

Terrorist chatter

Understanding what terrorists talk about

A Working Paper by: Lorenzo Vidino, Joshua Kilberg, Josh Lefkowitz, and Evan Kohlmann

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Executive Summary

Since the early 2000s the Internet has become particularly crucial for the global jihadist movement. Nowhere has the Internet been more important in the movement's development than in the West. While dynamics differ from case to case, it is fair to state that almost all recent cases of radicalization in the West involve at least some digital footprint. Jihadists, whether structured groups or unaffiliated sympathizers, have long understood the importance of the Internet in general and social media, in particular. Zachary Chesser, one of the individuals studied in this report, fittingly describes social media as "simply the most dynamic and convenient form of media there is." As the trend is likely to increase, understanding how individuals make the leap to actual militancy is critically important.

This study is based on the analysis of the online activities of seven individuals. They share several key traits. All seven were born or raised in the United States. All seven were active in online and offline jihadist scene around the same time (mid- to late 2000s and early 2010s). All seven were either convicted for terrorism-related offenses (or, in the case of two of the seven, were killed in terrorism-related incidents.)

The intended usefulness of this study is not in making the case for monitoring online social media for intelligence purpose—an effort for which authorities throughout the West need little encouragement. Rather, the report is meant to provide potentially useful pointers in the field of counter-radicalization. Over the past ten years many Western countries have devised more or less extensive strategies aimed at preventing individuals from embracing radical ideas or de-radicalizing (or favoring the disengagement) of committed militants. (Canada is also in the process of establishing its own counter-radicalization strategy.)

Radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors. It is no surprise then that counter-radicalization initiatives are equally complex.

Even among the seven subjects in this project there are only limited commonalities in terms of interests and views. While all seven subjects share a common background, based on the evidence of their online activities, their interests, views and approaches remain highly

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diverse. Some are focused mostly on religion; others are more interested in political issues. Some immediately adopt a jihadist mindset; others seem to undergo a long radicalizing trajectory. Given this diversity, it becomes obvious that any counter-radicalization needs to be tailored to the specifics of the case. Flexibility is the name of the game.

Another key finding is that, at least in the beginning of their trajectories, the individuals studied here are all avid seekers of knowledge and information on religion. All refer to religious concepts and frames throughout their posts. Jihadism is a complex ideology that mixes religion and politics. But this study confirms the importance of its religious aspect for many of those who embrace violence—a fact some studies have dismissed. Any counter-radicalization effort, while not ignoring other aspects, should take into consideration the centrality of religious issues for those embracing jihadism. While for legal, political and cultural reasons it might be difficult to replicate in the West some of the religion-based counter-radicalization efforts adopted in countries such as Saudi Arabia or Singapore, the religious aspect should take a central role.

The study also shows that those interested in religion are extremely inquisitive during the first stages of their radicalization trajectories. In the first months or even years of their posting life, in fact, these individuals constantly engage with fellow posters for sources and opinions on religious matters. They seem to be constantly searching for validation of their opinions. Over time, this openness seemed to slowly decrease, and by the end of the posting trajectory, there are only limited traces of questions. In the late stages, instead of questions, statements appear, often filled with confident pronouncements of their own knowledge. This attitude provides an enormous opportunity for counter-radicalization. It is arguable that it is in this phase that any kind of intervention might be more likely to succeed.