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Literature Review: Innovation, Creativity and the Interplay Between Far-right and Islamist Extremism

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
1: Terrorist Innovation and Terrorist Learning	5
2: Reciprocal Radicalisation and Operational Reciprocity	11
Conclusion	17

Introduction

As intercommunal violence has intensified in many Western countries in recent years, members of the terrorism studies community have sought to better understand the commonalities and interplay between radical Islamists and extremists on the far-right. One theory that has gained particular traction of late is that of “reciprocal radicalisation”, the notion that far-right and Islamist extremists feed off each other’s words and actions in a “spiral of violence.” This theory entered the mainstream in the mid-2000s and quickly attracted the attention of policymakers and counterterrorism practitioners, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK). In, for example, his 2007 speech on “bringing down the barriers to cohesion”, Prime Minister David Cameron appeared to allude to it when he described Islamist extremists as a “mirror image” of the far-right British National Party (BNP).¹

The purpose of this review is to examine the extent to which reciprocal radicalisation plays out in reality and, if it does, whether there exists any operational or tactical exchange between far-right and radical Islamist terrorists. To this end, our intent is to summarise and synthesise the literature on how and why terrorists across the ideological spectrum develop and deploy innovative practices, be they tactical, strategic, organisational, or doctrinal in nature. Beginning with an examination of how social scientists understand creative processes within “malevolent” organisations, we offer an overview of what factors have been identified as influencing the innovative and learning-based practices of terrorist organisations. In the second section, we examine the existing literature on reciprocal radicalisation before turning to the limited scholarly work that covers what one might call “operational reciprocity” between far-right and Islamist extremists – that is, an exchange of knowledge and/or material collaboration between groups.

There are important policy implications to each of these questions. If reciprocal radicalisation is indeed as widespread and consistent a phenomenon as some proponents of the theory claim, then it would mean that many Western societies are already trapped in a vicious cycle of violence where the far-right and Islamist extremists act as self-fulfilling influences on each other. Relatedly, it has been anecdotally established that far-right extremists have borrowed from the jihadist playbook, which would potentially help them increase the efficacy of their tactics – both lethal (e.g. bombmaking) and non-lethal (e.g. social media messaging). In short, were this to be the case, it would be a potentially grave mistake to treat the far-right and jihadist threats in isolation rather than examining how they interact and influence one another.

¹ David Cameron, “Bringing down the barriers to cohesion”, (speech, Birmingham, UK, 29 January 2007), SayIt, <https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/599905>.

1: Terrorist Innovation and Terrorist Learning

Social scientists have long recognised that there may be a “dark side” to creativity in organisational settings, sometimes referring to it as “negative creativity.” An example of this would be an employee using innovative means to steal from their employer for personal gain. In such a scenario the actor’s intent is not to specifically inflict harm on anyone, even though the employer will suffer negative financial consequences.² In contrast, creativity that is specifically planned to harm others is a phenomenon that has only recently begun to receive academic attention, particularly in the studies of terrorism and organised crime. Cropley et al. define this as “malevolent creativity”, a form of creativity that “is deemed necessary by some society, group, or individual to fulfil goals they regard as desirable, but has serious negative consequences for some other group, these negative consequences being fully intended by the first group.”³

Drawing on the work of O’Quin and Besemer, Cropley et al. argue that a creative product (or practice) must be relevant and effective with regards to the function for which it was created. A product that is simply novel in an aesthetic sense but has no functionality is not creative. By extension, a creative product may be judged by: (i) how new or surprising it is; (ii) the extent to which it achieves its intended goal; (iii) whether it is well-crafted and fit for purpose; and (iv) whether it can be deployed to achieve objectives other than that for which it was designed.⁴

For their part, counterterrorism or law enforcement agencies must similarly seek to develop tools and policies that have “effective novelty” in order to combat such malevolent creativity. For instance, in response to the September 11 attacks, governments across the globe deployed a range of physical, engineered tools (e.g. metal detectors) as well as systems, services, and processes intended to prevent further attacks of a similar nature. In this sense, the War on Terror is in many ways a contest of “competing functional creativity” between terrorists and counterterrorist organisations.

Importantly, the novelty of any product or technique, broadly defined, will decay over time, and Cropley et al. suggest it is likely to do so exponentially. This allows counterterrorist organisations the opportunity to develop policies and tools to mitigate against the terrorists’ solution in question. Should counterterrorist organisations fail to take advantage of such opportunities, however, a given terrorist tactic or tool may lose its novelty while retaining its effectiveness. The authors thus conclude by noting that, “Highly creative, pre-emptive

² R. B. McLaren, “The dark side of creativity”, *Creativity Research Journal* 6, (1993): 137 – 144; David H. Cropley, James C. Kaufman, and Arthur J. Cropley, “Malevolent Creativity: A Functional Model of Creativity in Terrorism and Crime”, *Creativity Research Journal* 20, no. 2 (7 May 2008): 105-115.

³ Cropley et al., “Malevolent Creativity”.

⁴ Ibid.

counterterrorist solutions must be deliberately engineered. They will not happen of their own accord.”⁵

The question of innovation is closely related, though separate, to that of malevolent creativity. Dolnik’s 2007 book was the first work to approach the issue in detail, drawing a distinction between malevolent creativity and terrorist innovation.⁶ Gill et al. succinctly summarise this distinction in their 2013 article: “While creativity refers to the generation of ideas and novel concepts, innovation involves implementing these ideas. In other words, for an innovation to occur, it must first go through a creative process from idea generation through to full implementation.”⁷ Rasmussen and Hafez, in their edited volume, which is based on a United States (US) government Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA)-sponsored roundtable, adopt this holistic definition of innovation, seeking to address it with a particular focus on *why* terrorists innovate. Using Crenshaw’s framework, the authors describe three forms of innovation: tactical, strategic, and operational:

“Tactical innovation usually involves inventing or adopting new techniques or technologies to achieve unchanging objectives. Strategic innovation entails formulating new objectives, which necessitate the adoption of new operations, targets, or technologies to advance those objectives. Organisational innovation involves new ways of structuring the terrorist group or inventive methods of drawing recruits.”⁸

Additionally, Rasmussen and Hafez distinguish between radical innovation (a new technology or tactic) or incremental innovation (an improvement or modification to an existing technology or tactic). Citing the experts present at the roundtable, the authors argue that terrorist innovation is often incremental but that radical innovations are rarer. They also state that terrorist innovation is usually a form of problem-solving – i.e., a response to specific constraints in the security or political environment.⁹

Gill et al. draw on the same foundational literature, particularly that which revolves around malevolent creativity, to examine what factors influence creativity within a terrorist group and whether particular organisational traits influence a group’s propensity for creativity and innovation. They argue that environmental drivers of terrorist innovation may be distal (“root causes”) or more proximate – i.e., prompted by a desire to circumnavigate counterterrorism policies. With regards to the latter, terrorist groups may be incentivised to experiment with creative acts of violence in response to effective interventions.

Notably, though, such interventions may also limit a terrorist organisation’s capacity for innovation when they impact on its ability to operate logistically and bureaucratically. Investigating this limiting dynamic, Gill et al. go on to use the example of al-Qa’ida’s efforts to obtain chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons as an example of how organisational structure affects

5 Ibid.

6 Adam Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation: Technology, Tactics and Global Trends* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2007).

7 Paul Gill, John Horgan, Samuel T. Hunter, Lily D. Cushman, “Malevolent Creativity in Terrorist Organisations”, *The Journal of Creative Behavior* 47, no. 2 (2013): 125–51.

8 Maria Rasmussen and Mohammed Hafez, ‘Terrorist innovations in weapons of mass effect: Preconditions, causes and predictive indicators’, Defense Threat Reduction Agency: Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, (2010), 2.

9 Ibid., 2-3.

terrorist innovation. Whereas the group sought relatively sophisticated weapons in the 1990s, post-9/11 counterterrorism efforts forced the group to decentralise command and control, a consequence of which has been that its cells and affiliates now pursue cruder devices to achieve relatively less ambitious goals (at least, in terms of their immediate material impact). The authors also identify organisational, small group, individual, and leadership dynamics and characteristics as critical contributors or hindrances to creativity, such as a leader's technical expertise.¹⁰

Dolnik's aforementioned research supports Gill et al.'s finding that internal structures and attitudes – including ideology and strategy – are as integral to successful innovation as environmental factors. In, for example, his contribution to Rasmussen and Hafez's volume, he examines Japan's Aum Shinrikyo and argues that the cult's distinctive millenarian ideology, the megalomania of its leader, and the fact that it was a legally recognised religious organisation allowed the group to develop and deploy a uniquely innovative CBRN tactic.¹¹ To be sure, Dolnik is not alone; multiple scholars have argued that hierarchically structured terrorist organisations are not intuitively creative. Established, hierarchical Salafi-jihadist groups in particular tend to be doctrinally conservative, such that innovation is generally a top-down process insofar as it is driven or at minimum fostered by senior leadership. Gill et al. note, for example, that the technology-savvy Ayman al-Zawahiri personally directed al Qaeda's ambitious efforts to acquire CBRN weapons prior to 9/11.¹² In contrast, Kfir reports in his analysis of post-2017/18 Islamic State propaganda that groups that adopt a more network- or franchise-based approach appear to be more willing to innovate (whether they have the capabilities to do so is another question).¹³

Relatedly, several authors have argued that Islamic theology specifically affects how jihadist groups adopt terrorist innovations and learn. In particular, scholars have pointed to the supernatural rewards offered by martyrdom in examining why jihadist groups first started to adopt suicide bombings as a tactic.¹⁴ Horowitz, however, adds some nuance to this argument by stressing that it is not Islamic theology per se that inspires groups to adopt suicide tactics, but rather that religion serves as a "coordination vehicle for like-minded groups" and thus enhances diffusion vis-à-vis terrorist learning. In other words, religion is not determinative as to which groups conduct suicide attacks (the group that conducted the most suicide attacks between 1981 and 2003 was the non-Islamic LTTE in Sri Lanka). That said, Horowitz argues that the shared ideologies and social networks of many Islamist terrorist groups may give them more direct exposure to this tactic and ultimately influence how quickly they adopt it – although, interestingly, the likelihood that a group will adopt the tactic declines with the group's age. In other words, "Religious affiliations serve as the networks through which knowledge spreads."¹⁵

10 Gill et al., "Malevolent Creativity in Terrorist Organisations."

11 Adam Dolnik, 'Aum Shinrikyo's path to innovation', in Rasmussen and Hafez (eds.), 'Terrorist innovations in weapons of mass effect: Preconditions, causes and predictive indicators', Defense Threat Reduction Agency: Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, (2010), 126-144.

12 Ibid.

13 Isaac Kfir, 'Terrorist innovation and online propaganda in the post-caliphate period', SSRN, (2019).

14 Michael C. Horowitz, "Nonstate Actors and Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism", *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (January 2010): 33-64; Victor Asal and R. Karl Rethemeyer, "The Nature of the Beast: Organisational Structures and the Lethality of Terrorist Attacks", *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (April 2008): 437-449.

15 Horowitz, "Nonstate Actors and Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism."

By way of contrast, Acosta stresses ideological solidarity, competition, and brand imitation within the terrorist landscape as factors driving the continued use of suicide bombing. He bases this thesis on the idea that suicide attacks are actually not that effective in precipitating outcome-goal success, and that groups instead may seek to use them “to gain supporters, promote organisational longevity, and boost or preserve status.”¹⁶

More broadly, Winter et al. argue that the jihadist movement is quite permissive of technological innovation and that efforts to pursue innovation have in fact been a consistent feature of the movement. Jihadists, they observe, distinguish between technological innovation and material progress, which they deem to be religiously neutral, on the one hand and the theological concept of “innovation” (Ar. *bid'a*), which is understood as a heretical practice of modifying Islamic beliefs. Examining three technological innovations – improvised explosive devices (IEDs), strategic communications, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) – the authors find that where debates have occurred within jihadist circles, they have been over the specific context in which these technologies are being applied and their impact on civilians, not the use of these innovations per se. Based on that, the authors conclude that jihadists will continue to embrace battlefield innovation and that almost no technology appears to be off-limits.¹⁷

In her 2020 book, Cronin offers a similar warning. She begins with an historical examination of terrorist innovation since the 19th century, an evolution that she attributes to the growing democratization of lethal capabilities in the late modern era. Many of the technologies she examines were originally designed for peaceful purposes – Alfred Nobel, for example, designed dynamite with construction work in mind – but terrorists have proven adept at conceiving of deadly uses for them, often before traditional militaries have thought to do the same. Cronin warns that the plethora of cutting-edge technologies available today to ordinary consumers offers malign actors a range of options for lethal battlefield creativity that could soon include autonomous vehicles, 3D printing, and AI-driven facial recognition software. She urges governments to adopt a coordinated, comprehensive strategic approach towards the development and regulation of such technologies to ensure that innovation for peaceful purposes can continue in a way that limits the ability of terrorists to co-opt such technologies.¹⁸ Also with an eye on the future is Veilleux-Lepage, who separately warns of the inexorability of evolutionary processes in the field of terrorist innovation.¹⁹ Applying evolutionary theory to the study of violent extremist creativity, his work investigates the forces that lead to terrorist uptake and abandonment of new techniques, tactics, and strategies, noting that innovative processes are an inevitable outcome of malign and covert activism.

16 Benjamin Acosta, “Dying for survival: Why military organisations continue to conduct suicide attacks”, *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 2 (2016): 180-196.

17 Charlie Winter, Shiraz Maher and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Understanding Salafi-Jihadist Attitudes Towards Innovation”, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, January 2021.

18 Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow's Terrorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

19 Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, *How Terror Evolves: The Emergence and Spread of Terrorist Techniques* (Washington, DC: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

A related field of enquiry is that of terrorist learning, which itself draws heavily on the notions of malevolent creativity and terrorist innovation.²⁰ Singh, for one, offers a typology for terrorist learning and innovation in modern jihadist groups, which he does through four categories:

*“(a) intergroup learning within a single domestic setting; (b) intergroup learning between two or more local groups across a state or national boundary; (c) intergroup learning between a transnational group and one or more domestic groups; and finally (d) intragroup learning or “self-learning.”*²¹

Others, adopting a similar framework, have attempted to draw attention to the internet’s role in terrorist learning. For example, in their review of the literature on extremists’ use of the internet, Winter et al. define online extremism as “Internet activism that is related to, engaged in, or perpetrated by groups or individuals that hold views considered to be doctrinally extremist” and find that in many instances, extremists use the internet in an intuitive, non-revolutionary, but persistently innovative manner.²²

Chertoff et al. go even further in stressing the importance of information communication technologies (ICTs) in terrorist activities and offer a new ICT-based typology for understanding jihadist evolution. The authors argue that ICTs have facilitated dramatic transformations in jihadist strategy, organization, and tactics since the 1990s, from hierarchically managed outfits around the turn of the millennium (“Jihadism 1.0”) to inspired “lone actor” terrorism that has become commonplace since the late 2000s (“Jihadism 3.0”). The authors argue that jihadism is evolving towards a new phase of cyber-terrorism (“Jihadism 4.0”) in which the internet is not only a vector for radicalisation and terrorist learning, but an operational tool for conducting attacks itself, a warning reminiscent of Cronin’s.²³

Other scholars, like Vitale and Keagle and Veilleux-Lepage, for example, have further explored this communications-focused aspect of terrorist creativity, both drawing on the specific example of the Islamic State. The former assess the skills it has exhibited in disseminating information online, from its relatively clear-cut digital messaging and one-time development of apps that allowed for the flooding of Twitter with pro-Islamic State content, to its recruiting tactics and use of video content.²⁴ They also note the sophisticated organisation of its operations on social media platforms in general, where official channels and pro-Islamic State ‘news agencies’ disseminate clear messaging to their supporters. For his part, Veilleux-Lepage has similarly argued that Islamic State supporters on Twitter have played a central role in not only propagating the group’s messages but also in portraying it as having greater support and appeal than it does in

20 For foundational texts on terrorist learning, see Brian Jackson, John Baker, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, John Parachini and Horacio Trujillo, “Aptitude for destruction, volume 1: Organisational learning in terrorist groups and its implications for combating terrorism”, RAND, 2005; and Brian Jackson, John Baker, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, John Parachini and Horacio Trujillo, “Aptitude for destruction, volume 2: Case studies of organisational learning in five terrorist groups”, RAND, 2005.

21 Rashmi Singh, “A preliminary typology mapping pathways of learning and innovation by modern jihadist groups”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40, no. 7 (2017): 624-644.

22 Charlie Winter, Peter Neumann, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Magnus Ranstorp, Lorenzo Vidino and Johanna Fürst, “Online Extremism: Research Trends in Internet Activism, Radicalisation, and Counter-Strategies”, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 14, no. 2 (2020).

23 Michael Chertoff, Patrick Bury and Daniela Richterova, “Bytes not waves: information communication technologies, global jihadism and counterterrorism”, *International Affairs* 96, no. 5 (September 2020), 1305-1325.

24 Heather Marie Vitale and James M. Keagle, “A Time to Tweet, as Well as a Time to Kill: ISIS’s Projection of Power in Iraq and Syria”, *Defense Horizons*, no. 77 (October 2014): 1-12.

reality.²⁵ This leveraging of international, indirectly affiliated supporters in online spaces represents a form of innovation, as it is, he argues, unprecedented in any other terrorist organization.²⁶ Moreover, with one of the Islamic State's key goals being the formation of a new society, rather than simply military victories, Veilleux-Lepage suggests that the dissemination of its brand via mainstream social media is critical for it to achieve its strategic goals.²⁷

As multiple authors have noted, however, there are limits to the utility of the internet with regards to the role it can play in terrorist learning and innovation. For example, Stenersen considers al-Qa'ida "e-learning" courses on bomb-making to be a relatively marginal phenomenon, noting that it has always preferred to train people in person in its camps whenever possible. She also notes that individuals who are sufficiently determined, as demonstrated by the cases of the far-right extremists Timothy McVeigh and Anders Breivik, are not dependent on online terrorist forums or comprehensive bomb-making manuals produced by terrorist groups as such individuals will seek out the relevant information on their own.²⁸

Holbrook similarly suggests that the appearance of bomb-making manuals on jihadist forums – like the infamous "make a bomb in your mother's kitchen" article in the al-Qa'ida web publication *Inspire* – may grab headlines, and thus further one set of terrorist ends by drawing media attention, but is generally of negligible tactical value as the bombmaking "process is not all that simple or straightforward."²⁹ This finding is supported by Kenney, who distinguishes between what the Greeks called *techne* (abstract technical knowledge) and *mētis* (practical, experiential knowledge) and finds that the internet may facilitate the diffusion of the former among terrorists but not the latter.³⁰

Holbrook summarises the limitations of the internet as such: the internet offers avenues for would-be-terrorists "to embark on some of the initial steps towards planning and participating in terrorism," but does little to facilitate anything "beyond this exploratory and experimental phase, especially in terms of overcoming technical hurdles."³¹

25 Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, "Paradigmatic Shifts in Jihadism in Cyberspace: The Emerging Role of Unaffiliated Sympathizers in Islamic State's Social Media Strategy", *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 1 (5 February 2016): 36–51.

26 Veilleux-Lepage, "Paradigmatic Shifts in Jihadism in Cyberspace", 43.

27 Veilleux-Lepage, "Paradigmatic Shifts in Jihadism in Cyberspace", 40-1.

28 Anne Stenersen, "Bomb-making for Beginners': Inside an Al-Qaeda E-Learning Course", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 1 (2013).

29 Donald Holbrook, "A critical analysis of the role of the internet in the preparation and planning of acts of terrorism", *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8, no. 2 (2015): 121-133.

30 Michael Kenney, "Beyond the Internet: *Mētis*, *Techne*, and the Limitations of Online Artifacts for Islamist Terrorists", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (2010): 177-197.

31 Holbrook, "A critical analysis of the role of the internet in the preparation and planning of acts of terrorism."

2: Reciprocal Radicalisation and Operational Reciprocity

Reciprocal radicalisation, also known as “cumulative extremism”,³² is a concept first described in 2006 by Roger Eatwell as “the way in which one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms [of extremism].”³³ Lee and Knott offer a similar definition, describing it as a theory which posits that “extremist organisations are connected and feed on one another’s rhetoric and actions to justify violent escalation.”³⁴

Eatwell’s original analysis focused on community cohesion in the UK, particularly looking at the 2001 riots in Bradford – which pitted young whites against South Asians – as well as the 7/7 bombings conducted by British jihadists in 2005. Eatwell proposes ten theories for examining rising ethnic tensions in Britain over the preceding decade, “cumulative extremism” being the tenth and most novel. He argues that far-right groups like the BNP helped create the conditions for the Bradford violence by latching on to the rhetoric of extremist preachers such as Abu Hamza al-Masri, then imam of the Finsbury Park Mosque, as opposed to actual evidence that Muslims were planning attacks on whites. In turn, Muslim leaders in the aftermath of 7/7 used the BNP and other far-right groups as scapegoats for the UK’s societal ills rather than acknowledging the radicalisation taking place within their own communities. The result was that both the far-right and certain Islamist leaders increasingly fuelled a “clash of civilisations” narrative, although the former generally framed it as a clash of cultures.³⁵ Eatwell doubled down on this notion in 2010, claiming that cumulative extremism could be “more threatening to the liberal democratic order than attacks from lone wolf extreme Right-Wingers or even al-Qaida-inspired spectacular bombings.”³⁶

The theory of reciprocal radicalisation has gained significant traction since Eatwell first posited it, not only within academic debates but also among the policy and practitioner community. It has, for example, been invoked to explain rising levels of far-right violence in the West. This is based on the idea that, along with a general increase in far-right extremist violence since the early 2000s, there has been a shift within the far-right extremist milieu: whereas prior to the September 11 attacks, neo-Nazi organisations were pre-eminent within the far-right scene, anti-Islamic organisations now dominate the mantle of the Western far-right.³⁷ Importantly, while not all anti-Islamic organisations

32 The concept has also been called “cumulative radicalisation”, “tit-for-tat radicalisation”, “interactive escalation”, or “co-radicalisation.” See Benjamin Lee and Kim Knott, “More Grist to the Mill?: Reciprocal Radicalisation and Reactions to Terrorism in the Far-Right Digital Milieu”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (2020): 98-115.

33 Roger Eatwell, “Community Cohesion and Cumulative Extremism Contemporary Britain”, *The Political Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2006): 206-216.

34 Lee and Knott, “More Grist to the Mill?: Reciprocal Radicalisation and Reactions to Terrorism in the Far-Right Digital Milieu.”

35 Eatwell, “Community Cohesion and Cumulative Extremism Contemporary Britain.”

36 Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, “Conclusion”, in Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, eds., *The New Extremism in 21st Century Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 243.

37 Katrine Fangen and Maria Reite Nilsen, “Variations within the Norwegian far right: from neo-Nazism to anti-Islamism”, *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2020).

are violent, as Berntsen and Sandberg note, they together constitute a global movement that promotes an ideology that could easily radicalise individuals into perpetrating acts of terror.³⁸

Goodwin expands on Eatwell's original definition of cumulative extremism, which is limited to explaining escalating violence between opposed groups, by invoking the theory to explain the *formation* of an extremist group – in this case, the anti-Islamic English Defence League (EDL), which formed in 2009 in response to a local march by the now-banned Islamist group al Muhajiroun.³⁹ Bartlett and Birdwell similarly argue that reciprocal radicalisation could be used to explain organisational change within extremist groups like the EDL, not simply the use of violence by said groups.⁴⁰

In their examination of hate crime data in the UK between 2014 and 2015, Littler and Feldman offer some statistical evidence to support the theory, noting an increase of varying magnitudes in hate crime incidents within the first several days after a high-profile jihadist attack.⁴¹ Other scholars have pointed to the fact that some far-right extremists, such as the Christchurch shooter, have explicitly referenced jihadist attacks in their manifestos or statements.⁴² In her 2018 book, Ebner offers the most detailed defence of the theory and argues that far-right and radical Islamist rhetoric “are two sides of the same coin.”⁴³ Ebner holds that both the far-right and radical Islamists believe in a monolithic Islam that is inherently political, all-encompassing, and anathematic and opposed to a culturally heterogenous West.⁴⁴ She notes that some far-right extremists have even employed the term “white jihad” to describe their goal of “defending” their race.⁴⁵ For his part, Holbrook assesses similarities and differences between far-right and radical Islamist literature and suggests an additional dimension to reciprocal radicalisation: that the perceived threat of Islamist terrorism will push far-right groups to adopt increasingly extremist anti-Muslim stances as a means of competing for support among far-right sympathisers.⁴⁶

Reciprocal radicalisation has also received its share of scrutiny, however. One common critique is that more attention must be paid to local political and social factors rather than treating the theory as a categorical and totalising explanation of interaction between ideologically opposed extremist groups. For example, Carter, in his case study of Northern Ireland's “Troubles”, stresses the importance of understanding how cumulative extremism interacts with existing sectarian dynamics and the role of the state in managing (or exacerbating) such tensions. Carter suggests that “the greater the extent to which the mutually incompatible goals of opposing social movements correspond to the symbolic and material interests of wider

38 Lars Erik Berntsen and Sveinung Sandberg, “The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 759-779.

39 Matthew Goodwin, “The Roots of Extremism: The English Defence League and the Counter-Jihad Challenge”, Chatham House, March 2013.

40 Jamie Bartlett and Jonathan Birdwell, “Cumulative Radicalisation Between the Far-Right and Islamist Groups in the UK: A Review of Evidence”, Demos, November 2013.

41 Mark Littler and Matthew Feldman, “Annual Monitoring, Cumulative Extremism, and Policy Implications”, Centre for Fascist, Anti-Fascist, and Post-Fascist Studies at Teesside University, June 2015.

42 Lee and Knott, “More Grist to the Mill?: Reciprocal Radicalisation and Reactions to Terrorism in the Far-Right Digital Milieu.”

43 Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 1.

44 *Ibid.*, 133.

45 *Ibid.*, 139.

46 Donald Holbrook, “Far Right and Islamist Extremist Discourses: Shifting Patterns of Enmity”, in Max Taylor, PM Currie, and Donald Holbrook, eds., *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 234.

distinct communities, the greater the chances of cumulative extremism developing in terms of both mobilisation of numbers of supporters and radicalisation of protest tactics.”⁴⁷

Similarly, Bartlett and Birdwell caution that there may be countervailing trends to reciprocal radicalisation, such that an escalation between opposed groups, be it in rhetoric or action, might serve to alienate both groups from the wider public. The authors note that following the 2013 murder of Lee Rigby by an Islamist extremist, there appeared to be widespread public unease about the extremist activities of both radical Islamists and supporters of the EDL.⁴⁸ Similarly, Abbas, in his overview of the socioeconomic drivers of reciprocal radicalisation in Western Europe, argues for an appreciation of the complexities of radicalisation, specifically calling for more systematic examination of local urban social issues, including a widespread crisis of masculinity, in order to understand the broader landscape of radicalisation as it applies to both the far-right and Islamists.⁴⁹

Busher and Macklin, while sympathetic to Eaton’s efforts to shed light on the interactional dynamics between opposing groups, provide one of the most substantive critiques of cumulative extremism. They note that, as an empirical matter, interactions between extremist groups have often not resulted in any escalation in violence, offering the examples of fascist and anti-fascist street fighting in the UK in the 1990s, which de-escalated rather than falling into a “spiral of violence.” The authors consequently lay out six proposals to enhance conceptual clarity, suggesting that scholars better (i) distinguish between extremist rhetoric or narratives and extremist action (such as terrorism); (ii) interrogate the relationship posited by Eatwell between “spirals of violence” and broader community polarisation; (iii) describe the ebb and flow of interaction between extremist groups with nuance; (iv) broaden the study of interactional effects between opposing movements beyond an exclusive look at antagonising behaviour; (v) examine how political, cultural, and social factors shape these interactions; and (vi) examine how the relevant movements are “coupled” – i.e., how focused is each group on the other’s rhetoric and behaviour. With regards to this last point, the authors note that “coupling” may be asymmetric insofar as movement A may be more reactive to movement B than vice-versa.⁵⁰

Overall, the empirical picture regarding reciprocal radicalisation that has emerged to date has been mixed. As Lee and Knott succinctly note, “In some cases, extremist groups and actors undoubtedly see themselves as taking revenge for the outrages of ideological opponents. However, these connections have been seen to vary depending on the wider organisational, political and social contexts.”⁵¹ They go on to argue that jihadist attacks often fail to have any direct, discernibly radicalising effects on members of the far-right. Surveying three popular forums in the far-right digital milieu, Lee and Knott note that the forums’ users often reacted to high-profile jihadist attacks

47 Alexander James Carter, “Cumulative extremism: escalation of movement-counter-movement dynamics in Northern Ireland between 1967 and 1972”, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 9, no. 1 (2017): 37-51.

48 Bartlett and Birdwell, “Cumulative Radicalisation Between the Far-Right and Islamist Groups in the UK: A Review of Evidence.”

49 Tahir Abbas, “Far Right and Islamist Radicalisation in the Age of Austerity: A Review of Sociological Trends and Implications for Policy”, ICCT – The Hague, January 2020.

50 Joel Busher and Graham Macklin, “Interpreting “Cumulative Extremism”: Six Proposals for Enhancing Conceptual Clarity”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 5 (2015): 884-905.

51 Lee and Knott, “More Grist to the Mill?: Reciprocal Radicalisation and Reactions to Terrorism in the Far-Right Digital Milieu.”

as if they were obvious and expected results of broader political and social failures. Some would call for violent reprisals, but many others simply saw these attacks as reaffirming of their prior convictions around immigration policy, societal decadence and the like.⁵²

In contrast to the relatively sizeable body of literature on reciprocal radicalisation, there has been minimal scholarly research on the question of operational reciprocity – i.e., the transfer of tactical knowledge or technology – between far-right and radical Islamist extremists. That being said, open-source information does suggest that far-right extremists have an interest in learning from extremists of opposed ideologies. For example, in 2019 the transnational neo-Nazi group Feuerkrieg Division posted a screengrab from an ISIS bombmaking video on its Gab page. A version of the video was also shared on a prominent neo-Nazi Telegram channel, according to Vice News.⁵³ Members of the Atomwaffen Division have also been known to share propaganda glorifying Osama bin Laden and have spoken of jihadists' culture of martyrdom as something to emulate.⁵⁴ Similarly, an online user linked to a newer far-right group, The Base, urged his associates to read and learn from "The Management of Savagery", an influential book within the al-Qa'ida and Islamic State networks.⁵⁵ Separately, in September 2020, the director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) warned that far-right organisations were using similar social media tactics for recruitment purposes as those adopted by the Islamic State, although she did not specify what these tactics were.⁵⁶ One potential area of exchange is that of propaganda, something that Bridget Johnson addresses by offering specific examples of aesthetic and rhetorical similarities between white supremacist and jihadist propaganda, with a particular emphasis on the former.⁵⁷ She notes, for example, that extremists of both stripes have used variations of the same memes and have produced heavily stylised videos of militant training camps.

Separate to the issue of cross-ideological mimicry or learning is the question of deliberate cross-ideological collaboration. The limited scholarly research on this subject suggests, similar to the above, that there has on occasion been a degree of rhetorical support but little in the way of meaningful, concrete collaboration. In their 2009 study, Chermak et al. found that two US state police agencies reported having knowledge of deliberate collaboration between far-right extremists and Islamist extremists, including in prison, though further details were not provided. The authors also found two other instances of potential collaboration by scouring open-source literature, including an FBI-recorded conversation between a white supremacist and Islamist extremist in which the two men discussed establishing operational ties and inciting a civil war in America. They also found four instances in which far-right or Islamist extremists spoke favourably of the opposing movement or suggested cooperation across

52 Ibid.

53 Ben Makuch and Mack Lamoureux, "Neo-Nazis Are Glorifying Osama Bin Laden", *Vice*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bjvw4a/neo-nazis-are-glorifying-osama-bin-laden>.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Andrew Greene, "Right-wing extremists using Islamic State tactics to recruit, ASIO warns, amid spike in surveillance", *Australia Broadcasting Corporation*, 22 September 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-22/right-wing-extremists-asio-islamic-state-tactics/12690002>.

57 Bridget Johnson, "White supremacist threat has 'striking resemblance' to jihadism, experts tell Congress", *HS Today*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/white-supremacist-threat-has-striking-resemblance-to-jihadism-experts-tell-congress/>; Bridget Johnson, "How Islamist extremists and white supremacists try to exploit civil unrest", *HS Today*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/how-islamist-extremists-and-white-supremacists-try-to-exploit-civil-unrest/>.

movements, as well as three instances in which extremists appeared to have ideologically migrated from the far-right to radical Islamism or vice-versa.⁵⁸

Ackerman and Bale, using data from the University of Maryland's START program, found that joint attacks between far-right or far-left and Islamist extremists are incredibly rare (21 cases out of 81,799 as of 2009, though it drops to only one if controlled for shared ethnicity). The authors likewise found that most cross-ideological support has been rhetorical rather than operational. They do, however, warn of the threat posed by religious conversions from extremists on the far-right and far-left.⁵⁹

In this regard, there have been multiple recorded instances of ideological "migration" among extremists, usually from the far-right to radical Islamism. Some have also identified ideological similarities between the far-right and radical Islamism. Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., for example, note that antisemitism is a shared feature of many far-right and radical Islamist ideologies and has served as a gateway for individuals in their progression of radicalisation towards violent extremism. One of the American extremists they use as a case study, former police officer Nicholas Young, was inspired by a bizarre concoction of neo-Nazi and jihadist ideologies which he attempted to synthesise into a single worldview.⁶⁰ Buckingham and Alali, meanwhile, underscore the centrality of hate, peril, and urgency as a commonality between the far-right and Islamist extremists in their linguistic analysis of three terrorist manifestos.⁶¹ In sum, there are certain ideological, rhetorical, and aesthetic similarities between the far-right and Islamist extremism that may facilitate an individual's drift from one extremist cause to the other, but this drift is a rare phenomenon in practice..

58 Steven M. Chermak, Joshua D. Freilich, and Joseph Simone Jr., "Surveying American State Police Agencies About Lone Wolves, Far-Right Criminality, and Far-Right and Jihadist Criminal Collaboration", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 11 (2010): 1019-1041.

59 Gary Ackerman and Jeffrey Bale, "Where the Extremes May Touch: The Potential for Collaboration Between Islamist, Right- and Left-Wing Extremists", START.

60 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Bennet Clifford, and Lorenzo Vidino, "Antisemitism as an Underlying Precursor to Violent Extremism in American Far-Right and Islamist Contexts", Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, October 2020.

61 Louisa Buckingham and Nuseibah Alali, "Extreme parallels: a corpus-driven analysis of ISIS and far-right discourse", *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 15, no. 2 (2020): 310-331.

Conclusion

Terrorist creativity, innovation and learning are not uniform processes through which all groups proceed steadily over the course of their existence. As this literature review has shown, there is tremendous variation in how and why terrorists innovate, variation that is driven by a multiplicity of internal, external, and environmental factors. Similarly, recent studies suggest that reciprocal radicalisation is a more complex and inconsistent phenomenon than Eatwell's original work suggested. While it is not precisely correct to say that the far-right and radical Islamists are "two sides of the same coin", anecdotal reports of the far-right extremists' interest in jihadism indicate that the interaction between the two movements is not always one of simple enmity.

In any case, the empirical data suggests that policymakers have reason to be concerned that the co-presence of far-right and radical Islamist groups could aggravate social cleavages and lead to an escalation in violence or rhetoric from one or both groups. Unfortunately, there is no clear-cut "escalation ladder" that would help policymakers and practitioners determine the likelihood of spiralling violence and tailor their interventions accordingly. Policymakers should consequently not treat reciprocal radicalisation as a certainty nor as an all-encompassing theory to explain the interplay between the far-right and radical Islamists. That being said, policymakers should still be aware of the possibility of both reciprocal radicalisation *and* operational reciprocity between these ideologically opposed movements. It is entirely conceivable that far-right extremists and Islamist extremists might engage in escalatory violence by invoking the threat of the other while simultaneously adopting the most effective tools and tactics employed by their adversary.

To help policymakers better understand the potential of such a scenario and, by extension, prepare for it, scholars of terrorism should seek to fill several critical gaps in our knowledge. For starters, the literature on terrorist creativity and innovation has tended to focus on material innovations on the tactical level, such as suicide bombing, with a focus on the various factors that affect a group's ability (or lack thereof) to successfully employ the tactic. What is lacking is a more robust examination of strategic and organisational innovation, to use Crenshaw's typology, including in the online space. Similarly, to date, there have been few examinations of how ideology affects the innovating practices of terrorists, with notable exceptions such as Winter et al.⁶² Likewise, there is no study that examines terrorist innovation through the specific lens of far-right doctrinal literature. Indeed, the discussions of terrorist innovation as a whole remain skewed towards jihadist groups.

When it comes to the literature on reciprocal radicalisation, there remain many gaps. One critical gap is how the theory of "coupling" applies to different strains within the far-right and/or radical Islamist

62 Charlie Winter, Shiraz Maher and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Understanding Salafi-Jihadist Attitudes Towards Innovation", International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, January 2021.

movements, which are themselves not monolithic. For example, it would be worth examining whether anti-Islamic groups respond differently to escalations by Islamist groups than neo-Nazis do given that the former's *raison d'être* is to oppose the "Islamisation" of Western societies. Relatedly, case studies of reciprocal radicalisation in non-Western societies, particularly those with high levels of pre-existing sectarian or intercommunal tension, would be welcome contributions to the literature.

It is admittedly difficult to conduct research on operational diffusion between the far-right and radical Islamists given the limited empirical data on this subject. That said, the literature would benefit from more comparative studies of the two movements that identify commonalities that might serve as vectors for some form of knowledge diffusion or even cooperation. There is an opportunity, for example, to examine the potential of prison networks to serve as incubators of collaboration or ideological migration between far-right and Islamist extremists. Similarly, it would be worth investigating whether any of the far-right extremists who have converted and become jihadists have brought any practices or material knowledge with them that in turn influenced the innovations of jihadist groups or networks. The potential consequences of operational reciprocity between far-right and Islamist extremists are quite concerning. As such, scholars within the terrorism studies community should stay alert for any signs of such cross-ideological knowledge diffusion or collaboration.



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