POLICY BRIEF 04/20

THE-VULNERABLE-ONLINE: INGREDIENTS FOR POSSIBLE VIOLENT EXTREMISM ENGAGEMENT

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"*…COVID-19 stay at home policies are providing vulnerabilities for VEO's to target and exploit at-risk individuals easily.*" – Anonymous

Recent narratives from practitioners and violent extremist organisations alike have resulted in more questions than answers. While practitioners highlight the vulnerabilities that COVID-19 presents in the current lockdown, the dynamics of online engagement has limited explanations and response application. As a result, the discussions on engagement or non-engagements, at-risk populations, vulnerabilities and other terminology, remain assumptions that over time have become a reality in the Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism field.

This policy brief therefore supplies an understanding on the online institution vis-à-vis the violent extremism (VE) space and a justification for the risk placement, categorisation, and/or risk avoidance, when discussing violent extremism and terrorism.

Let us begin

The resilience of any terrorist organisation is not dependent on the number of trained members from the past but in its ability to continuously recruit, mobilise and animate both actual and would-be fighters, supporters and sympathisers.[1] When a collective of people come together, they share specific perspectives and a unitary identity resulting in sub-cultures or a community categorised as radical milieus.[2] Radical milieus are specific social environments whose culture, narratives, and symbols shape both individuals and groups.[3] These environments can be online or offline.

"*…actions of policing COVID-19 are creating at-risk populations to be easily influenced by online radicalisation and recruitment.*" -Anonymous

[1] Bruce Houffman, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism: Why Osama bin Laden Still Matters," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2008-05-03/myth-grass-roots-terrorism.
[2] Avner Barnea, Challenging the "Lone Wolf" Phenomenon in an Era of Information Overload, International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, 31:2, (2018), Pp.217-234
[3] Maura Conway, From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki: The emergence and development of an online radical milieu. CTX: Combating Terrorism Exchange, 2 (4). (2012), pp. 12-22; Peter Waldmann, "The Radical Milieu: The Under-Investigated Relationship between Terrorists and Sympathetic Communities," Perspectives on Terrorism vol. 2, no. 9 (2008).

Why is this important?

Narratives are essential aspects of seduction for terrorism. The online institution put in place a strategic shift where the weaker party in asymmetrical warfare disperses relationships in a giant open network through narrative modelling. The growth and expansion of the internet has created opportunities and possibilities for radical milieus as sub-cultures to learn and share.[4] Vulnerabilities associated with the internet maybe increasing but scholars caution the capacity of the institution to mould, rationalise and normalise behaviour that is radical, extreme and resulting to violence.

The institution has sympathizers, moderates and other radical individuals searching for information that aligns to or supports particular views. The form of the social structure responsible for the observed in-group cohesion can be used to distinguish general users from sympathisers and radical milieus.[5] Even with the vulnerabilities associated with online radicalisation and recruitment, the most significant debate has been the ability for the radical online milieu to produce a real-world terrorist.

Much of the debate has centred on questions of whether governments should intervene through censorship, monitoring and counter-propaganda programmes, or allow the free flow of traffic on the internet, to support democratic values, such as freedom of expression.[6] While the current situation seem to have reduced the government's push, practitioners still request engagements from governments. While discussing radicalisation and recruitment online, the "simple causation-based approach" is largely dismissed, and an agreement has coalesced around a broad set of parameters that act as ingredients in the radicalisation process.[7] The internet space is not a vulnerability

[4] Martin A. Bouchard and Rebecca Nash, "Researching terrorism and counter terrorism through a network lens" in Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter Terrorism, ed. Martin Bouchard (New York, Routledge, 2015); Maura Conway, "Reality Bites: Cyberterrorism and Terrorist 'Use' of the Internet," First Monday vol. 7, no. 11 (Nov. 2002);
[5] Maura Conway, From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki: The emergence and development of an online radical milieu. CTX: Combating Terrorism Exchange, 2 (4). (2012), pp. 12-22; Benjamin Ducoi, "A radical sociability: in defence of an online/offline multidimensional approach to radicalization" in Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter Terrorism, ed. Martin Bouchard (New York, Routledge, 2015).
[6] David Fidler, "Countering Islamic State Exploitation of the Internet," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 18th, 2015, https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-islamic-state-exploitation-internet; Tinnes, Judith. "Bibliography: Terrorism and the Media (including the Internet) (Part 3)." Perspectives on Terrorism 10, no. 5 (2016), Pp. 112-55.
[7] Kate Cox, William Marcellino, Jacopo Bellasio, Antonia Ward, Katerina Galai, Sofia Meranto, and Giacomo Persi Paoli, "Social Media in Africa: A double-edged sword for security and development," *UNDP, 2018,* https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/Reports/UNDP-RAND-Social-Media-Africa-Research-Report_final_3%20Oct.pdf

space but rather a medium (just like any other offline space) where all the ingredients boil together.

The ingredients include; Grievance; as sense of alienation or disenfranchisement that provides a cognitive opening, Ideology; as the extreme set of ideas that provides the individual with a new outlook and explanation for the world he or she sees around him, Mobilisation; as the process by which the individual slowly integrates into a community who are like-minded and create a self-reinforcing community, and Tipping points; which are the specific events that push individuals from rhetoric into action.

How do we explain the online pot?

1. Grievance

Generally, people tend to refrain from behaviour that violates their moral values and avoid engagement in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions.[8] In the current COVID-19 environment communities have started having justification for social disobedience as a response to the interpretation of government policies by implementors including law enforcement agencies.

Most of the discussions even with non-sympathizers, have questioned government action and police brutality with an increased focus on the securitization of activities in the Horn of Africa. As the grievance discussions start offline, the online space provides the source of likeminded individuals to coalesce.

2. Ideology (not necessarily religious)

This process happens through the reconstruction of the inhumane manner into something benign or worthy. It begins with the displacement of responsibility that distorts the relationship between the individual's behaviour and its outcomes. To obscure or minimise their active role, this new outlook supports the presentation of actions as having arisen from social pressures.

[8] Anne Aly, Elisabeth Taylor & Saul Karnovsky, "Moral Disengagement and Building Resilience to Violent Extremism: An Education Intervention," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37:4, (2014), Pp.369-385; Albert Bandura, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement." In W. Reich (Ed.), Origins of terrorism: Psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind (pp. 161-191). (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1990)

Dehumanisation the follows and allows people to find violence easier if they do not see the victims as humans. Even as governments draft a raft of measures to combat the Corona virus, communities have gone beyond the virus to assign symbolic meaning to the actions from government. The online space provides an avenue for mapping and exploitation to fit into specific ideologies.

3. Mobilisation

Online institutions have also used euphemistic language for sanitisation and mask aggressive or violent behaviour. This happens by focusing on the targets' symbolic meaning and stripping the victims of human attributes. It presents aggression as a tolerable act and reduce personal responsibility for it. Government lockdown present opportunities for self-reinforcing communities arising from victimhood to propagate against the lack of action from governments. Explaining the vulnerabilities of online engagement from this perspective provides an opportunity for response and avoids vagueness in the process.

4. Tipping points

As in the case of Al-Shabaab and other VEOs globally, online institutions combine a process that makes an advantageous comparison of categorising the responsibility for harmful conduct as reduced option compared to the actions of the outgroup.[9] The distortion of the sequence of events is used to make the argument that terrorist action is the only viable response at the time. This process is accompanied by the attribution of blame to the victims, for their fate.[10]

Why do we make assumptions?

So far, such actions may take the form of violent conflict in communities based on propaganda on-and-offline. In situations where the level of blame is extremely high from citizens, online institutions may provide the channel to transition into action. Online

[9] Kate Cox, William Marcellino, Jacopo Bellasio, Antonia Ward, Katerina Galai, Sofia Meranto, and Giacomo Persi Paoli, "Social Media in Africa: A double-edged sword for security and development," UNDP, 2018, https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/Reports/UNDP-RAND-Social-Media-Africa-Research-Report_final_3%20Oct.pdf

[10] Ibid

campaigns across the globe provide opportunities for terrorist organisations to exploit and ride on the mass car-pool that is branded with trending topics and hashtags.

"Terrorists realized they could exploit the confusion and vacuum in power created by the uprisings," - U.S. intelligence officer[11]

While Al-Shabaab's early use of the internet in 2006 and 2007 focused on written media communiqués and reports, the frequency of written statements was later reduced in favour of video communications.[12] The rebranding of the media department to the 'al-kataib foundation in July 2010 depicts the importance of international publicity and attraction of a more extensive network, to Al-Shabaab. Recently, the engagement from Al-Shabaab has been through What's-up conversation, allegedly seeking funding from government representatives in Somalia.

During the Westgate incident, Al-Shabaab has demonstrated a concerted effort to become the core narrator of the event, divert attention from official reporting by the Kenyan government, and attracting international media attention.[13] Research from 2017 documented minimal vulnerabilities associated with online radicalisation and recruitment in the Horn of Africa and more so in Kenya.[14] Other studies suggest that open chat groups on Facebook and other social forums are used as targets with the influencers picking conversations with likely individuals into a more closed network.[15]

However, social media use in countering violent extremism in Horn of Africa is limited with few empirical studies that explore the impact of either online campaigns or counter-

[11] Sharyl Attkisson, "How Arab Spring Opened the Door to Terrorism's Ugly March," *The daily march,* March 12, 2015, https://www.dailysignal.com/2015/03/12/arab-spring-opened-door-terrorisms-ugly-march/, accessed April 20, 2020.
[12] Ken Menkhaus, 'Al-Shabaab and Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword." *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20:2, (2014), Pp. 309 – 327.
[13] Anzalone, Christopher. 'From "Martyrdom" Videos to Jihadi Journalism in Somalia: The Rapid Evolution of Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahideen's Multimedia.' 2010: https://www.juancole.com/2010/08/anzalone-from-%E2%80%98martyrdom%E2%80%99-videosto-jihadi-journalism-in-somalia.html
[14] UNDP, "Journey to Extremism in Africa," UNDP, 2017, https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf
[15] Fathima Badurdeen, "Women and Recruitment in the Al-Shabaab Network: Stories of Women being recruited by Women Recruiters in the Coastal Region of Kenya." *The African Review* Vol. 45, No.1, 2018, Pp. 19-48

narratives.[16] However, even with limited evidence on engagement and transitions, the online institution starts through offline peer to peer engagements in the communities.[17]

Many discussions around the impact and influence of Al-Shabaab to the communities in Kenya end with offline explanations and examples confirming a "Handshake" process that is explained as; peer to peer engagement, online engagement and offline linkage – in that order. The presence of local networks including Al-Hijra that has allegiance to Al-Shabaab and Jasba- with allegiance to ISIS, form part of the handshake for the Horn of Africa VEO activities.

So what?

The research presented provides mixed perspectives on the vulnerabilities of online institutions. The placement of the thoughts for response to the contextual issues relating to radicalisation and recruitment should also understand that COVID-19 situation may take some time to normalize. Though online institutions may lead to radicalisation and recruitment the vulnerability placement should be clear on whether it is based on grievance formation, ideological opening, mobilization or the tipping point processes.

This categorization allows practitioners to present an analysis and structure the response to the given category rather than having general assumptions of the online space. It allows for the development of contextualized alternative narratives that create successful preventative and organic response against violent extremism. It will expand the resilience capacities of communities during this tough time.

[16] Hanna Rogan, "Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad: Virtual Battlefronts from Iraq to the Horn of Africa," Culture & Society (Summer/Fall 2007): 91 see also; Kate Cox, William Marcellino, Jacopo Bellasio, Antonia Ward, Katerina Galai, Sofia Meranto, and Giacomo Persi Paoli, "Social Media in Africa: A double-edged sword for security and development," UNDP, 2018, https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rba/docs/Reports/UNDP-RAND-Social-Media-Africa-Research-Report_final_3%20Oct.pdf

[17] Manuel R. Torres Soriano, "The Vulnerabilities of Online Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35:4, (2012), Pp. 263-277

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