Committee History

The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee is traditionally a Security Council committee however, we will be adopting it into the General Assembly format for the purposes of this committee. Countering the scourge of terrorism has been on the agenda of the United Nations for decades, in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks against the United States in 2001, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1373 (2001), which for the first time established a dedicated Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) of the Council.

The CTC conducts country visits on the Counter-Terrorism Committee's behalf to assess Member States' counter-terrorism efforts, including progress made, remaining shortfalls, and priority areas for technical assistance needs, as well as to identify terrorism-related trends and challenges and good practices employed in the implementation of relevant resolutions

This committee was inspired by the CTC's recent special meeting in India to discuss new and emerging technologies as they relate to terrorism and counter-terrorism measures. This meeting is a direct result of Resolution 2617 addressing "emerging technologies."

"The combination of hatred and technology is the greatest danger threatening mankind."
- Simon Wiesenthal, 1989

Committee Background

The field of study surrounding online right-wing radicalization is experiencing a moment in the spotlight in recent years, but also fraught with uncertainty, opacity, and an overall lack of consensus. Even the definition of radicalization itself is debated, with some focusing on adoption of extremist beliefs ('cognitive radicalization'), some on engagement with extremist behavior ('behavioral radicalization'), and some on both.

The topic first gained scholarly attention in the mid-to-late 1990s, with the advent of the Internet as a method of communication. Mark Weitzman of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Kathy Crilley of the Internet Studies Research Group were able to pick up on these early trends, issuing warnings through their publications that far-right extremism was proliferating online and calling for dialogue regarding how to best counter this growing phenomenon.

Given that the Internet was still a relatively new phenomenon, early studies seem to be mainly concerned with the *why* and the *how* of far-right internet usage, such as why the Internet is so appealing to extremists, and how extremists use the Internet as a way of advancing their goals and interests. A consistent finding across early studies is the phenomenon of extremist networks being built through the Internet, with a common feature of extremist websites being that they link to other extremist websites, even if the linked websites don't necessarily promote the exact same message as the linking site does. These linked websites included both domestic pages written in English as well as pages from other countries written in other languages, leading to the conclusion that the Internet allows extremists to reach a larger, more diverse, and even international audience when compared to traditional means of communication such as print and word of mouth.

There are also warnings about the unregulated nature of the Internet, that the lack of moderation and oversight leads to a vulnerability that allows for the exploitation of people's trust and the willful dissemination of false information, prophetically implicating greater problems in the future for individuals that rely on the Internet for news and other information. Perhaps the most intriguing finding from these studies that would signify what was to come was that these networks of extremist websites also contain a number of "soft-core" sites in which less radical views are posted, creating an entry point into the movements which can lead to the individual seeking out more extreme content. There was an agreed upon consensus that the Internet's ability to disseminate information quickly with little cost and low risk of censorship is unrivaled when compared to traditional forms of communication.

By the late aughts, researchers would once again set their sights on the online world of the far-right. This time around, there's a marked difference in how researchers define and approach the problem. While in the late 90s and early 2000s researchers mainly focused on the content and proliferation of far-right extremist content on the Internet, studies were now shifting to the specific purposes and functions that these communities held for their members.

Two key factors likely contributed to this change. First, the explosive rise of social media, particularly Facebook, led to a renewed focus in the "online world" and our interaction with it. Second, in July of 2011, Norwegian Anders Breivik killed 77 people in what would become the first large scale right-wing terror attack that directly involved the Internet. Breivik was active in a number of far-right and neo-Nazi communities online, and

on the day of, he published his manifesto in which he explains how to publish documents on the Internet and how to use social media for recruiting purposes.

Bowman-Grieve published one of the first articles seeking to understand not just the content and strategies used to disseminate information, but how the dynamics of these online extremist communities support the individuals involved in them. In her study, she uses the infamous website Stormfront, and examines the processes in which new members join the community and how older members help foster recruitment and growth within the organization. She shows that online communities help develop a sense of identity and a meaning of group belonging, and how the ideologies promoted in these communities can exert increasing levels of control over individuals and potentially facilitate commitment to the movement in the form of real-world action. The most profound notion in this study that helps mark a shift in understanding is Bowman-Grieve warns that simplifying the problem into an "online world" separate from the "real world" would be an error in judgment, and that "the potential of the virtual realm to have an impact on the 'real' world is not to be underestimated.

Another study of note comes from Lennings et al., where they conduct a review of current knowledge regarding recruitment tactics by hate groups, and explore how these tactics recruit people who aren't already involved in hate and extreme action, how these hate sites and their tactics could influence the actions of young people, and how effective online recruitment is as a whole. Their study, for the most part, is inconclusive. While they point out that there's no empirical evidence that young people are being recruited by extremist groups through the Internet, they do establish the feasibility of such a tactic for

future studies. They suggest that the Internet can be used as a means of recruitment, but the effectiveness of doing so is also still unclear.

By this point, despite remaining ambiguities in how the Internet plays a role in the radicalization process, studies from the late aughts and early 2010s agree on a number of basic principles. It's well acknowledged that the Internet helps like-minded extremists connect with and find each other, as well as share ideological writings, weapon-making plans, and other resources. There's also consensus that the Internet is being used in attempts to recruit members into far-right extremist movements. Some even examine the ways in which youth are targeted in this recruitment and radicalization process. The disagreements, however, still lie in questions such as how to define radicalization, how the Internet facilitates radicalization, and why some are more susceptible to online radicalization.

State of Committee

By the mid-2010s, the phenomenon of online far-right extremism and radicalization went from a fringe idea believed and warned of by few, to an active threat that needed to be addressed, but with no clear solution or plan of action. It's also during this era where we begin to see much more of the literature published in a terrorism and criminology context.

Far-right online activity also increased greatly in visibility, thanks in part to the presence of hate groups and their activity both on and off the Internet. As a result, literature began to focus on the presence of hate groups and the people that join them. Some studied the spread of far-right ideologies on mainstream social media websites like Twitter. This mainstream availability of extremist content reflected an important change in the radicalization process from the earlier days of the Internet when one had to search out content themselves.

In contrast to earlier content- and process-based studies focusing on extremist websites, more studies turned their focus to the sociodemographic characteristics of individuals within these organizations that actually produce, share, and seek out content, marking another important shift as researchers start to move closer to the individual.

Questions a Resolution Should Address

- Can there be an agree upon definition of online radicalization?
- What preventative measures can be put in place to prevent online radicalization?
- Should there be punishment for individuals or member states found to be spreading extremist ideals online?
- Is the internet inherently dangerous?
- Can member states harness the internet for good?
- Who are the most vulnerable when it comes to online radicalization?

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