saifur-Rahman Al-Mubarakfuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum - The Sealed Nectar: Biography of the Noble Prophet* (Houston: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1996), 342.

³⁵ Ibn Qudamah, *Al-Mughni*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1984), 10, 368-387; John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 101; Fred M. Donner, "The Sources of Islamic Conceptions of War," *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, eds, John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 51.

³⁶ Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "A Rebuttal of Al-Qaeda and IS' Theological Justification of Suicide Bombing," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* Vol. 9, No. 7, July 2017, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CTTA-July-2017.pdf>.

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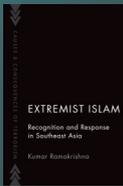
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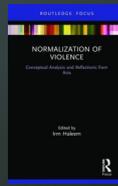


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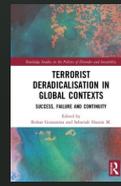
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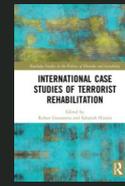
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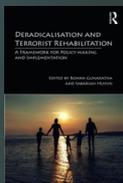
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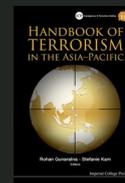
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