

Social Networks and Terrorism, How Online Alternative Right Culture Helped Shape Modern Terrorism and the Lone Wolf Phenomena.

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Abstract: Even though terrorism does not have a universally accepted concept, the work follows Walter Laqueur's premise and classifies terrorism as any violent act carried out by non-state organizations with the objective of influencing the population and the current government. Therefore, this paper aims to argue the connections between the Lone Wolf phenomena and social media. The current work is primarily grounded in the qualitative approach, and the review of specialized literature is the main methodology chosen. The lone wolf is characterized by an individual who appears to have no connection to any organization but is willing to take up arms and spread terror in pursuit of this ideal. Even though the scale of their attacks may not be as significant as those of large organizations like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, with current technologies, it's possible for an individual's or a small group's attack to attract as much attention as an attack organized by a larger group. Furthermore, lone wolves can achieve significant notoriety by producing viral content during their attacks or writing texts that encourage others to follow their lead. Anonymity and humor serve as a shield for posts classified as absurd on other platforms. The presence of humor and elements of pop culture is not accidental, and presenting their ideology with elements of popular imagination generates identification with a younger generation or appeals to the nostalgia of older users. Exploring the evolution of the study of terrorism and national security, linking them to how the advance of the internet helped shape a new vision of messages and propagandas.

KEYWORDS : Terrorism, Lone wolf, Alt-right, Virtual Culture, Security Studies, International Relations, Cultural War.

1. Introduction

Terrorism has been an important element in the study of international security since the 19th century. It has been one of the main factors brought about by globalization. Throughout history, terrorism has influenced significant moments around the world, from the assassination of political leaders to the fall of empires. Currently, the term "terrorism" is used as an argumentative scarecrow, and various criminal and political groups take advantage of the impact caused by the term to present ideas or justify actions [1]. However, terrorism goes beyond a simple strategy. Its use is vital for movements classified as terrorist, being the first and primary action to be taken by these groups in their claims.

Terrorism does not have a definitive concept accepted by the academic community. Therefore, this work will follow the reasoning presented by Walter Laqueur (2018), that terrorism is any act of violence carried out by non-state actors outside of combat zones. These acts target civilians and representatives of the state, aiming to influence and shock the population. This concept is used by national defense agencies, such as the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), for the creation of analytical documents and the development of laws related to domestic and international terrorism.

The idea of modern terrorism is dependent on the formation of democratic states and the sense of national identity. Another significant factor for this argument was technological advancement. With the evolution of transportation means and the speed of information dissemination, groups were able to expand their influences and bring an international dimension to terrorism [2].

David Rapoport introduces the perspective of terrorism in waves: it expands and contracts throughout history, acquiring distinctive characteristics of the respective moments [2].

As of the writing of this work, Rapoport separates modern terrorism into four waves: the anarchist wave, the anticolonial wave, the new left wave, and the religious wave. The anarchist wave developed during the 19th century and introduced the main practices associated with terrorist acts, such as the use of bombs and the assassination of key political figures. Anarchists managed to distinguish the terrorist from an ordinary criminal. [2].

The anticolonial wave, terrorism took on a more noble image and attempted to distance itself from the irreverent figure of the anarchists. Terrorists adopted a heroic image, justifying their struggles as freedom fighters against European influences. In this wave, the international model proposed by anarchists was replaced by nationalism, and the idea of national and popular identity was the main motivation for groups in this wave [2].

The third wave was a consequence of the Vietnamese victory over the U.S. At this moment, various groups supported by the former Soviet Union carried out terrorist acts against capitalist regimes and challenged the U.S. position as the hegemonic power at the time [2].

The fourth and current wave is that of religious terrorism, primarily represented by Islamic groups due to their organization and persistence. This fourth wave emphasizes internationalism due to the goal of creating a global caliphate. The most famous attack orchestrated by these groups was the September 11th attacks, which still holds the record for the deadliest terrorist attack to date. This attack revealed the vulnerability of the U.S. government in dealing with external threats and groups who did not adhere to the principles of conventional warfare.

Throughout the 21st century, the advancement and establishment of the internet had a similar effect to what was seen during the rise of the anarchist wave. The spread of information became almost instantaneous, and contact with people from other continents became commonplace. Obviously, these developments were not only used by terrorist groups but also helped to create new strategies and the profile of new groups [1]. However, internet access not only influenced terrorist movements; this means of communication also served as an alternative for various political expressions.

The alt-right, or alternative right, emerged in the late 2000s. This movement stands out for its extensive use of the internet for political propagation, concern for the security of Western society, and the presence of supremacist ideas [1]. According to adherents of this philosophy, the white race and Western culture are constantly under threat due to the plans of shadowy forces aiming to dismantle the traditional way of life. This ideology does not have an original nationality, as it spread across various social media platforms and incorporated nationalist elements from different countries.

In 2020, the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) released a document defining domestic terrorism as acts of violence committed on U.S. soil with the intent to intimidate the population, influence the current government, and affect its conduct through mass destruction, murder, and kidnapping. The definition excludes the premise of hate crimes due to the guarantee of freedom of expression in the U.S. Constitution (Constitution, United States of America, 1789). Only when expressions against the well-being of minorities escalate to physical violence does it fall under the category of federal crimes.

The concept of domestic terrorism existed as far back as the 1960s. During this period, terrorism was in the third wave, also known as the "new left." The primary motivation of these groups was to challenge America's position as the hegemonic power. Groups from this period became political tools in the competition between the capitalist and communist blocs. In the 1990s, the rate of attacks decreased, and the new focus shifted to far-right extremist groups. However, the concept of domestic terrorism was still different from what it is today. It was only after September 11th, with the emergence of international terrorism and the spread of mass media, that the concept of domestic terrorism was updated to its current definition.

Following the stringent border control measures implemented after September 11th, various Islamic terrorist organizations found it challenging to send members from other countries to carry out attacks on U.S. soil. Due to this difficulty, new strategies were developed to target the United States. The most successful of these strategies was radicalization through propaganda, which involved disseminating targeted messages to local residents with the aim of recruitment and organizing attacks [1].

The propaganda targeted Islamic diasporas on U.S. soil, appealing to their sense of patriotism by emphasizing that it was possible to serve the cause even without formal training, and everything could be provided via social networks. These individuals are known as "lone wolves" because they operate without any operational team and have no connection to any chain of command [1].

Lone wolves are not treated as the primary threats within the study of terrorism because, in many cases, the attacks committed by these individuals are not as brutal as those carried out by organizations. However, their significance lies in achieving similar effects because the fear generated by the possibility of living alongside a terrorist is used by various political figures as justification for implementing authoritarian measures and bringing more attention to acts of terror [1]. Therefore, the present work seeks to demonstrate the importance of understanding the lone wolf phenomena and how social networks and propaganda can intensify their actions.

2. Research Method and Theory

The current work is primarily grounded in the qualitative approach, as the main focus lies in the analysis of human behavior across various social networks and how viewers are influenced by advertisements. Therefore, the review of specialized literature is the main methodology of the study. Additionally, I intend to use the Constructivism theory of International Relations to illustrate my line of inquiry and help me to develop my discoveries.

Constructivism is one of the theories used to explain the relationship between states and other concepts in the field, its main contribution being the inclusion of new perspectives on reality and giving prominence to new players in the international system beyond states. Regarding perspectives, constructivism emphasized the importance and influences of individual realities and epistemic communities of states. Thus, in addition to being an organizational entity, the state is a reflection of its leadership and the reality experienced by that state in the international community [3].

Conceptualized in the 1990s, as presented by Sarfati (2005), constructivism aimed to balance the study of international relations with what characterized international relations. The theory presented itself as a third way in the debate between positivists and post-positivists. One of its most famous academics was Alexander Wendt, who, through works like "Social Theory of International Politics" (1999) and "Anarchy is What States Make of It" (1992), proposed a series of revisions to academically established concepts and logics as pillars of the discipline.

Instead of other schools of thought, constructivism presented a system of shared beliefs and values with structural characteristics that exerted significant influence on social and political actions (Sarfati, 2005). The various influences of the environment on an individual dictate how problem resolutions will be chosen and which aspects of leadership will be prioritized compared to others. In addition to the influences brought

by its representatives, the state and all those who compose it are subject to constant changes since, for constructivism, the interaction of one agent with another leads all involved to experience new perspectives [3].

Constructivism is classified as a State-centric theory due to the state's monopoly on the use of force, but it recognizes the increasing presence of non-state actors in international dynamics due to the approach that the state is an ahistorical truth. However, since systemic changes predominantly originate from the state, the theory does not exclude the importance of both parties in the development of the subject matter. [3].

The September 11, 2001 attack became a landmark in the international arena, a subject of study for the discipline and for constructivism enthusiasts. The social aspect of terrorist groups has become a tool of great strategic value for defense agencies, the interaction of non-state armed groups with the international system, and the spillover effect of this interaction is a constant concern for all nations today.

The cultural aspect of constructivist theory presents itself as a consistent alternative for the current work, as lone wolves share a questioning of the current status quo of reality. The entire motivational aspect of the attacks is based on a mythology considered as truth and originating from interactions among the lone wolves themselves, society, and the state. The conflict between these different perspectives of reality is the primary trigger for the attacks committed by these assailants [4].

3. Discussion and findings.

The origin of the American Alternative Right has a strong connection to the European identity landscape of the New Right in the 1960s: schools of thought such as Alexander Dugin's Fourth Political Theory, the Nouvelle Droite (New Right), and Archeofuturism. In all these strands of thought, one can find concurrent points, such as the rejection of values originating from modern society, the return to pre-Enlightenment European traditionalism and Christianization, the protection of the European community, and the rejection of non-European values. The Alternative Right justifies the adoption of these radical measures as a response to targeted attacks on the white community and attempts to alter the cultural heritage of this group [5].

Among these groups, the main strategy and motivation were metapolitical activism. A strategy that recognized the power of ideas within a community and how all subsequent processes of socialization derive from the culture of the group. Therefore, the real struggle was not within political institutions or democratic processes but in the realm of ideas [5].

For these groups, control over worldview and culture is the true prize in any contest. Once you have control over both, any other goal will follow as a consequence of this monopoly. After all, for these groups, the flow of history is governed by human will and action, both nurtured and directed by ideas inherent to humanity [5].

Until then, all these concepts were associated with the European New Right. However, from the 2000s, the popularization of the internet allowed for instant information exchange and provided new spaces for knowledge sharing. It is from the creation of these new spaces that the Alternative Right emerged. It proposes a revision of the old ideas of the European New Right, introduces new forms of dissemination, and appropriates various other internet cultures.

Within the virtual environment, various communities and social networks were created, most of them with the aim of representing individuals through their own avatars. Most of these networks have moderators and rules to follow, so even if fake accounts are created, it is possible to trace a point of origin for a user. However, the forums and social networks chosen by members of the Alternative Right follow a different logic. They seek platforms that value anonymity to spread their ideology [5].

The digital activism chosen by the Alternative Right takes many forms, from parodies of popular songs with supremacist messages to "memes" that exalt classical periods like the Roman Empire and ancient Greece. The celebration of so-called "white" culture and the hyper-valorization of wartime heroism are common messages on sites like 4chan, for example, a platform where people send messages and images in existing subgroups [5].

Anonymity and humor serve as a shield for posts classified as absurd on other platforms. The presence of humor and elements of pop culture is not accidental, and presenting their ideology with elements of popular imagination generates identification with a younger generation or appeals to the nostalgia of older users. Humor is used for an attempt at pseudo-intellectualism because when another user presents themselves as offended, the main response is that they are not prepared for a simple joke and that the platform's freedom of expression is at risk, garnering support from other users for the aggressor [5].

This line of action is similar to what the Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) did in the beginning, they used cultural liturgical sermons to talk to the masses and used tv and radio stations. But, with the advance of the internet they started to produce more and more audiovisual propagandas with better quality and writing [6].

4. Conclusion.

Various right-wing movements have capitalized on the denialism and narrative proposed by the global Alternative Right, resistance to vaccination campaigns, and the appropriation of the president's image in 'memes,' making the relationship between national and international right-wing groups quite evident. Such movements seek to enter the popular imagination and present themselves as a means of challenging the status quo, when in fact they represent a gateway to a dangerous process of radicalization within terrorism.

David Rapoport's work allows for a temporal and comparative analysis of the evolution of terrorism. It is possible to perceive how the emergence of new waves is linked to major political events, similar to the current democratic instability present not only in the United States but also in all Western continents [2].

As presented in part 3, the level of domestic terrorism attacks has been increasing exponentially in the United States, but this growth is not limited to North America alone. The revisionism present in narratives linked to this ideology is flexible enough to fit into any culture and attract dissatisfied groups with their political realities. It is in this flexibility that social media comes into play. Since the primary idea of terrorism is to spread fear and the message of the perpetrator, the various social networks we currently have serve as a perfect mechanism for disseminating the messages of these groups and individuals [4].

The lack of awareness on current social media platforms allows numerous groups to expose a significant portion of the global population to propaganda that appeal to personal frustrations and aim to desensitize the individual [4]. Consequently, endorsing a more active stance and exposing the potential future lone wolf to content that aids him in to achieve their goals, such as where to obtain weaponry and even how to produce it manually.

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