
Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism

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Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: Similarities, Differences and the Implications

Abdul Basit

Synopsis

This paper explores how the intersection of conspiracy theories and violent extremism is producing new forms of terrorism, while making a case for their inclusion in the broader Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) frameworks. Extremist groups across the ideological spectrum have absorbed conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-term effects require vigilance.

Introduction

Conspiracy theories (CT), defined as an account of events as the result of actions of a small powerful group, are not new.¹ A culture of CT has existed both in the Western and non-Western world for centuries.² However, with the relative decline of militant jihadism,

CT, facilitated by social media and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have entered the political mainstream, producing new forms of terrorism and political violence.³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, CT have impacted extremism of all kinds.⁴ Among others, the 2021 Capitol attack by QAnon followers⁵, the 2020 Christmas Day bombing near a telecommunication company in Nashville, Tennessee⁶ and neo-Luddites' attacks on 5G poles in the West bring into sharp focus how CT are enabling new forms of terrorism.⁷

Violent extremist (VE) groups across the ideological spectrum use CT in their propaganda narratives to lure recruits and validate their Manichean worldviews.⁸ For instance, the jihadi-Salafist groups purport a Zionist-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant, anti-Muslim coalition among Western powers.⁹ Similarly,

¹ Scott A. Reid, "Conspiracy Theory," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed on May 25, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/conspiracy-theory>.

² Conspiracy theories are not falsifiable, and their committed adherents are hard to reason with. Conspiracy theories do not have to be plausible in order for individuals and groups to commit acts of violence. Taken as powerful coping mechanisms, people are unlikely to abandon them. Conspiracy theories are also hard to leave because their consumers are also their producers. Banning or de-platforming can push their believers further down the path of radicalisation. Both banning and de-platforming are taken as further evidence of their veracity.

³ Shadi Shahsavari and Pavan Holour et al., "Conspiracy in the time of corona: automatic detection of emerging COVID-19 conspiracy theories in social media and the news," *Journal of Computational Social Science*, Vol. 3, No.2 (October 2020), pp.279-317, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-020-00086-5>.

⁴ Flora Deverell and Maygane Janin, "COVID-19: far-right violent extremism and tech platform's response," *Foundation Pour L'innovation Politique*, November 2020, <https://www.fondapol.org/en/study/covid-19-far-right-violent-extremism-and-tech-plateforms-response/>.

⁵ "FBI chief says five QAnon conspiracy advocates arrested for Jan 6 U.S. Capitol attack," *Reuters*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/fbi-chief-says-five-qanon-conspiracy-advocates-arrested-jan-6-us-capitol-attack-2021-04-14/>.

⁶ "FBI: Nashville Bomber Driven by Conspiracies, Paranoia," *Voice of America*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/fbi-nashville-bomber-driven-conspiracies-paranoia>.

⁷ Adam Satariano and Davey Alba, "Burning Cell Towers, Out of Baseless Fear They Spread the Virus," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/technology/coronavirus-5g-uk.html>.

⁸ Raul Rois, "Why Misery Loves Company: The Rise of Conspiracy Theory and Violent Extremism," Policy Brief, *Institute for European Studies*, November 2020, <https://www.ies.be/files/IES-Policy-Brief-Raul-Rios.pdf>.

⁹ Ali Mashuri and Esti Zaduqisti, "We believe in your conspiracy if we distrust you: the role of intergroup distrust in structuring the effect of Islamic identification, competitive victimhood, and group incompatibility on belief in a conspiracy theory," *Typical Psychology*, Vol. 4, e11, (November 2014), pp. 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jtp.2014.11>.

the Western far-right movement believes in conspiracies such as “The Great Replacement” and “White Genocide” by immigrant Muslim communities, which can only be addressed by creating a White ethno-state through race war.¹⁰ Likewise, the far-left and anti-establishment groups deem economic progress as the scheming of a handful of powerful elites.¹¹ Similarly, Hindutva extremists in India target the Muslim community based on myths that the latter is engaged in the so-called love, land and corona jihad.¹²

With rapid societal, political and technological changes unfolding around us, it is important to explore the intersection of CT and VE and its likely consequences. Extremist propaganda when paired with misinformation and CT carries mass appeal, especially if it is linked to prevalent sociopolitical and economic concerns.¹³ The European Union’s Counter Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, has warned about the emergence of “new forms of terrorism” based on “CT.”¹⁴ Thus, how terrorist groups exploit conspiratorialism to lure new recruits, further their extremist ideologies and fuel violence merits attention.

Against this backdrop, this article will examine the intersection of CT and VE, their similarities and differences, as well as their nexus with extremist violence. This study submits that alongside extremist narratives and ideologies,

the role of CT in causing VE should be included in the broader PCVE agenda. Further policy and academic research is needed to unpack the causal role of CT in fueling extremist violence. This is an exploratory paper based on published secondary sources, with the modest aim of drawing the policy and academic community’s attention to this aspect of VE.

Context

CT proliferate quickly and gain widespread acceptability during crisis events, such as pandemics, natural disasters, wars and conflicts.¹⁵ It is in this context that the question of CT causing VE should be explored. Additionally, social media platforms have also allowed disparate conspiracy groups and movements to form networks and spawn into a global phenomenon. This networking dovetails with CT to generate new forms of violence in an offline setting.

CT have been recycled in every era by adapting them to prevalent socio-political contexts. In the past, this process took years.¹⁶ Since CT were confined to the margins of the system, self-correction, detachment and moving on for their followers was relatively easier. However, social media has fundamentally altered this dynamic by expediting their spread.¹⁷ Concurrently, the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated

¹⁰ Mark Scott and Steven Overly, “Conspiracy theorists, far-right extremists around the world seize on the pandemic,” *Politico*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/12/trans-atlantic-conspiracy-coronavirus-251325>.

¹¹ Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, “The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-terrorism,” *Demos*, August 2010, p.12, https://demosuk.wpengine.com/files/Conspiracy_theories_paper.pdf?1282913891.

¹² Aastha Tyagi and Atreyee Sen, “Love-Jihad (Muslim Sexual Seduction) and ched-chad (sexual harassment): Hindu nationalist discourses and the Ideal/deviant urban citizen in India,” *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol. 27, Issue 1, (2020), pp. 104-125, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1557602>; Mohan Rao, “Love Jihad and Demographic Fear,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 18, Issue 3, (2011), pp. 425-430, <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152151101800307>; Abhishek Saha, “BJP will tackle love jihad, land jihad: Amit Shah in Assam,” *The Indian Express*, March 27, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/elections/amit-shah-love-land-jihad-elections-7246974/>.

¹³ Ayan Mohammed, Amanda Garry et al., “Extremist Manifestations: Translation of Conspiracy Theories,” p 15.

¹⁴ Raffaello Pantucci, “A View From the CT Foxhole: Gilles de Kerchove, European Union (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, Issue 8, (August 2020), pp. 8-17, <https://ctc.usma.edu/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-gilles-de-kerchove-european-union-eu-counter-terrorism-coordinator/>.

¹⁵ Scott A. Reid, “Conspiracy Theory,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

¹⁶ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, “Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations,” *Memory Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (2017), pp.323-333, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1750698017701615>.

¹⁷ Peter Suci, “Conspiracy Theories Have Gained Traction Since 9/11 Thanks To Social Media,” *Forbes*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2020/09/11/conspiracy-theories-have-gained-traction-since-911-thanks-to-social-media/?sh=6e20dce63ddb>; Daniel Allington, “Conspiracy Theories, Radicalisation and Digital Media,” *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, February 2021, <https://gnet->

the proliferation of conspiratorial narratives in different countries where they are (re)adapted and (re)molded to local milieus.¹⁸ This localisation of conspiracy narratives allows them to gain more currency and traction.

Similarities Between CT and VE

As with VE, CT cut across educational and socio-economic levels. CT and violent extremist have five common characteristics. Both have deep-seated distrust of government institutions, political infrastructure and official/mainstream narratives, i.e., “anomie.”¹⁹ Both may be strongly associated with highly structural thinking styles.²⁰

CT may fulfill basic needs which violent extremists strive for, such as the need for certainty to overcome perceived powerlessness. CT form a “monological belief system” to develop a clear and structured understanding of the world, by offering oversimplistic explanations of a complex world and hence carry a stronger emotional appeal.²¹ Likewise, violent extremists also believe in an “us versus them” world view where a sharp in-group and out-group distinction, punctuated by distrust and polarisation, exists.²²

Individuals and groups with beliefs in extreme ideologies and CT may be rooted in similar underlying psychology. CT are linked to threat perception, prejudices and negative attitudes about powerful outgroups.²³ These intentions may lead to engagement in violent political action.

research.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GNET-Conspiracy-Theories-Radicalisation-Digital-Media.pdf.

¹⁸ Silvia Mari and Homero Gil de Zúñiga et al, “Conspiracy Theories and Institutional Trust: Examining the Role of Uncertainty Avoidance and Active Social Media Use,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 0. No. 0 (2021), pp.1-20.

¹⁹ Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill, “Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: The Contingent Effect of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related morality,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2020), pp.1-2,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288>.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

²² Susilo Wibisono, Winnifred R. Louis and Jolanda Jetten, “A Multidimensional Analysis of Religious Extremism,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 10,

In recent years, both CT and violent extremist narratives have proliferated exponentially through various social media and digital platforms. Social media’s rise has created a stark increase in easily accessible and manipulated (mis)information. The social media platforms have enabled conspiracy theorists and violent extremists to swiftly reach out to wider audiences.²⁴ To conspiracy theorists and violent extremists alike, social media platforms offer opportunities to form virtual networks and communities of co-believers.²⁵ These virtual networks play a pivotal role in forging online communities where CT may facilitate VE.²⁶

Differences between CT and VE

However, CT and VE are separate and should not be confused with each other. As outlined above, almost all VE groups have CT as part of their ideological and propaganda narratives, yet they cannot be termed as conspiracy theorists or vice versa, barring few exceptions such as QAnon.

Like VE, CT are linked to the question of identity, quest for significance, the need for belonging and search for a meaning in life. Adlington (2020) maintains that “Conspiracy theories generate strong social and cultural identities both of the self and evil beings plotting self’s destruction and enslavement.”²⁷ However, unlike VE, CT may not always lead to violent actions.

(November 2019), pp.1-12, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02560>.

²³ Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill, “Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: The Contingent Effect of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related morality,” p.2.

²⁴ Matthew Sparkes, “How social media can nudge people into becoming conspiracy theorists,” *New Scientist*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24933193-300-how-social-media-can-nudge-people-into-becoming-conspiracy-theorists/>.

²⁵ Maura Conway, “Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 40, Issue 1, (2017), pp. 77-98,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157408>.

²⁶ Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill, p.2.

²⁷ Daniel Allington, p. 38.

Also, CT may not be the proximate cause of militant violence.²⁸ There are extremist groups, such as the IRA, who do not believe in CT.²⁹ Conversely, there are numerous non-violent extremists and moderates who are conspiratorial like the “9-11-truth movement” or the “2012” ecological group.³⁰ Finally, CT may constitute the necessary but not sufficient conditions for VE. In other words, CT are one among several factors that can lead to VE.³¹

Intersection of CT and VE

In the context of VE, CT play a significant “social” and “functional” role as “multiplier³²” and “enabler³³” of radicalisation. Violent extremists employ CT as a “rhetorical device” to advance their ideologies, identify scapegoats and legitimise use of (indiscriminate) violence.³⁴ Violent extremist groups exploit conspiracies which have strong emotional appeal, such as pedophilia, child abduction, freedom struggles and victimhood narratives, to increase their influence and outreach in their immediate societies.³⁵

CT serve as an adhesive force, keeping extreme groups together and pushing them in a more extreme and sometimes violent direction. Those grounded in CT, often feel alienated from mainstream society and its values. This estrangement can potentially mark the first step towards radicalisation.³⁶

In the context of CT intersection with VE, the following three factors merit consideration.

²⁸ Ibid, p.4.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kieron O’Hara, David Stevens, “Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism: Assessing the Internet’s Complicity in Violent Extremism: The Internet’s Complicity in Violent Extremism,” *Policy and Internet*, Vol.7, No. 4, (April 2015), pp. 401-422, <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.88>.

³² Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, “The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-terrorism,” p.21.

³³ Terje Emberland, “Why conspiracy theories can act as radicalization multipliers of far-right ideals,” *Centre for Research on Extremism*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2020/conspiracy-theories-radicalization-multipliers.html>.

³⁴ Daniel Allington, p.5; Ayan Mohammed, Amanda Garry, Rukaya Mohamed and Antoine Andray, “Extremist Manifestations: Translation of Conspiracy Theories,” *American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience*, November 2020, pp.9-14, [https://americanctri.org/wp-](https://americanctri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Extremist-Manifestation-and-Translation-of-Conspiracy-Theories-Perspective.pdf)

Cognitive Closure

Cognitive closure is intolerance for ambiguity and the desire to possess an answer.³⁷ Vulnerable and dispossessed individuals suffering from identity crises struggle to accommodate uncertainties and complex realities.³⁸ They try to make an oversimplistic sense of a complex world through structured and clear thinking.³⁹ Moreover, they strive for order and purity of mind in their thinking patterns.⁴⁰ In such situations, conspiratorial explanations come in handy by offering cognitive closure in an emotionally appealing manner.

The need for cognitive closure predicts belief in CT and people in need of the former tend to freeze on a conspiratorial explanation when it is in sufficient supply and official narratives are absent.⁴¹ This allows individuals to accept information confirming a general belief without requiring particular contexts to validate that information.⁴²

More importantly, individuals needing cognitive closure are more likely to adhere to in-group norms than those with a low need for cognitive closure.⁴³ Radicalisation most often occurs in in-group settings, and those with a high need of cognitive closure may stay with

[content/uploads/2020/11/Extremist-Manifestation-and-Translation-of-Conspiracy-Theories-Perspective.pdf](https://americanctri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Extremist-Manifestation-and-Translation-of-Conspiracy-Theories-Perspective.pdf).

³⁵ Ibid, p. 23,

³⁶ Daniel Allington and David Toube, “Conspiracy theories are not a harmless joke: alienated individuals are radicalised.” *New Statesman*, (16–22 November 2018), pp.15–16.

³⁷ Gregory Rousis, “The Truth is Out There: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations,” p.11.

³⁸ Antonio Chirumbolo and Stefano Livi et al., “Effects of need for closure on creativity in small group interactions,” *European Journal of Personality*, Vol. 18, Issue 4, (June 2004), pp.265-278, <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.518>.

³⁹ Deigo Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), p.134.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Gregory Rousis, p.11.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, p.52.

highly radicalised in-groups regardless of any moral concerns.⁴⁴

Quest for Significance

The quest for significance foretells engagement in VE through the need for closure. However, the pathways to the quest for significance leading to VE are not linear. Radicalisation, in the context of the quest for significance, is a “matter of degrees.”⁴⁵ These degrees may be different for different individuals at various stages of their lifecycles. Hence, it is important to differentiate between those who possess radical views and those who actually engage in violent actions. Regardless of the end state, these trajectories are primarily contingent on individual anxieties, socio-political contexts, institutional distrust, and propensity for violence.⁴⁶

Rousis (2018), in the context of significance quest, stresses that “social factors of radicalisation” are more important than ideational or demographic reasons.⁴⁷ Rousis, Richard and Wang (2020) note that societies which are immune to violence (like the Middle East, parts of Africa and Asia) or do not condemn particular forms of violence against certain groups, are more prone to violence and extreme attitudes.⁴⁸ In such societies, the role of CT in facilitating pathways to violent extremist can be higher.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the manner in which grievances and the proposed line of action are framed, determine whether the quest for significance would contribute to VE or not.⁵⁰

Self-sacrifice is a critical component of the significance quest. Individuals who suffer loss of significance are more likely to engage in violence, i.e., self-sacrifice, to regain significance than those who did not experience the loss of significance.⁵¹ For conspiracy theory-prone individuals and groups to take the path of VE, three factors are important: i) grievances; ii) culprit for the grievances; and iii) suitability of violence to address the grievances.⁵²

In-Group, Out-Group Distinction

To address in-group grievances, CT define the out-group in adversarial terms. In doing so, not only group boundaries are made prominent but violence is promoted as the only workable option in an existential (life-and-death) struggle.⁵³ The out-group is demonised and de-humanised by hardening a sense of in-group identity.⁵⁴ This potentially increases the chances of violence in most extreme situations against the out-group.

Extremists present violence as the only option against the out-group as they do not believe in peaceful options of resistance and dissent within the system.⁵⁵ In fact, peaceful means of change are presented as unworkable.⁵⁶

To present violence as the only recourse to address injustices, extremist groups promote the idea of “vanguardism,” i.e., “spectacular acts of defiance to awake people from self-perpetuating slumber.”⁵⁷ For example, al-Qaeda views itself as the vanguard of global jihadism and the group’s 9/11 attack is portrayed by some as an act of vanguardism

⁴⁴ Ibid; Contrarily, individuals who have more tolerance for ambiguity are more likely to explore new identities concerning family, friends and society. Hence, they are less likely to settle on one particular identity without exploring alternative options.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.8.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Gregory Rousis, “The Truth is Out There: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations,” p.6.

⁴⁸ Gregory J. Rousis, F. Dan Richard & Dong-Yuan Debbie Wang, “The Truth Is Out There: The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theory Use by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (November 2020), pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1835654>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger et al., “The Psychology of Radicalization

and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 35, Supplement 1, (2014), pp.69-93,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43783789?seq=1>;

Jeremy Ginges and Crystal Shackelford, “Self-sacrifice for a cause: The role of ideas and beliefs in motivating human conflict,” *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 41 (2018),

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X18001693>.

⁵² Gregory Rousis, p.14.

⁵³ Daniel Allington, p. 24.

⁵⁴ Justin Reedy, John Gastil and Michael Gabbay, “Terrorism and Small Groups: An Analytical Framework for Group Disruption,” *Journal of Group Research*, Vol. 44, Issue 6, (2013), pp. 599-629, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496413501892>.

⁵⁵ Deigo Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, p. 132.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.133.

⁵⁷ Daniel Allington, p.30.

to awaken the *Ummah* (Muslim world) from its slumber.⁵⁸

Finally, in-groups also try to discredit internal dissenting and moderate voices, which offer a different explanation, by portraying them as disinformation agents.⁵⁹ A case in point is the incumbent al-Qaeda chief Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri's critique of the militant group's former ideologue Dr Syed al-Fadal who rebutted the group's transnational jihadist narrative from prison in Egypt after 9/11.⁶⁰

Conspiracy-Driven VE

QAnon

QAnon originated as an online conspiracy group in 2017 on the 4chan messaging board and highlights how conspiracy-driven violent incidents are translating into domestic terrorism in the US.⁶¹ QAnon emerged from the Pizzagate conspiracy that high-ranking Democrats were allegedly involved in child sex-trafficking.⁶² Adherents of QAnon also believe in a deep-state coup against former US President Donald Trump. QAnon's influence spread quickly after the COVID-19 pandemic, with its followers believing that the coronavirus was staged to divert attention from the issue of child sex-trafficking.⁶³

In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation classified CT like QAnon and Pizzagate as domestic terrorism threats.⁶⁴ A recent study has found that nearly one in five Americans believe in QAnon CT.⁶⁵ Likewise, a poll of the

Public Religion Research Institute and the Interfaith Youth Core revealed that QAnon beliefs are as popular in the US as some major religions.⁶⁶ The poll found that the "American patriots may have to resort to violence" to restore the country's rightful order.⁶⁷

More recently, QAnon has begun using CT as a framework to interpret the Bible which allows its followers to validate their beliefs and unknowingly consume misinformation. This process of combining conspiracy and spirituality is giving birth to a new phenomenon of "conspirituality."⁶⁸ Such endeavors provide like-minded individuals with platforms (in an offline setting) to exchange ideas that have the potential to translate into violence.⁶⁹

5G Conspiracy

The launch of 5G technology coincided with the outbreak of the coronavirus, resulting in attacks on 5G masts in different parts of the UK (87 attacks), the Netherlands (30 arson attacks), Belgium, Sweden, Italy, Cyprus, Germany and France. These attacks involving arson and vandalism are based on the myth that the droplets that cause the coronavirus can be spread from 5G poles' electromagnetic waves. Also, 5G adherents blame public figures like Bill Gates and George Soros for allegedly striving to make the global vaccination drive against the coronavirus mandatory. They believe that the vaccinations include tracking chips that could be activated

⁵⁸ Colin P. Clarke, "The Future of the Global Jihadist Movement After the Collapse of the Caliphate," *Rand Corporation*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/12/the-future-of-the-global-jihadist-movement-after-the.html>.

⁵⁹ Daniel Allington, p. 26.

⁶⁰ Steven Aftergood, "Ideological Conflict Puts Al Qaeda on the Defensive," *Federation of American Scientists*, September 22, 2008, https://fas.org/blogs/secrecy/2008/09/ideological_conflict/.

⁶¹ Amanda Garry, Samantha Walther, Rukaya Rukaya, Ayan Mohammed, "QAnon Conspiracy Theory: Examining Its Evolution and Mechanisms of Radicalisation," *Journal for Deradicalisation*, No. 26, (Spring 2021), pp. 152-216, <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/437/265>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ayan Mohammed and Amanda Garry et al., p.10.

⁶⁴ Marianne Dodson, "FBI Labels Fringe Conspiracy Theories as Domestic Terrorism Threat," *The Daily Beast*, August 1, 2019,

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/fbi-warns-against-qanon-pizzagate-in-report-highlighting-dangers-of-fringe-conspiracy-theories>.

⁶⁵ Chuck Todd, Mark Murray and Carrie Dann, "Study finds nearly one-in-five Americans believe QAnon conspiracy theories," *CNBC News*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/study-finds-nearly-one-five-americans-believe-qanon-conspiracy-theories-n1268722>.

⁶⁶ Giovanni Russonello, "QAnon Now as Popular in US as Some Major Religions, Poll Suggests," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/us/politics/qanon-republicans-trump.html>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Egil Asper and Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?" *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 30, Issue 3, (2015), pp.367-382, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2015.1081339>.

⁶⁹ Ayan Mohammed and Amanda Garry et al., p.11.

by 5G radio waves. Such anti-technology sentiments have been termed by the EU's CT Coordinator de Kerchove as "technophobia" or aversion to new emerging technologies.⁷⁰

Neo-Luddites attacking 5G towers believe that the coronavirus lockdowns announced by different governments was a cover to weaken public resistance to the installation of 5G infrastructure.⁷¹ Similar trends concerning radio waves' negative impact on human health also persisted in Europe in the 1990s.⁷²

Militant Jihadism

For decades, CT have been the mainstay of jihadist militancy. For instance, jihadist groups opine that the US-led war on terror is a pretext to invade Muslim countries and that the US and Western nations are waging a "war against Islam." Hence, "Islam is under siege" and requires a fight back by these groups to defend the religion. Such narratives are employed by groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) to justify their extremist ideologies, attract new recruits and legitimise their excessive violence.

By linking individual grievances within the broader jihadist narrative of the Muslims' decline, the likes of al-Qaeda and IS propose militant jihadism as the desired plan of action. In doing so, they provide aggrieved individuals self-worth by allowing them to participate in events of historical importance, i.e., performing a holy duty to glorify Islam.

Soon after the spread of the COVID-19 contagion, al-Qaeda's propagandists exploited it to influence Western audiences by

terming it as "divine punishment" against the latter for intervening in Muslim countries⁷³.

IS' position on COVID-19 changed with the virus' geographical spread. First IS termed it as God's wrath on China for mistreating Xinjiang's Uyghur Muslim community.⁷⁴ When the virus spread to Iran, the group labelled it celestial revenge on Shia Muslims for their transgressions and innovations, i.e., *bidah*, in Islam.⁷⁵ Finally, when COVID-19 inundated Europe, IS narrative shifted to castigation of the Western nations by God for destroying the group's self-styled territorial Caliphate in Iraq and Syria.⁷⁶

Hindutva Extremism

In India, the Hindutva supporters affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its para-militant wing, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have used CT like love, land and corona jihad to target the Muslim minority, resulting in recurring communal tensions, riots and violence.⁷⁷

The love jihad conspiracy theory opines that Muslim men in India are luring Hindu women into marriages to convert them to Islam as part of the broader war by Muslims against India.⁷⁸ Some states in India have passed anti-love jihad and anti-conversion laws to discourage religious conversions, particularly of low-caste Hindus converting to Islam, and inter-faith marriages, particularly of Hindu women with Muslim men.⁷⁹ Ironically, the same laws neglect trends like *Ghar Wapsi* (Homecoming) where Muslim families have been forcefully converted to Hinduism by the RSS.

⁷⁰ Raffaello Pantucci, "A View From the CT Foxhole: Gilles de Kerchove, European Union (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator."

⁷¹ Kelvin Chan, Beatrice Dupuy Arijeta Lajka, "Conspiracy theorists burn 5G towers claiming link to virus," *ABC News*, April 22, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/conspiracy-theorists-burn-5g-towers-claiming-link-virus-70258811>.

⁷² Ayan Mohammed and Amanda Garry et al., p.14.

⁷³ Abdul Basit, "COVID-19: a challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups?" *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 15, Issue 3, (2020), pp. 263-275, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2020.1828603>.

⁷⁴ Abdul Basit, "COVID-19 Pandemic: An Opportunity for Terrorist Groups?" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, Issue 3 (April 2020),

pp. 7-12, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CTTA-April-2020.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ David James Strohi, "Love jihad in India's moral imaginaries: religion, kinship, and citizenship in late liberalism," *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 27, Issue 1 (2019), pp. 27-39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1528209>.

⁷⁸ Charu Gupta, "Allegories of "Love Jihad" and Ghar Vāpasī: Interlocking the Socio-Religious with the Political," *Archiv Orientalni*, Issue 84, No. 2 (2016), pp. 291-316.

⁷⁹ Abhishek Saha, "BJP will tackle love jihad, land jihad: Amit Shah in Assam," *The Indian Express*, March 27, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/elections/amit-shah-love-land-jihad-elections-7246974/>.

The love jihad is a typical example of the in-group, out-group dynamics, where the Hindu extremists are making the group boundaries clear through the laws barring inter-faith marriages resulting in religious conversions. Several Indian states under the BJP rule have legislated against love jihad, notwithstanding that this conspiratorial notion is unsupported by data.⁸⁰ Such laws have lent credence and legitimacy to Hindu extremists' narratives in India. On June 18, in a first, Gujrat police booked a Muslim man under the love jihad law.⁸¹

Land jihad is allegedly a ploy by Muslims forcing Hindus to sell their native lands by involving a third party, i.e., a broker who makes a purchase offer to the owner.⁸² Allegedly, the land is made "uninhabitable by stealing cattle and throwing chopped heads of the cattle in the country yard."⁸³ This is done to deprive Hindus of their ancestral lands and spread Muslim influence through land ownership.

Soon after the outbreak of COVID-19, RSS adherents blamed the Muslim missionary organisation *Tableeghi Jamaat's* annual gathering for waging the so-called corona jihad against India.⁸⁴ The BJP's sudden decision to enforce a lockdown by suspending inter-city travel, among other measures, left several Tableeghi Jamaat members, who came to New Delhi's *Nizam-ud-Din Markaz* from different parts of the country, stranded. The gathering, among others, was the first main vector of the coronavirus in India.⁸⁵ Several social media accounts affiliated with the Hindu right-wing spread misinformation

and falsehood dubbing it as corona jihad, while apparently ignoring several other Hindu gatherings and festivals which took place in India during the same time period.⁸⁶

Implications of CT and VE's Intersection

The immediate risk of CT is misinformation and disinformation misleading public opinion. The long-term implications of harnessing conspiracies for continuous violence raise concerns for the PCVE community. These implications are even more acute for states with weak social cohesion. This dynamic is further complicated by the difficulties that states face, particularly when the COVID-19 pandemic has dented public confidence in them, to refute CT. Rather, the more states negate CT, the harder they get entrenched among their followers. Rebuttals are taken as further evidence of CT's veracity. Hence, states should focus on imparting critical thinking in their digital literacy syllabi to students at school and college levels to better equip them to differentiate between verifiable and unverifiable information. A general awareness campaign targeting other age groups is also required.

Unconstrained circulation of CT may produce a climate of confused and undirected radicalism. The emergence of "mixed"⁸⁷ and "salad bar ideologies"⁸⁸ are manifestations of undetected radicalism. Adherents of these two extremist categories do not fit into orthodox definitions or traditional classifications of terrorism. Rather, they (mostly lone actors and small cells) are inspired by a range of ideological beliefs that

⁸⁰ Shemin Joy, "No love jihad case, not defined in law: MHA," *Deccan Herald*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/no-love-jihad-cases-not-defined-in-law-mha-801441.html>.

⁸¹ "Gujrat police detain 6 in First FIR Under New Love Jihad Law," *The Print*, June 18, 2021, <https://thewire.in/government/gujarat-police-detain-6-in-first-fir-under-new-love-jihad-law>.

⁸² Karishma Hasnat, "What is 'land jihad', and why BJP has promised a law against it in Assam election manifesto," *The Print*, March 26, 2021, <https://theprint.in/politics/what-is-land-jihad-and-why-bjp-has-promised-a-law-against-it-in-assam-election-manifesto/628521/>.

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ "BJP's Karnataka MP calls Delhi's Tablighi Jamaat event corona jihad," *The Print*, April 2020, <https://theprint.in/politics/bjps-karnataka-mp-calls-delhis-tablighi-jamaat-event-corona-jihad/395511/>.

⁸⁵ Sahil Mayaram, "Why Flinging the Term Corona Jihad at the Tablighi Jamaat Makes No Sense," *The Wire*, April 2, 2020, <https://thewire.in/religion/using-corona-jihad-for-the-tablighi-jamaat-makes-no-sense-besides-being-inflammatory>.

⁸⁶ Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, "The Indian government's silence over Kumbh Mela crowds during Covid-19 exposes its bias," *Quartz*, April 14, 2021, <https://qz.com/india/1996084/modi-governments-silence-over-kumbh-mela-shows-its-bias/>.

⁸⁷ Matt Dryden, "An Ideological Pick n Mix: The Rise of Mixed Ideologies & their Implications for Terrorist Violence," *Henry Jackson Society*, March 2021, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/research-brief-ideological/>.

⁸⁸ "The Counterterrorism Challenge of Salad Bar Ideologies," *The Soufan Centre*, March 29, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-29/>.

converge, overlap—and sometimes even contradict—across the extremist eco system. Important factors linked to CT such as anomie, accelerationism, anti-Semitism, extreme misogyny and nihilism, facilitate this ideological convergence.⁸⁹ The “remix culture” within the CT may be causing this trend.⁹⁰ Moving forward, PCVE programmes, which tend to be focused on countering extremist narratives, should incorporate strategies against CT.

The 5G attacks, discussed above, are only one manifestation of new forms of political violence related to emerging technologies. Similar concerns also exist regarding automation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics.⁹¹ People fear that they will lose their jobs, if not equipped with requisite skillsets and knowledge, of automation and AI.⁹² On the other hand, paradoxically, the greater penetration of robotic and drone technology would empower new social groups to carry out violence more easily.⁹³ Arguably, one explosive-laden drone is the equivalent of one suicide bomber.⁹⁴ Such security concerns need to be factored in while devising future PCVE policies.

Another long-term effect of this trend could be that more extreme and violent groups could forge alliances based on shared conspiracies and goals. A case in point is the National-Anarchist Movement, the Base and other far-right overtures to al-Qaeda.⁹⁵

Finally, these trends may create a wider pool of alienated, confused and vulnerable people for the extremist groups to lure and recruit.

Conclusion

This article, keeping in view emerging security threats, has shone light on the potential risks related to the intersection of CT and VE. While

establishing a direct causal-link between CT and VE is difficult, the former’s role as enabler, multiplier and facilitator of the latter is undeniable. Further research is needed in this direction to develop a deeper and nuanced understanding of the links between CT and VE.

A public-private partnership of governments and tech companies mediated by the civil society organisations is also needed to free social media spaces from such malaise without compromising on freedom of speech. The role of civil society is critical in pushing back against CT. The inherent inability of states in neutralising conspiracies and reluctance of big-tech companies to remove materials deemed as harmful place civil society in an important bridging role. Research has shown that pre-bunking, i.e., stopping the spread of conspiracies before they proliferate, compared to debunking has proved more successful against the spread of CT. Policy frameworks and strategies are needed to halt the spread of CT on social media to minimise their harmful impact. CT are here to stay, and they are developing into formidable security challenges for states and societies alike. Keeping this in view, including CT, misinformation and disinformation in future PCVE strategies, alongside countering extremist narratives, is much needed.

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⁸⁹ “The Counterterrorism Challenge of Salad Bar Ideologies,” *The Soufan Centre*, March 29, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-29/>.

⁹⁰ “The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives,” *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, November 24-25, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_c-n_concl_pap_impact_consp_narr_on_vrwe_vlwe_24-25_112021_en.pdf.

⁹¹ Audrey Kruth Cronin, *Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow’s Terrorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp.206-207.

⁹² Abdul Basit, “How terrorist and extremist groups are exploiting coronavirus cracks in society,” *South China Morning Post*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3082368/how-terrorist-and-extremist-groups-are-exploiting-covid-19-cracks>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, p.5.