Religion, Radicalization, and Security in the New Digital Age

**Paper #1**

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Challenges and Opportunities in Tackling Propaganda Wars: Using Semantic Analysis in Deconstructing Terrorist Recruitment Models Online

Abstract

Although much has been written on how violent religious extremist groups (VREG) utilize the Internet for recruitment, particularly social media, little has been done to systematically examine how VREG narratives are framed in a semantic analytic context. Scholars and policymakers concur that big data analytics offer an effective method of detecting and countering religious extremism including how various VREG actors produce and disseminate propaganda narrative online. With an overarching question of “to what extent does semantic analysis help deconstruct VREG recruitment patterns?” this study attempts to contribute to a growing body of (de)radicalization research by (1) analyzing the original ISIS manifesto documents and social media communications, (2) identifying salient thematic clusters used in narrative construction, and (3) developing a provisional model of ISIS’ recruitment narrative.

Specifically, by critically applying a framing theory, the paper argues and demonstrates the utility of big-data driven semantic analysis using text analytics and machine-learning to identify and map ISIS’ prevalent narratives, including the patterns of ideological diffusion thereof, in the post-physical-caliphate era (i.e., a digital caliphate). The finding may help formulate new and effective strategies to counter VREG narratives targeted at millions of vulnerable youth online.

**Paper #2**

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The Syria Coalition and the Triumph of the New Counterterrorism

Abstract

The U.S.-led air campaign in Syria marks the legitimization and consolidation of a new approach to fighting terrorism that the U.S. has helped to pioneer since the 9/11
attacks. Before 2001 the U.S. had controversially used strictly tailored military force outside of conventional armed conflict against state sponsors of terrorism, for example against Libya in Operation El Dorado Canyon in 1986, but not directly against terrorist groups themselves. After 9/11, however, the U.S. began to systematically employ tailored military operations, mainly precision airstrikes, against terrorist groups, sometimes in coordination with local ground forces, but in other cases in isolation and even in the face of (at least public) condemnation by the local host state (as in Pakistan from 2004 onwards). Initially, however, this policy generated widespread criticism internationally. It is only with the formation of the U.S.-led global alliance in support of military intervention against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, supported by over seventy states, that the policy of tailored military intervention against terrorist groups has gained international legitimacy, even as in this case where the intervention lacks public support from the host state. These shifting attitudes have been reflected in two complementary patterns: (1) the gradual muting of international criticism of U.S. counterterrorism campaigns in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya and elsewhere; and (2) the accelerating adoption of tailored military operations as a response to international terrorist threats elsewhere – by countries as diverse as Chad, Niger, France, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Iran, Russia, Turkey and Israel. In short, Syria has become the poster-child for the future of counter-terrorism.

**Paper #3**

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**Security Concerns, Regulation of Religion, and Violence**

**Abstract**

Security studies, both of the traditional and critical kind, have been criticized for a heavy fixation on elites as a primary unit of analysis. That is not surprising as government officials, security analysts, security firms and corporations occupy a paramount space on the supply side of security policy. Academic focus on the level of society, as both beneficiary of security policies and a source of insecurity in the first instance, has been less frequent. Explicit legal regulations of religious activities as well as less direct policies shaping religious life are deemed to exert an important influence on security outcomes and other aspects of social life. We consider various theoretical frameworks as grievances, greed, political opportunities, strategic framing, resource mobilization, and everyday vernaculars of critical security studies in our attempt to “unpack” the views of the Muslim and non-Muslim publics towards such security concerns as domestic and international terrorism (e.g., ISIS), and the effectiveness of security policies, especially legal regulation of religion as enacted and executed by state
actors. We collect and analyze textual data from online forums and social media platforms, including Twitter, VKontakte, and Facebook.

The study has implications on the debates concerning legal measures that states should take against radicalization of religion as well as a broader question on the relationship between religious freedom and religious extremism. The debate in the ethnic conflict literature on the effects of state accommodation of distinct ethnoreligious practices on peace settlements is largely inconclusive. Institutionalization of ethnoreligious diversity has an inherent value as far as liberal pluralist tradition is concerned. It is further argued to soothe ethnic grievances and cultural deprivations and thus is conducive to peace. On the other hand, opponents argue that recognition by the state of ethnoreligious difference in the institutional setting of power-sharing is likely to lead to deeper conflicts as it empowers secessionist and radical forces. We hypothesize that a group’s historical experience with both religion and state conditions the effects of legal accommodation of (ethno)religious diversity. Thus, it is likely that a sudden introduction of legal accommodative institutions to areas seen as more observant, with a recent experience of religious violence in nondemocratic settings will lead to further demands on the part of religious minorities and, therefore, be less constructive than to areas with a greater tradition of nonviolence and experience with democratic practices.

**Paper #4**

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Analysis of Islamist Extremist Narrative on Social Media

Abstract

The rise of the Islamist Extremist content in social media presents unprecedented security threats at the global scale. Toward tackling this problem, detection, monitoring and eventually combating the extremist narrative on social media has gained an immense importance. However, a reliable and robust solution still lacks. In this regard, the background information in a conceptualized manner can be used in detection of extremist narratives in social media platforms. However, subjectivity of the concept of “extremism” mandates its limitations on determination of an extremist content. Social media companies (i.e., Twitter, Google, Facebook) have been asked by government officials to develop tools to detect and remove this content from their platforms. This concern has recently been voiced by the US and UK governments as it...
continues to threaten the national and global security. Furthermore, their efforts overwhelmingly focus on the detection, yet they are lacking the background knowledge to assess the level of extremism that exist in a piece of content; then they can make the call to remove it in a real time manner. Also, they do not provide any method, tool or strategy to counter these narrative as it has largely been neglected. Recent reports (e.g., Policy Exchange from UK) suggests that the terror attacks that occurred in the first half of 2017 were linked to the online extremist content, which was consumed by tens of thousands of supporters.

It is an emergent need to conduct further research that will shed light on the underlying ideological rhetoric that the extremists are using to recruit individuals online. Therefore, it is imperative to retrieve information from big user-generated data utilizing a domain specific knowledge model that conceptualizes the semantic components of extremist-radical rhetoric. In this way, the retrieved information can be used within a machine learning framework to perform the detection of the extremist narrative.