

# *Radicalization at High Speed Terrorism and the Media in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*

Katarzyna Maniszewska



21

! Collegium Civitas

STUDIES AND ANALYSES

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**Radicalization at High Speed:  
Terrorism and the Media in the Age  
of Artificial Intelligence**

Warsaw 2025

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**Volume 21 publication series: Collegium Civitas – Studies and Analyses**

**e-ISBN:** 978-83-66386-53-2

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.2821838>

**Publisher:** Collegium Civitas

**Ministry of Education and Science Identification Number:** 19800

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## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the leadership of The Kosciuszko Foundation spearheaded by President Marek Skulimowski, The Kosciuszko Foundation Poland President Grażyna Czetwertyńska, and the Program on Extremism Director Lorenzo Vidino for the opportunity to conduct research in the United States.

I am genuinely thankful to the excellent experts and supportive colleagues at the Program on Extremism (in alphabetical order): Sergio Altuna, Luke Baumgartner, Lara Burns, Rosa Cabus Carrera, and Jon Lewis. I am grateful to Prof. Bruce Hoffman and Prof. Mia Bloom for their time and the interviews, which significantly enriched the report. I deeply value the insightful feedback provided by the academic reviewers, Prof. Tomasz Aleksandrowicz and Prof. Jarosław Stelmach. I am also very grateful to Renee Stillings for invaluable language consulting.

I am grateful to my home university, Collegium Civitas, in Warsaw, Poland, for providing the opportunity to publish the outcomes of my research.

## Introduction

This research is a continuation of the author's previous work, which has been conducted since 2002. In her book *Terrorism and the Media* published in Poland in 2006, the author used the case study of the German leftist organization Red Army Faction (RAF) and looked at the media coverage of terrorism during the times of RAF activity and post-9/11. The mass media analyzed at that time were primarily television and printed press. Much has changed since the first decade of the 2000s. In 2005 only about 16% of the world's population had Internet access, approximately 1 billion people (World Bank n.a.). As of 2023, it is 5.4 billion people – or 67% of the world's population (Ibid.). Still, it leaves 2.6 billion people digitally excluded. This data should be kept in mind throughout this paper. The limitation of the research is that much of the findings only apply to digitally included individuals, among them to target groups of terrorist and extremist actors.

Adopting the descriptive and correlational methods of research, based on desk research and literature review supplemented by expert interviews, the author will analyze the media usage by terrorists in this report.

The main research question is focused on the role of the media in the strategies of terrorist organizations, how it has changed over time, and whether the modus operandi differs depending on geopolitical shifts in terrorism. The research aims to explore whether the paradigm has changed in the 21st century and what the trends of media usage by terrorists are with a view to rapid technological progress. The hypothesis is that the modus operandi in mass media usage by terrorist organizations shifted with the usage of new media and with new regions emerging as epicenters of terrorism. Still, there are patterns to be found in the modus operandi of terrorist organizations that can help prevent and counter terrorism. The author argues that a better understanding of the variables influencing media techniques and practices used by terrorist organizations is vital for broad counterterrorism efforts (including de-radicalization).

The work was conducted at the Program on Extremism, George Washington University<sup>1</sup> within the framework of the author's Kosciuszko Foundation Fellowship<sup>2</sup> between August and November 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 2015, the Program on Extremism at George Washington University is a research center on all forms of extremism. "The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work and developing pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public," see: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/about>.

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1925 The Kosciuszko Foundation is a national not-for-profit, nonpartisan, and nonsectarian organization dedicated to promoting educational and cultural exchanges between the United States and Poland and to increasing American understanding of Polish culture and history. See: <https://thekf.org>. The Kościuszko Foundation Poland has been operating since 2010. The Foundation supports intellectual, scientific and cultural exchange between Poland and the United States, organizes cultural events, co-organizes trips for scientists and artists on scholarships to the USA, and hosts American students in Poland. See: <https://kfpoland.org>.

## **Media and Terrorism – the Shifting Paradigm**

An inherent feature of terrorism is the intent to influence public opinion through the mass media. This is shown by the research of Alex P. Schmid (2023), Bruce Hoffman (2006), Audrey Cronin (2020), Peter Warren Singer and Emerson T. Brooking (2019) – to name a few scholars. Terrorists need the media to generate fear, destabilize opponents’ societies and groups, and present their message to the public. The group of victims of terrorist activities is not limited to individuals directly affected by a given event. Through ‘proxy victimization,’ the group expands and can even be global in this era of online globalization, especially when combined with traditional media coverage. This essence of the terrorism–media relationship is perhaps best captured in the quotes by Brian M. Jenkins: “Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is theater” (Jenkins 1974: 4) and by Margaret Thatcher: “We must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend” (Thatcher 1985: 29). Both quotes are still relevant today. This paper will take a closer look at the *modus operandi* and the technological progress exploited by the terrorists.

Terrorist organizations may be among the greatest beneficiaries of the digital revolution, harnessing technological progress (Cronin 2020; Hoffman 2006). They embraced the potential for propaganda, recruitment, fundraising, and training, all of which will be discussed in this report. In the era of social media and the widespread availability of technical equipment enabling the recording and transmission of messages and content created by (means of) Artificial Intelligence (AI), anyone can become a quasi-professional content creator, including terrorists and their sympathizers.

In the 21st century, political extremists have not only the support of some traditional media outlets; they also run their own media outlets, social media channels, and groups, thanks to which they can design the communication process and influence it to a much greater extent. Their ability to influence public opinion



grew dramatically. It is, therefore, worth considering how strong the influence of the mass media is on individuals and how terrorists can take advantage of this.

The media inform, educate, and provide entertainment. Among the most essential functions they perform is the role of the “fourth estate.” They fulfill the role of controlling political life because they constantly observe it and publicize pathological behaviors (e.g., corruption). For many of us, the media is the only source of knowledge about politics. The media set the so-called “information agenda of the day,” reinforced by appropriately highlighting certain information and sometimes entirely omitting others. A lengthy article with a title in a larger font, which appears on the front page of a newspaper or at the top of an online platform, is considered more important by readers than one that appears on page five (or after scrolling down), in smaller print among many other pieces of information.

In the pre-social media era, terrorists depended on the traditional mass media to achieve their goals. At the same time, they were undoubtedly aware that practically no media outlet would present a kidnapping or bombing in a positive light, regardless of the motivation behind it. Thus, the media shaped public opinion by simply reporting on attacks, events, or political demands put forward by terrorist organizations. Usually, the influence of the media on public opinion has been indirect – determined by the number of articles on a given topic or the selection of information, which could also pose a threat. If a phenomenon is presented in the mass media, it also exists in public opinion. Moreover, if a topic – e.g., terrorism – is overrepresented in media coverage, it can lead to distortion in the perception of reality by media recipients – e.g., their fears of further terrorist attacks are exaggerated relative to the actual or statistical threat (Maniszewska 2006; Ead. 2024).

The above-described paradigm has changed with the spread of social media; the traditional media coverage, combined with social media, only amplified the effects. Although this report’s main foci are not the state supporters of terrorism, it has to be noted that the terrorist agenda is further advanced with the assistance of state sponsors of terrorism as part of information warfare.

Depending on the content creator advancing terrorist strategies the following three main types of content can be distinguished:

- a) Terrorism supporting content by traditional media outlets (press, radio, television and their online channels),
- b) terrorist generated content (primarily online),
- c) user generated terrorism supporting content.

All the above-named types of content can reinforce the message and help terrorists achieve their goals, even if journalists and users do so unintentionally. The forms may occur simultaneously and synchronized but also separately, and the configuration may differ depending on the region. While further research is needed, the assumption is that the three main content types combined bring more effective coverage, allowing for reaching more individuals. Moreover, in this regard, the role of traditional media outlets is vital as they not only allow for reaching audiences but can also lend credibility. This is particularly visible in the case of Hamas, which will be discussed in this report.

According to Sergio Altuna<sup>3</sup> „traditional media outlets are a very needed collaborator to amplify the message.” Altuna believes that „a newspaper at least 15 years ago had more credibility than influencers today. Pieces were researched, verified, fact checked. Today – the influencers communicate in a way that resonated with the interest of the followers.” Among the issues further enabling the dissemination of terrorist narratives, Bruce Hoffman<sup>4</sup> emphasizes the presently observed lack of journalistic standards and “safety net” based on editorial process and factchecking. Hoffman, citing Matti Friedman from Free Press, former Associated Press correspondent, emphasizes that most of the newspapers in America started to not report the news but write in a way that appealed to their audience. In this way the media became increasingly biased.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Altuna, Sergio. Personal Interview. 19 September 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Hoffman, Bruce. Personal interview. 18 September 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In addition, terrorism supporting content creation and dissemination can be state-sponsored, even if (some of) the content creators, journalists, and influencers may not know they are advancing malign foreign influence.

The factor contributing to the success of disinformation campaigns is the phenomenon of truth decay, defined by Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael Rich (2018) as a set of four trends: “increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data, a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, the increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact and the declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information” (Kavanagh, Rich 2018: 10-11). Truth decay is a fertile ground for extremism, it contributes to the acceptance of political violence<sup>6</sup> and fuels radicalization.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2023 a Public Religion Research Institute survey showed that 23% of Americans expressed acceptance for political violence: „The rise in support of political violence comes amid growing mistrust in media, massive demographic shifts across the nation, and a boom in misinformation and unchecked bigoted content on social media” (Contreras 2023).

## Weaponization of Social Media

Many terrorist groups and states aligned with them do not view the war they are waging as something to be won by means of kinetic, conventional armies. On the contrary, they aim for the perpetuation of conflict which is seen as a long-term venture featuring political and violent irregular operations that will eventually bring the power and control (Schultz et al. 2009). To be effective, the terrorist non-state actors use deliberate communication strategies that are aligned with their primary goals and are aimed at different target groups. They may seek acceptance and/or sympathy within a local population and/or international community, trying to justify the illegal use of force to pursue their ideological aims (Schultz et al. 2009). In most cases, however, the communication aimed at external audiences (“external” understood as those who are not potential sympathizers) uses fear (Maniszewska 2006).

“Social media and media, in general, are being used to increase not only sympathy but also anger and antipathy against the enemy, tailoring and having curated, bespoke messages for different kinds of audiences.” – Mia Bloom emphasizes.<sup>7</sup> She points to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which had different messages addressed to various groups, not only to terrorize the West, but also targeted messages to doctors and medical staff, to women, etc. “And the net of adversaries of the West, NATO, the European Union – Iran, China, Russia are either helping create or spread the message.” – says Bloom<sup>8</sup>.

Depending on the target group and goals to be reached, terrorist organizations may have different communication strategies; they may aim at mobilizing sympathizers and radicalizing and/or intimidating the enemy. Both end goals are not mutually exclusive; they are often pursued simultaneously to advance the terrorist agenda:

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<sup>7</sup> Mia Bloom. Personal Interview. 23 October 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

- **Mobilize sympathizers** in order to:
  - A)** recruit new members;
  - B)** radicalize ‘lone actors’;
  - C)** gain financial support;
  - D)** gain additional media reach (e.g., help propagate the online content to reach a new, wider audience).
- **Intimidate the ‘enemy’** in order to:
  - A)** instill fear in the public;
  - B)** bring the message (e.g., jihadism) to a wider audience;
  - C)** expand the victim groups by ‘proxy victimization’ so that the psychological effects of terrorism are felt by a larger group than the direct victims of terrorism.

All the above could be successfully achieved by different terrorist organizations or movements in the pre-Internet or pre-social media era. However, the spread of new tools of mass communication was a turning point in the development of terrorism, allowing for exponential growth in all the above-mentioned areas.

Researchers and thinkers debate what AI is and what the possible development scenarios are for technology (Heaven 2024). There is no generally accepted definition of the concept (Sheikh et al. 2023). For methodological clarity, Artificial Intelligence (a term coined by American computer scientist John McCarthy in 1956) will be understood in this paper as a “technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem-solving, decision making, creativity, and autonomy” (Stryker, Kavlakoglu 2024). Generative AI will be understood as a “machine-learning model that is trained to create new data, rather than making a prediction about a specific dataset. A generative AI system is one that learns to generate more objects that look like the data it was trained on” (Zewe 2023).

The Report on Digital Defense issued by Microsoft in 2024 confirms that state threat actors are using AI for influence operations; among the tools are AI-generated images, deepfakes, and audio and video manipulations used to influence perception and boost societal engagement in conspiratorial narratives (Microsoft

2024). Although the Microsoft report does not directly discuss terrorist supporting narratives<sup>9</sup>, one can assume that similar techniques are also used to advance terrorist narrative.

The use of Artificial Intelligence to advance the terrorist agenda presents a new development stage and a new speed and as such, consequences unseen before. According to Bruce Hoffman, AI-enhanced fake content acts like a trigger. “Once you pull it, the bullet is released and it doesn’t come back, just like a real bullet. In this case it’s a digital one, that will prompt people to take action but what they may be responding to has no basis in facts”.<sup>10</sup>

The cutting-edge IT tools enabling this development became:

- A)** available (basic IT equipment is sufficient);
- B)** low cost (or available free of charge);
- C)** easy to use (you don’t need a tech-savvy person, and you do not need an expert in communication or political marketing or propaganda to produce professional looking content that will be produced along with a targeting plan).

Peter Warren Singer and Emerson Brooking in *Like War. The Weaponization of Social Media*, wrote that five core principles have been influencing the weaponization of the Internet. First, the Internet has been developed as the “preeminent medium of global communication, commerce, and politics” (Singer, Brooking 2019: 21). Second – “the internet has become a battlefield” where many wars are waged with no clear borders, and as a result, “every battle seems personal, but every conflict is global” (Ibid.: 22). Third – the Internet changes how conflicts are fought, with power measured by the “command of attention” instead of high-tech advancements or physical strength (Ibid.). Fourth – the meaning of “war” changes because of the Internet; winning online battles wins the real world – not only cyberspace (Ibid.). Fifth – we are all part of this war (Ibid.: 23). In addition, the

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<sup>9</sup> The report mentions the role of AI for recruitment to terrorist organizations. See: Microsoft 2024: 88.

<sup>10</sup> Hoffman, Bruce. Personal interview. 18 September 2024.

weaponization of social media can have direct implications offline, and here, as an example, the “Twitter Wars” between IDF and Hamas are given by Singer and Brooking. Reportedly, IDF took the numbers of likes and re-tweets into account in targeting strategies on the ground (Ibid.: 9).

Social media put a powerful tool into the hands of terrorists and extremists. Modern, social media enhanced storytelling and visualization have been strategically exploited in conflicts and as Bernd Hirschberger writes, it can make a difference. In his research, he refers to pictures and stories and states that “negative pictures and stories can mobilize against a conflict party.” In contrast, “positive pictures and stories can help mobilize support in favor of a conflict party” (Hirschberger 2020: 9-13).

Hirschberger thoroughly analyzes the case of external communication by Palestine versus Israel. Among the outcomes of his research, one is especially relevant in the context of this paper: sympathy for the underdog. Public sympathy for the underdog is a researched evidenced effect (Quesque, et al. 2021). People are inclined to feel sympathetic towards the weaker, less powerful actor in a conflict and tend to adopt the emotional perspective of the powerless. It is the sympathy for David in his quest against Goliath; it is the sympathy for Cinderella in her struggle against the evil stepsisters (this example is given in the research paper by Quesque, et al.), or for Harry Potter.

It is a trope widely used in fiction; however, it translates into real life and can influence politics and individual decision-making. Thus, public opinion should be aware of this tendency, especially if actors in conflict try to strategically position themselves as underdogs. Let us not forget that the underdogs can also be the aggressors, which has been the case of Hamas throughout the years, with the peak reached with the October 7, 2023 attack. This attack for the period of 19070-2023 is the deadliest terrorist attack by number of fatalities per capita (Byman et al. 2023).

However, the fact is that the strategically used underdog motive (Hirschberger 2020) combined with extensive social media presence can be decisive for communication success. To give just one example that can hint at the effectiveness of the campaigns led by Hamas: Gallup poll (Jones 2023) showed that 55 percent of

Americans disapproved of Israel's actions, and a Pew Research Center poll from April 2024 showed that younger Americans are more likely to sympathize with the Palestinian people than the Israeli people (Silver 2024).

Echo chambers and algorithms feeding the recipients with pre-selected content are among the factors increasing the potential for radicalization. The study *How Algorithms Promote Self-Radicalization: Audit of TikTok's Algorithm Using a Reverse Engineering Method* showed in the example of TikTok the existence of a loop effect leading to enhanced auto-radicalization (Shin, Jitkajornwanich 2024). In short: the more radical content there is, the more radical the recipient becomes, the more radical the recipient becomes, the more radical content the algorithm feeds him. The content feed suggested by algorithms is gradually becoming more and more radical and in sync with the user's radicalization process (Ibidem). However, "[a]lgorithms are much more than mere technological instruments" – Ico Maly writes in *Metapolitics, Algorithms and Violence. New Right Activism and Terrorism in the Attention Economy* and explains how algorithms, in fact, are just a tool that depends on being "fed" with content and data by people and that even if we consider the development of AI, still at the end of this chain there is a human being with values, ideas and goals, which may be economic, political, educational, ideological etc. (Maly 2024: 29).

Once again, it must be emphasized that not all people are part of online wars, as not all are online. Singer and Brooking write that there are 4 billion people using the Internet (Singer, Brooking 2019: 23). Only 4 billion, one could add. We must not forget about the billions of people who are digitally excluded and, hence, cannot be target groups of online radicalization efforts. To put it in a more concrete perspective: when the list of the top 10 countries most impacted by terrorism as identified in the Global Terrorism Index – GTI (Institute for Economics & Peace 2024: 18) is crosschecked with the statistics presented by the World Bank Data



on individuals using the Internet<sup>11</sup>, it becomes clear that the percentage of Internet users does not correlate with the level of terrorism threat. In fact, one could say it is inversely proportional for the majority of countries which are at the forefront of addressing terrorism.

**Table 1.** Individuals using the Internet in countries ranked 1-10 in GTI 2024

GTI 2024 Rank	Country	% of population using the Internet	Year of data collection (latest available data)
1	Burkina Faso	20	2022
2	Israel	92	2022
3	Mali	33	2022
4	Pakistan	33	2022
5	Syria	36	2020
6	Afghanistan	18	2020
7	Somalia	28	2022
8	Nigeria	35	2022
9	Myanmar	44	2021
10	Niger	17	2022

**Source:** World Bank Group. (2024).

As comparison, for the European Union for the year 2022 individuals using the Internet were 90% of the population, for OECD member states 90% and for the United States 97%.

The data may show where (in which geographical locations) the terrorists can use new media effectively and where the usage of new media may not be the decisive factor for the terrorists to psychologically target the general population. However, online media are still used by groups such as Boko Haram, Jama’at

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<sup>11</sup> Individuals using the Internet (% of population) – Internet users are individuals who have used the Internet (from any location) in the last 3 months. The Internet can be used via a computer, mobile phone, personal digital assistant, games machine, digital TV, etc. See: World Bank Group. (s.a)..

Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), or Al Shabab to psychologically target social groups that have access to the Internet in the given regions. It can be assumed that the targets of the psychological part of terrorism in countries with low Internet penetration rates are representatives of the local and national governments, journalists, and business representatives – and not the broader populations. In other words, the aim of instilling fear and destabilizing society can be realized by targeting selected groups situated higher on the social strata. Furthermore, the messages can target populations abroad, including developed countries.

The propaganda strategy by ISIS is a suitable example here. John Horgan presents the case study of ISIS in the book about the psychology of terrorism, *Terrorist Mind*, where the increased role of social media in radicalization is discussed. Starting in 2014, ISIS brought its media presence to a new level with a series of recordings of very carefully staged executions. To engage the audience, ISIS even asked the followers which way they should kill one of the hostages, and as a result, one of the hostages – a Jordanian pilot – was burned alive. The atrocity was also recorded and published online (Horgan 2024: 61). Marshal Sella writes about the global brand of savagery that ISIS created, which became a Jihadist franchise specialized in shocking and instilling fear through the highly professional use of new media (Sella 2014).

Omar Mohamed points out that after 9/11, mass casualties (the more brutal and ruthless, the better) became standard for jihadist organizations. To instill fear, shock the enemy, and destabilize the socio-political situation, the jihadists have deliberately raised the bar on cruelty. This, as Mohamed argues, is part of a strategy aimed at provoking the adversary, acting as a trigger for wrath and revenge (Mohammed 2023). The case of the October 7 attack – with Hamas terrorists (recording the attack with GoPro cameras<sup>12</sup>) targeting, killing, and mutilating the victims (among them children, newborns, elderly, and women) shows that Mohammed's hypothesis is valid.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Washington Post* wrote in January 2024 that the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack is among the most well-documented in history with evidence from smartphone cameras and GoPros (Dwoskin 2024).

The examples are, unfortunately, many. One of the most recent (at the time of writing) is the massacre in Burkina Faso, where the jihadists from JNIM killed over 200 and injured another 150 people, recording and posting the massacre on the Internet – as reported by *Al Jazeera* Staff (2024). Singer and Brooking draw attention to anger as the most “interactive” emotion that causes content to spread fast and far on social networks (Singer, Brooking 2019: 162). At the same time, some studies suggest that anger may lead to increased susceptibility to believing in fake news (e.g. Martel, Pennycook, Rand 2020). Due to its “effectiveness” (perceived believability and dissemination potential), content based on anger (or aimed at causing recipients’ anger) is deliberately exploited in communication by the extremists, terrorists, and state actors behind disinformation campaigns. ISIS is again named as an example. Their propaganda is aimed at not only terrorizing the West but also causing anger that leads to anti-Islam sentiments and actions, which can be used among ISIS supporters to justify the need for terrorism to protect Islam (Singer, Brooking 2019: 162-163).

While analyzing the Europol TE-SAT reports, it is visible that ISIS propaganda was shifting its message between glorious jihadism and the need to avenge Muslims. For instance, in 2016, as reported by TE-SAT 2017, “[The Islamic State] messages shifted from the rhetoric of victorious Islam to calls for retaliation for alleged attacks on Islam” (Europol 2017: 29). The narrative responds to political and societal developments and feeds on social sentiments and topics that resonate in public discourse. In this context, it is not surprising that in 2024, the ISIS narrative moved toward calls for revenge with emphasis on Palestine, as in the example of the statement issued by the organization after the attack in August 2024 in Solingen, Germany: “in revenge for Muslims in Palestine and everywhere” (Maher, Tolba 2024).

Not only a shift in the message but also in target groups accompanies the development of terrorism. According to Sergio Altuna, who researched the narratives by Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, content distribution between the target groups shifted in the first decade of the 21st century. From 2002 to 2006, according to Altuna’s research, the propaganda was about 95% directed towards the

general Arab-speaking public (about 95%), and approx. 5% was targeted at the West. In 2007, the amount of propaganda targeting Western audiences (easily accessible in their languages) increased substantially, reaching approx. 18% versus approx. 82% in Arabic.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, in its radicalization efforts, ISIS used tactics similar to legitimate organizations and online influencers (among them celebrities), including the use of authenticity or, to be more precise, using content deliberately created to appear as “authentic” – that is, reflecting real opinions and emotions. Research by Matter Communications shows that “81% of respondents have either researched, purchased or considered purchasing a product or service after seeing friends, family or influencers post about it. 69% of respondents are likely to trust a friend, family member, or influencer recommendation over information coming directly from a brand. Consumers want authenticity from the influencers they follow, gravitating toward those that create relatable, original content or provide credible expertise” (Matter Communications 2023). Although primarily related to legal and commercial marketing, this data is highly relevant in the context of terrorist narratives.

Terrorists aiming to increase their influence and the effectiveness of propaganda strive for authenticity in messaging. Singer and Brooking put emphasis on the sense of authenticity that was deliberately used by ISIS in their recruitment strategies. The terrorists tried to “make friends” with potential sympathizers and not only talked about the caliphate but also, for example, shared how sad they were when Robin Williams died and about “their childhood love of his character in the movie *Jumanji*.” Singer and Brooking (2019: 168) see authenticity as the decisive factor for success in recruiting foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) from Western Europe. It is estimated that 5,000 FTFs from the European Union fought in 2015 for ISIS in Syria and Iraq; 3,700 out of 5,000 FTFs came from four countries: France, the UK, Germany, and Belgium (European Parliament 2016).

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<sup>13</sup> Altuna, Sergio. Personal Interview. 19 September 2024.

## Terrorism of Atmosphere and Its Enablers

Gilles Kepel, a French political scientist and Arabist, proposed in his book *Le prophète et la pandémie. Du Moyen-Orient au jihadisme d'atmosphère* an interesting theory of the next stage of development of jihadism: jihadism of atmosphere. It is characterized by the lack of organizational structure, even loosely connected. It requires online inspirers that radicalize individuals, but the characteristic feature is that the inspirers<sup>14</sup> operate within the legal boundaries of freedom of expression. They vilify and gradually dehumanize the target, leading to radicalization of those who eventually go out to the offline world and commit a terrorist attack. The murder of the French teacher Samuel Patty is named by Kepel as an example (Kepel, 2021). This development is similar to those observed within the right-wing terrorism spectrum. In fact, it is not limited to jihadism but is a new stage of violent extremism and terrorism evolution. "Terrorism of atmosphere"<sup>15</sup> is enhanced and enabled by the rapid development of technology, with particular focus on social media proliferation. The development is not competitive to terrorist organizations, rather it is complementary. It depends heavily on the online inspirers, who – it has to be stressed again – are not breaking the law but operating just at the edge of legality. And lone actors are amplifying the message of the terrorist groups, often framing their acts within a broader narrative of terrorist organizations (where the so-called Islamic State can be one of examples).

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<sup>14</sup> Kepel uses the term *entrepreneurs de colère* (entrepreneurs of anger/rouge), coined by French researcher Bernard Rougier.

<sup>15</sup> To clarify the categories of extremism, two examples will be presented. One is the categorization of Domestic Violent Extremist Threat by FBI and the other will be the categorization of terrorist ideologies as presented by the European Police Office Europol. The FBI divides Domestic Violent Extremist Threat in five main categories (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General 2023): Anti-Government/Anti-Authority Violent Extremists, Animal Rights/Environmental Violent Extremists, Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists, Abortion-Related Violent Extremists, All Other Domestic Terrorism Threats. Europol (2023: passim) differentiates between five types of terrorism: Jihadism, Right-wing, Left-wing and anarchist, Ethno-nationalist and separatist, Other.

An example can be found in American cyberspace with the Alt-Right movement that significantly grew its online presence. Singer and Brooking, who thoroughly researched the topic, date the online boom of right-wing extremists to 2015. Online inspirers have been clever in the sense that they did not directly call for murder or violence, which could have legal consequences (even in the US). What they did was the initial targeting and amplification of the atmosphere of hatred, contributing to radicalization. Example: putting Jewish-American last names in triple parentheses as a sign that the person is (perceived as) Jewish was popularized by antisemites on social media, foremostly Twitter in 2016 (Hess 2016; Singer, Brooking 2019: 238).

In addition, the inspirers distributed fake news and, as studies show, falsehood propagates significantly farther, faster, deeper, and broader than truth and can influence the personal and political decisions of individuals (Zhao et al. 2020; Behzad et al. 2023). The inspirers, including social media influencers in politics, capitalize on fake news to expand their reach in social media.<sup>16</sup> “On social media extremism pays. It breeds more followers, and then also imitators” – says Bruce Hoffman.<sup>17</sup> In this way extremist content dissemination forms a vicious circle that is hard to break.

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<sup>16</sup> Influencer Marketing Hub (2024, August 30<sup>th</sup>) defines influencer as “someone who has the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of their authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with their audience. Influencers are usually active on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, X, TikTok, and Instagram. Typically, each influencer is known for a specific niche – be it fashion, travel, gaming, beauty, cooking, fitness, or any other interest area. They create content around their niche, and people who follow them are interested in that particular topic.” In the context of this paper the most important niche to be exploited by the inspirers is politics.

<sup>17</sup> Hoffman, Bruce. Personal interview. 18 September 2024.

## Freedom of (Hate) Speech?

The question of the legality of inspirer actions – that is, spreading disinformation, hate speech, and inciting violence – is of fundamental importance here. To understand how relevant this point is, let us first take a brief look at the regulations within the European Union countries and then compare them to United States policies. The main difference between the EU and the USA in this regard is that hate speech is illegal under European Union law (of Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA 28 November 2008), while in the US, it is constitutionally protected by the First Amendment.

Thus, in the U.S. private companies and their goodwill and commitment to imposing internal regulations banning hate speech provide the backbone of radicalization prevention, with legal measures additionally in place. Of course, we do need to consider the degree to which owners of social media channels are interested in preventing radicalization. The example of Telegram and its owner, Pavel Durov, in custody in France at the time of this writing (Davies 2024) shows that this is not always the case.

Twitter/X, under the leadership of Elon Musk, is another example where the owner is reluctant to implement hate speech protection measures and enforce the X community rules of forbidding hate speech and incitement to violence (X Corp. 2023). This was shown by a report of the Polish association monitoring hate speech “Nigdy Więcej/Never Again.” Even when there are laws against hate speech in a country where X operates, the platform is hesitant (to say at least) to take down hateful content. The report details hundreds of cases of hate speech (against different groups: Jews, Muslims, Ukrainian minority in Poland, LGBTQ+ community) in the Polish language reported by the association Nigdy Więcej to X in 12 months, with the platform refusing to remove or ignoring the vast majority of reports (approx. 90% of reported hateful comments were kept online by X (as estimated by Nigdy Więcej/Never Again Association 2024: 2).

In the European Union hate speech is punishable by law and there is a catalogue of forms of conduct that are considered hate speech, among them:

- “public incitement to violence or hatred directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined on the basis of race, color, descent, religion or belief, or national or ethnic origin [Including public dissemination or distribution of tracts, pictures or other material – KM];
- “publicly condoning, denying or grossly trivializing crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes as defined in the Statute of the International Criminal Court (Articles 6, 7 and 8) and crimes defined in Article 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal, when the conduct is carried out in a manner likely to incite violence or hatred against such a group or a member of such a group” (Council of the European Union 2008: Summary).

Further, on the European Union level, attempts to regulate the dissemination of terrorist content online have been made with Regulation 2021/784 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 (European Union 2021). The Regulation came into force in 2022, and since then, Internet companies in the EU must take swift measures to prevent the misuse of their services for the dissemination of terrorist content (Wahl 2022). Regulation 2021/784 emphasizes that terrorist content online has serious negative consequences for societies (“While not the only factor, the presence of terrorist content online has proven to be a catalyst for the radicalization of individuals which can lead to terrorist acts”) and online service providers hosting such content “since it undermines the trust of their users and damages their business models” (European Union 2021).

However, as Ramin Farinpour noted in 2021 in the article *A snapshot of recent developments regarding EU counterterrorism policies and legislation*, the Regulation is seen as controversial, and the question of freedom of speech is being brought up. “Several NGOs continue to see the new Regulation as a significant threat to freedom of expression. In particular, the broad understanding of ‘terrorist content’ poses the risk that orders for political purposes will be abusively issued under the guise of combating terrorism” (Farinpour 2021: 368).

As already stated, in the U.S., hate speech is protected by the 1st Amendment: „Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press;



or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (U.S. Bill of Rights, ratified 1791). The First Amendment prevents prosecution of hate speech, unless „it directly incites imminent criminal activity or consists of specific threats of violence targeted against a person or group” (American Library Association 2017). Provisions such as codified in the EU Regulation 2021/784 would not have been possible under the 1st Amendment.

The report on online extremism by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued in January 2024 sheds more light on radicalization through hate speech that can potentially lead to offline terrorist attacks. The authors define hate speech as “derogatory speech against individuals or groups based on their actual or perceived characteristics such as race, color, religion, ethnicity, national origin, gender, gender identity, disability, or sexual orientation” (United States Government Accountability Office 2024: 7).

The report includes a comprehensive review of studies on hate speech and hate crimes in the U.S. conducted in recent years, as well as data and interviews with representatives of companies operating online platforms, including four social media platforms (for purposes of the report, they are anonymized). The interviews offer some interesting insights, such as: “[a]ccording to officials from a company that operates one of the four social media platforms, violative hate speech content from the U.S. represented about 39 percent of violative hate speech content globally from October 2022 through December 2022” (Ibid.: 30). Americans represent about 4% of the global population – 4% of the global population versus 39% of hate speech content. Of course, due to the anonymity, we cannot analyze it thoroughly – we lack information on the share of users globally per country and the absolute numbers of users (theoretically, it is possible that, e.g., a smaller number of users being more prolific is responsible for the hate speech content production). Still, it shows a disturbing, however not surprising picture, given the constitutional protection of hate speech in the U.S. We can add to this picture the data on arms in private possession in the U.S. Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware cite the following numbers in their book *God, Guns, Sedition: U.S.*

citizens own 40% of firearms globally, that is approx. 400 million weapons (Hoffman, Ware 2024: 7).

The U.S. is overrepresented in both areas: the amount of hate speech content online and in weapons possession. At the same time, the research cited in the GAO report suggests that the occurrence of hate crimes is associated with hate speech on the Internet. The findings suggest that levels of hate speech online are correlated with hate crimes. An increase in hate speech observed online was synchronized with the time of terrorist attacks, giving the examples of the attack during the rally in Charlottesville (2017) and at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh (2018).

Further, the GAO report is aligned in its conclusions with Gilles Kepel's jihadism of atmosphere theory, namely that individuals radicalized on the Internet can perpetrate violence as lone actors (GAO 2024: 43). It shows how – paradoxically – irrelevant the ideology behind radicalization is. In the American context, the most common motif is the far-right, which is broadly understood (with sub-movements). However, the patterns are characteristic of those identified by Kepel within jihadism.

The author's hypothesis is that a similar phenomenon occurs with left-wing extremists and a more contemporary trend of the "salad bar extremism"<sup>18</sup> or mixed ideology extremism. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Moustafa Ayad analyzed the spectrum of mixed ideologies in the report *The Age of Incoherence? Understanding Mixed and Unclear Ideology Extremism*, published in June 2023 by the Program on Extremism. In the report, Meleagrou-Hitchens and Ayad focus primarily on the mixture of jihadist and, conspiracy and alt-right ideologies.

This broader ideological mixture of extremist left-wing, jihadism, and alt-right deserves further attention. These ideologies are aligned in their antisemitism, which, after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, seems to be a theme uniting extremists of different ideological hues. The European Police Office

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<sup>18</sup> The term was first used in 2020 by FBI Director Christopher Wray to describe the nature of some of the recent violent extremist threats. See: Ayad, Conroy, Meleagrou-Hitchers 2023.

Europol has also identified the trend of mixed ideologies. The Terrorism Situation and Trends Report 2023 Europol states that “[t]he lines between diverse types of terrorism, including right-wing, left-wing, anarchist, jihadist, and other ideologies, are likely to become more blurred in the future. Points of convergence have already been observed among terrorist and violent extremist actors across the whole ideological spectrum” (Europol 2023: 73). The same phenomenon was noticed on both sides of the Atlantic. More research is needed to determine the possible scope and effects of this “terrorism mix,” especially post-October 7, which, as the author suspects, may be one of the turning points in the development of the “terrorism mix,” with antisemitism as ideological glue for the otherwise fragmented and often contradictory ideologies.

How specifically right-wing extremists are capitalizing on the rise of hatred and hostility towards Jews has been shown by the study *From Memes to Mainstream: How Far-Right Extremists Weaponize AI to Spread Antisemitism and Radicalization* where authors affiliated at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Reichmann Institute, Israel analyze the usage of an anti-Israel narrative “to radicalize individuals across the ideological spectrum” with AI-enhanced memes being one of the tools of radicalization (Koblentz-Stenzler, Klempner 2024). Memes are weaponized (Goldenberg, Finkelstein 2020), and as John Giese points out, memetic warfare is conducted by state and non-state malign actors. Memes are used as the “currency of propaganda” (Giese 2016: 68). Hamas is one of the examples of efficiency in the weaponization of memes.

It should be explained that in this article, the key terms antisemitism and genocide are understood according to the definitions by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and as adopted by the UN in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The working definition of antisemitism as adopted by IHRA reads: „Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities” (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance 2016: 1). IHRA

makes it also clear that „criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic” (Ibid.). This part is of vital importance, especially in the context of the antisemitic rhetoric that re-gained prominence after the October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel, capitalizing also on false narratives against Israel (Center on Extremism 2024; Eisele, Steinwehr 2023).

The second crucial term in this context is genocide. Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin, who coined this term in 1944 in response to the atrocities of World War II, defined it as “a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves” (Lemkin 1944: 79). The UN Convention adopted in 1948 defines genocide as:

“any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948).

A study *Antisemitic Attitudes Across the Ideological Spectrum*, published in 2023 (written prior to the October 7, 2023 attacks), showed that the epicenter of anti-semitic views in the U.S. was with young adults on the far right. However, the study also looked at left-wing antisemitism, where anti-Israel attitudes are also present (Hersh, Royden 2023).

More research and content analysis are needed, but the links between anti-semitism and left-wing politics are visible in many articles in the American media post-October 7. To name a few examples: *Antisemitism has moved from the right to the left in the U.S. – and falls back on long-standing stereotypes* by Arlie Perliger (2023) in *The Conversation*, *How the Activist Left Turned On Israel* by Charlotte Alter in *Time Magazine*, *The Long Story of Left-Wing Antisemitism* by Dan Hannan

(2024) in the *Washington Examiner*, *Will Progressives Confront Left-Wing Antisemitism?* by Will Marshall (2024) in *The Hill*, *'I Just Couldn't Take It': How a Jewish Politician Decided to Confront Left-Wing Antisemitism* by Alexander Burns (2023) in *Politico*, *The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending* by Franklin Foer (2024) in *The Atlantic*, *How Hamas Won Hearts and Minds on the American Left* by Lorenzo Vidino (2023b) in the *Wall Street Journal*.

The coverage of left-wing trends towards antisemitism, along with the extensive coverage of protests on American campuses, including the antisemitic attitudes of some of the universities' staff members, show that antisemitism is on the rise across the ideological spectrum. Columbia University can serve here as an example with the well-documented case of three staff members who were removed from their positions "after finding that text messages they exchanged during a campus discussion about Jewish life 'disturbingly touched on ancient antisemitic tropes'" (Associated Press 2024).

Similar developments can be observed in the European Union countries; even though hate speech is not legal – as was shown at the beginning of this section – the extremism of the atmosphere is becoming visible in societies both online and offline. In recent months, it was especially visible during the pro-Palestinian protests, manifesting in the form of clandestine or openly expressed antisemitism, support for terrorists (perceived as "freedom fighters"), chanting of songs calling for the annihilation of Israel ("from the river to the sea...").<sup>19</sup> How the attack on October 7, 2023, amplified radicalization tendencies in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy was presented in the Soufan Center Special Report *Accelerating Hate: The Impact of October 7 on Terrorism and Political Violence in the West* (Broekaert et al. 2024).

The radicalization dynamics show that the protests, even if they may start peacefully, in many cases end up in violence. The radicalization processes may

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<sup>19</sup> Which the author of this report could see for herself in Washington, D.C. in August and October 2024.

be broken down into three main phases – radicalization stages, regardless of the ideology that drives the protesters:

- Active demonstration of social disagreement;
- Aggressive demonstration of disagreement, which includes elements of physical violence;
- Terrorism.

What can be historically seen as a characteristic feature of the radicalization pattern in democracies and open societies is that with each stage, public support declines (Maniszewska 2024). This can also be translated to the online sphere. The vast majority of Internet and social media users are not engaged in propagating content supporting terrorism. In addition, Mia Bloom emphasizes that there is a difference between radical speech and action, and even a smaller percentage of social media users would go out to the offline world to perpetuate a violent act.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, it does not mean that we should underestimate those who can be radicalized to the point of committing a crime. The aforementioned attack in Solingen, Germany, where a lone actor stabbed to death three people and wounded eight, was claimed on a Telegram account by the Islamic State as part of the revenge for Muslims in Palestine and everywhere, can be seen as part of the radicalization cycle and effect of the “terrorism of atmosphere” (Maher, Tolba 2024).

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<sup>20</sup> Mia Bloom. Personal Interview. 23 October 2024.

## **Deceive the Enemy. A Closer Look at the Strategy of Hamas**

Hamas provides an example of the growing use of soft power instead of fear in communication strategy. The terrorist organization managed to position itself successfully as an underdog, building on its previous experiences with targeting messages to achieve the best effects with a given target group. These strategic objectives were realized in the Middle East, but also on U.S. soil, where Hamas supporters established their presence in the 1980s. When, in 1993, the FBI wiretapped a meeting of Hamas activists in Philadelphia, it became clear how fully-fledged and long-term strategy they strived to implement, engaging in “fundraising, lobbying, education, propaganda dissemination,” hiding real goals and capitalizing on sympathy. As one wiretapped leader said, explaining how they should operate: “Deceive your enemy” (Vidino 2023a: 5).

Looking back at the communication strategy of Hamas, one of the examples that proves the long-term communication strategy addressed to different target groups is to be found in the media usage by the organization after the election in Gaza in 2006. The conclusion of the author’s research paper written in 2009 was that Hamas was effectively using the media for four primary purposes, carefully building their positive image in the eyes of the Western public opinion: “[t]he media controlled by Hamas are an excellent example of the ‘modern’ approach of terrorists to mass media. Just like the methods of communication in the real world, those in cyberspace can become a tool of crime in the wrong hands (a seemingly harmless envelope with a postage stamp can also be used to send ‘anthrax letters’). Leaving aside the problem of cyber terrorism, understood as attacks on computer networks (...), it seems that there are four main purposes for which extremists use the Internet: promotion, communication, recruitment, and fundraising” (Maniszewska 2009: 69).

The communication strategy by Hamas has been well thought out and involves long-term planning and messaging that varies depending on the given target group. It can, to some extent, be compared to the fundraising strategy of Hamas via non-governmental organizations, in which a network has been created and

exploited to deliberately obscure the true objectives (“deceive the enemy” tactics) as it was revealed in the aftermath of the Holy Land Foundation process which exposed Hamas’ financial networks in the U.S. (Vidino 2023a).

The websites operated in 2008 by Hamas<sup>21</sup> or their affiliates operating as NGOs presented content in different language versions that varied in message. In English, the content was mainly aimed at evoking sympathy for the Palestinian cause. In contrast, in French, Arabic, and Russian, the content included more materials aimed at potential recruits who could advance jihadism in their regions. From today’s perspective, the websites analyzed back then seem extremely simplistic and not technologically sophisticated. However, they were quite modern back then – adequate to the development stage of online media. In addition, Hamas ran at least one website targeted at children and youth that contained, in addition to educational materials, games, and entertainment, antisemitic content and content inciting violence. The website was created in 2002, and its primary goal was to indoctrinate children and prepare them to continue jihad, also through the glorification of suicide terrorist attacks (Maniszewska 2009).

Considering that Internet access was extremely limited at the beginning of the 2000s, Hamas also set up a presence via television. Between 2006 and 2009, Al-Aqsa TV aired the children’s program *Pioneers of Tomorrow*. The TV station actively supported the propaganda efforts and indoctrination of the youngest viewers. The show was an example of jihadi propaganda aimed at the youngest and most vulnerable target group – children. The show’s main protagonist was a fluffy mouse, Farfour (an adult person dressed in a mouse costume). The friendly-looking mouse explained to the children the justification of jihad and called for the destruction of Israel. In the studio, the mouse, which looked like a Mickey Mouse clone, was accompanied by a girl, Saara Barhoum, who talked to Farfour about

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<sup>21</sup> Hamas was not the first to harness Internet for their purposes. Mia Bloom gives the example of LTTE in Sri Lanka which was one of the early pioneers in using the online space not just for recruitment. LTTE were investigating Tamil diaspora, making sure that they were donating a portion of their income and if they ever wanted to come back to the region, the donations to the movement were paid (Mia Bloom. Personal Interview. 23 October 2024).



the situation in Palestine. The show's format was interactive; it included phone calls from viewers. The show was held in Arabic; thus, if it had not been for NGOs and media who highlighted the *Pioneers of Tomorrow*, it most probably would not have been noticed in the West.

In one of the episodes, the children calling in sang songs about Palestine, including about their wish to sacrifice their lives as “martyrs,” killing Jews, and “the answer being the AK-47”. In this episode, Farfour, dancing to the song, pretended to hold a machine gun and made gestures like it was shooting. This brought international public attention and the show was strongly condemned by international public opinion; consequently, Farfour disappeared from the program (CBS News 2007). Young viewers were given a very peculiar explanation of why they would no longer see their favorite character. The Al-Aqsa TV aired a special episode in which Farfour received a treasure from his dying grandfather – a key and a document important to Palestine's freedom. Farfour, in despair after his grandfather's death, said that his grandfather trusted him. However, Farfour did not know how to free this land from the “filth of those criminal, predatory Jews who killed his grandfather and others”. In the next scene, Farfour was arrested and brutally interrogated by the police, but he did not want to reveal the secret entrusted to him by his grandfather, bravely resisted bribery attempts and then was beaten up by an officer. Then, the black screen appeared, and the viewers were informed that Farfour was a martyr. Farfour was quickly replaced in the broadcast by his “cousin,” the fluffy bee called Nahoul, who in the first episode declared: “I want to continue Farfour's path – in the spirit of Islam, heroism, martyrdom, and the mujahideen” (*Black Book on Hamas* 2009<sup>22</sup>).

The message sent with Farfour to the child viewers may have resulted in protracted war and terrorism reaching its peak with the October 7, 2023 attacks. It is

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<sup>22</sup> *Black Book on Hamas* is a multimedia material, including videos, from the seminar *Hamas – real obstacle to peace?*, which took place on 15 April 2009 in the European Parliament in Brussels. The seminar was organized by MEPs Jana Hybaskova and Nickolay Mladenov from the European People's Party group and Frederique Ries from the Liberals and Democrats for Europe group.

likely that among the perpetrators of the October 7 attack were terrorists who watched *Pioneers of Tomorrow* as children 16 years earlier. The carefully designed radicalization plans by Hamas may have contributed to the rise of the new generation of terrorists. Still, the technology was, from today's viewpoint, rather archaic. With the latest technological advancements deployed, the scope of damage not only to individuals but to societies is increasing sharply, as it is visible in the already discussed rise of political polarization and extremism.

Lorenzo Vidino<sup>23</sup> emphasizes that propaganda production has become horizontal. "The vast majority of products people consume is produced by peers, everybody can create and disseminate propaganda. That creates a challenge. The new approach (to countering terrorism) has to be horizontal, not "top-down". Additional challenge lies in the number of different platforms used by extremists, platforms that are outside of jurisdiction of countries that have interest in bringing the propaganda down. It is more challenging to shut down, to intervene, to monitor." – Vidino says. The mass production of propaganda is accompanied by a phenomenon that Vidino calls "the shallowness of the propaganda". Years ago, propaganda materials were longer, more detailed, such as hour-long videos, long statements. It changed, propaganda materials are keeping pace with the interests and trends in the media, including social media. The content pieces are short, dynamic, colorful, and designed to be catchier. "It is the TikTok style of propaganda" – Vidino said. That is also why the propaganda appeals to younger generation, it is shallow but it's catchy and trendy, thus effective.

The report *Distortion by design: How social media platforms shaped our initial understanding of the Israel-Hamas conflict* issued in December 2023 by The Atlantic Council details the stages of the attack and the media outreach and further coverage by Hamas. "Many users experienced the crisis not as a series of static news headlines but as a stream of viral events, often accompanied by unverified claims, decontextualized footage, and salacious imagery" (Brooking et al. 2023).

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<sup>23</sup> Lorenzo Vidino. Personal Interview. 25 October 2024.

The report points to the role of influencers – users with large follower groups and the usage of algospeak<sup>24</sup> that is “a collection of phrases, special spellings and code words” aimed at preventing posts from being removed or suppressed by social media companies (Nix 2023) to evade the algorithms on social media platforms – members of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT).<sup>25</sup>

The well-known example of foreign malign influence, known as the Doppelganger case, demonstrates how state-sponsored disinformation works and how important influencers’ role is in advancing the narrative (U.S. Department of Justice 2024). The case presents how Russia deliberately operated to influence American politics, internal and international (with one of the objectives of cutting funding for Ukraine). As the Justice Department points out, the campaign was based on influences, AI-generated content, paid social media ads, social media accounts to drive Internet traffic, and cybersquatting domains.

A similar mechanism can be used to execute the foreign malign influence through advancing the terrorist supporting content, especially as radicalization can be a powerful force for disrupting democracies. Thus, it is highly probable that the content supporting terrorist narratives also is in part created, supported, and sponsored by state actors.

The role of influencers is essential here. The documents disclosed by the State Department show how professionally the disinformation campaign was designed. Exhibits called *Good Old USA Project*, *The Guerilla Media Campaign*, and *U.S. Social Media Influencers Network Project* are to the point, concise, precise, based on data, sentiments, social engineering combined with propaganda, underline the need for using a mixture of truth and fake to be more effective, the documents highlight the role of influencers which is pivotal in advancing the narrative. Russia, via its proxies, engaged in collaboration and paid promotion with legally

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<sup>24</sup> This is a trend visible not only in the American context but also e.g. in Poland where not only the right-wing internet trolls but also some influencers in politics are using algospeak, one of the examples is using the word “Romans” (Polish: *Rzymianie*, also not grammatically correct spelled as *Żymianie*) instead of “Jews” (Polish: *Żydzi*).

<sup>25</sup> See: Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, <https://gifct.org/membership>.

operating influencers. Multiple social media channels were used in the campaigns, including TikTok, Instagram, X, and YouTube. The influencers received hundreds of thousands of USD (United States of America v. Konstantyn Kalashnikov and Elena Afansyeva, 2024). Among the influencers (conservative, right-wing influencers/ commentators in politics, with millions of followers), were Benny Johnson, Tim Pool, and David Rubin – the trio is estimated to have been paid by Russian proxies 10 million USD (Seddon 2024) – and the Canadian alt-right YouTuber Lauren Southern (Bond et al. 2024).

Even if (some of) the influencers may not have been aware of the fact that they are part of the system of disseminating narrative created by the Kremlin, and they are, in fact, given talking points and salary by Vladimir Putin, the public should know who those influencers are, what were the amounts they received, what was the content published within the framework of “cooperation” with Russian proxies. It is in the best public interest of transparency.

It is to be assumed that the same mechanisms are being exploited to advance a terrorist supporting narrative, which is yet another axis of narrative helping destabilize Western democratic societies. The case of Hamas shows that radicalization is often a matter of supply and demand. “The narrative by Hamas in fact didn’t change much for the past 30 years, but the audience has become more receptive because parts of society moved to accept a certain mindset that the narrative fits like a glove.” – Vidino explains.<sup>26</sup>

The main challenges discussed in this report are the decay of truth, technological progress, including AI-boosted fake news and visuals, online inspirers and influencers pivotal in the radicalization process, and states sponsoring disinformation enhancing each other. How can these challenges be effectively addressed, and what can be done to reinforce societal resilience to radicalization?

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<sup>26</sup> Lorenzo Vidino. Personal Interview. 25 October 2024.

## Recommendations

To (more) effectively address the challenges relating to terrorism and the media<sup>27</sup> in the age of AI we need to first analyze the intent of the content creators. As previously described, there are three main content areas used to advance terrorist strategies:

- a)** terrorism supporting content by traditional media outlets (press, radio, television and their online channels),
- b)** terrorist generated content (primarily online),
- c)** user generated terrorism supporting content.

In the case of terrorist generated content, the intent is clear: to advance the terrorist agenda. In the case of terrorism supporting content by media outlets or individual users the matter is not that straightforward anymore. There are some content creators or propagators who are “unintentional helpers,” there are some who believe they are doing the right thing aligned with their beliefs, and there are some who profit (including financially) from contributing to radicalization and playing the terrorist cards.

Proposed solutions should correspond with the feature of intentionality or non-intentionality (similar to the case of accidents versus premeditated crime). Other tools and methods should be deployed with people propagating terrorism supporting content without the background knowledge and understanding of the effects of their actions, and another set of tools is required with actors deliberately advancing the terrorist agenda.

It is important to underline that in the context of countering terrorism and radicalization, generative AI needs to be supplemented by the usage of traditional

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<sup>27</sup> The focus is on radicalization and the media usage in advancing terrorist agenda. This paper does not look at the wide array of AI applications in counterterrorism efforts in intelligence, military, protection of critical infrastructure et al.

machine learning<sup>28</sup> models, which, as Zewe (2023) argues, quoting Devavrat Shah from MIT, will be in some of the cases more effective, especially when deployed to make predictions and analyze large sets of tabular data. Sheikh et al. (2023) point out that machine learning can be used in other types of AI, but its unique applications relate to advanced analytics, identifying patterns, and on these grounds – predicting. Thus, Sheikh et al. write that machine learning could be referred to as ‘predictive systems’. In the context of countering the terrorist narrative, it can be of fundamental importance when it comes to identifying the perpetrators (understood as both the sponsors and the main nodes in the network of terrorist content dissemination).

### “Follow the Money”

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the topic of terrorism and the media, an aspect particularly threatening democratic societies, is the state-sponsored terrorism supporting content, which is used as one of the axes of information warfare, effective in radicalizing, destabilizing, and polarizing societies, thus undermining national security. It is extremely challenging to prove in many cases. However, the famous advice “follow the money”<sup>29</sup> may be the decisive factor for success. Analyzing the financial flows can help determine who is the sponsor and the primary beneficiary of the radicalization and social effects of the given piece (or series) of content. Here, an AI-based analysis of financial flows can be deployed.

The preventive and countering actions must consider the sponsors of terrorist supporting content and hold them accountable. Considering the American context, even when, as in the case of the U.S., disinformation, dissemination of fake news, and hate speech is protected by the First Amendment, foreign interference

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<sup>28</sup> Machine learning focuses on using data and algorithms to enable AI to imitate the way that humans learn, gradually improving its accuracy (IBM s.a.)

<sup>29</sup> This well-known advice is given to Robert Redford portraying Bob Woodward in the classic movie *All the President's Men*.

is not, and from there, appropriate solutions (including legal mechanisms) can be implemented to prosecute and hold the sponsors and their proxies accountable.

Recognizing the importance of sponsors should translate directly into allocating more funds and resources to the FBI to support the work of the Foreign Influence Task Force (See: Federal Bureau of Investigation s.a.). There are existing laws that can be used in the cases of proven foreign interference: Foreign Agents Registration Act (U.S. Department of Justice 1938), Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act (2016), Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (U.S. Department of Justice 1986), and an array of anti-terrorism laws, which could all be deployed here as the First Amendment does not protect foreign actors (nor their proxies in the U.S.) engaged in interference in the American system. Foreign sponsorship of terrorist communication and advancing its narrative is a fundamental threat to U.S. internal security and could be prosecuted as material support.<sup>30</sup>

The Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control can designate an individual or an entity as a specially designated terrorist or specially designated global terrorist.<sup>31</sup> “It tells the world a) „this individual or entity is acting on behalf of a terrorist organization” and b) now, you are aware, that providing support to this individual, entity is criminalized behavior.” – Lara Burns explains<sup>32</sup> and gives the example of Samidoun, an organization based in Canada, aligned with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which, in the wake of October 7, aligned themselves with Hamas. They have advocated openly for the terrorists.

„On October 15, 2024, in a joint action with Canada, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control designated the Samidoun Palestinian

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<sup>30</sup> Tarek Mehanna case could be an example here; Mehanna was convicted of conspiracy to provide material support to al Qaeda, providing material support to terrorists (and conspiracy to do so), conspiracy to commit murder in a foreign country, conspiracy to make false statements to the FBI, and two counts of making false statements (U.S. Department of Justice 2012). The case stirred legal debates whether Mehanna’s activities should be protected or not under the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment (Wittes 2012). Mehanna’s case proves that e.g. providing translation services, publishing terrorist propaganda can be material support and prosecuted and punished as such.

<sup>31</sup> See: Specially Designated Nationals (SDNs) and the SDN List (U.S. Department of the Treasury s.a.).

<sup>32</sup> Lara Burns. Personal Interview. 31 October 2024.

Prisoner Solidarity Network, or “Samidoun,” a sham charity that serves as an international fundraiser for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) terrorist organization. The PFLP, which was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the U.S. Department of State in October 1997 and October 2001, respectively, uses Samidoun to maintain fundraising operations in both Europe and North America. Also designated today is Khaled Barakat, a member of the PFLP’s leadership. Together, Samidoun and Barakat play critical roles in external fundraising for the PFLP.” – the press release from October 15 by the U.S. Department of Treasury reads (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2024).

The designation alerts the world that any support for them is criminalized behavior under federal law. Through that, it disrupts the activities of the given entity or individual. The designation may be challenged in the U.S. court by an entity or an individual. However, until the designation is revoked or suspended, their assets are frozen, and support for them is a crime.

Investment in activities that disrupt the proliferation of terrorist propaganda is needed. Lara Burns points to the fact that supporters of the narrative sometimes operate legally in the U.S.; moreover, they enjoy tax-exempt status. “This status should be revoked. Why should these organizations benefit from tax exemptions in the U.S. when their agenda involves disseminating terrorist propaganda? Tax exempt status is for promoting public good, not for foreign propaganda efforts. Thus, such organizations should be held accountable, the status revoked, and the public informed about their activities.” – said Burns.<sup>33</sup> She stressed the need to enhance legislation to more effectively counter the problem, as the legislation is currently insufficient to address the increasing radicalization. This aspect applies not only to social media but also to formal education and schools, including K-12. The U.S. noted a sharp rise in antisemitic incidents at

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<sup>33</sup> Lara Burns. Personal Interview. 31 October 2024.



schools, and there are reports of systemic dissemination of propaganda through the United Teachers Los Angeles chapter (Shrier 2024).

What would be recommended to counter these trends is, in the first step, a systemic mapping of existing legal resources and the creation of a catalog of legal, diplomatic, and economic tools and cybersecurity measures (AI could also be deployed here to speed up the process). In the second step, based on the mapping, it would be recommended to design solutions specifically addressing the state sponsors of terrorist communication and their proxies. As discussed in this report, the experience and knowledge gathered while investigating and prosecuting the Russian influence could be of essential importance. In addition, AI could be fundamental in evidence gathering, and the usage of AI could also help bring the issue (along with proven cases) to international bodies.

The American best practices and lessons learned could be a valuable model for other countries, especially as, for instance, in the European Union, it is – from the legal standpoint – easier to combat hate speech and disinformation, as there are accountability mechanisms built into the legal system. In addition, the Microsoft Digital Defense Report 2024 report shows that the United States is the most targeted country by nation-state threat actors<sup>34</sup> (Microsoft 2024: 13).

International cooperation in this regard is crucial; it should include information exchange, lessons learned, and best practices, knowledge and tools sharing to detect better, prevent and counter terrorism supporting content sponsored by states. Targeting the sources of funding may be pivotal here; it cuts the malign actors off from the oxygen on which they depend – to paraphrase the words of Margaret Thatcher.

Public-Private Partnership (PPP) is also of fundamental importance here, as most terrorism supporting content occurs on publicly available platforms that operate legally, and influencers and inspirers operate within the legal framework of free speech. PPP is needed to track and flag terrorist supporting content

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<sup>34</sup> Followed by Israel, Ukraine, Taiwan and South Africa.

effectively and should include the deployment of AI to analyze the central nodes in the global information network responsible for terrorist-supporting content dissemination online.

The counter-radicalization system should be built on two core pillars: prevention and prosecution (repression). As Lorenzo Vidino<sup>35</sup> emphasizes, the systemic approach should encompass prevention and repression. Repression is understood as legal means to counter, deter and hold perpetrators accountable. “People who engage in terrorist propaganda creation, dissemination are engaging in activities that are as functional to terrorism as weapon procurement or financing. Terrorism is by definition an ideological matter so those who supply the ideology are as problematic as those who supply the weapons or funds.” – Vidino says.

### Education is the Key

Professional media outlets and journalists, even if unintentionally, can contribute to advancing the terrorist agenda. As the popular Spiderman-related proverb goes, “With great power comes great responsibility.” It seems not all media contributors realize the full scale of their power over the hearts and minds of the audience. Moreover, they can have a direct impact on the lives of people.<sup>36</sup>

The media can play a crucial role in the broad anti-terrorism system and help prevent radicalization. And that is not by restraining or censoring the reports but by re-introducing some of the journalistic rules and practices, such as fact-checking and source confirmation, multi-step editorial procedures, including referring to the senior editorial figure, clearly distinguishing opinion from facts. This is nothing new for journalism, and in fact, it is still to be found in journalistic codes

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<sup>35</sup> Lorenzo Vidino. Personal Interview. 25 October 2024.

<sup>36</sup> One of the best-known cases of how the media directly jeopardized law enforcement efforts and contributed to the death of people is the live transmission from the Olympic Village in Munich in 1972 when the live broadcast showed police officers on the way to rescue the hostages – the terrorists watched the transmission live on tv and the law enforcement plan was compromised.

of conduct.<sup>37</sup> Another aspect related to education is training for journalists, especially those reporting on security threats and politics. Already in 2005, the Council of Europe, in its Recommendation 1706 (2005), called, among other activities, to organize training courses for media professionals to “increase awareness of the sensitive nature of media reports on terrorism;” and “to avoid aggravating, through their news and comments, the societal tensions underlying terrorism, and in particular to refrain from disseminating any kind of hate speech” (Council of Europe 2005).

Here, concrete actions could include mapping resources and, where needed, updating and/or adapting to more accessible formats (that would appeal to younger generations of journalists and editors). There are high-quality materials available at no cost, such as *Terrorism and the Media: a Handbook for Journalists* (Marthoz 2017), which need to be adapted and revised to consider the dynamic technological progress.

In the case of individual users, the key lies in media literacy, which should be one of the pillars of anti-terrorist education (AT education), serving not only as an element of protection against the psychological effects of terrorism but also as a shield against radicalization<sup>38</sup>. Education should include critical analysis, the ability to make informed choices, the ability to select and verify information, and awareness of threats and the responsibilities (including legal regulations) of content creators. Further, as one of the radicalization target groups is young adults (including those participating in the educational system at the university level), the development of a university (undergraduate and graduate) high-quality course design, which would be disseminated under a Creative Commons license, could partially address the problem. Such a syllabus could be adopted and adapted by faculty members worldwide and would highlight the mechanisms

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<sup>37</sup> A suitable example is the Code of Ethics of *The Washington Post* (2021/2024).

<sup>38</sup> AT education in the broad sense is education that can contribute to the reduction of the terrorist threat and minimization of both the direct consequences of and the long-term social consequences of terrorist events. (Maniszewska 2024).

exploited by terrorists, raising awareness among students. It could be enhanced and/or endorsed by renowned experts working at leading universities, increasing the chance of its adoption at different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

## Conclusion

An inherent feature of terrorism is the intent to influence public opinion through the mass media. Terrorists need the media to generate fear, destabilize opponents' societies, and present their message to public opinion. However, the *modus operandi* in mass media usage by terrorist organizations shifted with the use of new, Internet-based media, and with new regions emerging as epicenters of terrorism worldwide.

In their media strategies, terrorist organizations are using the content/ coverage from three main content creator groups:

- a)** terrorism supporting content by traditional media outlets (press, radio, television, and their online channels);
- b)** terrorist-generated content (primarily online);
- c)** user-generated terrorism supporting content (primarily online).

The three types may be disseminated simultaneously and aligned in time, but also separately, and the configuration may differ depending on the region. The three main types combined bring more effective coverage and allow for reaching more individuals. By including traditional media outlets, terrorist organizations (and their sponsors) can raise the credibility of the message (even though the journalists' role here may be unintentional).

The terrorists' messages shift depending on geopolitical conditions. It is not always about instilling fear anymore; more often, the messages are aimed at gaining sympathy and empathy. In this process, the role of the online spread of fake news, including AI-generated content, is vital.

Research suggests that while terrorist media strategies differ depending on geopolitical shifts in terrorism, there are still specific patterns and common practices, such as the pivotal role in advancing the terrorist agenda of influencers and online inspirers who often operating legally (within the limits of freedom of speech) incite violence and bring individuals prone to radicalization to commit acts of physical violence, including terrorist attacks.

Terrorism supporting content creation and dissemination can be state-sponsored, even if (some of) the content creators, journalists, and influencers may not know they are advancing malign foreign influence.

Hamas is an example of the growing use of soft power rather than fear in communication strategy. The terrorist organization managed to position itself successfully as an underdog, building on its previous experience with targeting messages to achieve the best effects with a given target group. Furthermore, since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel, antisemitism has re-emerged as a theme uniting extremists of different ideological hues: right-wing, left-wing, jihadist, and mix-ideology extremism.

To counter the terrorist media strategies, systemic actions at local, national and international levels are needed, including (but not limited to):

- a)** education to build societal resilience, including undergraduate and graduate courses at the university level, and specialized training courses addressed to journalists;
- b)** enhanced Public-Private Partnership to (more) effectively track and flag terrorism supporting content, including the deployment of AI to analyze the main nodes online responsible for terrorism supporting content dissemination in the global information network;
- c)** identifying and addressing state sponsors of terrorism supporting content;
- d)** revision of codes of conduct for journalists in traditional media outlets, reflecting the growing role of social media and AI-generated content combined with incentives to follow the guidelines.

In all these areas AI can be deployed to raise effectiveness in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation.

The complexity of the threat posed by the terrorist media strategies requires a systemic approach and international cooperation. State actors alone will not be able to counter the threat; they need to ensure buy-in from the private sector, which is media owners. At the same time, more advanced actions should be undertaken to cut the funding for disinformation. Here, sanctions are an instrument

that would be recommended against the actors supporting disinformation campaigns, including Russia and Iran. Depending on the legal systems in a given country, actions aimed at penalizing hate speech are recommended.

A systemic approach is needed, as there are no shortcuts in de-radicalization and countering terrorism, especially in today's technology-driven globalized world, where the terrorism-media paradigm is evolving. More research is needed and will be needed with the technological progress for counterterrorism efforts to be a step ahead of those interested in advancing the terrorist agenda. The more we understand the practices and patterns, the more effective solutions in broad counterterrorism efforts (including de-radicalization) can be developed.

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## About the Author

Katarzyna Maniszewska is a graduate of the University of Warsaw (MA in Journalism and MA German Philology). She received her Ph.D. degree from the University of Warsaw. Her research focuses on the history and development of political extremism and terrorism with particular emphasis on media coverage of terrorism. She completed postgraduate studies in Issues Relating to Organized Crime and Counterterrorism through the Faculty of Law as well as Postgraduates Studies in Management (Faculty of Management) at the University of Warsaw.

She is a member of the Scientific Board of the Terrorism Research Centre and lecturer at Collegium Civitas where she teaches courses on: Geography of Terrorism, Terrorism and Other Security Threats, Introduction to Security Studies, Colonialism and Decolonization. She co-designed the master's degree program in International Security Studies.

As visiting scholar she held lectures, among other institutions, at West Virginia University (USA), Politeknik Negeri Malang (Indonesia), Philippine Public Safety College and UNJANI – Indonesia Military University. She was awarded the Kosciuszko Foundation research fellowship for the academic year 2024/25, her research project devoted to countering radicalization (*Radicalization at High Speed. Terrorism and the Media in the Age of AI*) was held at Program on Extremism, George Washington University.


Dr. Maniszewska authored two academic books in Polish: *Terroryzm a media* [*Terrorism and the media*] (Wrocław 2006) and *Pionierzy terroryzmu europejskiego: Frakcja Czerwonej Armii* [*Forerunners of the European terrorism: Red Army Faction*] (Kraków 2014), one in English: *Towards a New Definition of Terrorism* (2024 Springer) and was the academic editor of several volumes, incl. *Society and Security in the Information Age* and *International Security Studies. Graduate Research Projects*. She is on the reviewers' team of the journal *Terrorism – studies, prevention, analyses* (published by the Polish Internal Security Agency).

Her academic publications include numerous papers and book chapters devoted – among other issues – to the role of the media (incl. Internet and social

media) in the strategies of terrorist organizations. In her papers she points out the significance of media-literacy and public education in enhancing the traditional counterterrorism measures.

Katarzyna Maniszewska currently she holds the position of Vice-Rector for International Relations at Collegium Civitas. She is the Director of the Summer School and Study Abroad Program “Security and Society in the Information Age”.

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## Summary

This report discusses the evolving paradigm of the media strategies employed by terrorist organizations. The hypothesis is that the modus operandi in mass media usage by terrorist organizations shifted with the usage of new, Internet-based media and with new regions emerging as epicenters of terrorism worldwide. Adopting the descriptive and correlational methods of research, based on desk research and literature review, supplemented by expert interviews, the media usage by terrorists and narratives advancing terrorist agenda are analyzed.

The research suggests that terrorist media strategies differ depending on geopolitical shifts in terrorism. However, there are specific patterns and common practices to be found, such as the pivotal role in advancing the terrorist agenda of influencers and online inspirers who often operate legally (within the limits of freedom of speech), incite violence, and bring individuals prone to radicalization to commit acts of physical violence, including terrorist attacks. In this process, the role of the online spread of fake news, including AI-generated content, is vital.

Among the case studies used, the example of Hamas and the growing use of soft power instead of fear in the communication strategy was analyzed, highlighting terrorist-generated content and terrorism “supportive” content that aims to gain sympathy.

The report discusses the need for a systemic approach in countering radicalization, tailoring solutions to the specific target groups. Research suggests that there are three principal areas of intervention: education, public-private partnership, and countering state sponsors of radicalization. AI can be deployed in all these areas to increase effectiveness in planning, design, implementation, and evaluation.

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