



Irish Security Series

Briefing Document

Terrorism and Violent Extremism – Challenges for Ireland

Terrorism and violent extremism, both online and offline, present significant challenges across the globe. No country is immune and no one body has the solution. Discussion at the inaugural Irish Security Series event highlighted a number of intervention points that might be worth considering for better management of the risk of extremism, many of which go beyond the sole role of law enforcement. This briefing document highlights some of these possible intervention opportunities.

This briefing document represents the presentations made at the inaugural 'Irish Security Series' event by Prof Maura Conway, DCU, Dr Paul Gill, UCL, and Sheelagh Brady, SAR Consultancy. It provides a summary of the keys issues raised and concludes with articulating the implications for Ireland. SAR

would like to thank Maura and Paul for their invaluable input and to the audience, whose questions raised some interesting perspectives.



Speakers

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The Irish Security Series is hosted by SAR Consultancy. The aim of these panel discussions are to bring together academics and operational experts to discuss a range of security related topics. The panels will seek to draw on available and emerging academic knowledge and operational know-how in the field of security both home and abroad. Coupled with high quality speakers, these events seek to attract a quality audience to enable a healthy exchange of differing perspectives. The aim of which will be to contribute to a better understanding of the evolving security environment.

Islamic State and their online activity.

The Islamic State (IS) established its so called 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria in June 2014. This period, 2014/2015, also marks its 'golden age' online. During this time the group had relatively free rein on social media, having a particular affiliation to Twitter, which became a very important platform for them over time. During these early years, it was very easy to find IS content online. They were producing somewhere between 900 and eleven hundred items per month, in the peak of things in the summer of 2015. Videos, often very gruesome, received a lot of attention--often disproportionately--in the media. Second to that were the magazines, such as *Dabiq*. The English language versions of various magazines also received a lot of media coverage, but the bulk of IS content, if quantified, was actually still images and photo montages. IS pushed their content out very widely across multiple platforms, in multiple languages. The level of translation depended on the content, and what and who the audience were. Much of the content, at this time, portrayed the caliphate as a utopian destination for Muslims in

the Western world and elsewhere, showing places like Raqqa and Mosul as functioning cities, in terms of schools, health services, etc.

IS liked Twitter because of its publicness and massive fan community, which was broken into sub-communities, such as, women, foreign fighters, Chechens, etc. targeting them with more detailed content, and developing lively sub-networks creating vibrant and emotionally supportive

However, things changed from 2016 or thereabouts. A number of things influenced this. For one, IS began to have significant losses on the battlefield in 2016, which impacted their ability to produce content. The impact of this was a downturn in the quality of the content being produced and in its quantity. The content at this time was also much less about the Utopian idea of the caliphate and much more about IS's battlefield activity. In addition, from the summer of 2016 onwards there was a targeting of media operatives by the coalition forces and in on 30 August, a major operative was targeted and killed. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a core figure in IS and within their media operations, was killed by the Americans in an air strike. The battle for Mosul was also underway at that time. After this, the production and circulation levels of IS online

content significantly decreased. This coincided with a concerted effort by Twitter to remove content. They really upped their game in terms of their take down strategy on their platform at this time. Facebook followed suit.

Islamic State is not the only game in town, the extreme right have a significantly growing online presence. Greater attention is required.

IS were never restricted to just a single platform however. The role of the internet for them was all about getting their content out to as many people and therefore as widely as possible. So a whole host of other platforms were integral to their strategy. In fact, their strategy was always more than a social media strategy, in that they also use websites and content uploads sites, such as JustPaste.It, as core distribution nodes. Therefore, their strategy represents a complex arrangement of social media platforms, websites, content upload sites, and other online technologies, such as apps. This is similar for other violent jihadi groups and other violent extremists.

IS's online media strategy at this time was interesting because, it was structured as a top down process for the production of official content. Fan communities online were then used to push that content out further. These communities also produced their own user generated content. This user generated content is becoming more important at the present time, influenced by the downturn in official content.

IS content had two key purposes. The first was to attract and encourage Muslims from all over the world to travel to the so-called 'caliphate,' which they believed would help build the capacity of the state. (They referred to this as making *hijrah* to Islamic State territory). Such travellers became known as 'foreign fighters' in the western world. IS also spoke to those who could not travel. They stated that these individuals were obligated to carrying out attacks in whatever country they found themselves in at that time, or a third country. The group provided a lot of instruction, as to what types of attacks to carry out and how to carry them out.

The link between content and actions.

Taking down content has become a relatively common response by many online service providers. However, such a strategy assumes a link between the content and violent extremist actions, which is very difficult to empirically prove. Nonetheless, four things can be suggested from the content. Firstly, no organisation puts the kind of

resources IS has done into their online activity, over such a period of time, without feeling like they have gotten some return on it. Secondly, there are a number of examples of the group pushing out specific types of content at different times, and then certain actions evident on the ground. For example, a lot of the early content was seeking to influence young men from western countries to travel to the caliphate. Shortly after, one saw an exodus of young men from various European countries to Syria and Iraq. IS soon figured out that a state cannot be built on the basis of men alone and that women were crucial for procreation and state building. This was played out in a change of content aimed at attracting women to the caliphate. In response, there was an influx of young foreign women to Syria and Iraq. However, IS soon realised that this approach would take considerable time, given that it would take a long time for the 'cubs of the caliphate' to actually grow up and fight for the caliphate. So they realised they needed men and women with children. They thus began encouraging people, in their online content, to bring their families. More families were thereafter seen travelling to Iraq and Syria. Thirdly, the content called for certain types of attacks. For example, IS encouraged people who identified with their ideology, but could not make *hijrah* to carry out knife attacks and/or to conduct vehicular attacks? A spate of both types of attack were seen over the last number of years, which coincided with IS's instructions about these issues. These incidents have shown that their influence is no longer just on the Internet, with the group happy to use the media attention of such incidents to influence copycat phenomenon. Fourthly, IS became really frustrated with Twitter, when they increased their take down strategy, because Twitter was crucial to their activity as it provided them with a route to a lot of people who wouldn't otherwise come across their content. Twitter's take-down strategy relegated them to other less attractive platforms. This was happening at the same time, they were being heavily targeted in the field. The loss of their media production in Raqqa was a really significant blow to creating content and getting it out.

Take downs

That said, there is much debate over whether taking down extremist content is a valid method in reducing violent extremism. Some people are in favour of it, whilst others are against it. Police often favour a take-down approach while intelligence operatives often prefer leaving it up. The four largest social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Google, Twitter, YouTube) are practicing a take-down strategy, with Twitter taking down some

content in hours and days, if not within minutes. This has pushed IS to Telegram fuelling the argument that take-down strategies are a 'whack a mole' approach: you hit one and one pops up elsewhere. However, recent research by VoxPol has shown that if enough content is taken down, the communities built around that content can and are being taken down too. Secondly, albeit such groups are being pushed to other services, such as Telegram, such services are not all the same and do not provide the same opportunities for groups. For example, Telegram is not known to the same number of people, as Twitter or Facebook, nor does it have the same large number of users. It also has greater barriers to entry. For example, you need a phone number to sign-up, which is a barrier in itself, but every time your account gets disabled you need a new phone number to start again. Furthermore, it is also not a social media platform in the same way Twitter is. You cannot have the same networks operating and it does not provide the same level of sociality.

Current situation

IS no longer has a large active community on Twitter. They do seek to get back on, but Twitter proactively seeks to keep them off. Other major social media platforms, in particular FB, are also active in this regard. However, this raises an issue, are people happy that private or corporate service providers are policing the internet? More and more governments and policymakers are concerned with this. As a result, this debate is likely to gain more attention in the medium to long term; the potential outcome being more legislation in this area.

Point of intervention

The logic of take-down strategies is apparent on heavily trafficked sites/platforms. If one believes that IS are creating content to attract people to their position and a smaller number of these people are influenced by this content, and an even smaller number of these people are influenced by this content to carry out a terrorist attack, then the less people that see the content the better. One could argue that removing content could help reduce the likelihood that people will engage in terrorist activity. This could be helpful in reducing access to material currently being circulated by IS, as it has become quite instructional in nature.

Lone Actors

Research has helped identify eight key factors that can help inform and influence policing and intelligence approaches to lone actor terrorism. These include:

(1) Forget about Profiles

Profiles are operational useless, because they over predict who is going to become a terrorist. For example, 'if we imagine we have a perfect profile of a school shooter, and that is of someone who is 16, male, wears dark clothes and listens to music we don't understand, is a little bit depressed and morose and cannot get out of bed in the morning', this could represent a high proportion of the teenager population, the majority of which will never have the sort of capacity or intention to conduct an act of violence. So profiles, even if there is a perfect profile, are likely to be operationally useless. Even at that, a perfect profile is unlikely to be found as the data shows examples of every demographic feature one could think of in lone actor datasets. For example, people as young as 14 and as old as 88.

The average age of lone actors is 35 while the average of those involved in extremist violent groups is early 20s.

(2) Leakage

Research has shown, which came as a surprise to many, that many lone actors inform someone of their intended attack prior to action. For example, 60% of the individuals in Dr Gill's dataset had told someone, such as family, friends, or co-workers about their plans before they went out and conducted their attacks. The information given was not aspirational stuff, it was specific. For example, "on Tuesday, I'm going to such a location, don't be there, it is going to be dangerous", thereby specifically, leaking big bits of the plot. There would appear to be a number of reasons why

they may do this. One, many don't want to be lone actors and they are trying to get their mates to come along with them. Secondly, many have a fixated mind-set, meaning they live, breath and sleep the plot and it drips out. Thirdly, they need people to know why they conduct such attacks. Terrorism is about the message and theatre and about projecting out beliefs

A young man in the UK informed his girlfriend of his intended attack. She got concerned and reported it to the police. They arrested him outside his home enroute to committing an attack.

afterwards so they need others to know why they did it.

(3) Bystanders

Very often, somebody sees what is happening in their direct community, and either chooses to report it or does not. Authorities are often reliant on these people to report it, however, these relationships are not always present in communities to facilitate this to happen.

A neighbor noticed a couple testing bombs in the back garden, but did not inform the police. They only mentioned it to the police when the police responded to a domestic violence incident at the suspect house.

Point of intervention

If someone is told about a potential attack or they notice something suspicious, and they tell the relevant authorities, there is an opportunity for early intervention. However, this may not be as simplistic as it sounds. For one, the person hearing the information or seeing something suspicious must be concerned or worried about the information received enough to tell the relevant authorities. If they sit on the information too long, they can make the process more difficult. In other cases, people do not know who to tell, or may not have good relationships with the relevant authorities. A study on a group in Minnesota, showed that 90-95% of youths would not tell the authorities if they found out a friend was planning to travel to Syria or Iraq. Additionally, from an operational perspective, if the person receiving the information, does not take it serious and/or, delays assessment, a timely intervention becomes unlikely. This illustrates that there often needs to be a little bit of luck. As a result, relevant agencies need to actively create an environment that makes these opportunities more likely to emerge. One aspects of this is to develop trust relationships with vulnerable communities in order to motivate them to report suspicious activity.

(4) Ideology vs Personal Grievance

There has been a disproportionate focus on ideology. In the context of crime prevention and what research is showing, most lone actors are quite illiterate when it comes to ideology. Many have a shallow understanding of it. For the ones that step over the line to violence, there is usually a mix of ideology and a personal grievance; a personal grievance which the ideology helps

explain. When they come in contact with the ideology or when they decide to go to the next step and move to violence, one typically sees multiple stressors at play, such as the breakdown of relationships, family problems, loss of a job, kicked out of university. A lot of those kind of negatives stressors are spiralling when they get exposed to an ideology and/or idea of doing something. In some way that is why the IS ideology has worked for so many people. It has a simple message, reaching out to young, disillusioned, marginalised individuals, saying something like 'is that where you find yourself in life? of course it is! That is where you are, because that is where the west wants you to be!' Such a message helps tell a wider story to what is a very personal, individual grievance and situation, which builds into something very much bigger. It is often these dynamic risk factors that make it more salient for an individual.

A former member of a right extremist groups, the IRA, and of a jihadi organisation all stated that they sought to recruit young men, who they can manipulate, who will do what they are told, who would go along with their friends, who will conform, and who have vulnerabilities that allows the recruiter to manipulate for their own ends. Psychologically speaking, young men are bigger sensation seekers, poor at judging risk, more likely to do what their mates are going, more likely to confirm to charismatic authority. Research has shown that lone actors are less likely to have these features, but have different types of stresses, vulnerabilities and influences.

This considerably reduces the timeframe from interventions, resulting in more cases slipping through the net. The main reason why this period is shortening is because attacks are now, more commonly, low key and low tech, therefore not requiring much time to prepare and plan.

(6) Ideology vs Instructional Material

Much discussion in this area relates to online radicalisation, resulting in a big focus on internet referral units.

However, such units appear to concentrate on ideological material, while less attention is given to content relating to operational materials. Yet many attacks across Europe have shown that perpetrators have accessed videos on You-Tube to learn how to make explosives. The

most recent of these was the perpetrator of the attack at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester. Unfortunately, such incidents have not spurred action to take such content down.

Point of intervention
A mixed perspective of personnel grievance and ideology needs to be incorporated into risk assessments. So there is a mixture of who they are individually and the ideology. These individual stressors need to be treated, because it is those that are influencing the risk of radicalisation. So these individuals needs to be worked with in regard to their decision making schemes and about why they think turning to violence is a legitimate choice.

Point of intervention
Content on line allows people to access material for explosives and weapon making, instructing individuals on the elements needed and the process to put them together. Removing this content would help reduce the opportunity of building capacity to create deadly weapons.

(5) Planning Process

Conducting an attack is rarely a spur of the moment decision for lone actors. Six years ago, there was (on average) a one to two year lag, from the moment they started planning their attacks to the day they acted. This provided a considerable period of time to spot suspicious activity. However, this is changing. The time is shortening, to (on average) three months.

A male planned a jihadi attack within three months of converting to Islam after having been a member of the Jehovah witnesses.

(7) Mental Health

Research has shown an elevated level of mental health problems amongst lone actors. Elevated levels of Schizophrenia, delusional disorders and a presence on the autism spectrum is being found amongst such violent individuals. Interestingly, the research is showing significantly lower rates of depression and anxiety. However, if one looks at those who are radicalised but have yet to step over the line to violence, studies have found higher levels of depression. This fits with their symptomology. They are at home all day. They are on the internet, they are not socialising with individuals, yet they do not feel they have the capability of getting out the door and acting.

Point of intervention

Elevated risks of mental health issues provides an opportunity for intervention, but unlike many of the others which require the intervention of police or intelligence, this requires intervention from partner agencies such as health authorities, psychiatrists, clinical staff, etc. to help conduct risk assessments.

(8) Crime Prevention

Finally, given the evidence of mental health issues, some researchers have taken to looking at other types of criminal offenders for possible opportunities for intervention. The first are stalkers and violent stalkers. They have found to be similar in terms of symptomology, in terms of behaviours and in terms of fixated-ness. They are just fixated with a different kind of thing. The second are those individual who make threats against VIPs. These people are also similar in terms of their mental health issues and in the ways they manage them. They also appear to have a mixture of personal stressors and fixation.

Point of intervention

Lone Actor terrorism is not be something entirely new, given similarities with other criminal types. It is an old crime problem with a political spin. This provides an opportunity to look to proven crime prevention methods and other crime types for possible examples of relevant intervention.

Implications for Ireland

Many of the issues raised have direct relevance here in Ireland, where we too are facing a number of different terrorism related threats. Ongoing threats stem, to differing degrees, from sectarian violence in Ireland, violent Islamic extremism, and to a lesser degree, from right wing extremism. While Ireland has some experience in tackling terrorism, it is evident that things are changing rapidly in some areas. Law Enforcement and intelligence analysts need to keep on top of such changes in order to be best placed to identify opportunities for intervention. These eight elements identify a number of areas that would warrant greater interventions, such as:

- ❖ Take-down strategies – Many of the top social media platforms are present in Ireland, direct liaison between such providers and law enforcement analysts may help identify opportunities for intervention.

- ❖ Creating luck – An Garda Siochana has recently shown that when dealing with organised crime, it can create an environment where positive opportunities for intervention emerge. Counter terrorism officers need to create a similar environment. That said, the work of the Ethic Liaison Officers helps this, but more can and needs to be done with hard to reach communities. Furthermore, cognizance needs to be payed to the growing threat from Right Wing extremism.
- ❖ Individual stressors – Ireland needs to move away from seeing lone actors, and terrorism, as solely the realm of law enforcement. Greater work is needed by the government to reduce such stressors, whilst also providing services, along with civil society, to help people identify and cope with such stressors.
- ❖ Content Removal – Ireland could use its influence in EUROPOL to encourage expansion of the take-down strategy to include content containing operational instructions. Ireland has the opportunity to be a positive conduit in this regard, working also with the large social media providers in Ireland in encouraging them to also target this content.
- ❖ Mental health issues – Mental health services in Ireland are often over stretched. This may be indirectly increasing the risk of vulnerable people to radicalisation. Greater investment is required in this area. Additionally, professionals in this field need to be included into the risk assessment process, traditionally conducted by law enforcement, given that they have the necessary skills to identify dynamic risk factors. A cross-agency approach is required. This would also help build community resilience across Ireland.
- ❖ Crime Prevention – Given Ireland has not experienced a terror attack in a number of years. This provides Ireland with an opportunity to look at what other areas of crime prevention may be applicable for tackling terrorism. Such an approach was event recently, when Assistant Commissioner John O'Driscoll noted that they had used methods previously used to target subversive activity in fighting the ongoing criminal feud.

These interventions all require a change in the traditional approach to fighting terrorism, an approach that would require a very different way of thinking about things than is currently in place in Ireland and in many other countries for that matter. It would not be the first time Irelands leads the way for positive change; the opportunity is there.