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# SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ

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# FORMS OF INSURGENCIES, EXTREMISMS AND HATE CRIMES



# Karenni Revolution: the centrality of border territories in Myanmar's national insurgency<sup>1</sup>

ANDREA CASTRONOVO

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## Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2021 military coup, hundreds of non-state armed groups have been established across Myanmar to fight the regime, known as State Administration Council (SAC). The newly formed revolutionary forces, generically called People's Defence Forces (PDFs), have transitioned from poorly armed and uncoordinated small cells to structured, well-trained and semi-regular companies and battalions capable of operating through a wide range of guerrilla warfare tactics. After two years of war, the nation descended into a state of violence characterized by the collapse of legitimate central state authority, the regime's countrywide scorched-earth campaigns against the population, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs), an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and a failing economy. Myanmar has become a war-torn country in the heart of the fastest-growing region in the world: South-east Asia. Although, the dominant Western narrative frames the current national crisis as a never-ending conflict, political deadlock or a failed state, what's happening in Myanmar is a multidimensional Revolution that aims, not only to overthrow the military regime, but to redefine the socio-political structure of the entire country. By analyzing both the Karenni leading guerrilla force, the KNDF, and the interim Government of the ethnic State, the KSCC, this paper investigates how Karenni youth, coordinating with local Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and civil society groups, have established one of the most advanced anti-regime fronts in Myanmar.

All'indomani del colpo di Stato militare del 2021, centinaia di gruppi armati sono stati formati in Myanmar per combattere il regime, autoproclamatosi Consiglio dell'Amministrazione Statale (SAC). Le nuove forze rivoluzionarie, genericamente chiamate Forze di Difesa del Popolo (PDFs), sono passate da essere piccole cellule scarsamente armate e non coordinate a compagnie e battaglioni strutturati, ben addestrati e semi-regolari, in grado di operare attra-

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this essay were first published in *Journal of Political Studies*, quarterly of the Institute of Political Studies "St. Pio V" (Year XXXIV, January-June 2022: "Revolutionary movements in Myanmar: the centrality of border territories in the current popular insurgency. The case of Karenni State")



verso molteplici tattiche di guerriglia. Dopo due anni di guerra, la nazione è sprofondata in uno stato di violenza caratterizzato dal collasso della legittima autorità dello Stato centrale, dalla devastazione causata dalla tattica della «terra bruciata» condotta dal regime contro la popolazione, dalla proliferazione di armi leggere e di piccolo calibro (SALW), e da una crisi umanitaria ed economica senza precedenti. Il Myanmar è diventato un paese dilaniato dalla guerra nel cuore della regione in più rapida crescita del mondo: Il Sud-est asiatico. Sebbene la narrazione occidentale dominante inquadri l'attuale crisi nazionale come un conflitto senza fine, uno stallo politico, oppure rappresenti il paese come uno stato fallito, ciò che sta accadendo in Myanmar è una Rivoluzione multidimensionale che mira non solo a rovesciare il regime militare, ma a ridefinire la struttura socio-politica dell'intero Paese. Analizzando sia la principale forza di guerriglia Karenni, il KNDF, sia il governo ad interim del medesimo Stato etnico, il KSCC, questa ricerca indaga su come i giovani Karenni, in coordinamento con le organizzazioni etniche armate locali e con i gruppi della società civile, abbiano costituito uno dei fronti anti-regime più avanzati di tutto il Myanmar.

## Keywords

Myanmar, military coup, Revolution, PDF, Karenni State

## 1. Introduction

The February 1st, 2021 illegal military coup triggered a new wave of insurgency across Myanmar. Within two months, the spontaneous anti-coup movement shifted from a peaceful phase, characterized by nationwide demonstrations, to the formation of armed revolutionary forces. This radical change has been caused by the junta's brutal counterstrategy in suppressing the opposition. The regime's crackdowns, and the following full-scale war against its own population, resulted in the deaths of at least 3,447 people and the arrest of 17,726 activists<sup>2</sup>.

The new revolutionary groups, broadly called People's Defence Forces (PDFs), can be identified as local guerrilla forces. In this historical time, where the ethnic majority group, the Bamar, has fully embraced the path of Revolution, armed conflicts have spread across the entire country. As described by Shona Loong, "almost all of Myanmar's 330 sub-districts or "townships" – the country's basic administrative units – are now plagued by war"<sup>3</sup>.

Since mid-March 2021, tens of thousands of young people from urban areas and beyond have moved to territories controlled by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), after the coup referred to as Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), to undertake basic military training. In this way, hundreds

<sup>2</sup> For regular updates about the number of deaths and arrests: <https://aappb.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Shona Loong, *Post-coup Myanmar in six warzones*, "The International Institute for Strategic Studies", July 5 2022, <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/introduction>.

of revolutionary forces were formed throughout Myanmar. Despite limited training, resources and experience, the new groups have inflicted severe losses on the military junta. Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of the Sit-tat, the Burmese Army, finding himself completely unprepared to face an armed insurgency of this magnitude, vowed to “annihilate” the revolutionary groups and its supporters “to the end”<sup>4</sup>.

Given the degree of heterogeneity among armed forces that emerged over the last two years, this paper aims to delve only into the Revolution in the Karenni State, by focusing on the armed struggle of the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) and the state-building efforts of the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC). The Karenni State, despite covering 11,670 square kilometers, reflects the complexity and the main challenges of the whole country: “Political impasse, a multiplicity of conflict actors, contested natural resources, land grabbing, humanitarian suffering, and divided communities seeking to rebuild after more than six decades of civil war”<sup>5</sup>.

The Karenni State has positioned itself as one of the most advanced, well-organized, and cohesive anti-coup fronts in Myanmar. The KNDF, as the leading guerrilla force, engages the Sit-tat daily in fierce battles, contesting the military’s authority in over 90% of the ethnic State. By analyzing the structure, strategies, weaponry, and geographical distribution of KNDF forces, this article investigates the reasons behind its current on-the-ground success.

Although Myanmar’s newly formed revolutionary groups have improved remarkably over the last two years, a key issue emerged among the democratic forces: the difficulty in managing and coordinating such a plethora of independent non-state armed actors responding to different chains of command. The KNDF, established by merging multiple local armed forces into a single chain of command, could represent a model to replicate for anti-coup armed groups in Myanmar in order to shift the current national Revolution into a new, more coordinated and effective phase.

The Revolution in Karenni State, however, is not exclusively related to the warfare dimension. The KSCC has been playing a pivotal role in establishing a people-driven political and administrative body that provides access to humanitarian assistance, security protection and political representation to local communities within the ethnic State. The KSCC, together with pre-existing armed groups and civil society organizations (CSOs), is implementing a

<sup>4</sup> Myanmar’s military ruler vows to ‘annihilate’ resistance groups, “The Guardian”, March 28 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/28/myanmars-military-ruler-vows-to-annihilate-resistance-groups>.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Kramer, Oliver Russell, Martin Smith, *From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State: A Land at the Crossroads in Myanmar*, “Transnational Institute”, July 2018, pp. 10.

bottom-up federal system that advances or retreats depending on the ground success of revolutionary forces.

In order to fully grasp the nature of the multidimensional Revolution unfolding in Karenni State, it is essential to look at the frontlines not only as demarcations of areas where Sit-tat troops and resistance forces engage in conflict, but where two different political and social systems clash. In the war-turned borderlands, federal and democratic values move at the same speed as revolutionary fighters' boots.

## 2. The transition of the resistance movement: from peaceful protests to armed revolution

The sudden spread of peaceful demonstrations in the aftermath of the military takeover brought millions of people into the streets across the whole country. The Sit-tat leadership, after a sterile initial response, ordered a countrywide systematic crackdown on pro-democracy protesters. Yangon, like many other areas of Myanmar, turned into a war zone: "Plumes of smoke rose [...] above a part of Myanmar's biggest city that has turned into a battle zone, with burning barricades and security forces firing at unarmed anti-coup protesters to enforce martial law"<sup>6</sup>.

In Karenni State, the demonstrations spread mainly to the cities of Loikaw, Demawso, and Hpruso. For weeks, protesters faced the military brutality armed only with slingshots and rudimentary defense systems, such as makeshift shields and barricades scattered around the city to slow down the advance of security forces.

After the first few months of anti-coup demonstrations, an increase in militarization was recorded in Karenni State. As described by Khun Bedu, Chairman of the KNDF and Deputy Minister of the National Unity Government (NUG): "Since the coup, the SAC [military regime] has removed local police from their stations, replacing them with soldiers from other parts of the country dressed in police clothes. Unlike local police, they started shooting at passers-by and into crowds"<sup>7</sup>.

Following the same trajectory as the rest of the country, in response to the military's dramatic use of lethal force on peaceful demonstrations, youth started to undergo basic military trainings with the support of local EROs.

<sup>6</sup> Town a battle zone as Myanmar enforces martial law, "Asia Times", 7 March 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/town-a-battle-zone-as-myanmar-enforces-martial-law/>.

<sup>7</sup> Earning Credentials: A Karenni perspective on the future of Burma/Myanmar. A Myanmar Commentary by Khun Bedu, "Transnational Institute", 17 August 2021, <https://www.tni.org/en/article/earning-credentials-a-karenni-perspective-on-the-future-of-burmamyanmar>.

In Karenni State, a key event that transformed the anti-coup nonviolent movement into an armed resistance was the death of U Shan Pu in Loikaw on March 19th, 2021, the first local casualty since the coup.

In the second half of March 2021, thousands of Karenni youth began to move from the cities to the outskirts in order to join the armed struggle. One of the first military trainings took place in the Shadaw region, the stronghold of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). Being the first of its kind in the territory, the recruits had to build the entire training camp from scratch in the middle of the forest. The same experience happened in other areas of Myanmar. As recounted by a young revolutionary who participated in one of the first PDF military trainings in Karen State: “Once I arrived in Kawkareik, a town halfway between Pa-an and Myawaddy, I was welcomed by a KNU representative. I was part of the first group of young revolutionaries who arrived in Karen State after the military coup. At first, we had to wait for the conclusion of negotiations between the CRPH and the KNU regarding our military trainings. I left my hometown, Pathein, together with three friends, but once I arrived in Kawkareik I met people from all over the country. In total there were forty-three of us. We received ten knives, four shovels, and a raincoat each to build shelters in a nearby bamboo forest”<sup>8</sup>.

Once the camp was built, three hundred youth began two weeks of basic military training under the guidance of the Karenni Army (KA), the armed wing of KNPP. Given the limited time available, the program was only based on physical exercises and gaining experience with rifles, mainly AK-47s and M16s, instructing how to shoot, disassemble and clean weapons<sup>9</sup>. At the end of the two weeks, the recruits were asked whether they intended to continue training for another three months in order to become official KA soldiers, or to go immediately to the frontline with the newly formed armed revolutionary groups. Over the course of the following months, tens of thousands youth joined the basic military trainings.

On May 5th, 2021, the NUG, the democratic government representing the people of Myanmar, announced the formation of the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs). In forming the PDFs, the NUG set three main goals: “1) To end the 70-year long internal conflict by extinguishing the terrorist acts and aggressive attacks of the State Administration Council (SAC) [military regime]; 2) To perform effective reforms in the security sector; 3) To participate as an essential forerunner for establishing the Federal Union Forces”<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with PDF member, Mae Sot, 13 March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Karenni Army (KA) soldier, Mae Hong Son, 25 September 2022.

<sup>10</sup> People’s Defence Force, “National Unity Government”, <https://mod.nugmyanmar.org/en/peoples-defence-force/>.

After the NUG's announcement, PDFs were formed in almost every township, including: the Demawso PDF on May 5th and the Karenni People's Defence Force (KPDF) on May 7th. From May 20th, 2021, an armed escalation began between the military troops and Karenni Revolutionary forces: on May 20th, the KA clashed with the Sit-tat in Hpaswang Township; on May 21st, the KPDF destroyed three military outposts in Demawso and Bawlakhe townships<sup>11</sup>; and on May 23rd, the Moebye PDF attacked a local police station<sup>12</sup>.

One KPDF member, reflecting on the days that followed the formation of his armed group, stated: "When the People's Defence Force was formed, we started setting up township communication offices. We built our own strongholds to protect people. We warned [the junta's authorities] from the beginning not to cross the line"<sup>13</sup>.

As described by Ye Myo Hein: "Karenni theater has thus become an attractive haven for pro-democratic activists who have snuck into places held by civilian defense teams, obtained military training from the EAOs and local PDFs, and formed their own militia groups"<sup>14</sup>. Within this territorial framework divided between militarization and a flourishing youth resistance, one revolutionary group has been playing a prominent role: Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF).

### 3. Karenni Nationalities Defense Force

Following the NUG announcement, hundreds of PDFs were formed across Myanmar. To better understand the nature and the strategies of the new armed groups, it is important to note that they are guerrilla forces that, especially over the first year, used "three main tactics to wear down the SAC: bombings with improvised explosive devices, targeted assassinations and ambushes on military convoys. Their targets are not just soldiers, but assets or

<sup>11</sup> Karenni resistance fighters kill three police officers as military attacks residential areas with artillery, "Myanmar Now", 22 May 2021, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/karenni-resistance-fighters-kill-three-police-officers-as-military-attacks-residential-areas-with-artillery/>.

<sup>12</sup> Unfolding Moebye (Mongbye) youngsters' thorny road armed revolution, "BNI", 30 November 2021, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/unfolding-moebye-mongbye-youngsters-thorny-road-armed-revolution>.

<sup>13</sup> Karenni resistance fighters open new front against junta, "Myanmar Now", 26 May 2021, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/karenni-resistance-fighters-open-new-front-against-junta/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ye Myo Hein, *One Year On: The Momentum of Myanmar's Armed Rebellion*, "Wilson Center", May 2022, pp. 51.

people affiliated with the junta, including SAC-appointed village administrators, suspected informants and Pyusawhti members<sup>15</sup>”.

However, one structural challenge that immediately emerged after the coup was the difficulty in managing and coordinating such a plethora of independent armed actors responding to different chains of command. In Karenni State, a step forward has been made to form a more cohesive and efficient anti-regime front. On May 31st, 2021, five PDFs merged to create the KNDF: Loikaw PDF, Demawso PDF, Namkhone PDF, Moebye PDF and Phalthone PDF. As explained by the KNDF information officer: “The main point is, the chance of victory is slim if we fight against the military council in an uncoordinated scattered fashion. We have formed the KNDF to collectively fight against the military council”<sup>16</sup>.

Reflecting on the formation of its armed force, the KNDF Chairman explained: “After our group managed to obtain about a hundred weapons, people from other districts also wanted to join the revolution, and so we gave up our original name and ambitions. We chose the current name, KNDF, so that not only indigenous Karenni ethnic people but also people from other ethnic groups in Karenni State could unite in protecting the people. Today we have 21 battalions and more than 8,000 fighters who have signed up to serve in the army for two years”<sup>17</sup>. After two years of fighting, due to the rigid and challenging living condition in conflict-affected areas and a lack of weaponry for every single member, it appears that more than one thousand KNDF fighters have left the frontline to join the different KNDF departments, such as: Central Information, Explosion and Technique, Health Care, Fundraising, and Logistics.

### **3.1 Structure, Chain of Command and geographical distribution of forces**

To date, the KNDF represents one of the most organized and well-structured revolutionary groups founded after the 2021 military coup. The main reasons behind its current success are related to the large number of fighters at its disposal, the territorial extent covered by its battalions, and its ability to

<sup>15</sup> Shona Loong, *The Dry Zone: an existential struggle in central Myanmar*, “The International Institute for Strategic Studies”, 5 July 2022, <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/dryzone>.

<sup>16</sup> An interview with the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) information officer, “Burma News International”, June 08, 2021, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/interview-karenni-nationalities-defense-force-kndf-information-officer>.

<sup>17</sup> We are Getting Stronger to Complete the Revolution”: Karenni Resistance Leader, “The Irrawaddy”, 15 June 2022, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/we-are-getting-stronger-to-complete-the-revolution-karenni-resistance-leader.html>.

follow a single chain of command. The KNDF, despite being an independent revolutionary group, is under the KA Chain of Command (CoC), given the ERO's experience and strategic capability gained over the 70-year long armed struggle against the Sit-tat. Although the KA Commander-in-Chief (CinC) Bee Htoo is also the CinC of the KNDF, the armed group is led by its Central Executive Committee (CEC), the most important decision-making body inside the KNDF, formed by five members: Chairman, Vice-chairman, Deputy Commander-in-Chief and three Secretaries<sup>18</sup>.

The KNDF consists of 21 battalions, each formed by at least three hundred revolutionary fighters. In terms of geographical distribution, the KNDF forces are divided as follow: Battalion 01 (B-01), B-05, B-06, B-07, B-09, B-10, and B-19 are based in Demawso township; B-02, B-12, B-14, and B-17 are based in Loikaw township; B-04, B-08, and B-15 are based in Hpruso township; B-03 and the B-11 are based in Pekhonn township in Southern Shan State; B-16, B-18, B-20, and B-21 are based in Bawlakhe township; and B-22 is based in Pinlaung township in Southern Shan State. For superstitious reasons, the KNDF B-13 does not exist. Each battalion is divided into companies, which usually consist of about 100 fighters each. It should be noted that units of different battalions can move to other locations according to strategic military operations. For example, given the territorial proximity, it is not uncommon to locate the B-17 in both Loikaw and Hpruso, or the B-07 in both Demawso and Hpruso.

*Table 1: Geographical distribution of KNDF battalions in Karenni State and Southern Shan State*

Township	Battalion (B)	Number of battalions for each township
Demawso	B-01, B-05, B-06, B-07, B-09, B-10, B-19	7
Loikaw	B-02, B-12, B-14, B-17	4
Bawlakhe	B-16, B-18, B-20, B-21	4
Hpruso	B-04, B-08, B-15	3
Pekhonn (Southern Shan State)	B-03, B-11	2
Pinlaung (Southern Shan State)	B-22	1

<sup>18</sup> Maui, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of KNDF is also a Secretary member.

On the ground, KNDF forces operate through six different deployments: the 1<sup>st</sup> deployment is commanded by the former leader of the B-03 that oversees the operation of B-03, B-11 and B-22; the 2<sup>nd</sup> deployment is commanded by the leader of the B-02 that oversees the operation of its battalion, B-12 and B-14; the 3<sup>rd</sup> deployment is commanded by Secretary 3 that oversees the operation of B-09, B-10, B-15 and B-17; the 4<sup>th</sup> deployment is commanded by Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Secretary 2 that oversees the operation of B-01, B-05, B-06 and B-07; the 5<sup>th</sup> deployment is commanded by Secretary 1 that oversees the operation of B-04, B-08 and B-19; and the 6<sup>th</sup> deployment is commanded by Vice-chairman that oversees the operation of B-16, B-18, B-20 and B-21<sup>19</sup>.

In analyzing the new revolutionary groups in Myanmar, it is essential to emphasize, not only the young age of the leadership, but also the socio-political context in which individual leaders grew up. The period from 2011 to 2020 was marked by the historical opening up of the country, mostly for people living in urban areas, characterized by greater freedom, economic reforms, booming technological development, especially in the telecommunication sector, and stable interaction with the outside world.

As described by KNDF Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Secretary 2 Maui: “Before the coup, the KNDF leaders were human rights defenders focused on social and environmental justice, peace process, and land rights. We have always stood up against injustice, even before [the coup], without guns”. He goes on, clarifying an important point to remember despite the current armed struggle: “We strongly believe in non-violence, but, unfortunately, the military only uses weapons. It is not possible to dialogue with them. We have used non-violence strategies for a long time and they did not work”<sup>20</sup>.

Within a national context of deep fragmentation and heterogeneity of armed groups where hundreds of non-state actors operate according to their own chain of command, their own ethical sensibilities, and their own political vision, defining a clear set of rules and objectives is an essential element for any armed group aiming to exert legitimate control over a specific territory. Linking the importance of the military discipline of individual revolutionary fighters with the social and political goals of the Revolution, the KNDF Deputy Commander-in-Chief explained: “We are aware of the negative effect of weapons on people. When you hold a weapon, the weapon can change you. Therefore, before starting the armed struggle, we have laid down a set of

<sup>19</sup> Interview with KNDF Secretary 3, Mae Hong Son, November 2022, and KNDF telecommunication officer, Mae Hong Son, March 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with KNDF Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Secretary Maui, Mae Hong Son, July 2022.



rules: 1) we will not become another ethnic armed group, our only purpose is to protect the people against the brutality of the Burmese Army; 2) we must eradicate the military system that penetrates every aspect of the country; 3) our goal is not to kill every soldier of the Burmese Army, we want to change the mindset of the current national army; and 4) we want to stop the cycle of hatred and violence. We are also aware that many people will have to sacrifice themselves, but we will do everything to make this the last battle. After that, issues will have to be solved only through dialogue”<sup>21</sup>.

### **3.2 A new revolutionary phase: the evolution of military strategy, weaponry and territorial control**

Anthony Davis, security analyst for IHS-Jane’s, in an interview with Myanmar Now, described the basic steps of an armed revolution, with reference to the Myanmar context: “Myanmar’s PDFs are a very long way from achieving any conventional [military] capability. They are still in Phase One of what Mao Zedong famously defined as a three-phase revolutionary war. That means first a phase of “strategic defense” fought by poorly armed guerrilla bands; then a phase of “strategic balance” when resistance forces have developed larger, better equipped and more mobile units; and only finally an offensive phase in which revolutionary forces have achieved a conventional capability involving regular or semi-regular forces, and regime forces are increasingly confined to urban centres”<sup>22</sup>.

The KNDF is already in the second phase of the Maoist theory of revolution. In relation to the development of the armed group, the KNDF Secretary 2 says, “one year after the coup, conflicts have become more and more intense. Our soldiers have gained more battle experience and we have more weapons. Our tactical skills have also improved greatly. This year we fought against the military using many different strategies”<sup>23</sup>. Although the current Revolution is often perceived as a static phenomenon, described as an impasse or a never-ending conflict, especially from the West, each year revolutionary forces expand their operational territory and gradually shrink what in the aftermath of the coup seemed an insurmountable military gap.

The armed group’s transition from the “strategic defense” phase to the “strategic balance” phase has been determined by the increment of the revo-

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Tin Htet Paing, Myanmar’s PDFs in ‘phase one’ of revolutionary war, “Myanmar Now”, 29 June 2022, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmars-pdfs-in-phase-one-of-revolutionary-war/>.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with KNDF Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Secretary Maui, Mae Hong Son, July 2022.

lutionary fighters' experience, the strategic effectiveness of the military operations, the improvement of weaponry and the extension of territorial presence.

Throughout 2022, the KNDF's main strategy has been focused on disrupting the Sit-tat's links between cities and township outskirts. The short-term goal was to cut off the distribution of supplies to frontline troops and the dispatch of reinforcements<sup>24</sup>. By analyzing the trajectory of the conflict, it is evident that the KNDF strategy worked. Most of the time, when the regime forces left territories under their control, mainly urban areas and military bases, to move to other parts of Karenni State, they clashed with local revolutionary forces. Ambush has been the main tactic implemented by the KNDF to pursue its objective.

Another relevant element connected to the impact of the KNDF strategy emerges from the changing behavior of Sit-tat soldiers on the battlefields. "In 2021, when a Burmese soldier was killed, the comrades would retrieve his body. In 2022, Burmese soldiers first took weapons and ammunition from their comrade's corpse and only later, if deemed possible, would retrieve the body. But often it did not happen, and the bodies of their comrades were abandoned"<sup>25</sup>. This phenomenon underlines the challenge faced by the regime to adequately resupply its frontline units and the deterioration of physical and psychological condition of Sit-tat foot-soldiers.

The progressive improvement of the KNDF's strategic capability is not only related to the experience of individual fighters obtained in the battlefield, but also to the constant military training they undergo. The system of unit rotation within battalions allows non-frontline high-ranking members to study the battles they have fought during specific training<sup>26</sup>.

The first few months of 2023 confirmed this positive trajectory. Although it is soon to indicate it as a consolidated practice, it appears that the KNDF, which often coordinate operations together with both KA and local PDFs, is gradually shifting its main military operation's target from cutting off the military supply channels to overrunning Sit-tat checkpoints, outposts, and artillery camps. From February 10th to March 26th, 2023, multiple guerrilla-style operations had successfully targeted regime troops all over Karenni State, especially in Bawlakhe and Demawso, and Southern Shan State, in Moebye and Pinlaung. If confirmed, the new strategy would indicate better intelligence, coordination, and military capability of the revolutionary front,

<sup>24</sup> Interview with KNDF telecommunication officer, Mae Hong Son, September 2022.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Interview with KNDF Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Secretary Maui, Mae Hong Son, July 2022.

shifting the posture of the Karenni strategy from defensive to a more offensive approach.

A second essential aspect to understand the KNDF's evolution is the weaponry. Like for many revolutionary groups in Myanmar, obtaining enough weapons and ammunition to adequately confront the Sit-tat is the most complex challenge for Karenni forces. However, within two years the situation has improved significantly. KNDF fighters have gone from carrying out early military operations mainly with hunting weapons, such as .22 Long Rifles, or traditional single-shot rifles, called *tumi*, to gradually acquiring assault rifles, mainly M-16s and AK-47s, rocket launchers (RPGs), 40 mm grenade launchers, 60 mm mortars, and, most recently, heavy machine guns.

Following the same direction of other conflict-affected areas in Myanmar, the Karenni State recorded an intense use of commercial drones for monitoring enemy positions and movements and agricultural drones capable of carrying multiple 60 mm bombs simultaneously, for assault and defense operations. The KNDF has one team specialized in drones called Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Department, supported by single drone unit deployed in most battalions<sup>27</sup>.

Apart from the intra-State weapon suppliers, notably the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the remarkable arming efforts made by the KNDF over the last two years has been based on both acquiring weapons from the neighboring Thai black market, where the prices tripled since the beginning of the coup, raising the cost of an M16 to roughly 3,000 US dollars, and seizing arms and ammunition from the enemy. In this regard, especially over the last few months of 2022, the KNDF has managed to seize a large number of weapons, including assault rifles, grenade launchers and RPGs from the Sit-tat. However, given the high number of daily armed clashes, more than the lack of weapons, the main issue in Karenni appears to be the lack of ammunition. For this reason, the same RPGs seized cannot be used consistently in battles<sup>28</sup>.

A key role in the development of the KNDF's weaponry has been played by its Fundraising Department. The Department, often coordinating with individual battalions or deployments, has successfully completed multiple campaigns. So far, the strategies implemented to raise funding are mainly focused on two different types of categories: "Challenges", with a deadline between 10 to 15 days, are often used to buy ammunition, and "Campaigns", with a longer and extendible time frame, are utilized to buy higher-caliber weapons, such as heavy machine guns, already deployed in the Karenni theater. The

<sup>27</sup> Interview with the coordinator of Karenni Civil Society Network, Mae Hong Son, September 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with KNDF telecommunication officer, Mae Hong Son, September 2022.

last successful campaign, called “The Fence”, has been initiated by the 4th deployment and raised 353,000 US dollars within 30 days, from March 20th to April 19th, 2023. As suggested by its name, the campaign aims to improve the capability of each battalion from the 4th deployment to defend their own territory. “Behind “The Fence” we want to build our Karenni governance, from education to healthcare services. This campaign is not only focused on weaponry, but it is also focused on [defending] our government system”<sup>29</sup>. The KNDF is going to buy 20 semi-automatic rifles for each battalion from the 4th deployment.

Due to the limited resources available and the challenges in having a constant access to the black market bordering with Karenni State, the KNDF created the Explosion and Technique Department (ETD). Although its production capacity is still limited, it is possible that ETD production teams will grow in the medium-term. An increase of new recruits within the military training camps, not only to become revolutionary fighters or medics, but also to join the weapons and IED production teams has been recorded<sup>30</sup>. Nevertheless, any improvement on this front will depend on the ability of the Karenni resistance to develop stable or semi-stable “liberated areas” where they can build their own small arms and light weapons (SALW) and ammunition production factories without the constant threat of being identified and destroyed by the regime forces. Indeed, the last essential element that supported the KNDF’s transition to the new revolutionary phase is related to territorial presence.

In the current national context of full-scale civil war, authoritarian repression, instability and multiple armed insurgencies, assessing the level of territorial control exercised by the resistance, or by an individual revolutionary group, such as the KNDF, is an extremely difficult task. A useful document for developing a general idea about the situation in the country is “Effective Control in Myanmar”, published by the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M). The report considers eight different degrees of territorial control by the resistance and Sit-tat. With reference to the Karenni theater, the document divides the area into three different types of influence. The first type, located in Hpasawng and Shadaw townships, local resistance forces appear to be present over 90 percent of the territory. “In these townships, the junta is able to maintain troops isolated in the heart of the main towns and a few select bases but with significant supply limitations and unable to conduct

<sup>29</sup> Interview with KNDF Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Secretary Maui, April 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with a member of the KNDF Explosion and Technique Department, Mae Hong Son, September 2022.

regular operations”<sup>31</sup>. In the second type, located in Pekhon (Southern Shan State), Demawso, Loikaw, and Mese townships, a decline in the junta’s ability to control the territory due to the growing presence of resistance groups has been recorded. “In these areas, resistance forces are extending their reach where there are large vacuums of authority and are strengthening their public administration systems in response to popular demand”<sup>32</sup>. Finally, in Hpruso and Bawlakhe townships, the resistance, despite expanding the territory under its control, is not yet able to consolidate its presence.

In line with the above report, the KNDF estimates that the regime controls only 10 percent of Karenni State<sup>33</sup>. Although it is still not possible to verify the above-mentioned data, it is evident that the junta is losing ground in most of the Karenni State. The Sit-tat’s convoys are constantly under attack outside the main cities and, over the last few months, also the military checkpoints and outposts are being targeted. However, in the absence of anti-aircraft weapons, such as man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), it remains extremely difficult for the resistance forces to defend the territories under their temporary control during the regime’s counter-guerrilla operations, especially when the offensives are supported by airpower.

In April 2023, the KNDF, in order to mitigate the Sit-tat airpower, has launched a fundraising campaign, called “Karenni point five”, that aims to reach 400,000 US dollars to buy new heavy machine guns (HMGs), possibly the M2 machine gun model. As explained by the Deputy Commander-in-Chief: “Since we are not able to purchase sophisticated air defense systems, the goal is to counter the military airstrikes, especially helicopters and fighter jets, by forcing the [regime Air Force] to fly at high altitudes [due to the deployment of HMGs]. So, they will not have a clear target on our positions”<sup>34</sup>. Videos of HMGs in Karenni State have already started circulating on social media.

The Sit-tat has been relying heavily on airstrikes as one of the primary counterinsurgency tactics to contain the armed resistance forces. Challenging what has so far been unchallenged will re-shape the battlefield dynamics, not only in Karenni State but countrywide.

<sup>31</sup> Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M), *Effective Control in Myanmar*, 5 September 2022, pp. 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Regime Controls Only Ten-percent Of Karenni State*, KNDF Says, “BNI”, 4 February 2022, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/regime-controls-only-ten-percent-karenni-state-kndf-says>.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with KNDF Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Secretary Maui, April 2023.

#### 4. Karenni battlefield: between militarization and resistance

The post-coup Karenni revolutionary forces are embedded in a highly complex environment dominated by ethnonational conflicts, division and militarization. In fact, the contemporary evolution of Karenni State has always been strongly influenced by the conflictual relationship with the Burmese central governments. The first critical issue emerged in the aftermath of Myanmar's independence in 1948. The Karenni, having never been formally included within the territories under the British Empire, claimed their own status as a sovereign state. Although Myanmar's 1947 Constitution granted the Karenni State the right to secede, the post-independence Burmese government rejected the creation of the independent ethnic state. Thus, together with dozens of other ethnic minority groups, the Karenni launched its own armed struggle.

The historical complexity of Karenni State must also be framed within its ethnic heterogeneity. Despite being the smallest state in Myanmar, it is home to seven main ethnic groups: Kayah, Kayan, Kayaw, Paku, Yintale, Keba, and Manu Manaw. The high number of ethnic minorities, coupled with decades of the use of the *divide et impera* strategy by Burma's authoritarian governments that aimed to destabilize the fragile inter-ethnic dynamics, led to a highly ethno-politically fragmented territory. The formation of opposing political organizations caused social fractures among local communities and a deep territorial division among non-state armed groups.

In Karenni State, a large number of armed groups operate, such as KNPP, Kayan New Land Party (KNLP), Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), Karenni National Democratic Party (KNDP), Kayan National Guard (KNG), Karenni National Peace and Development Party (KNPDP), and Karenni National Solidarity Organization (KNSO). Furthermore, as a direct consequence of the decades-long campaign of the Burmese regimes to "pacify" the State's ethnic peripheries, several Karenni armed organizations, in exchange for a free hand to develop a range of illicit business activities, accepted to be transformed into Border Guard Forces (BGFs) and joined the Sit-tat Chain of Command. "Increasingly key to the generals' plans for suppressing the insurgency, the BGFs serve as a force multiplier particularly against major ethnic armed organizations, providing battlefield intelligence, logistics support and even troops"<sup>35</sup>. In 2009, the KNPLF became a BGF and the KNDP, KNPDP, KNSO, KNLP<sup>36</sup> and KNG were transformed into *pyi-*

<sup>35</sup> Priscilla A. Clapp; Jason Tower, The Myanmar Army's Criminal Alliance, March 7, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/myanmar-armys-criminal-alliance>.

<sup>36</sup> Ashley South, The dream of Kayan homeland, "Frontier", April 19, 2020, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-dream-of-a-kayan-homeland/>.

*thusit*, literally “people’s militias”, which are local militias that are also allied with the Sit-tat<sup>37</sup>.

Although the tension between armed groups close to or in conflict with the military junta is still highly relevant within the ethnic State, the 2021 popular uprising has also had an impact on the internal dynamics of the Karenni BGFs. For example, as described by a member close to the KNDF: “The KNPLF officially does not fight against SAC troops because it wants to maintain a good relationship with them. But some soldiers remove the patch from their uniforms, in order not to be recognized by the regime troops, and join resistance forces during battles against the Burmese Army”<sup>38</sup>. In addition, the KNPLF has also conducted some basic military training for Karenni revolutionary youth.

The Karenni BGFs’ main task remains to guide regime troops to fight against the resistance. It will be extremely difficult to see a radical change in the leadership of the BGFs, who have based their power on the system of privileges and economic interests guaranteed by their close ties with the Sit-tat. Nonetheless, it appears there is a difference between the BGFs elite and foot-soldiers, the latter, in some cases, being closer to the call of the Revolution. As recounted by a Karenni civil society member: “When I fled from Loikaw to reach the Thai border, I had to take shelter in a territory under BGF’s control. During the negotiation between the KNPP and the BGF to arrange my safe trip to the border, I met several young [BGF] soldiers. Some of them told me they wanted to leave with me, join the Civil Disobedience Movement and participate in the Revolution. But in the end, they did not run away, they told me: we know that our organization can reach us anywhere at any time”<sup>39</sup>.

The heterogeneity of non-state armed forces is not related only to the history. From 2021 to the present, dozens of revolutionary armed groups have emerged across the Karenni territory. As noted by Ye Myo Hein in May 2022: “According to informed sources, there are no less than 20,000 fighters among the various anti-junta groups”<sup>40</sup>. In September 2022, the Information Centre of Progressive Karenni People Force (PKPF), a local activist group, estimated a total of 15,850 fighters active in the ethnic State<sup>41</sup>.

Although, it is still a challenge to determine the accurate number of Karenni revolutionary members active on the ground, there are more detailed information about the overall groups fighting the regime’s troops in the eth-

<sup>37</sup> John Buchanan, *Militias in Myanmar*, “The Asia Foundation,” July 2016, pp. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with a member of the KNDF, Mae Hong Son, September 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with a member of the Karenni civil society, Chiang Mai, September 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Ye Myo Hein, *One Year On: The Momentum of Myanmar’s Armed Rebellion*, Wilson Center, May 2022, pp. 52.

<sup>41</sup> Progressive Karenni People Force (PKPF) statement published on September 10, 2022.

nic State. The most relevant forces formed after the 2021 coup, besides the KNDF, are the PDFs operating at township level, including Demawso PDF (DMO-PDF), Loikaw PDF (LK-PDF), Bawlakhe PDF (BLK-PDF), Moebye PDF (MB-PDF), and Pekhonn PDF (PK-PDF). There are alliance attempts between different armed groups, such as the Karenni Revolution Union (KRU), composed by Karenni Generation Z (KGZ), Karenni Democratic Front (KDF), Fight for Justice (JPDF), and Southern Shan People Defense Force (SSPDF). It is also not unusual for outside forces to join temporarily Karenni groups during military operations. Two examples are Naypyitaw-PDF and Southern Shan Revolution Youth (SSRY)<sup>42</sup>, both repeatedly active in Moebye and Demawso <sup>43</sup>.

The last relevant factor in describing the militarized environment in Karenni State is represented by the territorial distribution of Sit-tat troops and their regional chain of command. On the ground, the military operations in Karenni State are overseen by Regional Military Commands (RMC) based in Loikaw. The RMC is in charge of the troops and holds political responsibility for the progress of the conflict. The RMC is overseen in turn by the Bureau of Special Operation (BSO) 2. The BSOs “are high-level field units in the Army formed with the original purpose of coordinating regional military commands in counter- insurgency operations”<sup>44</sup>. The last local center of military power is represented by the Military Operations Command (MOC) No. 7, based in Pekhonn (Southern Shan State). MOC No. 7 is in charge of implementing the strategic-military directions of RMC and supervises the Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) deployed across the region. MOCs are “comprised of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs) made up of three battalions each”<sup>45</sup>.

In September 2022, before the major offensive launched by the junta at the beginning of March 2023 in Karenni State, the regime deployed 20 LIBs. Although, each LIB consisted of one hundred and twenty soldiers, only eighty

<sup>42</sup> The Southern Shan Revolution Youth (SSRY) is a coalition formed by the SSRY Easel Force, the Dragon Force, the Tai PDF Cobra Force, the Dove Guerrilla Force, and the Southern Shan Irine Force. The SSRY is NUG No.1008 Infantry-Southern Shan.

<sup>43</sup> 90 soldiers killed in Demawso armed conflicts, “BNI”, March 28, 2023, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/90-soldiers-killed-demawso-armed-conflicts>.

<sup>44</sup> Htet Myet Min Tun, Moe Thuzar and Michael Montesano, Min Aung Hlaing and His Generals: Data on the Military Members of Myanmar’s State Administration Council Junta, “ISEAS”, Singapore, 23 July 2021, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_97.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_97.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Doo Tha Htoo District Short Update: Killing, torture and use of human shields and navigators by the SAC and BGF in Bilin Township, May to June 2022, “KHRG”, 22 August 2022, <https://khr.org/2022/08/22-182-d1/doo-tha-htoo-district-short-update-killing-torture-and-use-human-shields-and/#ftn3>.



generally took part in counterinsurgency missions<sup>46</sup>. Specifically, LIB 427 and LIB 102 are in Demawso township; LIB 531 in Hpruso; LIB 422 in Moebye; LIB 336 in Pekhon; LIB 250 in Loikaw; and LIB 530 east of Loikaw<sup>47</sup>. The LIBs form the Light Infantry Divisions (LIDs). The LIDs are known to be the most violent units in the entire military structure. A recent demonstration of their brutality occurred on Christmas Eve 2021, when soldiers from LID 66 massacred dozens of civilians in Hpruso district of Karenni State, burning them alive<sup>48</sup>. Finally, there are two Artillery Battalions, one in Loikaw and the other in Demawso. The two battalions use Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), not only to attack military targets of the revolutionary forces, but mostly to bombard civilians in villages or refugee camps across the State.

It is relevant to note that in early February 2022, the commander of the Regional Military Commands and the deputy commander of Military Operations Command No. 7 were both replaced. The change of leadership in the most important centers of military operations on the ground was a clear sign of the Sit-tat's failed strategy to regain control of Karenni State. In other words, an attempt by the junta to respond to the "failure to contain the growing armed resistance"<sup>49</sup> in Karenni State.

## 5. The geography of the Karenni Revolution

An essential aspect that has led to the "growing armed resistance" in Karenni is defined by the specific geographical features of the territory. First, Karenni State itself represents a strategic area. The capital city of the Karenni ethnic State, Loikaw, is only two hundred kilometers away from Myanmar's national capital, Naypyidaw, the center of military power. For this strategic reason, to push back the revolutionary forces that got into the peripheries of the city in the early days of January 2022, the Sit-tat bombed Loikaw. "About 50,000 people reportedly fled Loikaw after military airstrikes destroyed areas of the city during recent attacks, bringing the number of displaced people to

<sup>46</sup> Interview with the coordinator of Karenni Civil Society Network, Mae Hong Son, September 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Given the difficulty in obtaining detailed information regarding the position of Sit-tat troops over the Karenni State, the list of LIBs is partial and reflects the situation on September 2022.

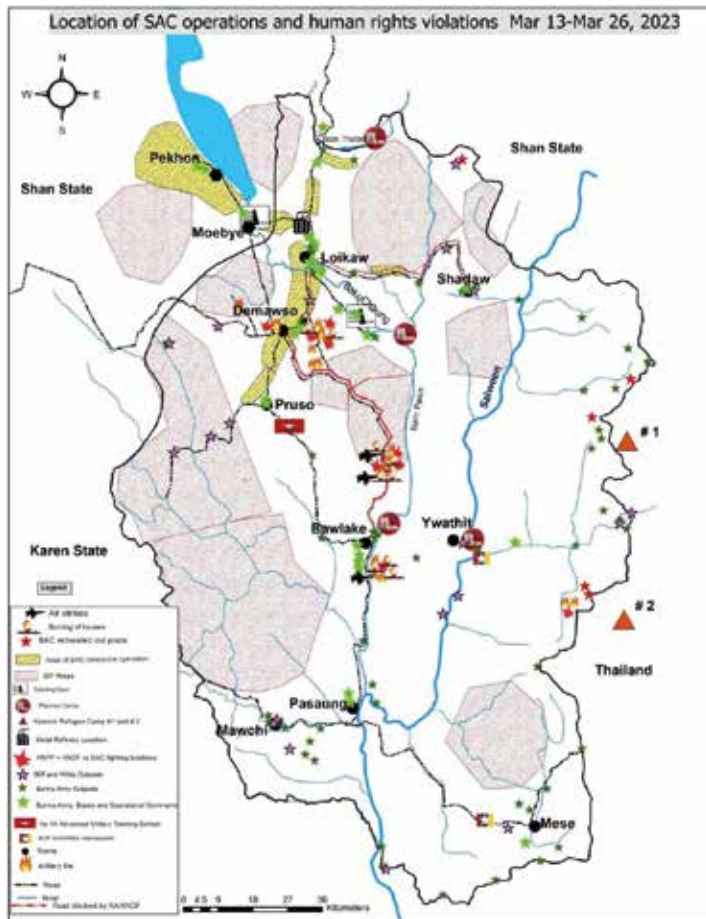
<sup>48</sup> Esther J, Junta soldiers implicated in Christmas Eve massacre occupy town of Moebye, "Myanmar Now", 17 February 2022, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/junta-soldiers-implicated-in-christmas-eve-massacre-occupy-town-of-moebye>.

<sup>49</sup> Ye Myo Hein, *One Year On: The Momentum of Myanmar's Armed Rebellion*, Wilson Center, May 2022, pp. 52.

about 200,000”<sup>50</sup>. This was a relevant episode within Myanmar contemporary conflict dynamics, as it represented the first airstrike against, not only a developed urban center, but a capital city of an ethnic State.

In the insurgency and counterinsurgency strategy in Karenni State, the road section from Pekhon to Demawso represents the main geostrategic target of the conflict, where the effort of both resistance forces and regime is focused. In fact, armed clashes between the two factions take place along this very road that runs through the townships of Demawso, Loikaw, Pekhon and Hpruso.

Figure 1: Map of Karenni conflict published by the Karenni Civil Society Network, KCSN: Bi-weekly update, March 31, 2023.



<sup>50</sup> Sar Shi Mi, Myanmar junta launches air strikes on Loikaw as the battle continues to rage, “Mizzima,” January 12, 2022, <https://mizzima.com/article/myanmar-junta-launches-air-strikes-loikaw-battle-continues-rage>.

During 2021, the military used mostly the road from Taungoo, in Bago region, to Loikaw, entering into Karenni State from the south. However, since 2022, as the conflict in and around Karenni State has intensified, the military has only used the road from Pekhon to Demawso, north-west of the ethnic State. Although the reasons behind this strategic shift are unknown, the leading cause could be the growing presence of the anti-junta Karen resistance coalition, formed by Karen EROs, especially the Karen National Union (KNU), and PDFs, across the region.

With the Taungoo option excluded, the only road that allows the Sit-tat troops to enter into the Karenni State is the one from Pekhon in Southern Shan State. Emphasizing its implication within local dynamics, KNDF telecommunication officer explained: “The Pekhon-Demawso road is very important for transporting supplies and reinforcements. Whoever takes control of the main road, controls the whole Karenni State”<sup>51</sup>. Therefore, taking control of the above-mentioned road section is the current Sit-tat objective in the Karenni theatre.

On the other hand, the KNDF does not possess yet the military capability to defend territories from the Sit-tat’s air counteroffensives. As one KNDF member indicated: “For us, taking control of the entire road section, and being able to defend it from military attacks, represents another level of strategy, another level of organization, and another level of weaponry: Another phase of the Revolution”<sup>52</sup>. In other words, at present no actor is able to control the key strategic element of the conflict. Future game-changing efforts, on both sides, will be focused on this aspect.

An additional geographical element that shapes the Karenni theatre is the role played by its bordering country. In fact, Karenni State shares part of the long border between Myanmar and Thailand. This aspect is mostly relevant to local resistance forces, since Shadaw township, which connects Karenni State to Thailand’s Mae Hong Son region, is the KNPP’s historical stronghold. The KNPLF operates in Mese township, also bordering with Thailand.

The ability to interact with the outside world, although to a limited extent, represents an advantage for the revolutionary groups in both obtaining cross-border humanitarian aid and acquiring weapons and ammunition. It is relevant to note that no major armed clashes have yet occurred in Shadaw and Mese townships. It appears that both areas have been voluntarily left out of the conflict. If there will be increased support for Karenni revolutionary

<sup>51</sup> Interview with KNDF telecommunication officer, Mae Hong Son, September 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with a member of the KNDF, Mae Hong Son, September 2022.

groups in the future, and for KNDF specifically, it will likely come through the Thai border.

## 6. Revolution is Federalism: building a new model of governance in time of war

Federalism has always been perceived as the solution to Myanmar's civil war, even before the country gained its independence. The first attempt to establish a society based on the shared principles of equality, self-governance and self-determination for every ethnic minority was the Panglong Agreement of February 12th, 1947, signed by Aung San, representing the Bamar, and the Kachin, Chin, and Shan leaders. The agreement remains the benchmark for many EROs to this day.

The Constitution, drafted the same year, confirmed the general direction of the Panglong Agreement. "As Josef Silverstein points out, although the Constitution did not mention the words "federal" or "federalism", it was clear that this was its main intention"<sup>53</sup>. However, Myanmar's post-independence, dominated by the authoritarian turn of central governments, ethnocentrism, and oppression of ethnic and religious minorities, led the country to move drastically away from early attempts to implement a federal and inclusive system.

The outbreak of the first peaceful and then armed uprising of 2021, with the collapse of legitimate central state authority, brought federalism back to the center of political discussion. On February 5th, 2021, a group of parliamentarians elected in the November 8th, 2020 general election, led by Daw Phyu Phyu Thin, established the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). On March 31st, the CRPH launched the Federal Democracy Charter. In addition to the formation of the NUG, composed of members with diverse ethnic and political backgrounds, the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) was established: an inclusive political dialogue platform that brings together diverse actors, including some EROs, political parties, and civil society organizations, with the aim of laying the foundation for the country's future political and administrative system. "NUCC's aspiration for a "Democratic and Federal Union" emphasizes "federalism" as a priority"<sup>54</sup>.

While it is important to pay attention to the top-down political initiatives already mentioned, this last section will focus on analyzing the politi-

<sup>53</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, London and New York, Zed Books Ltd, 1999, pp.79.

<sup>54</sup> Htet Myet Min Tun and Moe Thuzar, Myanmar's National Unity Consultative Council: A Vision of Myanmar's Federal Future, "Fulcrum," January 5, 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/myanmars-national-unity-consultative-council-a-vision-of-myanmars-federal-future/>.

cal efforts of Karenni communities within the current national revolutionary framework. Indeed, as expressed by Ashley South: “Although constitutional change is necessary, federalism can also be seen as an “emergent” phenomenon, developing from the bottom up from the existing structures and practices of ethnic minority communities and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs)”<sup>55</sup>.

Within this vision of a bottom-up federalism, the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC) was formed in Karenni State on April 9th, 2021. The KSCC is composed of parliamentarians elected in the 2020 general election, political parties, ethnic revolutionary forces, and civil society and youth organizations. On April 18th, 2021, in its first official statement, the new representative body declared: “The KSCC will take the political leadership role in Karenni State and guide the formation of an interim state government and implementation of the state’s executive, legislative, and judiciary sectors”<sup>56</sup>.

As set out in the Federal Democratic Charter Part-II, approved by the People’s Assembly, the KSCC has been working on the Interim Constitution of Karenni State. The Constitution, although still in the making, lays the foundation of the future federal and democratic State of Karenni. It includes purposes, responsibilities, and principles of the KSCC, focusing on women’s participation, equality, justice, and non-discrimination; the formation of the interim state administration and the division of powers; an inclusive and multilingual educational system; a political roadmap; a coordination system with existing ethnic revolutionary administrative departments; and a multi-dimensional transitional plan from the current armed struggle to the post-revolutionary period, including security sector components: management of weapons, dissolution of anti-dictatorship armed forces, and rehabilitation and reintegration process for former revolutionary fighters<sup>57</sup>.

The KSCC also aims to bring together different local ethnic political-armed organizations within the same interim government. At first, the main armed organizations that accepted to join the Council were the KNPP, KNPLF and KNLP. Two years after its formation, the representative members from National League for Democracy (NLD), the KNLP and the KNPLF withdrew their participation from the KSCC<sup>58</sup>.

Despite the attempt to establish an inclusive interim government open to all armed organizations and political parties representing different local

<sup>55</sup> Ashley South, Towards “Emergent Federalism” in Post-coup Myanmar, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 43, No. 3 (2021), pp. 439-60, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute.

<sup>56</sup> Karenni State Consultative Council, Statement No. 1/2021, April 18, 2021, <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2021/04/18/karenni-state-consultative-council-statement-no-1-2021/>.

<sup>57</sup> Interim Constitution of Karenni State.

<sup>58</sup> KSCC works to finalize the Karenni State Administrative Council, “BNI”, February 27, 2023, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/kssc-works-finalize-karenni-state-administrative-council>.

ethnic minorities, it remains challenging to reach agreements, policies, and a shared vision of the future Karenni State. As expressed by a KNPP Central Committee member: “One of the main goals is to unite the Karenni people and groups. However, the problem of cooperating with Karenni armed groups close to the Burmese Army is defined by the lack of mutual trust. If some sensitive information, shared exclusively within the government, were to be leaked to the military, we would risk endangering our troops and people, giving an advantage to the Burmese Army. The circle of trust must be 100 percent secure, but this inevitably slows down the unification process with all Karenni groups. Despite this difficulty, the KNPP chairman is clear: we want to move forward not backward”<sup>59</sup>.

Since its formation, the KSCC has sought to build a local administration while maintaining a stable relationship with democratic forces across the country. Currently, under KSCC control there are 400 schools, from kindergarten to tenth grade, one on-campus university, with in-person classes, five hospitals, 74 clinics and 426 healthcare personnel (HCP), including doctors, nurses and volunteers<sup>60</sup>. In addition, KSCC works closely with the NUG and directly participates in the NUCC.

In relation to the governance capacity of the KCSS, considerable progress has been made in the security sector. On one side, the KNDF is a security force that reports to the KSCC, besides having representative members within the interim government. On the other side, the Karenni State Police (KSP) was formed in August 2021 under the supervision and guidance of KSCC. The KSP consists of 320 policemen who have left the ranks of the national police force to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)<sup>61</sup>. In less than two years, the KSP has opened seven police stations and two police outposts, “providing law, order, security, and other services to the Karenni people through community-based police work in these areas.”<sup>62</sup> From August 25th 2021 to July 3rd, 2022, the KSP had arrested a total of 235 people: “SAC informers (13), SAC instigators (76), drug-related crimes (31), rape (1), theft (11), Non-CDM (43), military deserters (13), police deserters (4), drug trafficking (27), domestic violence (8), and prisoners of war (8)”<sup>63</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with members of the Central Committee (CC) of the KNPP, Mae Hong Son, July 15, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Khun Bedu, leader of the KNDF, October 25, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Anti-junta police force formed in Karenni State by striking police officials, “Myanmar Now,” August 26, 2021, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/anti-junta-police-force-formed-in-karenni-state-by-striking-police-officials/>.

<sup>62</sup> Annual report of Karenni State Police, (25-8-2021 to 31-7-2022).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

For these concrete state-building efforts, the Karenni Revolution must be framed not only through its goal of overthrowing the current military regime, but within a broader political and social project of transforming the current State of Myanmar into a federal and democratic country that guarantees political aspiration, equality, social justice, and self-determination to all ethnic minorities. This is a multidimensional Revolution where the implementation of the federal system is not postponed into the uncertain future, but it is an urgency of the present: federalism in times of war.

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# 'Sexdemic': counter gender- based hate crimes. Virtual practices, cyber-bodies, micro-celebrity and sex crimes

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## Abstract

The various forms of participation on the web, such as likes, posts, tweets, leave 'traces of our selves', fragments of our identities that we are unaware of, that we cannot control and that we cannot delete.

In recent months, we have witnessed more and more diverse situations online, such as those involving groups of teenagers who use social networks to build identities, micro-celebrity paths and distribute photos/videos of beatings, torture, murders, but especially live suicides.

The causes and consequences of these forms of deviant behaviour, which are reproduced in the virtual dimension, are many and varied: depression, envy, the search for power and visibility, the transformation of a simple user into a cyber-victim, sometimes without even realising it, and the "telling off" on social networks, especially through self-produced videos and photos. Drawing on international sociological and psychological literature, this paper aims to reflect on some forms of online deviance related to 'pathological' communication practices concerning the body and (cyber) sexual violence.

Le varie forme di partecipazione in rete, come i like, i post, i tweet, lasciano "tracce di noi stessi", frammenti della nostra identità di cui non siamo consapevoli, che non possiamo controllare e che non possiamo cancellare.

Negli ultimi mesi abbiamo assistito a situazioni sempre più diversificate in rete, come quelle che coinvolgono gruppi di adolescenti che utilizzano i social network per costruire identità, percorsi di micro-celebrità e diffondere foto/video di pestaggi, torture, omicidi, ma soprattutto suicidi in diretta.

Le cause e le conseguenze di queste forme di devianza, che si riproducono nella dimensione virtuale, sono molteplici: la depressione, l'invidia, la ricerca di potere e visibilità, la trasformazione di un semplice utente in una cyber-vittima, a volte senza nemmeno rendersene conto, e il "raccontarsi" sui social network, soprattutto attraverso video e foto autoprodotti.

Attingendo alla letteratura sociologica e psicologica internazionale, questo articolo si propone di riflettere su alcune forme di devianza online legate a pratiche comunicative "patologiche" riguardanti il corpo e la violenza (cyber)sessuale.

## Keywords

Sex; crime; digital media; celebrity; online reputation; bodies, hate speech; crimini sessuali; media digitali; celebrità; reputazione online; corpi

### 1. Introduction: the culture of violence and celebrity

The fact that we live in a technological society of the image and exhibitionism is demonstrated by the numerous cases of online deviance, which report a type of homicidal and suicidal behaviour, mainly by minors.

Such events are increasingly accompanied by new media practices (a video or a selfie) that remain forever on the web, as a form of ‘memory’ or long-term ‘digital memory’” (Ziccardi 2016), which depict live the violent act and the death of the victim.

The same FBI investigative agency has even reported the existence of numerous closed groups within social media where it is possible to discuss the topic of suicide, asking members for suggestions on how and when to practice such behaviours online.

In this context, the criminologist David Garland (2004) and the American educationalist Henry Giroux speak of a new “culture of violence and cruelty” as a result not only of particularisation but also of a “refined deselection of what we see”.

Violence on television and the Net is becoming a daily trans-media narrative that makes us more protagonists (‘spectator-actors’) and perhaps too easily guarantees an easy, unconscious and violent entry into the world of virtual micro-celebrity in search of visibility and power. The current open question is the relationship between adolescents, the Web and forms of virtual deviance.

There is a need to understand how the representation of violent acts and suicidal behaviour develops within social platforms, who the cyber-victims are, what the modus operandi is, and what the social implications of the production, display and direct consumption of this type of content in online and offline life are for ‘new audiences’.

In recent years, we have also seen an increase in violent cyber-behaviour such as bullying and sexting on the Net, and it is on the latter point in particular that most of the proposed analysis in relation to education and sexuality in adolescence will focus.

For Danah Boyd (2014), there is a very simple way of describing the relationship between the Net and adolescents: it is about fear and the need for identity, the need to appear and to tell their stories: this is because they are always connected, therefore “together but alone” (Turkle 2012).

Young people are perfectly familiar with the new digital space in which they move, constructing multiple identities, but allegedly unable to distinguish between the real and the virtual, ready to accept the end of the private dimension, which they unconsciously and paradoxically keep alive, however, by acting out false online identities, often embodying roles of perpetrator and/or victim.

The ability to easily use social and digital media to interact with others automatically multiplies the messages each individual produces about themselves.

There is a big difference between 'being in public' and 'being public' and this is the biggest gap to be bridged: Instead of acting to obtain privacy, thus limiting the visibility of their online content and actions on social platforms, adolescents develop other strategies to obtain it in public (Boyd 2014).

The phenomenon of the selfie, i.e. the habit of taking pictures of oneself with one's smartphone and disseminating them a few seconds later on the web, is one of the new mass practices and strategies of "social window dressing" (Codeluppi 2015), which constitute a communicative model based on spectacularisation and the exhibition of one's external attractiveness.

In 2001, the French psychiatrist Serge Tisseron proposed the term 'estimity' to describe the desire that drives many people to stage some of their intimacy on television, while today this movement has taken on considerable proportions on the Internet (Tisseron 2001).

The relationship between intimacy and estimity can only be understood if a third element is included: self-esteem.

## 2. Sexting as a digital subculture

The construction of self-esteem requires intimacy (one's own space), but it also requires esteem, as it allows one to be validated by others.

The desire to find oneself is primary, and recognition by other users within digital platforms is just the easiest way to get there, especially when one chooses or finds oneself showing oneself, one's body, one's intimacy.

But all this can have important consequences in the offline space.

Sexting is conventionally defined as 'the exchange of sexually oriented messages or images' (Livingstone et al. 2011) and 'the creation, sharing, or forwarding of nude or semi-nude images' via mobile phones and/or the Internet (Lenhart 2009).

The definition of 'sexting' is inherently confusing, although Lounsbury et al. (2011) recommend using a narrower definition to better capture the phenomenon at hand, focusing on the exchange of images between minors

under the age of 18, thus adopting a discriminatory criterion based on the nature of the offence.

Wolak and Finkelhor (2011) use the severity of the act as a yardstick, ranging from so-called 'experimental' sexting, carried out by adolescents in a climate of physiological experimentation with sexuality, to the extreme of 'aggravated' sexting, which leads to non-negligible consequences and criminal acts.

Schools have gradually had to come to terms with this phenomenon, as have parents, children's services and operators.

From a regulatory point of view, attempts have been made to understand how to intervene in situations ranging from the creation to the distribution of sexual material relating to minors, with solutions ranging from a milder form of justice to the adoption of a more extremist approach (Lenhart 2009).

In addition, there are numerous scientific studies on the psychological and social condition of the victim, but equally important is the research that highlights how juvenile offenders often live in a situation of family/sociocultural distress that limits their ability to control, self-regulate and assess consequences (Loeber and Farrington 2001).

Sexting remains an issue that is often approached with positions ranging from prohibition to total indulgence, in the context of a 'sexualised' culture and society where processes of mediatisation have overwhelmed even complex social phenomena such as the one we are talking about.

This can be seen in television programmes such as 'How to Look Good Naked', popular in the UK, where women are encouraged to photograph themselves naked in order to increase their confidence and trust in themselves and their sexuality (Ringrose et al. 2013).

According to the 'cultivation theory' model (Gerbner 1994), young people's constant exposure to media would gradually 'cultivate' the belief that the real world coincides with the digital one.

Exposure to sexually explicit and pornographic content in this way appears to have a direct impact on intimate relationships, esteem and respect for one's partner, and the violent ways in which couples behave (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009). The sexual content circulating on the internet, known internationally as SEIMS (sexual explicit internet materials), presents an unrealistic, riskless and often violent view of sexuality that denigrates women.

Young people who are constantly exposed to this kind of sexuality online are more likely to experience and judge risky sexual behaviour as normal and to adopt discriminatory representations of the opposite sex.

The key point is that there is no 'digital dualism' between real and virtual life, as the sociologist Nathan Jurgenson points out, and it is precisely in the

absence of this awareness that the phenomenon of cyberbullying and the many forms of net addiction tend to worsen.

According to a study carried out by NCMEC a few years ago (2009), American teenagers aged between 13 and 18 said that 9% of the time they had sent messages/emails containing sexually explicit references and photos, 17% of the time they had received such messages and 3% of the time they had forwarded them to someone else.

A 2009 study in the UK called 'Sex Tech' found that half of the teenagers surveyed (48%) had received sexual messages. 12% of British teenagers admit to having recorded or participated in a sex video (Barter 2015). Recent studies by Telefono Azzurro (Italy) and Doxa Kids (2016) show that 11% of teenagers know someone who has engaged in sexting.

This practice does not always involve two minors, in some cases an adult stranger hides behind the smartphone or computer screen; in fact, digital technology has changed the concept of 'abuse', making children and adolescents more vulnerable.

On the internet, paedophiles have many opportunities to come into contact with children through various means, such as chat rooms, social networks, online games, etc.

Whereas in the 1990s a paedophile had an average of 150 images of children, today he has an average collection of 150,000 images (UNODC 2014); the so-called sex offenders in question often collaborate online, based on what experts call 'collegial friendship'.

In the United States, 13% of young people between the ages of 10 and 17 report having received requests for contact from strangers (Wolak et al. 2010); moreover, it is not uncommon for the relationship established online with the stranger to be continued in an offline context, as the culmination of a system that begins with gaining the minor's trust, sexualising the relationship to the point of maintaining control over the other (Livingstone et al. 2010).

As far as Italy is concerned, we have data from the 1.96.96 helpline of Telefono Azzurro:

The solicitation of minors by adults represents 4% of the requests for help related to internet problems that reach the 1.96.96 helpline (Telefono Azzurro, Centro Nazionale di Ascolto, 1 April - 31 December 2015).

Importantly, however, recent research shows that the majority of young people, at a hormonally imbalanced age when they are trying to build social relationships online, do not know the boundaries between cyberbullying, child pornography and sexting, although they admit that some forms of the latter are extremely humiliating and offensive (Shaheen 2017). In the digital age, sexual exploration activities have clearly shifted from 'kissing in the back of the car' to engagement on social networking sites.

In addition to the apparent lack of sexual and digital education among many young people, part of their confusion is also due to the nature of media narratives on these issues: many media reports, as well as the various policy initiatives, end up conflating the violence of the bully with the actions of a paedophile or an online sexual groomer of minors.

### 3. Rape culture... in mass culture

Public policies in many European and Anglo-Saxon countries have so far focused exclusively on young people and have ended up criminalising their behaviour in front of screens, as if they were the only ones practising forms of humiliation and harassment in virtual spaces, when the same attention should be paid to the models offered by adults in mass culture and in the so-called “rape culture” that is increasingly practised in the online adult world.

“Rape culture is the term used in gender studies, feminist and postmodern literature to analyse and describe a culture in which rape and other forms of sexual violence are common, and in which prevailing attitudes, norms, media practices and attitudes normalise, justify or encourage rape and other violence against women.

The first definition of the term is attributed to the 1975 documentary *Rape Culture*, in which filmmaker Margaret Lazarus describes how rape is portrayed in film, music and other forms of ‘entertainment’.

In a 1992 article in the *Journal of Social Issues*, Patricia Donat and John D’Emilio instead suggest that the term originated in Susan Brownmiller’s 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* as a ‘culture that supports rape’.

It is generally agreed that such a culture can be defined as a set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and support violence against women. This takes place in a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent, where any form of physical and emotional terrorism against the female figure is considered ‘normal’ (often devastating for the victim, as it can compromise her physical-psychic health and profession).

Unfortunately, even in institutional and media environments (online), we often find sexist, misogynist attitudes (through posters, posts, messages, tweets), especially when it is women who are in positions of leadership and “exploit” this role to express conscious opinions and reiterate feminist points of view, thus creating a strong sense of insecurity and destabilisation in male subjects.

Amanda Hess, a well-known journalist who is very active on the Twitter platform, has repeatedly received death threats for writing about issues related to sex: “I see that you are not physically attractive” or “I’m going to look for

you and when I find you, I'm going to rape you and rip your head off" are just some of the threats she has received (Hess 2014); even the programmer and blogger Kathy Sierra was forced to cancel several public appearances after receiving severe death threats online, which were deemed "reliable" by the police.

From a sociological point of view, the relationship between rape culture, mass culture and its impact on the behaviour of teenage girls who publish intimate and nude photos online, which they then share with their peers, whom they initially trust, but who later turn out to be anything but friends, as they decide to publish them in public digital spaces for revenge or for fun (often unaware of the real consequences).

Reflections on feminist culture point to the fact that women and girls in today's society are encouraged to take on leadership roles, to occupy first positions in the world of education and work, to step out of the old and restrictive role of "mother-wife-homemaker" typical of the traditional family, which is no longer valid in the so-called postmodern families, where instead women live, build and strengthen their identity, reputation and relationships both in private and in public spaces, thus sending strong messages of sexual independence.

Since the 1990s, the same mass media have created an information space in which we find images of openly 'sexualised', assertive, highly paid women at the centre of the film, television and music industries, and all this for the opposite sex, which is rather confused by such social changes, irrefutable proof of women's 'power' and independence (Shaheen 2017).

This state is not easy to achieve immediately, especially for those teenage girls who are still immersed in their studies and tied to their families, but who recognise in the celebrities exalted by mass culture, such as Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Beyoncé, this position of strength and freedom that is still too far away for them and that they feel they must achieve now, at all costs, because this is the female figure that 'wins' today in the society of image and entertainment.

Thus, the tendency of girls to sext, to send naked photos, driven by the desire to be 'connected and searched' on the Internet as if they were micro-celebrities, could be explained as an attempt to achieve the status of success, independence and power that they see in their idols, but which is obviously not yet possible at the age of 12 or 15.

Biological time does not coincide with time in virtual space, which translates into a state of "window dressing" (exposing oneself in order to impose oneself) and an acceleration of things, now supported by a condition of transparency and traceability of our person on the net.



#### 4. Micro-celebrity and (dis)education in the new media

According to sociologist Jessica Evans, the media and celebrities are mutually constitutive and vehicles for the creation of social meanings: on the one hand, the media invest immense resources in the promotion and coverage of celebrities; on the other hand, the celebrity always represents something more than herself, harbouring values, perceptions, beliefs.

Media coverage in newspapers, films, television and social networks plays a crucial role in the perception and organisation of our world. The process of 'celebrification' is characterised by a strong displacement in a plurality of media offering different inputs and outputs: film celebrities, television celebrities and today's well-known 'youtubers' are completely different figures in terms of narrative, personality, audience, time and space, all of which are changing today as a result of media globalisation and the convergence process.

Television has created many stars and each of them suffers the consequence of being 'dailyised' by it, which causes them to lose their power (Couldry 2015).

Compared to the past, TV and film stars no longer seem so distant, superior and unattainable, but are simply part of the everyday lives of ordinary people. The stars of yesteryear are considered to be on the same level as today's youtubers, who cultivate their success every day by collecting likes (a measure of personal success) and gaining an impressive number of followers, without necessarily having any specific expertise in the field.

Today, thanks to Facebook and Twitter, new young (micro) celebrities are emerging, taking advantage of the transparency and interactive nature of digital media to establish direct channels with their audiences in a short time and at no cost, moving through social platforms as expert influencers.

New practices such as the selfie keep celebrities and the public in close contact, constantly updated on the professional and emotional life of the star, with the private dimension completely absent from the beginning of the relationship between them.

Moreover, with social media, the experience of the body also becomes public: a globalised and transparent body that creates interconnectedness, success or failure, power or fragility, but what is now certain is that everyone can at least try to build a path of micro- and self-celebrity.

We no longer look at the world to learn, to know or to be excited, but only to be appreciated by others, to expose ourselves (web reputation).

We try to capture the world around us, to lock it up, to show others ourselves and what we see: one, none and a hundred thousand celebrities in a single profile.

To be a small celebrity is now an easy and obvious step, almost a must, but to maintain this position online and offline for a long time is the real obstacle of the small 'contemporary star'; an obstacle that can only be overcome through a path of awareness and learning to educate and educate oneself in the 'on/off-life' environment.

## 5. Conclusion

Cyber-bullies, cyber-pedophiles, cyber-terrorists, these are the new criminals operating on the Net, using the new digital languages to implement persuasive and manipulative communication strategies for their own interests, to harm people, to destabilise institutions, to steal data and private information.

This is the violent and criminal side of contemporary communication, these are the modern 'criminal superheroes' who do not always have a name or a face, but who still function and intrigue in the media.

Deviant media, virtual and social realities, where there are no more borders and where the risk of distortion and the learning of certain behaviours and languages are becoming more and more concrete.

There is also an obvious problem and confusion regarding the identity and role of victim and perpetrator: who is the good guy and who is the bad guy?

Because if the media language used always and only focuses on the troubled past and the psychopathologies of the criminals, as if to justify them, it may be a twist in a fictional story or in a manga comic, but it cannot be a real fact where the characters are real subjects.

The message perceived by the viewer, already disturbed by the event, is that the 'poor' killer is not as responsible for his act because he is ill or because he has learned certain behaviours from friends and family.

So you cannot cover up or justify attitudes or behaviour just for the sake of the audience.

The perception of such risks is still very low, but the possibility that what is now a perception becomes a concrete social fact is getting closer and closer.

This now common system of communication, representation and narration of certain phenomena and individuals by the media, and the uncontrollable and excessive curiosity of the viewer to know violence at any cost, is thus present on the Web without limits or safeguards.

This condition only strengthens the individualism, the aggression, the desire for domination and control over others that characterise human relations and the emergence of a new "culture of violence" (Gallino, 2006).

It is therefore not only a problem of communication relations, but also a profound educational and cultural problem.

educational and cultural problem.

There is no longer a single cultural centre, but a plurality of very often contradictory and different value options, or better still, a plurality of subcultures (often deviant and violent), defined as a subset of cultural elements shared by the elements of a group, understood as “internal relationality more consistent than external relationality”, which are in open or hidden opposition to the norms and values of the dominant culture in which they are embedded.

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# L'Italia alla prova del fondamentalismo radicale islamico. Indagine sul polimorfismo della minaccia terroristica e analisi ragionata dell'ordinamento giuridico italiano in materia di antiterrorismo. Parte prima

FRANCESCO BALUCANI – FABIO OTTAVIANI

**Francesco Balucani:** al termine di un percorso di studi triennale in Mediazione Linguistica, volge l'attenzione al ramo delle Relazioni Internazionali, focalizzando gli sforzi d'apprendimento attorno alle tematiche inerenti gli studi sul terrorismo, i processi di intelligence e business intelligence, l'analisi geopolitica e geostrategica, le pratiche di crisis management, la sicurezza economica e la cybersecurity. Oltre che in ambito universitario (Laurea Magistrale in Relazioni Internazionali, strategie e conflitti internazionali), acquisisce esperienza attraverso corsi sul campo, corsi di perfezionamento post-universitari e progetti di simulazione. Nel 2017 frequenta un master in Sicurezza economica, geopolitica e intelligence presso la Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale (SIOI). Dal 2016 redige analisi geopolitiche e geoeconomiche per theZeppelin.org, rivista online di politica internazionale e viene poi coinvolto nella redazione di pubblicazioni scientifiche per riviste di settore come Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società e Geopolitical Report di ASRIE. Nel 2019 fonda un'attività imprenditoriale attiva nel settore sportivo e dell'educazione, di cui tuttora è co-titolare. Nel 2022 avvia un secondo ciclo di studi magistrali – LM in Storia Europea – tuttora in corso.

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## Abstract

This publication aims to analyze the most relevant features of today's Islamic terrorism, to list the critical issues that this kind of threat poses both in a strategic and a legal dimension, to examine the peculiarities and the attributes of the Italian legal system in terms of national security and counter-terrorism, and finally to analyze this issue in terms of international cooperation. The polymorphism and the irreducibility to pre-established schemes that have always distinguished the threat of terrorism require us to carry out an analysis free from generalizations, focused both on present days - foreign fighters, nuclear terrorism, Jihad 2.0, terrorism transnational - and historical past. Although in recent years the incidence of Islamic terrorism has decreased more and more, probably as a consequence of the progressive dismantling of the Islamic State and the intensification of American search and destroy campaigns, conducted through high-altitude military drones, satellite technologies and intelligence operations, we believe that it is appropriate to maintain high standards of security, since new potential threats may arrive unexpectedly and without great possibilities for prediction. The roots of the problem remain substantially unresolved - Islamic religious demands, the presence of political regimes close to the most extremist currents of the Islamic religion, the marginalization of Muslim populations within the global society, the presence of inter-ethnic conflicts and civil wars in regions of the world already affected by phenomena of poverty and by the externalities of climate change - and so it is possible that in the future the containment policies of Western societies may no longer be enough to contain the pressures arising from a problem that we have repressed and suffocated, but certainly not completely eradicated. In any case, this period of calm could also be used to address the unresolved issues related to the definition of terrorism on an international level and the dilemmas of interstate cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism and intelligence, which may compromise the effectiveness of the policies to contain the terrorist threat developed both nationally and internationally. The following publication is divided into two parts, or sections: in the first one, which you are about to read, we will deal with the issues mentioned above, while in the second, which will be included in the next issue of the journal, we will deal in depth with the issue concerning the protection of national security in the Italian legal system.

Questo articolo mira a indagare le caratteristiche salienti dell'odierna minaccia terroristica di matrice islamista, elencare le più nocive criticità che questa pone in campo dapprima strategico e poi giuridico, esaminare con attenzione le peculiarità e gli attributi qualificanti dell'ordinamento giuridico italiano in materia di sicurezza nazionale e lotta al terrorismo, e analizzare infine la questione sul versante della cooperazione internazionale. Il polimorfismo e l'irriducibilità a schemi precostituiti che da sempre contraddistinguono i fenomeni di natura terroristica ci impongono un'analisi puntuale e scevra da generalizzazioni, volta a statuirne le proprietà con uno sguardo al presente - foreign fighters, terrorismo nucleare, Jihad 2.0, terrorismo transnazionale - e uno sguardo al passato storico. Sebbene negli ultimi anni l'incidenza dei fenomeni riconducibili al terrorismo radicale islamico si sia ridotta sempre più, in maniera proporzionale al progressivo smantellamento dello Stato Islamico e all'intensificarsi delle campagne *search and destroy* americane, condotte per mezzo di droni militari d'alta quota, tecnologie satellitari e operazioni di intelligence, è opportuno mantenere elevati standard di sicurezza e monitoraggio, giacché nuove potenziali minacce possono giungere inattese e senza grandi possibilità di previsione. D'altronde, le radici del problema rimangono sostanzialmente irrisolte - istanze religiose del fondamentalismo islamico radicale, presenza di regimi politici vicini alle correnti più estremiste della religione islamica, tendenziale marginalità delle

popolazioni musulmane nell'ambito della società globale, l'insistenza di conflitti interetnici, interstatali e di guerre civili nelle regioni del mondo già colpite da fenomeni di povertà e dalle esternalità dei cambiamenti climatici – e non è del tutto inimmaginabile che un domani le politiche di contenimento delle società occidentali possano non bastare più a contenere le pressioni scaturenti da un problema sì represso e soffocato, ma di certo non debellato del tutto. Questa fase di calma più o meno apparente potrebbe peraltro essere intelligentemente impiegata per affrontare le annose e irrisolte questioni legate alla definizione del terrorismo sul piano internazionale e ai dilemmi della cooperazione interstatale in materia di antiterrorismo e di condivisione dell'intelligence, che come vedremo dettagliatamente rischiano di compromettere l'efficacia e la solerzia delle politiche di contenimento della minaccia terroristica messe a punto sul piano sia nazionale che internazionale. La pubblicazione che segue è suddivisa in due parti, o sezioni: nella prima, che state per leggere, affronteremo le questioni menzionate sopra, mentre nella seconda, che sarà compresa nel prossimo fascicolo della rivista, affronteremo in maniera approfondita la questione inerente la tutela della sicurezza nazionale nell'ordinamento giuridico nazionale.

## Keywords

Terrorismo, fondamentalismo jihadista, antiterrorismo, sicurezza nazionale, intelligence, cooperazione internazionale / terrorism, jihadism, counter-terrorism, homeland security, intelligence, international cooperation

## Prefazione

A CURA DI LARIS GAISER

Nel breve saggio che segue Francesco Balucani e Fabio Ottaviani, in maniera professionalmente sintetica ed estremamente precisa, presentano le non poche problematiche che da sempre accompagnano la comprensione del terrorismo. Il terrorismo è un fenomeno che si basa sulla lotta armata di carattere asimmetrico. Esso, come correttamente evidenziano gli autori, si differenzia dalla guerriglia per la diversità potenziale degli scopi finali, ma soprattutto, ci permettiamo di aggiungere, nell'identificazione dell'avversario da colpire. Lo scopo del terrorista è quello di destabilizzare colpendo chiunque in modo da generare un'insicurezza generale, mentre il guerrigliero – pur utilizzando metodologie affini – punta a obiettivi di tipo militare al fine di vincere una guerra. La Storia dimostra che la guerriglia ha forti probabilità di riuscita qualora venga portata innanzi in un contesto sociale favorevole. Al contrario, il terrorismo sul medio, lungo periodo è destinato ad essere arginato e sconfitto. Balucani e Ottaviani indagano le caratteristiche principali del terrorismo per presentarle al lettore come una sorta di compendio, estremamente fruibile, della copiosa dottrina legale e delle strategie di gestione oggi esistenti. Si tratta di un testo che aiuta tanto i neofiti quanto gli esperti a districarsi nella complessità di una problematica stratificata, altamente mutevole e politicamente



fluida. Il terrorismo, pur mantenendo le sue costanti modali, nel corso della storia non si è mai presentato filosoficamente uguale a sé stesso. Esso è in continuo divenire, poiché cambia a seconda delle circostanze socio-politiche e si adatta agli scenari esterni rivedendo le finalità.

Oggi per noi europei, la sfida principale è rappresentata dal fondamentalismo radicale di stampo islamico. Nonostante questi sia principalmente orientato verso la lotta di potere intestina agli Stati islamici, nei quali si conta il maggiore numero di vittime, il mondo occidentale ne risente in quanto obiettivo strategico di importanza tattica. La destabilizzazione del nostro mondo è perseguita per mantenere viva la retorica del nemico esterno e per influire negativamente su alcune nostre scelte geopolitiche le cui conseguenze dovrebbero comunque riversarsi nelle regioni del mondo realmente contese dai movimenti terroristi. Gli attentati accaduti - e quelli che probabilmente ancora accadranno - in territorio europeo certamente influiscono sul nostro modo di vivere, provocando inutili costi aggiuntivi in termini economici e di sicurezza, ma sul lungo periodo non attecchiranno in quanto avvengono in un contesto culturale estraneo alla causa. Tuttavia, è giusto dire che ci troviamo in guerra, dato che la nostra sicurezza e libertà dipendono da come riusciamo a gestire proattivamente la minaccia terrorista sia in territorio nostrano, che nei teatri esteri.

Gli Stati democratici, unità del cosiddetto mondo occidentale, sono il frutto di un processo storico che li ha plasmati per garantire sicurezza e libertà al popolo. Essi perseguono tutti la lotta al fondamentalismo che tenta di porre in dubbio le basi stesse della nostra civiltà, ma in maniera spesso scoordinata e, col pretesto dei differenti interessi nazionali o delle differenti percezioni di pericolo, assai poco collaborativa. Tanto l'Europol, ancora oggi profondamente divisa nel suo agire a causa delle gelosie nazionali, quanto i servizi segreti, da sempre restii nei confronti della circolazione delle informazioni, hanno di fronte a sé impressionanti margini di manovra per migliorare le proprie prestazioni. Prova ne siano le palesi mancanze venute a galla in Francia e Belgio negli anni passati, complici nel trasformare questi Paesi in obiettivi piuttosto semplici per le organizzazioni terroristiche. Lacerazioni interne e mancanza di collaborazione tra le varie agenzie preposte alla sicurezza, soprattutto all'interno di un quadro sufficientemente istituzionalizzato quale quello dell'Unione Europea, sono le carenze su cui contano i fondamentalisti per affondare in profondità la propria scure.

Quanto esposto sopra diviene ancor più importante nel momento in cui ci si rende conto che la minaccia è generalizzata. Ad essere colpiti non sono solo i Paesi direttamente impegnati, politicamente o militarmente, nei territori di provenienza del terrorismo, ma anche i Paesi terzi, come ci hanno dimostrato i casi che hanno coinvolto la Spagna.

Il fatto che nonostante la sua posizione, i suoi impegni internazionali e l'incredibile simbolismo religioso emanato dal proprio territorio, l'Italia non sia ancora stata oggetto di pesanti attentati terroristici da parte del fondamentalismo islamico depone a favore delle nostre agenzie di sicurezza e del Legislatore che, arricchito dalla propria esperienza storica, ha saputo ampliare con cognizione di causa le norme su cui si basa l'azione di contrasto dello Stato nei confronti del terrorismo. Grazie alla riforma dei servizi segreti del 2007 – che lascia comunque, proprio grazie alla qualità del dettato legislativo, in molti campi ancora formidabili margini di miglioramento qualora dovessero trovarsi i fondi per garantirne l'operabilità - l'AISE e l'AISI sono oggi ritenuti da numerose capitali estere tra i partner istituzionali maggiormente affidabili e competenti.

Il terrorismo ha lo scopo di creare il massimo dell'insicurezza con il minimo dei mezzi e ciò che differenzia il criminale dal terrorista è il fatto che quest'ultimo desidera apparire. Ha bisogno e cerca pubblicità. Al Qaeda prima e Daesh poi hanno creato una forte discontinuità con le forme di lotta precedenti in quanto sono riuscite a massimizzare l'operatività in ambito informativo inserendosi nello sviluppo effettivo della guerra ibrida. I gruppi fondamentalisti, mai come prima, sono diventati estremamente capaci di sviluppare strategie innovative di combattimento, come la magistrale padronanza delle nuove frontiere comunicative, le campagne di proselitismo che fanno leva sui disagi provocati dalla mancata integrazione e l'insistenza programmatica nell'indottrinamento dei giovani.

A tali minacce si può rispondere solamente con l'aumento esponenziale delle nostre capacità di governo della guerra ibrida in corso e con la difesa efficace delle nostre vulnerabilità. Una guerra informativa per essere vinta presuppone la conoscenza della realtà, presuppone cittadini informati capaci d'apprendere nuove competenze.

È per tale motivo che non possiamo che salutare questo saggio. Esso è scritto per comprendere e far comprendere una realtà complessa, che necessita di chiarezza ed onestà intellettuale al fine di gestire i rischi che da essa derivano.

## 1. Introduzione

Dopo l'11 settembre 2001, il fondamentalismo radicale islamico ha raggiunto una posizione preminente nell'agenda politica delle principali nazioni occidentali. Prima di allora il terrorismo *sensu lato* non era certo un fenomeno sconosciuto, ma la gravità e la portata degli attacchi terroristici scatenati contro il *World Trade Center* di New York e il Pentagono dimostravano che le potenzialità distruttive del fondamentalismo radicale islamico,

nonché la capacità di individuare e colpire bersagli dalla natura fortemente simbolica per conseguire obiettivi di natura politica, erano state ampiamente sottovalutate negli anni precedenti dagli istituti preposti alla tutela della sicurezza nazionale e internazionale.

I fatti dell'11 settembre rappresentano una cesura netta nel campo degli studi strategici e, più in generale, della politica internazionale. Nel nome della lotta al terrorismo jihadista sono stati invasi Stati sovrani, riformate le politiche di sicurezza nazionale, costituiti appositi reparti civili e militari, riorganizzate le procedure di transito aeroportuale, istituite reti clandestine per la gestione su scala internazionale dei prigionieri politici, erosi i confini delle libertà civili e ristrutturati gli apparati di intelligence e gli organi costitutivi delle organizzazioni militari internazionali come l'Alleanza Atlantica e l'ASEAN. Il successo di queste misure rimane tuttora oggetto di un acceso dibattito, ma un dato su tutti può far luce sulla discrepanza esistente tra sforzo profuso e risultati conseguiti: il numero di vittime provocate da atti di natura terroristica ha subito un incremento di oltre nove volte dall'inizio del ventunesimo secolo al 2014, passando, stando ai dati del *Global Terrorism Index* dell'Institute for Economics and Peace, da 3.329 nel 2000 a 32.685. Negli anni successivi il trend è andato invertendosi, e nel 2022 il numero delle vittime è ridisceso a 6.701, il 59% in meno rispetto al picco del 2014. Tale riduzione è verosimilmente dovuta alla sconfitta militare dello Stato Islamico, al rafforzamento delle agenzie di monitoraggio occidentali, e alle implacabili campagne *search-and-destroy* americane, condotte in ogni angolo del mondo per mezzo di droni militari e tecnologie satellitari. Ciò nonostante, la recente riconquista dell'Afghanistan da parte dei talebani, i tentativi di riorganizzazione dell'IS, il fenomeno transnazionale dei *foreign fighters*, la paventata resurrezione di al-Qaeda e un sempre maggiore impiego di tecnologie avanzate da parte dei principali gruppi terroristici (droni commerciali, sistemi di localizzazione satellitare, programmi di intelligenza artificiale per operazioni *launch-and-forget*) potrebbero in un prossimo futuro far risalire il terrorismo in cima all'agenda delle principali potenze. Va infine addotta l'eventualità, spaventosa e mai sopita, che il terrorismo possa a breve farsi nucleare.

È dunque cruciale che tutti gli organi ai quali è demandata la funzione di tutela della sicurezza nazionale e internazionale, dal comparto intelligence ai nuclei antiterrorismo e finanche agli attori preposti alla costituzione del formante giurisprudenziale, seguano da vicino gli sviluppi del caso, riqualificando e adeguando gli strumenti e le politiche impiegate in funzione delle *best practices* in campo internazionale e dell'evoluzione della minaccia, così instabile e polimorfa da mutare su base pressoché quotidiana.

Quella che segue è una pubblicazione divisa in due parti, ambedue dotate di una propria autonomia contenutistica, ma legate da una naturale continuità tematica.

La prima parte di questa pubblicazione mira a enucleare le caratteristiche salienti dell'odierna minaccia terroristica di matrice islamista, elencare le più perniciose criticità che questa pone in campo dapprima strategico e poi giuridico, ed analizzare infine la questione sul versante della cooperazione internazionale.

Nella seconda parte, la quale sarà disponibile con la pubblicazione del prossimo fascicolo della presente rivista, affronteremo in maniera approfondita la questione legata alla tutela della sicurezza nazionale nell'ordinamento giuridico italiano, analizzandone l'intero corpus normativo.

## 2. L'anatomia del terrorista tra polimorfismo e violenza latente

Il profilo tipologico del terrorista è sempre andato configurandosi secondo uno standard grossomodo comune: avvalersi della violenza illegittima, fisica e morale, per suscitare un sentimento di “terrore” e conseguire un obiettivo specifico di natura politica e/o ideologica. Dal terrorismo ottocentesco di matrice anarchica al terrorismo jihadista, questa connotazione costitutiva non è mai venuta meno, ed è tuttora generalmente accettata dalla comunità internazionale, benché, come vedremo presto, individuare una definizione comune del fenomeno resti ad oggi una chimera in ambito normativo. A questa costante contenitiva, si accompagnano delle accezioni variabili e più flessibili, che rispondono in massima parte al contesto spaziotemporale in cui il fenomeno terroristico s'inserisce. Gli studiosi chiamati ad analizzare il fenomeno attraverso le lenti interpretative della storia tendono a distinguere “quattro onde del terrorismo”: il terrorismo anarchico di fine ottocento; il terrorismo anticoloniale dipanatosi fino agli anni Sessanta del secolo scorso; il terrorismo della nuova sinistra, alimentato dalla violenza verbale dello scontro bipolare; e infine il più recente terrorismo religioso di matrice jihadista (Rapoport, 2011).

Nella prospettiva storica, pur manifestando una tendenza a mutare dietro l'influsso di condizioni diacroniche e diatopiche uniche, il fenomeno terroristico, come detto, mostra una serie di costanti che ne definiscono la struttura costitutiva. Esso accompagna la vita politica delle nazioni moderne secondo elementi e meccanismi logici ricorrenti, e costituisce una minaccia che tende a ripetersi con il passare del tempo. Nel settembre 1901, quando un terrorista anarchico assassinò il Presidente americano William McKinley, il suo successore Theodore Roosevelt invocò una “*crociata per sterminare il ter-*

*rorismo dappertutto*". Difficile non notare una somiglianza con la nota *War on Terror* scatenata dal Presidente George W. Bush all'indomani dell'11 settembre 2001. Solo adottando un approccio che non trascuri la memoria storica è possibile comprendere le dinamiche che muovono i fenomeni dell'oggi. Perché come avvertiva il grande storico Marc Bloch nella sua *Apologia della storia*, non v'è comprensione del presente, né capacità di immaginare il futuro, senza una solida conoscenza del passato.

Il terrorismo non è che uno strumento volto all'ottenimento di obiettivi superiori (Colombo, 2006; Schelling, 1968), che siano l'abbattimento dell'assolutismo monarchico attraverso l'atto del regicidio, l'indipendenza o l'autonomia politica per il proprio paese, la rivolta delle masse operaie plagate dal nemico imperialista o la costituzione di un califfato retto dalla *Sharia*.

Esso può manifestarsi sotto forma di atto criminale o di tattica bellica, e proprio come la guerriglia, il terrorismo viene tendenzialmente adoperato dai deboli per contrastare i forti, un'arma dal costo residuale che produce vantaggi sproporzionati contro un nemico che non può essere sconfitto sul piano militare ma può essere indebolito o prostrato su quello economico e morale. Nondimeno esso rientra anche nel corredo bellico di attori tutt'altro che deboli, come dimostra il recente impiego di armi chimiche da parte del regime di Damasco contro gli irregolari che minacciano la sua potestà nel territorio siriano. Analisti e studiosi impiegano sovente il termine *terrorismo di Stato* per evidenziare queste dinamiche.

Icastico ed esemplificato è il *link* storico al periodo del terrore giacobino, quando *"Il potere fu accentrato nelle mani di Robespierre e dei suoi più immediati collaboratori, come L.-A.-L. Saint-Just, e fu esercitato mediante il ricorso alla violenza sistematica contro i nemici"* (Maturi, *Terrore*, Treccani Enciclopedia Italiana) per ottenere vantaggi e benefici di natura politica. Come vedremo poi, l'accezione *terrorismo di Stato* è peraltro utile per evidenziare come l'individuazione di una comune definizione di terrorismo a livello internazionale vada spesso incontro ad ostacoli insormontabili, legati agli interessi di parte e alle istanze confliggenti di natura geopolitica.

Oggi il terrorismo è prevalentemente legato al fondamentalismo radicale islamico, le cui vittime sono, questo un grande paradosso, di origine prevalentemente musulmana, individui fedeli alla religione islamica. Questo perché gli attacchi terroristici perorati dalle varie sigle connesse alla lotta jihadista sono perlopiù circoscritti a quei paesi che ne ospitano le basi operative e logistiche, dove la popolazione è composta per larga parte da musulmani. Delle decine di migliaia di attacchi registrati negli ultimi anni, solo una piccolissima parte è avvenuta in Europa o in altri paesi del mondo occidentale. Questo è dovuto a diversi fattori, ma tra essi spiccano la mancanza di risorse

necessarie a organizzare operazioni in terra straniera e la frammentazione esistente nella dimensione strategica del terrorismo jihadista.

Basti pensare che nel 2022 gran parte degli attentati terroristici perorati da attori non-statali abbiano avuto luogo in zone di conflitto, lontane dal mondo occidentale e dai suoi riflettori mediatici.

Ciò depone certo a favore di coloro che considerano la minaccia del fondamentalismo radicale islamico un problema prevalentemente interno, legato al caos politico e socioeconomico che attanaglia gran parte del mondo afroasiatico. Tuttavia, tale stato di cose non può che allarmare le autorità occidentali, le quali, passive e silenti quando ad essere colpiti non sono cittadini comunitari o americani, agiscono e intervengono se ad essere lesi sono i propri interessi.

### 3. Che cos'è il terrorismo? Problemi di definizione e difficoltà giurisprudenziali

Dopo l'uccisione di Bin Laden nel 2011, individuato dagli americani dopo strenue ricerche ad Abbottabad, Pakistan, la rete *jihadista* è andata incontro a trasformazioni organiche e strutturali che hanno infine convogliato l'attenzione mondiale al fenomeno dell'IS (*Islamic State*) e delle sue cellule regionali.

Il "*linguaggio della violenza e della morte*" – espressione coniata da Osama Bin Laden – elaborato dalle principali sigle jihadiste ha fatto sì che gli Stati occidentali (tra cui l'Italia) si dotassero di un sistema penale all'avanguardia per contrastare il fenomeno terroristico ed eludere future tragedie. Un ruolo cardine, oltre al formante legislativo, è detenuto dal formante giurisprudenziale. Quest'ultimo spesso e volentieri si trova a trattare fenomeni di criminalità nuovi e in continua evoluzione con categorie normative datate.

Due temi hanno suscitato particolari criticità in campo interpretativo a livello giudiziario: quello della nozione di *terrorismo* e quello della sussumibilità del *nuovo terrorismo* con quello meno risalente.

Il primo tema è stato oramai affrontato da diverse dottrine e anche *post* introduzione nel 2001 dell'art. 270 *sexies* del codice penale (*Condotte con finalità di terrorismo*) sembrerebbe essere oramai consolidato, a livello nazionale, un significato pressoché univoco. Il legislatore definisce in maniera piuttosto stringata il terrorismo come "il compimento di atti di violenza con fini di eversione dell'ordine democratico". Sul piano internazionale, al contrario, il protrarsi di attriti politici e dissidi ideologici mai del tutto sanati ha reso impossibile l'elaborazione di una definizione comune del fenomeno terroristico. Questo problema è reso manifesto dall'assunto *one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter*. Parafrasando, colui che viene considerato

come terrorista potrebbe esser visto, agli occhi di una terza persona, come combattente per la libertà. Secondo l'illustre parere di Benedetto Conforti, si sarebbe ormai formata, sul piano internazionale, una norma di carattere consuetudinario avente per oggetto il terrorismo, seppur limitata ad atti compiuti all'esterno del territorio nazionale e non inquadrabili nella lotta contro la dominazione straniera. Secondo tale norma, il terrorismo "consiste essenzialmente nella commissione di un atto criminale (assassinio, sequestro, presa di ostaggi, ecc.), con l'intento di spargere terrore nella popolazione di uno Stato o in una parte di essa e sempre che l'atto trascenda i confini di un singolo Stato. Non rientrano, quindi, nella previsione della norma gli atti terroristici commessi da cittadini nel territorio del loro Stato. Sono esclusi altresì gli atti terroristici commessi da movimenti di liberazione di territori sottoposti a dominazione straniera, come tali inquadrabili nel principio di autodeterminazione dei popoli" (Conforti, 2014).

Malgrado una forma più estesa e omogenea di terrorismo sia, nell'ambito del diritto internazionale, oggetto di una consuetudine emergente, ad oggi esso non rientra nella categoria dei crimini contro l'umanità e sfugge quindi al principio della giurisdizione universale, valevole invece per altri illeciti di eguale e in taluni casi peggiore efferatezza (c.d. *crimina juris gentium*). Del fenomeno terroristico si occupano anche numerose convenzioni internazionali, ma a parte quelle che hanno per oggetto specifiche attività terroristiche (ad es. attività illecite contro la sicurezza dell'aviazione civile), non è mai stata conclusa una convenzione generale sul terrorismo.

Come detto in precedenza, l'assenza di omogeneità sul versante terminologico è dovuta a ragioni di stampo prevalentemente politico. Sono molte le parti che nutrono un profondo interesse per il fenomeno del terrorismo e ognuna ne dà una definizione che riflette una prospettiva peculiare, modellata sulla base della convenienza politica, degli schemi ideologici e dello specifico *bias* cognitivo, ovvero quella predisposizione a emettere giudizi o formare pregiudizi non necessariamente corrispondenti all'evidenza, basati sull'interpretazione personale e soggettiva delle informazioni in proprio possesso, anche se scarse o logicamente sconnesse, che determinano errori di valutazione e mancanza di oggettività di giudizio. Il termine terrorismo contiene, in sostanza, una fortissima soggettività.

Secondo l'interessante tesi di Raffaella Nigro, resa convincente dai fallimenti in cui per lungo tempo è incorsa l'Assemblea generale dell'ONU nel tentativo di elaborare una Convenzione generale sul terrorismo, è possibile individuare, nel diritto internazionale, definizioni diverse di terrorismo a seconda del contesto giuridico nel quale esse vengono applicate, proprio in virtù delle divergenze politiche che vengono a crearsi all'emergere di nuove controversie internazionali (Nigro, 2013).

Quest'insolubile questione terminologica impedisce alla comunità internazionale di produrre politiche chiare e concise, delineare strutture organizzative efficaci e allocare risorse in modo adeguato. Nel corso degli anni si è più volte tentato di formulare una definizione che fosse al tempo valida e conforme a visioni contrapposte ma ogni sforzo, che esso provenisse da legislatori nazionali, da organismi internazionali o dalla dottrina, si è sempre concluso nell'impasse. Una delle definizioni che più rispondono a necessità di ordine normativo e a canoni di rigore analitico è quella proposta da Joshua Sinai nel 2008: "Il terrorismo è una tattica di guerra che contempla l'uso premeditato e politicamente motivato della violenza da parte di gruppi subnazionali o agenti clandestini contro ogni cittadino di uno Stato, civile o militare, per influenzare e coartare i loro nemici, provocando, se possibile, vittime di massa e distruzione fisica. Diversamente dalle forze di guerriglia, le organizzazioni terroristiche non sono tendenzialmente in grado di rovesciare un governo legittimo, ma aspirano ad atti di coercizione che lo portino a modificare il corso delle politiche intraprese tramite l'infliczione, discriminata e indiscriminata, di atti distruttivi" (Sinai, 2008).

L'espressione "tattica di guerra" utilizzata da Sinai evidenzia in realtà un'ulteriore grande distanza interpretativa del fenomeno terroristico, questa volta prodotta da Stati Uniti e Unione Europea. Se per i primi il terrorismo è riconducibile a un atto di guerra, e quindi affrontato secondo le logiche e i principi della guerra medesima, per l'Unione Europea, pur divisa al suo interno, il terrorismo va inteso invece come atto di natura criminale, e affrontato dunque secondo i prismi della legge e della giurisprudenza. La distinzione è anche qui pernicioso, poiché lo stato di guerra contempla condotte non sempre compatibili con l'imperio della legge, e traspone il fenomeno in una dimensione completamente differente, dove alla polizia si sostituisce l'esercito, ai processi si sostituiscono le detenzioni illegali e ai tribunali si sostituiscono i droni. Si tratta invero di una frattura terminologica mai sanata, certo, ma forse neppure così rilevante, se consideriamo che da ambo le sponde dell'Atlantico si sono impiegati strumenti differenti a seconda del contesto, afferenti di volta in volta all'ambito della guerra o a quello della legge, e che ad oggi, stante la ridotta incidenza globale del terrorismo jihadista, è cosa certamente ardua stabilire se il successo sia stato reso possibile dagli strumenti della guerra (occupazioni militari, missioni *boots on the ground*, droni, etc.), dagli strumenti della legge e della cooperazione internazionale in materia di *law enforcement* e antiterrorismo (framework normativo, operazioni di intelligence, campagne di sostegno internazionale e di de-radicalizzazione, etc.), o da un efficace mescolanza dei primi con i secondi. Cosa ancora più ardua è stabilire se quanto fatto sinora sia concorde con i più diffusi canoni di giustizia e se i successi ottenuti siano prodromi di un miglioramento a lungo



termine, come sembrerebbe dai numeri, oppure siano solo un sospiro prima di una nuova tempesta.

Aggiungiamo infine che quello di definire il fenomeno del terrorismo è un problema vivo anche all'interno della comunità scientifica, poiché a seconda della definizione impiegata, mutano, talvolta radicalmente, gli output delle ricerche condotte. Illustriamo quest'ultimo concetto con un esempio chiarificatore: l'ultimo dossier dell'Institute for Economics and Peace sul terrorismo, redatto sulla base delle informazioni statistiche estrapolate da un database chiamato Dragonfly, non considera come gruppo terroristico il governo afgano dei talebani. Questo perché la definizione su cui si basa la raccolta informativa del database esclude dal novero dei gruppi terroristici gli attori statuali, e dallo scorso anno i talebani hanno effettivamente riconquistato il potere in Afghanistan e instaurato un nuovo governo basato sulla loro interpretazione della legge sharaitica. Secondo il database, al cambio di regime è dunque corrisposta un'immediata transizione da gruppo terroristico a legittimo governo sovrano. Inutile dire che seguendo l'una o l'altra interpretazione del fenomeno, i dati cambiano notevolmente, a dimostrazione di come il problema della definizione sia relevantissimo nell'ambito degli studi sul terrorismo.

Il secondo tema – la sussumibilità del terrorismo recente con quello meno recente – merita un'attenzione particolare in quanto manifestazione lampante delle criticità del diritto penale nel suo momento applicativo, allorché posto in rapporto dialogico con le peculiarità delle cellule *jihadiste* e con il loro *modus operandi* in costante e talvolta rapida evoluzione. Per sussumibilità s'intende la riconduzione di un concetto nell'ambito di un concetto più generale nella cui estensione esso è compreso. In questo caso si tratta della riconduzione del cd. *nuovo terrorismo* nell'ambito del terrorismo meno risalente, come ad esempio il terrorismo di matrice brigatista, nella cui estensione esso potrebbe, in un certo qual senso, esser compreso, perlomeno dal punto di vista giudiziario. Gli studi a riguardo nel settore sono ben pochi e data la complessità dell'argomento riteniamo che non sia questa la sede appropriata per discuterne. Con riguardo al tema della sussumibilità, rimandiamo all'ottimo testo di Fasani (Fasani, 2016), limitandoci qui a introdurre succintamente la questione.

#### **4. Dinamiche e dilemmi della cooperazione internazionale contro il terrorismo**

Sul piano internazionale, a pesare negativamente, come detto in precedenza, è l'assenza di una Convenzione generale sul terrorismo, in grado di elaborare una definizione del fenomeno accolta da tutte le parti contraenti.

Sono molte le convenzioni internazionali che hanno come *ratio* la repressione del terrorismo, ma esse manifestano tutte una connotazione particolare del fenomeno. Tra le convenzioni concluse in materia le seguenti sono state ratificate dall'Italia e sono in vigore: la Convenzione dell'Aja del 16.12.1971, sulla repressione degli atti illeciti rivolti contro la sicurezza dell'aviazione civile; la Convenzione di Strasburgo del 27.1.1977 sulla repressione del terrorismo, promossa dal Consiglio d'Europa, la Convenzione del 17.12.1979 contro la presa di ostaggi; la Convenzione di Roma del 10.3.1988 per la repressione degli atti illeciti contro la sicurezza della navigazione marittima; la Convenzione del 15.12.1997 per l'eliminazione degli attacchi terroristici promossa dalle Nazioni Unite; la Convenzione delle Nazioni Unite del 9.12.1999 per la eliminazione dei finanziamenti al terrorismo; la Convenzione sul terrorismo nucleare del 13.4.2005, promossa dalla IAEA.

L'Assemblea generale delle Nazioni Unite persegue tuttora l'obiettivo di elaborare una grande Convenzione generale in materia di terrorismo ed è pur vero che negli anni il numero di Stati che si oppongono alla realizzazione di tale progetto si sta gradualmente assottigliando. Il terrorismo è altresì oggetto di una norma consuetudinaria emergente ed è probabile, nel futuro prossimo, che vi siano ulteriori importanti sviluppi.

A livello giuridico, appare oggi fondamentale il ruolo dell'Unione Europea, specie in considerazione dell'influenza, crescente e persistente, che le sue istituzioni mantengono sui paesi membri. La collaborazione intereuropea, sempre più radicata e in costante maturazione, si concretizza in un rafforzamento delle *policy* su più livelli – politico, economico, finanziario, sociale, strategico – ivi compreso il contrasto al terrorismo transnazionale. In particolare la CEDU si è resa protagonista di una seria rivalutazione del fenomeno terroristico alla luce del rispetto e della tutela dei diritti umani. Queste due questioni, sovente accostate dagli organi giudiziari dopo la rivelazione del programma statunitense di *Extraordinary renditions* e dei trattamenti disumani e degradanti subiti dai detenuti accusati di terrorismo a Guantánamo, appaiono sempre più intrecciate.

Questi casi rendono inoltre evidente come la cooperazione internazionale in materia di contrasto al terrorismo non sempre maturi i frutti sperati. Essa va spesso incontro a una serie di ostacoli di ordine politico, giuridico e, soprattutto, strategico (Balucani, 2018). Anzitutto, l'assenza di una definizione univoca di terrorismo, cui abbiamo ripetutamente accennato, impedisce alla comunità internazionale di stabilire delle politiche efficaci, delineare strutture organizzative a cui demandare apposite funzioni e allocare efficacemente le risorse. Quest'incapacità si traduce, paradossalmente, in una sostanziale differenza nella percezione della minaccia terroristica da parte di paesi diversi, e quindi in linee di condotta profondamente disomogenee. Le difformità

possono inoltre ampliarsi qualora paesi dissimili tra loro in termini politici e geopolitici presentino anche sistemi ideologici e valoriali tra loro divergenti o addirittura antitetici, e quando sussistano oltre a ciò differenze incolmabili in termini di capacità e risorse, sia finanziarie che umane.

La cooperazione internazionale contro il terrorismo, ancorché essenziale, presenta dei rischi molto elevati per quei paesi che scelgano di agire, perlomeno in determinate aree, come nucleo collettivo. Il primo e più problematico di questi rischi riguarda la potenziale deriva populistica, nazionalistica e illiberale che emerge nelle situazioni di emergenza e che può trovare compimento proprio in quella cooperazione tra paesi che, pur rafforzandone l'azione, ne deresponsabilizza il ruolo (Borgognone, 2008). A dimostrare questo assunto, il programma internazionale di *Extraordinary renditions* lanciato dalla CIA all'alba della GWoT (*Global War on Terrorism*), con cui si designa la cattura, la deportazione e la detenzione illecita di elementi considerati ostili dalle autorità di governo e sospettati di terrorismo, pur in assenza di prove certe e comunque al di fuori della legge. Perorato dal governo Bush dopo l'attentato al *World Trade Center* di New York, il programma era finalizzato a sottrarre i sospetti di terrorismo internazionale alle garanzie (peraltro costituzionali) del *due process of law*, che a detta dei suoi promotori impediva il corretto svolgimento delle attività di intelligence condotte dai servizi segreti. Solo attraverso un'intensa cooperazione internazionale in materia di antiterrorismo sarebbe stato possibile amministrare il programma, al quale parteciparono asseritamente numerosissimi paesi, tra cui Italia, Germania, Inghilterra, Polonia, Spagna, Portogallo, Canada, Marocco, Libia, Egitto, Arabia Saudita, Iraq, Giordania, Tailandia, Indonesia e molti altri ancora. Questa palese violazione dei diritti umani, resa possibile dall'assenza di un'autorità supranazionale che vigilasse sull'operato dei singoli paesi, e quindi dall'assenza formale di un collante costituzionale, è forse il più pernicioso dei rischi che scaturisce da una più intensa cooperazione internazionale contro il terrorismo. Ma l'erosione dei valori democratici e la frustrazione degli ideali umanitari che tanto sono cari al mondo occidentale non è certo l'unico problema. C'è da considerare infatti la possibilità, qualora si decida di cooperare anche in materia di intelligence, di una fuga non autorizzata di informazioni sensibili che metta a repentaglio la sicurezza nazionale. Nel campo degli studi strategici esiste un ben noto principio che illustra questa dinamica: "*the wider the dissemination of information, the greater the chance of its unauthorized disclosures*" (in italiano, *maggior la disseminazione d'informazioni, maggior la possibilità di una loro divulgazione non autorizzata*) (Richalson, 1990).

È per le ragioni appena illustrate che i paesi scelgono generalmente di cooperare solo attraverso accordi bilaterali informali che non li vincolino a esercizi incerti e delicati. Affidabilità e fiducia reciproca sono dunque impre-

scindibili, ma queste vengono frequentemente frustrate, tanto dalle democrazie quanto dai regimi illiberali, soffocando e spesso scoraggiando ulteriori iniziative che vadano nel verso di una maggiore cooperazione internazionale. L'Unione Europea, seppur in maniera temperata, non è esente da queste difficoltà. Con la Convenzione di Bruxelles del 1995 è stata istituita l'Europol, che promuove la collaborazione tra le diverse forze di polizia nazionali, ma non v'è nessun obbligo di cooperazione in tema di terrorismo e la condivisione di informazioni avviene perlopiù su base bilaterale e "manca di elementi di sintesi che la rendano un processo strutturato" (Strazzari, 2016). La cooperazione internazionale viene talvolta vista come un'opportunità piuttosto che un obbligo, e le strutture esistenti hanno perlopiù finalità di supporto e facilitazione.

Pur in mancanza di una definizione univoca del terrorismo come fattispecie criminosa, e malgrado l'azione comunitaria sia sempre stata *incidet-driven* (in italiano, *guidata dagli eventi*), sviluppata sovente in reazione a eventi tragici e mai in maniera cautelativa e precauzionale, dal 2005 il Consiglio dell'UE ha adottato una strategia per contrastare i fenomeni di natura terroristica, ripresa e riveduta con interventi nel 2009 e nel 2014 e finalizzata alla tutela anzitutto dell'UE stessa. Tale sistema poggia su quattro colonne: prevenzione, protezione, perseguimento, risposta.

In ambito di prevenzione, l'azione degli organi comunitari mira a contrastare i fenomeni di radicalizzazione e reclutamento attraverso un approccio globale che si concretizzi per mezzo di impegni a lungo termine, coadiuvando i paesi membri per quanto attiene ai profili di natura transfrontaliera attraverso l'azione legale e il supporto logistico.

Si pensi, a riguardo: a) alla direttiva adottata dal Consiglio il 25 aprile 2017 inerente al controllo dell'acquisizione e della detenzione delle armi da fuoco; alla politica di controlli rafforzati sulle zone delle frontiere esterne; b) all'istituzione del Centro Europeo Antiterroristico (ECTC); c) alla direttiva antiterrorismo del 7 marzo 2017 che rafforza il quadro giuridico già esistente per combattere l'evoluzione della minaccia terroristica tramite la repressione di ulteriori azioni emblematiche, come la raccolta e l'utilizzo di capitali dolosamente indirizzati a reati connessi al terrorismo, e l'organizzazione, agevolazione o partecipazione a viaggi, in uscita o in entrata, a fini terroristici.

Protezione e risposta attengono rispettivamente: l'una alla protezione dei cittadini e delle infrastrutture dell'UE, tutelando in particolar modo gli snodi di maggiore vulnerabilità come le infrastrutture strategiche; l'altra alla capacità di reazione all'attacco terroristico, migliorando le capacità di gestione e coordinamento del personale, riducendo al minimo le conseguenze (politiche, socioeconomiche, culturali) dell'atto e tutelando nel modo più idoneo e le esigenze delle vittime sul versante psicologico e logistico.

Di fondamentale importanza soprattutto per i risvolti nei vari Stati è il punto riguardante il perseguimento del terrorismo e l'assicurazione alla giustizia di coloro che sono usciti dal solco della liceità. Nel giugno 2016 la Commissione europea ha pubblicato la proposta di modifica della quarta direttiva antiriciclaggio (2015/849), le norme in questione colpiscono lo stesso bersaglio sui due fianchi, mirano cioè a evitare il finanziamento di attività criminali e al contempo a potenziare la trasparenza evitando così l'occultamento dei fondi. La modifica alla direttiva mira in concreto a performare la trasparenza riguardo alla titolarità delle società e dei trust, a rafforzare i controlli sui paesi terzi ritenuti a rischio, ad affrontare i rischi connessi alle carte prepagate e alle valute virtuali e, infine, a rafforzare la cooperazione tra le unità nazionali di informazione finanziaria.

## 5. La minaccia del terrorismo jihadista dai combattenti stranieri al terrorismo nucleare

Uno dei fenomeni che ha più preoccupato la comunità internazionale negli ultimi anni è quello dei *returnees*, ovvero dei combattenti stranieri (cd. *foreign fighters*) assoldati tra le fila di *Daesh* (sedicente Stato Islamico, IS, o Stato Islamico dell'Iraq e del Levante, ISIS), i quali, dopo la sostanziale sconfitta sul terreno militare, sono costretti a volgere le spalle al Medio Oriente e camminare verso nuovi orizzonti. Molti di questi *foreign fighters* hanno raggiunto altri teatri di conflitto per perpetrare la loro guerra contro gli "infedeli", e molti altri hanno tentato di fare rientro nei paesi di origine, percorrendo a ritroso il viaggio compiuto all'andata o mimetizzandosi all'interno dei flussi migratori che hanno origine in Africa e in Medio Oriente. Secondo le stime, sono oltre 60.000 i *foreign fighters* partiti alla volta della Siria (Siria e Iraq) dal 2014 ad oggi, e di essi alcune migliaia hanno già fatto ritorno in patria. Un fenomeno, quello dei *returnees*, che coinvolge principalmente il Caucaso, le ex repubbliche sovietiche, il Medio Oriente e il Maghreb, ma che non risparmia i paesi europei, primi fra tutti Francia, Germania, Regno Unito e Belgio. I *foreign fighters* non rappresentano una categoria concettuale recente. È possibile rinvenire precedenti noti e meno noti, dei quali è opportuno ricordare la grande mobilitazione internazionale di militanti musulmani (c. *mujaheddin*) che seguì l'invasione sovietica dell'Afghanistan (1979), la guerra civile in Bosnia (1992), l'intervento in Somalia (1992), la guerra in Cecenia (1994) e più recentemente l'invasione statunitense dell'Iraq (2003). D'altronde, già nel 2012 l'Europol avvertiva di un possibile effetto *blowback*, ovvero della possibilità che i miliziani sfruttassero le competenze belliche acquisite nell'arco della loro permanenza sul campo di battaglia estero per organizzare attacchi terroristici in patria, diventando agli effetti dei veri "professionisti del

terrore”. L'effetto *blowback* denota l'insieme di tutte le conseguenze indirette e non intenzionali prodotte da un determinato evento o fenomeno. Oltre alla partecipazione attiva a operazioni di natura terroristica, i *foreign fighters* potrebbero accelerare e intensificare i processi di radicalizzazione, e servire come “consulenti” per organizzazioni e nuclei terzi.

Ai fini di una trattazione più approfondita, e senza negare che le generalizzazioni rischiano sempre d'inciampare nel campo della superficialità, è possibile suddividere i *foreign fighters* in quattro macro categorie.

“La prima categoria [...] è rappresentata dai disillusi e traumatizzati che hanno lasciato volontariamente i territori controllati da Da'ish; un secondo gruppo di returnees è invece composto dai cosiddetti “opportunisti”: persone non disilluse ideologicamente dal jihad, ma “costrette” a rientrare a causa di motivi familiari, malattie, ferite o altro. Sono soggetti che potrebbero ripartire per altri teatri di conflitto in virtù dell'immutata motivazione ideologica, o diventare dei reclutatori in patria. La terza categoria di reduci è composta dalle persone catturate o comunque rimpatriate contro la loro volontà; l'ambiente carcerario in questo frangente può diventare volano di idee estremiste, permettendo a soggetti già radicalizzati e violenti di creare un network di persone potenzialmente ricettive a messaggi anti-sociali. [...] L'ultimo gruppo di returnees, sicuramente il più pericoloso, è quello composto da agenti operativi. Returnees che gestiscono cellule e strutture dormienti in Europa o in altre nazioni al fine di compiere attacchi e spostare ulteriormente il focus mediatico dai teatri mediorientali al mondo occidentale. Secondo le stime dell'intelligence, centinaia di questi operativi sarebbero già rientrati in Europa (vedasi ad esempio l'attentato di Parigi del novembre 2015) e avrebbero costituito l'ossatura di Isis nel continente, cui farebbero riferimento i combattenti di rientro ancora stazionati in Turchia o in procinto di lasciare il Siraq” (Boncio, 2017).

Secondo i dati forniti annualmente dal Viminale, in Italia sarebbero 146 i *foreign fighters* censiti e monitorati dalle autorità (Ministero dell'Interno, *Dossier Viminale*, 2022), un numero che seppur non tiene conto dei combattenti unitisi a formazioni curde, rimane residuale se comparato a quelli di altre nazioni europee come Francia o Germania, le più colpite da fenomeni di radicalizzazione negli ultimi anni. L'Italia, in virtù della posizione geografica e del fardello burocratico che spesso cela o addirittura stimola lo sviluppo di realtà criminali sommerse, è singolarmente soggetta ad attività terroristiche di varia natura (radicalizzazione, reclutamento, organizzazione, smistamento) e malgrado non si siano finora verificati episodi di terrorismo legati al fondamentalismo radicale islamico, che sia per convenienza o per merito dell'intelligence nostrana, agli apparati di sicurezza italiani è delegata l'importante funzione di monitorare e gestire da un lato i flussi migratori provenienti dall'Africa settentrionale, dall'altro di sondare e indagare sulla

presenza, all'interno dei confini nazionali, di reti criminali a vocazione transnazionale, finanche cooperando con le agenzie omologhe delle nazioni alleate per scongiurare minacce potenziali e corrodere la rete jihadista a livello sistemico e non solo regionale.

Il nesso tra flussi migratori e terrorismo, sebbene costituisca un tema non ancora sufficientemente esaminato da un punto di vista scientifico, attira a sé un'attenzione crescente da parte di ricercatori e analisti per le implicazioni potenziali che esso sottende. A più riprese si è ipotizzato che le organizzazioni terroristiche possano trarre illeciti vantaggi dai flussi migratori trasferendo più agevolmente uomini e risorse in vista di possibili attacchi terroristici su suolo straniero o col solo proposito di formare nuclei terroristici autonomi *in situ* (cd. *hub* di radicalizzazione). D'altra parte, un incremento massiccio delle diaspore cagionato dai flussi migratori, specie in quei paesi privi di efficaci politiche d'integrazione e specie laddove le condizioni economiche non permettano di soddisfare le più basilari necessità di coloro che risiedono ai margini della società, potrebbe produrre un substrato di malessere e privazione foriero di un avvicinamento all'odio settario. Vero è che dalla sostanziale sconfitta sul terreno dello Stato Islamico non vi sono stati attentati terroristici di peso sul suolo europeo, e che secondo gli ultimi dati forniti dall'Institute for Economics and Peace, il terrorismo di matrice jihadista ha globalmente ridotto la sua portata e incidenza nel corso degli ultimi anni (Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index*, 2023).

Oltre al problema dei *foreign terrorist fighters* reduci dalla guerra e dei persistenti movimenti migratori che colpiscono il sud Europa, sempre più problemi di natura mediatica e politica oltre che strategica, v'è poi un'altra questione sul tappeto che rischia di riaprirsi: la guerra al nemico lontano di al-Qaeda. L'organizzazione terroristica fondata e costruita da Osama bin Laden nel lontano 1988, data più volte per defunta negli ultimi anni, smantellata e disgregata dalla *war on terror* degli Stati Uniti, ha indugiato lungamente all'ombra del sedicente Stato Islamico, forte nella volontà di ripristinare e ricostituire la propria rete operativa. Negli ultimi anni Ayman al-Zawahiri, nuovo leader del gruppo dopo la morte di bin Laden, ha optato per l'adozione di una strategia locale, regionale, volta a recuperare credibilità e potere senza catalizzare un'eccessiva attenzione da parte delle potenze occidentali, Stati Uniti *in primis*. Oggi, al-Qaeda costituisce un network ancora più decentralizzato e ramificato di quanto non fosse prima dell'11 settembre 2001 (Hoffman, *Al-Qaeda's Resurrection*, 2018). In Yemen, profittando della guerra civile tra sciiti Huthi e sunniti fedeli al governo di Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, al-Qaeda ha riunito sotto una sola sigla le sue branche yemenita e saudita, dando vita nel 2009 ad Al-Qaeda nella Penisola Arabica (AQAP). Il gruppo, pur leso e incrinato dalle continue campagne *search and destroy*

americane, conta migliaia di seguaci e detiene il controllo di vaste porzioni territoriali nelle zone centrali del paese, l'*Hadramawt*, e lungo la costa meridionale. Al Qaeda nella Penisola Arabica promuove il fondamentalismo radicale islamico attraverso la rivista in lingua inglese *Ispire* e caldeggia, al pari del sedicente Stato Islamico, il cosiddetto terrorismo-fai-da-te incoraggiando i sostenitori occidentali a compiere attentati terroristici impiegando tattiche e mezzi improvvisati. In Somalia, Al-Qaeda prospera attraverso il gruppo militante affiliato al-Shabaab, che controlla gran parte delle zone rurali nel meridione e si rende responsabile di incursioni armate in territorio keniota per rapire turisti occidentali da rivendere sul mercato secondario. Nelle regioni sahariane e saheliane dell'Africa è Al-Qaeda nel Maghreb Islamico (AQMI) a tirare le fila del terrorismo islamista. L'AQMI, già Gruppo Salafita per la Predicazione e il Combattimento, ha come obiettivo fondativo il rovesciamento del governo algerino e la costituzione, in sua vece, di uno stato islamico retto dalla legge shariatica, ma sin dall'affiliazione alla galassia di al-Qaeda, l'organizzazione algerina ha esteso le sue attività ai paesi confinanti, istituendo con altre sigle fondamentaliste un network transnazionale operante in tutto il territorio sahariano e saheliano e dedito ad attività criminali di natura disparata e non strettamente legata al terrorismo *stricto sensu*. Rapimenti con riscatto, contrabbando di beni preziosi, traffico di sostanze stupefacenti, estorsioni, insieme al business delle migrazioni che coinvolge finanche le organizzazioni malavitose nostrane, formano una "economia canaglia" (Napoleoni, 2017), che finanzia e sostiene organizzazioni terroristiche e bande criminali in tutto il Maghreb islamico, e che le lega a gruppi di natura simile in altre regioni del mondo, come il Corno d'Africa e il Medio Oriente. Secondo i dati forniti dal GTI, oggi è proprio il Sahel islamico ad essere il nuovo epicentro del terrorismo mondiale. Qui si conta il 43% dei decessi legati ad atti di natura terroristica, concentrati soprattutto in Burkina Faso e in Mali. Le condizioni geopolitiche della regione parrebbero confermare che il terrorismo tende ad instaurarsi laddove le condizioni socioeconomiche, politiche e climatiche appaiono più labili e precarie. Nel Sahel si sono registrati ben sei colpi di stato dal 2021, di cui quattro terminati con un violento cambio di regime politico. Nella regione v'è inoltre un processo crescente di siccità, che riduce le riserve di acqua e si risolve in carenza di cibo. Tale condizione di precarietà è aggravata dalle divisioni etniche, esacerbate dalla carenza di risorse, dalla crescita demografica dirompente, dall'assenza di profili politici adeguati e di una valida rete di cooperazione interstatale su scala regionale o globale.

Spostandoci sul quadrante mediorientale, la rioccupazione dell'Afghanistan da parte dei talebani e la fine dell'operazione *Resolute Support* potrebbero condurre ad un rafforzamento di al-Qaeda, che già stava ricomponendo i propri ranghi e riorganizzando le basi logistiche tra le montagne al confine



con il Pakistan. Questa tesi è stata rafforzata nell'estate del 2022, quando un drone americano ha identificato e colpito il leader di al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, proprio a Kabul, capitale afghana, mentre pare fosse ospite di un consigliere politico legato al regime talebano. Sebbene l'uccisione dello storico successore di bin Laden possa rallentare la ricostituzione di al-Qaeda, la sua presenza a Kabul denota la chiara possibilità che il Paese possa tornare ad ospitare e supportare il gruppo, come faceva negli anni Novanta, prima dell'invasione americana. Al momento attuale al-Qaeda persegue una strategia a carattere locale e regionale, ma da più parti si sostiene che questa possa rivelarsi più una tattica temporanea che una strategia vera e propria, volta a guadagnare tempo e ottenere consensi *in loco* prima di volgere nuovamente le attenzioni al nemico lontano.

In aggiunta, si fa strada l'ipotesi che in un prossimo futuro al-Qaeda possa impadronirsi e minacciare l'uso di ordigni nucleari tattici, trascinando l'occidente e il mondo intero in una nuova era, quella del terrorismo nucleare. William Perry, matematico e ingegnere, Segretario della Difesa sotto la presidenza Clinton, attualmente professore emerito presso l'Università di Stanford e fondatore del *William J. Perry Project*, è convinto che nel giro di qualche anno le organizzazioni afferenti alla galassia del fondamentalismo radicale islamico matureranno il *know-how* necessario per assemblare piccoli ordigni nucleari, con una potenza di qualche decina di chilotoni, modesti se paragonati alla tecnologia termonucleare sviluppata negli ultimi anni della Guerra Fredda, ma sufficienti a distruggere una piccola città con una singola deflagrazione.

La difficoltà maggiore per il gruppo terroristico riguarda il reperimento del materiale fissile. Processare isotopi come l'uranio o il plutonio non è semplice. Si tratta di procedimenti estremamente complessi e costosi, ma gran parte dei depositi che contengono le vecchie scorte di magazzino, specialmente in Russia, in Pakistan e nell'Europa dell'est, sono facilmente accessibili. La sorveglianza è inadeguata e la mano lunga della corruzione potrebbe indurre gli operatori della sicurezza a concludere affari sottobanco o liquidare parte del materiale fissile sul mercato nero.

Ad oggi le organizzazioni terroristiche si sono limitate a tattiche irregolari e armamenti convenzionali, ma questo scenario potrebbe mutare nel prossimo futuro. Già oggi il *Global Terrorism Index* rileva come il 65% di gruppi terroristici non-statali abbiano accesso a tecnologie avanzate (droni ad uso commerciale, intelligenze artificiali per campagne *launch-and-forget*, etc.). Da un punto di vista strategico l'impiego di ordigni nucleari può sembrare illogico, ma quando si affronta il tema della deterrenza nucleare, che di fatto ha mantenuto il mondo in uno stato di relativa pace negli anni della guerra fredda e che tuttora, seppur in maniera temperata, condiziona il ragiona-

mento dei decisori politici, non appartiene certo al bagaglio speculativo e intellettuale dei fondamentalisti. Nel 1999 Osama Bin Laden affermava che “munirsi di armi di distruzione di massa per difendere il mondo musulmano è un dovere religioso” e due anni dopo Ayman al-Zawahiri si mostrava fiducioso circa l'imminente ottenimento di potenziale nucleare “per uccidere quattro milioni di americani” (Larssen-Mowatt, 2011). Nel 2007 fu il Segretario generale delle Nazioni Unite Ban-Ki Moon a mettere in guardia contro il rischio di terrorismo nucleare, indicandolo come una delle minacce più serie del nostro tempo. Nel 2011 una *équipe* di ricercatori americani e russi elaborò poi un report, divenuto piuttosto celebre, volto a ridestare il dibattito e raccomandare la predisposizione di strategie nazionali e internazionali di contro-proliferazione nucleare (Belfar Center for Science and International Affairs, Institute for U.S and Canadian Studies, The U.S. – Russia Joint Threat Assessment on Nuclear Terrorism, 2011). Nel report si afferma che il terrorismo nucleare rappresenta una minaccia reale e incalzante, e che se anche vi fosse solo una remota possibilità che un'organizzazione di stampo terroristico giunga in possesso di un ordigno nucleare, questa sarebbe più che sufficiente a giustificare l'adozione di politiche volte a minimizzare le vulnerabilità dei paesi bersaglio e neutralizzare o quantomeno mitigare gli effetti avversi di un suo potenziale utilizzo.

## 6. Conclusioni

Il terrorismo rappresenta una minaccia polimorfa e mutevole, la cui caratterizzazione dipende dal contesto spazio temporale in cui esso si dipana, dai simboli che evoca e dalle risorse, umane e materiali, disponibili. Malgrado la riduzione complessiva dell'incidenza del fenomeno negli ultimi anni, le minacce potenziali legate al fenomeno dei *foreign fighters*, alla crescita dirompente degli eventi di natura terroristica nella regione del Sahel, alla paventata rinascita di al-Qaeda e al rischio che i gruppi terroristici s'impadroniscano o realizzino ordigni di tipo nucleare, impone un controllo efficiente e regolare degli sviluppi, intervenendo con prontezza laddove si reputi possibile agire su un piano di prevenzione e di riduzione del rischio. Sul versante strategico, le unità deputate ad attività di antiterrorismo agiscono generalmente con prontezza e vengono rassetate con tempestività all'emergere di sviluppi significativi nel campo avverso. Al contrario, sul versante legislativo e ancor più giurisprudenziale, le politiche di contrasto al terrorismo vanno incontro a difficoltà plurime, dettate perlopiù da contrapposizioni ideologiche, stasi politica e questioni di ordine morale. L'Italia vanta un formante legislativo e giurisprudenziale in linea con i tempi, attento alle metamorfosi delle parti avverse e forgiato da una lunga tradizione di lotta al terrorismo. L'assenza

di episodi riconducibili al fondamentalismo radicale islamico sul territorio nazionale depone a favore dello Stato, sebbene gli organi delegati, a partire dai servizi di sicurezza per arrivare alle unità operative delle forze armate, operino tendenzialmente in carenza di adeguate risorse finanziarie. È pur vero che la minaccia del terrorismo jihadista colpisce altre nazioni con forza incomparabilmente maggiore e che il successo e l'efficacia delle attività italiane di antiterrorismo discendono anche dall'assenza di un pericolo imminente.

Sul fronte della cooperazione internazionale contro il terrorismo, l'Italia gioca un ruolo attivo e partecipa sia a livello europeo che extraeuropeo, ma le difficoltà che tuttora qualificano e contraddistinguono le politiche di contrasto al terrorismo a livello internazionale impediscono sviluppi significativi. L'assenza di una definizione comune del fenomeno, indispensabile per il formante giurisprudenziale, e di un collante costituzionale che garantisca i diritti civili, il rischio sempre presente di fughe d'informazioni, le contrapposizioni politiche e i contrasti ideologici frenano e talora bloccano la formazione di ampi fronti d'intesa, dando perlopiù spazio ad accordi bilaterali informali senza alcun peso giuridico (cd. *gentlemen's agreements*), stretti su base volontaria e perlopiù privi di una reale efficacia.

Nella seconda parte di questa pubblicazione, affronteremo in maniera approfondita la questione legata alla tutela della sicurezza nazionale nell'ordinamento giuridico italiano, analizzandone l'intero sistema giurisprudenziale.

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# EMERGING THREAT ECOSYSTEMS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES



# Mapping a Telegram-centred Accelerationist Collective

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## Abstract

This paper aims to map the accelerationist collective known as Terrorgram and reconstruct its basic morphological characteristics through propaganda study and social network analysis. The core of the study focuses on digital ethnography within Telegram platform, and it is aimed at the recognition of narratives, communication objectives, techniques and strategies. And finally, a Social Network Analysis (SNA) is implemented, identifying actors and subgroups involved in pro-violence online propaganda within the the digital ecosystem.

Il presente lavoro si propone di mappare il collettivo accelerazionista noto come Terrorgram e di ricostruirne le caratteristiche morfologiche di base attraverso lo studio della propaganda e la social network analysis. Il nucleo dello studio si concentra sull’etnografia digitale all’interno della piattaforma Telegram ed è finalizzato al riconoscimento di narrazioni, obiettivi comunicativi, tecniche e strategie. Infine, viene implementata una Social Network Analysis (SNA) che identifica gli attori e i sottogruppi coinvolti nella propaganda online pro-violenza all’interno dell’ecosistema digitale.



## Keywords

Accelerationism, right, propaganda, terrorgram, terrorism

### 1. Introduction and methodology

Within the extremist digital ecosystems in particular on telegram the popularity of terrorgram is well established and especially its impact in conducting attacks is now proven. with this paper we propose a study that through content analysis and social network analysis attempts to provide as much information as possible on the functioning of this actor. Starting from the assumption that terrorism is communication (Lombardi 2016), the study of communicative and social processes within terrorist communities becomes crucial in the perspective of terrorism prevention. In this sense, digital ethnography proves to be the ideal tool to analyze and reconstruct digital communities and processes within them. The study and analysis of communicative processes makes it possible to grasp the relationships between the different actors within the digital ecosystem; once the relationships are analyzed, it is possible to decode the interpretive keys of the organization and the type of terrorist phenomenon it enacts.

On Telegram, the network of the different media actors was reconstructed by snowball effect and by keeping open sources monitored to expand the ethnographic research to other groups or organizations. Within the Telegram groups and channels, it was possible to access other channels using the beforementioned snowball effect as extremist Telegram groups tend to filter and share information from other reliable channels. Subsequently, the information, data and materials collected from the Telegram groups and channels during the observation sessions were stored through the “*Chat Export*” feature of Telegram and in the form of screenshots, a typical method of capturing the object of study and information flow of digital ethnography. The combination of the snowball effect and data collection via data scraper brought hundreds of channels and groups to our attention. Many of these did not have features that identified them as media actors with their symbology and community and were therefore excluded. Table 1 is the result of the data collection after making the selection. Finally, during the observation phase, it emerged that in some cases the same group possessed a digital infrastructure with multiple channels and chatrooms. In these cases, an attempt was made to reconstruct the set of channels and chatrooms as much as possible, focusing however on the channels engaged in the dissemination of propaganda and recruitment Following the observation phase within the ecosystem, relational data were collected to conduct a social network analysis. Assuming that channels used by extremist groups are connected through the platform features and that the

most common link between channels is the so-called “*forward and mention*”, we based our SNA on this type of connection<sup>1</sup>. When talking about mentions we intend posts within a channel that contain mentions of another channel (presence of “*t.me*” links or simple text mentions). The final phase of this research aims to reconstruct the network of actors who have been weaponizing anti-system propaganda, and consequently, the links that interest us are those that show the relationships between the various components<sup>2</sup>. A social network was established by linking any actor to another actor’s production house if he had been mentioned or forwarded.

## 2. Observation and Content Analysis

The Terrorgram is a self-called collective of channels and chatrooms involved in spreading dissident ideas, glorifying terrorism, calling for violence, spreading extremist ideological material and demonising minority groups.<sup>3</sup> The collective operates as a loose network without having any formal affiliation with a specific group but well connected with several extremist organizations such as The American Futurist (closely linked to James Mason and ex-AWD members)<sup>4</sup>, Ouest Casual (French extreme-right pro violence group) Ukrainian volunteers battalions and Russian mercenaries.

Our observations started on 2019 with the Terrowave channels. A set of channels that owns the Terrorwave brand which in turn are responsible for publishing and archiving (a preventive measure in case of channel closure) the material produced. Moreover, given its extensive activity as a media house it does not incorporate a single ideological strand, but its production takes a cross-cutting position the only common thread in the material produced is the emphasis on the pro-violence aspect.

The choice to analyze Terrowave channels as an initial move to study the Terrorgram is based on the following observations:

- this sub-community is the first promoter of group activities
- is the most productive and resilient actor
- embodies the aesthetic, ideological and content elements of the terrorgram

<sup>1</sup> Stephen P. Borgatti and Daniel S. Halgin, ‘On Network Theory’, *Organization Science* 22, no. 5 (2011): 1168–81, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781849807630.00024>.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*, Structural (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Davey et al., ‘A Taxonomy for the Classification of Post-Organisational Violent Extremist & Terrorist Content’, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> ‘What Is Siege Culture?’, accessed 24 October 2022, <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/what-is-siege-culture/>.

Terrorwave is thus an extremist online sub-community that posts hyper-stylized images of far-right attacks and violent incidents, using a refined aesthetic to make the violence more appealing. Many of these actors intersperse links from mainstream media with propaganda produced by far-right terrorist groups. From 2019 to 2021 the Terrorwave community published several banners containing multiple links from other channels, referred to as “Terror Telegram”, “Friends of Terrorwave Refined” and finally Terrorgram. In this case, it is interesting to point out how the snowball-effect was facilitated by the publication of such posts to such an extent that a large part of the community could be accessed through a single publication.

Militants, terrorists, soldiers and scenes of decades-old conflicts in Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Balkans and middle east are regularly repurposed for Terrorgram propaganda. The focus of these visual motifs relies on what is perceived as an attractive without an ideological affiliation of the militants. Terrorgram graphics include jihadists, criminals, militia, paramilitaries and nationalist terrorism. The celebration of terrorism and militancy distinguishes Terrorgram from the far-right ecosystem, appealing to those most attracted to violence.

In this particular case, the Terrorwave channel made several posts as a result of the many shutdowns it suffered. In doing so, in addition to reconnecting the community with other channels, it provided a re-grouping procedure of its members. The posts and especially the images created ad hoc to with the link-lists are products of their own making, a fact that denotes the use of their own graphic style and a propensity toward community retention. It should be remembered that the Terrorwave channel is also a media house with its own notoriously high-quality production. Through constant propaganda production of excellent graphic quality has managed to reach more than 5,000 user members. Three channel closures were detected during the observation. Nevertheless, the channel demonstrated excellent resilience and was able to reactivate and regenerate, at least in part, its community. As influential as broker channels are, they are constantly facing an efficiency/security trade-off<sup>5</sup>.

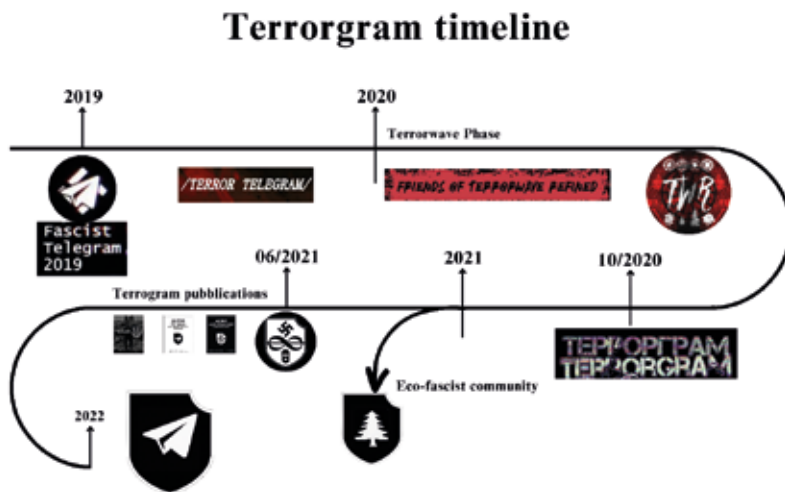
The Terrorwave channels have founded the foundations of Terrorgram and enabled its development as a collective. Between 2021 and 2022 the Terrorwave channel network becomes almost entirely a system of historical archives (figure 1). The eco-fascist ideological current has distinguished itself and created its own identity within the community similarly the more neo-Nazi one has oriented propagandist production on the dissemination of precepts of literary works including *Siege* by James Mason. After this experi-

<sup>5</sup> Carlo Morselli, Cynthia Giguère, and Katia Petit, ‘The Efficiency/Security Trade-off in Criminal Networks’, *Social Networks* 29, no. 1 (January 2007): 143–53, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2006.05.001>.

ment in 2021, Terrorgram becomes the promoter of a series of propaganda products that summarize its work thus far. Those works takes the form of a collection of various propaganda products resulting from the work of a variety of authors. In particular the last one published in July 2022, mentions the work of about 100 authors who are defined as members of Terrorgram. This propaganda can be described as ideological infographics that present the Terrorgram's goals and objectives and simultaneously providing the (scarce and unsystematic) information to achieve them. Nevertheless, the visual-motifs and symbologies used are well recognizable in all contributions:

- Online accelerationist symbology (Terrorwave, fashwave and meme)
- Neo-Nazi symbology
- Atomwaffen Division symbology
- Eco-fascist symbology
- Video game subculture with direct reference to the video game Minecraft
- White supremacist symbolism and language
- Survivalism.

Figure 1



### 3. Ideologies and narratives

The Terrorgram consists of a complex system of highly diverse and pulverized platforms, organizations, media houses, and users within different digital and geographic contexts. Even from the perspective of political instances, there are different types of extremism related to different ideologies. This level of ideological differentiation is integrated within the far-right community, and

despite the inherent differences, such an arrangement does not undermine the formation of more structured (and therefore more dangerous) collaborations or networks. The described set-up has been christened with the expression “ideological bazaar”; that is, a digital environment composed of actors with different ideological sets that often converge but are not always related<sup>6</sup> within which information, media products, ideological opinions, and expertise are exchanged. Although the amorphous<sup>7</sup> and multi-ideological environment makes specific profiling difficult, it is nonetheless possible and imperative to distinguish certain ideological macro categories (Ebner 2018) in order to recognize and analyze key actors.

The common ideological is a justification of violence (particularly terrorism) as self-defense against perceived deadly threats to the white race. From the latter current, we deduced the categories pro-violence and accelerationism. In summary, the starting categories developed to orient the observer within the digital ecosystem are as follows:

- White supremacism;
- Anti-Semitism
- Anti-immigration;
- Eco-fascism;
- Accelerationism;
- Neo-Nazism;
- Ethnonationalism

As suggested by the expression “ideological bazaar,” the media ecosystem of the far-right is extremely vibrant; the large number of actors and ideological commonalities drive organizations to share and relay material through their channels (Telegram channels or chatrooms). These mechanisms lead to mutual influence and the creation of collaborative networks. The pro-violence nature of the collective has even led the network to express positions of support for the Jihadism,<sup>8</sup> the North Korean ideology known as Juche<sup>9</sup> and for the anti-system perspectives typical of the no-vax fringes.

During the 2020, Terrorwave channels and published several call-to-action post that, in addition to its anti-social pro-violence content, rides the me-

<sup>6</sup> Julia Ebner, ‘Counter-Creativity. Innovative Ways to Counter Far-Right Communication Tactics’, in *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right*, ed. Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018), 169–82, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446706-012>.

<sup>7</sup> J M Berger, *THE ALT-RIGHT TWITTER CENSUS* (VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Moustafa Ayad, ‘Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures’, *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*, 2021, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Juche is the founding ideology of the North Korean dictatorship, which represents a state model that some bangs of the alt-right are inspired by. The militarist spirit and anti-Western approach are the major points of contact between the Juche and the alt-right.

dia wave of the recent Covid-19 pandemic. This kind of narrative it was used for inciting armed resistance against the black and Jewish population in the United States, citing the Viet Cong. And secondly the disease was depicted as purificator of inferior races and the weakest.

In 2020 we observed the first propaganda depicting the “Saints” of Terrorgram. This process is interesting because it combines the martyrdom of a symbolically relevant and evocative character with the attribution of epithets related to Christian culture such as Saints or Knights of religious orders<sup>10</sup>. The “sanctification” is a socio-digital practice that, in the case of an accelerationist, supremacist or neo-Nazi attack, sees the members of the collective engaged in the search for elements attesting to the ideological and operational affinity with the narrative core of the Terrorgram in order to sanctify the attacker. The sanctification of a terrorist entails his entry into the pantheon of terrorist-saints that are taken as models by the Terrorgram. Among these we can identify some who, by their history and modalities, can be considered as founders of the ideological core of the Terrorgram and therefore we define them as founding saints: Brenton Tarrant, Theodore Kaczynski, Anders Breivik, Charles Manson, Timothy McVeigh and Dylan Roof.

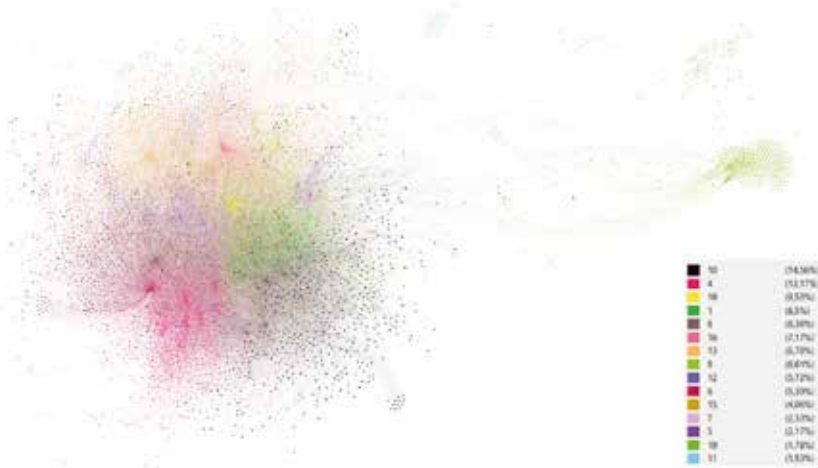
#### 4. Social Network Analysis

As previously discussed, to identify the role of actors within the digital ecosystem and at the same time integrate the results of ethnographic observation, a SNA was conducted placing the media actors as nodes and the forwarded post or post containing a mention, as links. By data scraping 3600 media actors were identified ( $n = 3600$ ), in some cases data includes several channels of the same media actor and 16870 edges. Using the forward and mentions technique we infer that the link between nodes will have a direction and intensity. The measures considered by SNA are pagerank and the modularity classes. Looking at the graphical and numerical outputs we can infer the extent of the role of key players of the Terrorgram.

Concerning the modularity classes the network is color-coded based on each node’s modularity class, and the edges are correspondingly coloured (figure 2). The modularity score of the Terrorgram is found to be 0.68, which indicates the presence of distinct communities within the network. As Newman and Girvan stated elevated modularity scores are indicative of greater community structure in a network.

<sup>10</sup> Ari Ben Am and Gabriel Weimann, ‘Fabricated Martyrs: The Warrior-Saint Icons of Far-Right Terrorism’ 14, no. 5 (2020): 18.

Figure 2



In particular, Table 1 shows the distribution of the five main different modularity classes. The size of each community is expressed as a percentage of the total nodes in the network. The modularity class measure provides a further understanding of the community clustering and an initial pro filiation. Combing the social network and the content analysis conducted within the Terrorgram we were able to classify the network.

Table 1

Modularity class	Share of nodes	Role
10	14,56 %	Organizations linked to Terrorgram
4	12,17 %	Terrorgram official channels
18	9,53 %	Neonazi and white supremacist channels
1	8,5 %	News and information sharing
8	8,35 %	Ecofascist Terrorgram channels
16	7,17 %	European national socialist
13	6,78 %	Terrorgram Sud America
9	6,61 %	Pro-Ukrainian channels
12	5,72 %	Memes and shitposting
6	5,39 %	Archiving and discussion
15	4,06 %	White suprematism
7	2,33 %	Pro-violence and survivalism
5	2,17 %	Anti-BLM channels
19	1,78 %	Ukrainian pro-Tarrant community
11	1,53 %	Terrorgram archive

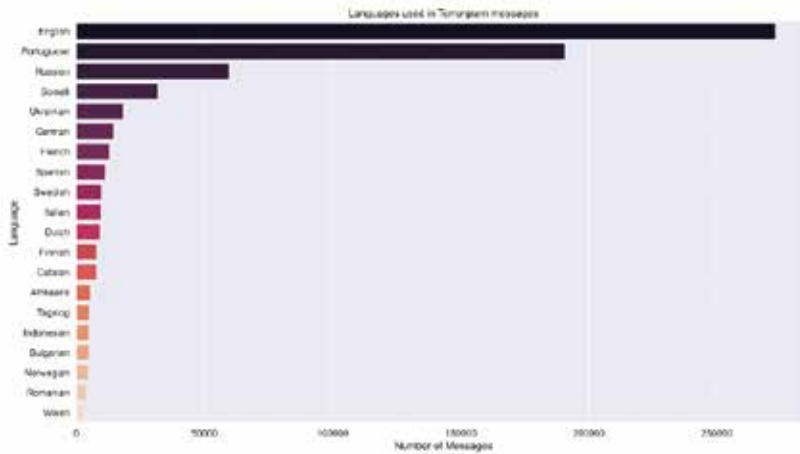
Clusters identified with 4, 11, 8 and 13 have been identified as Terrorgram official channels. Specifically, the cluster 4 is composed of the Terrorwave channels-net and all its recovery apparatus. It is interesting to note that the languages and root culture is strictly connected within the community. Although we can speak of official Terrorgram channels, it is necessary to draw attention to the extremely pulverized and international nature of the network. this permeability of the network to ideologies to subcultures of violence also allows it to develop in different geographical contexts. this is the case with clusters 19, 13, 9, 16, and 10.

Such clusters although they have varying degrees of interconnection with the Terrorgram core have a specific culture and geographic connotation. For example, 19 and 9 represent a Ukrainian linguistic core that is very close to the Terrorgram but quite distinct. The same goes for class 13, which represents the entire Terrorgram section of South America. From the study of the material, we also found that they are mainly Brazilian and Argentine actors. Similarly, it is interesting to note that channels and organizations related to the U.S. context are concentrated in cluster 10. The fact that this cluster represents the largest class of the ecosystem is explained by the fact that within it is presents a large part of the terrorist organizations that constitute the stylistic and ideological legacy of the Terrorgram in particular among all AtomWaffen Division. With it is found a galaxy of actors (organizations and individual supporters) imitators who revive its propaganda. finally, class 16 reports the existence of a large group of European actors. This label was chosen on the basis of their characterization as actors defending white and Aryan Europe. In fact, this cluster is composed of a plurality of actors with different languages and subcultures, but the Terrorgram is the ecosystem that has generated becomes the technical-ideological glue that allows these actors to expand, contaminate each other and increase their audience.

The following is the linguistic analysis conducted by analysing messages from within the Terrorgram ecosystem. The presence of the Somali language is partially explained by the sharing of jihadist propaganda by some actors. As counterintuitive as it may seem, the presence of jihadist material is not uncommon and unwanted. This is because the ideological bazaar expands the platform of users who can avail themselves of such material even if they are not jihadists, just be interested in the material.

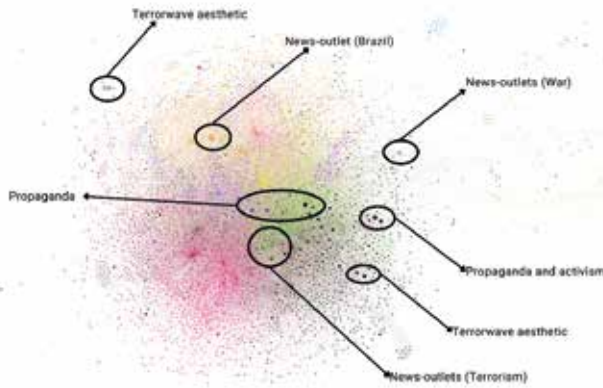


Figure 3: chart edited by Blacklight software



Regarding the cluster numbered as 11, 5 and 7 we have noticed that although these classes have different links with the Terrorgram core, they have similar characteristics in the management of the dissemination and archiving of materials. Those actors possess a communication oriented towards the formation of a cultural asset, nevertheless the type of manuals that could potentially contribute to the formation of an inter-collaborative operational legacy. as far as the Terrorgram is concerned, the existence of channels specifically focused on paramilitary training and manuals is fundamental. Furthermore, it is possible that the set of multiple actors on the Terrorgram could have constituted a pro-violence operational-cultural sharing system capable of enabling an ever-increasing number of organizations or individual actors to carry out organized attacks. Finally, during the observation, collateral activities connected to the weapon and training provider were detected. These activities refer to two actors and have been considered as secondary activities; nevertheless, they are extremely interesting for the understanding of the community.

The second measure launched in this paper is the PageRank. The PageRank algorithm measures the importance of each node within the graph, based on the number incoming relationships and the importance of the corresponding source nodes. The underlying the popularity of the actor within the network. from the calculations that have emerged, the most popular nodes are media actors from different network compartments. in particular, actors engaged in the production of propaganda and actors involved in the dissemination of news related to terrorist attacks and war events are distinguished. Regarding propaganda-producing channels such actors are a combination of historical Terrorgram channels and new initiatives.

*Figure 4*

## 5. Conclusions

Through the information gathered, it was possible to hypothesize that, although the extreme right does not have a centralized structure, capable of systematizing and hierarchising the propaganda apparatus, the set of different organizations and actors immersed in the ideological-cultural bazaar have spontaneously set up various networks and collaborative systems based on ideological proximity and specific skills. The network behaves like a community made up of different players within which they exchange information, propaganda content, media products and various services. It is therefore the role of the individual actor that determines his relative position within the Terrorgram. Based on the observations and evidence obtained, it was possible to categorize and model the digital ecosystem. According to these discoveries, the Terrorgram has diversified on the basis of specific roles defined not by a central authority but by the intertwining of skills and needs of the channels relating to the organizations.

The concept of a social network refers to the net composed of different kinds of links between people, organizations, and communities. Due to this, the social network analysis (SNA) is useful to study how such relationships are structured, their differences in terms of the nature of the link (strong or weak ties, structural holes) and the role of the actors. Interactions between the digital context and the relationship shaped by the type of social media platform have also been investigated. The position in the network of a specific actor, such as a mediatic house or propaganda channel can provide information about its influence and activities in the whole network. For example, actors

who occupy broker positions, that link other nodes who would not otherwise be connected, have been found to have a greater influence on the network in terms of radicalization and dissemination of propaganda. Given this, analysis of the positions occupied by the different actors in extremist networks appears to be a promising way to identify producers and spreaders of terrorist propaganda<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Mehmet Nesip Ogun, 'SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY AND TERRORISM', *Clinical Medicine* 07, no. 01 (2020): 9.

# Exploring the Telegram Hacker Ecosystem

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## Abstract

The study of hacker groups, their activities and the communities they form is becoming increasingly relevant in an even more digitalised world. Historically, academic research has portrayed hackers as solitary, misanthropic, and malevolent figures that reside within the depths of the underground web. This stereotype has led to a research focus only on the activities that occur within underground forums and markets. However, this narrow perspective is not entirely accurate, and it is crucial to understand the interactions and relationships that exist between hackers, even within more accessible and secure platforms such as Telegram. The current study employs a range of research techniques, including non-discriminative snowball sampling and social network analysis to explore the digital ecosystem of hacker groups on the Telegram instant messaging service. The aim of this research is to offer insights into the network's organizational structure and dynamics, as well as to identify key actors, their relationships, and the dissemination patterns of content. The findings of this research provide an original approach to investigating the digital ecosystems of hacker groups, thereby enhancing the understanding of their structures, dynamics, and behaviours, and facilitating the development of effective strategies for monitoring, identifying, and countering their activities.

Lo studio dei gruppi di hacker, delle loro attività e delle comunità che formano sta diventando sempre più rilevante in un mondo sempre più digitalizzato. Storicamente, la ricerca accademica ha dipinto gli hacker come figure solitarie, misantropi e malevoli che risiedono nelle profondità del web underground. Questo stereotipo ha portato la ricerca a concentrarsi solo sulle attività che si svolgono all'interno dei forum e dei mercati clandestini. Tuttavia, questa prospettiva ristretta non è del tutto accurata ed è fondamentale comprendere le interazioni e le relazioni che esistono tra gli hacker, anche all'interno di piattaforme più accessibili e sicure come Telegram. Il presente studio impiega una serie di tecniche di ricerca, tra cui il campionamento non discriminatorio a palla di neve e l'analisi delle reti sociali, per esplorare l'ecosistema digitale dei gruppi di hacker sul servizio di messaggistica istantanea Telegram. Lo scopo di questa ricerca è quello di offrire approfondimenti sulla struttura organizzativa e sulle dinamiche della rete, nonché di identificare gli attori chiave, le loro relazioni e i modelli di diffusione dei contenuti. I risultati di questa ricerca forniscono un approccio originale per

indagare gli ecosistemi digitali dei gruppi di hacker, migliorando così la comprensione delle loro strutture, dinamiche e comportamenti e facilitando lo sviluppo di strategie efficaci per monitorare, identificare e contrastare le loro attività.

## Keywords

Hacker groups, Social Network Analysis, Telegram, Digital Ecosystems

### 1. Introduction

The scholarly research conducted over the past forty years has played a significant role in refuting the stereotypical image of hackers as solitary and unsociable actors (Jordan & Taylor, 1998; Turgeman-Goldschmidt, 2005). Through this research, a deeper understanding of the social networks and supportive structures that facilitate hackers' activities has been gained, thus recognising their embeddedness within a community. By acknowledging that hackers are part of a community, a better understanding of the collective motivations and group dynamics that drive their behaviour is allowed. This understanding can assist law enforcement and security professionals in developing more effective strategies for preventing and responding to computer intrusions.

Specifically, the research conducted about this topic suggests that hackers form closely-knit online communities that encourage collaboration and sharing of specialised skills (Dupont et al., 2017; Leukfeldt et al., 2017a). This social embeddedness often leads to social hierarchies within the group, where members strive to establish their status and reputation through their hacking exploits (Décary-Héту et al., 2012). This insight is crucial for understanding how these communities function, and for developing effective strategies to disrupt their activities.

However, while much research has been conducted on individual hackers and their behaviour, there remains a gap in the understanding of the groups to which they belong (Perkins et al., 2022). Specifically, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the individual proclivities among hackers, it is necessary to examine their social dynamics at the group level. As a result, greater insight can be gleaned for designing effective interventions to disrupt these groups. Moreover, by examining the group-level dynamics, researchers can identify key factors that contribute to the formation and maintenance of these groups, such as shared ideologies, specialised skills, or access to resources (McGloin & Nguyen, 2013; Tremblay et al., 2019).

The presented study builds upon prior research about hacker communities by focusing on the digital connections among hacker groups and the

structural dynamics of the Telegram ecosystem in which they are increasingly becoming active. Specifically, this study aims to provide a more in-depth understanding of the intricate relationships that exist between hacker groups, as well as their interactions within the broader context of the Telegram platform. This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How does the illicit ecosystem of hacker groups operate within the Telegram platform? (2) What are the primary activities and functions of hacker groups within this ecosystem? By addressing these research questions, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on hacker groups and their activities on social media platforms.

The paper is organised into four sections. The next section provides a comprehensive review of the latest literature on hacker groups and the most recent studies of hard-to-reach communities on Telegram. The second section argues in favour of using snowball sampling and social network analysis methodologies to explore the intricate ecosystem of hacker groups on Telegram, while describing the retrieved data. The third section presents the findings of the performed analyses and critically discusses them. Finally, the fourth section presents an in-depth discussion of the observations, situating them within the broader context of prior research on hacker groups and offering insights into possible avenues for future research.

## 2. Related Work

The academic literature on cybercrime ecosystems has devoted significant attention to understanding the social networks surrounding online offenders, such as hackers. In general, hackers can be defined as individuals who exploit computer systems and Internet technologies to gain unauthorised access to other computer systems (Grabosky, 2016; Oliver & Randolph, 2022). Contrary to the popular stereotype of the isolated and misanthropic hacker (Holt & Kilger, 2008; Steinmetz, 2015; Turgeman-Goldschmidt, 2005), recent research has revealed that hackers operate within online communities that are structured hierarchically stratified by skill, expertise, and social standing (Dupont et al., 2016; Holt, 2013; Lu et al., 2010). These meritocratic communities foster the formation of small, cohesive groups that maintain social connections with the broader community through various means, such as personal interactions and online forums (Abbasi et al., 2014; Holt, 2007; Holt & Kilger, 2008). The culture of these communities is focused on sharing information, acquiring specialized knowledge, and disseminating expertise among new members (Dupont et al., 2017; Holt, 2007; Leukfeldt et al., 2017a). In particular, a growing corpus of research has used network analysis approaches to map out and measure the social interactions that hackers establish in order

to acquire a deeper understanding of these social systems. Overall, this research has revealed that hackers tend to be highly connected within their social networks, and their activities are often characterized by pockets of tight-knit groups. Specifically, the importance of social relationships to hackers' online activities has been observed across various data sources, including social media platforms such as Twitter (Aslan et al., 2020) and Facebook (Howell et al., 2019), online discussion forums (Macdonald & Frank, 2017; Paracha et al., 2023; Pete et al., 2020), and police records (Décary-Héti & Dupont, 2012; Leukfeldt et al., 2017b).

The significance of this study lies in its focus on the Telegram ecosystem and its use and abuse by hacker groups. Specifically, Telegram is a freemium, privacy-oriented, and cloud-based instant messaging service launched in 2013. The app boasts a variety of privacy-enhancing features, including end-to-end encryption, self-destructing messages, and the possibility to create private channels and groups (*Telegram FAQ*, n.d.). These features have made it a popular choice among a variety of users, including political dissidents, journalists, and human rights activists, who require secure communication channels to protect their privacy and safety. However, these same features have also made Telegram an attractive platform for terrorists, online-extremists, and criminals who seek to evade detection and carry out their illicit activities anonymously (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Rogers, 2020; Shapiro, 2013; Urman & Katz, 2022). Specifically, Telegram offers a to the security versus efficiency trade-off that illicit communities encounter as they attempt to balance their operational activities with their efforts to remain secure (Morselli et al., 2007). These groups are drawn to Telegram due to its ability to create and maintain private groups and channels, which allows them to communicate, trade for illicit goods and services, and share information without fear of being detected by law enforcement or other authorities. Moreover, the end-to-end encryption and self-destructing messages features make it difficult for authorities to track their activities and gather evidence for prosecution.

It is here considered that hacker groups, much like terrorist, extremist, anarchist, subversive, and conspiracy groups, can be classified as hard-to-reach communities. Thus, reviewing the limited literature about hard-to-reach communities' studies on Telegram can provide a framework for understanding the complexities of such communities and assist in identifying effective methodologies for researching hacker groups. Specifically, the literature on researching hard-to-reach communities on Telegram suggests that snowball sampling is the most common approach for exploring their complex social networks. While some scholars prefer to use an exponential discriminative snowball sampling approach (Peter et al., 2022; Simon et al., 2022; Urman & Katz, 2022), others opt for a more straightforward

snowballing technique (Krona, 2020; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023). Some research may even go as far as interacting with administrators and key actors in the network to gain access to closed groups and channels (Fisher & Prucha, 2022). After mapping the network, researchers commonly employ the framework of (participant and non-participant) covert observation to study the contents and materials produced by individual groups (Fisher & Prucha, 2022; Krona, 2020). This approach enables researchers to access and analyse their activities without disrupting their operations. The presented approaches are reasonably effective for facing the hard-to-reach nature of hacker groups and their activities on Telegram.

The presented studies have distinctly aided the advance of hacker groups ecosystems studies and the investigation of hard-to-reach communities on Telegram. However, it is suggested that a research gap exists regarding the study of hacker communities, which should not be limited to mainstream social media platforms and underground forums. This limitation exists because mainstream social media platforms and traditional social networks are easily accessible to all and are subject to censorship in cases of unethical or illegal activities. Meanwhile, underground forums are difficult to access, require specific technical expertise, have limited participation, and are self-referential. Therefore, it is argued the necessity to explore the dynamics of different hacker groups on Telegram, an ecosystem that is an intermediate point between traditional platforms and underground forums and has a more balanced security-efficiency tradeoff (Morselli et al., 2007), to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their activities and dynamics.

### 3. Data and Methodology

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The complexity of data sampling on Telegram is more challenging than on other platforms, since it does not provide simple data scraping functions and its privacy-oriented structure presents difficulties in identifying connections between groups and channels. Furthermore, Telegram's third-party plugins and encryption features create a unique data environment that requires specific technical expertise to navigate. To overcome these challenges, it was necessary to begin with a precompiled seed list and gradually expand the sample using a non-discriminative snowball sampling approach (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

The selection and initial access to channels and groups in the seed list was accomplished through invitations extended by a network of researchers and analysts, along with reviewing available information from open



sources. Channels and groups requiring peer-to-peer vetting in private chats were deliberately avoided in favour of those with no such vetting procedures. Finally, data of each accessed channel or group are collected through Telegram's integrated 'export chat history' function. This approach helps the recognition of other public and partially closed channels and groups that would have otherwise been difficult to access, while still guaranteeing an acceptable level of ethicality and scientificity of the research.

In this research, a comprehensive dataset of 47 public and partially closed channels and groups is collected, spanning a period ranging from July 2019 to March 2023, for the purpose of constructing a citation-based network. Specifically, the network is assembled by extracting all forwards from the retrieved channels and groups messages. Forwards are defined as direct reposts from other channels or groups, without considering the sentiment of the referred content. The resulting network is comprised of 1669 nodes, with 2 edges weighted by the number of forwards between channels. The total number of forwards (unweighted edges) is found to be 2647.

### 3.2 Methodology

The methodological framework for this research draws on a combination of different methodological approaches, an unavoidable condition for studying the dynamics and activities of hacker groups on Telegram. The use of exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling allows for network mapping, while social network analysis techniques are performed to analyse the dynamics of the network.

Regarding sampling methodology, a more straightforward snowballing approach has been preferred in order to be able to explore the context as a whole, with the aim of identifying affiliations, interests, and ideologies of hacker groups in their digital relations with other different communities on Telegram. Specifically, discriminative snowball sampling approaches involve the inclusion specific individuals or groups in the sample and excluding others basing on predetermined characteristics. These approaches have a limited scope, as they can effectively examine the internal dynamics of a specific community, but do not account for the broader ecosystem that surrounds and interacts with it, still remaining distinct from it.

Concerning the network, it is modeled through the process of extracting and aggregating all messages that have been forwarded from the channels and groups that have been accessed. Therefore, the nodes within the network are the channels and groups that have been accessed. The connections within the network are represented through forwarded messages,

as they indicate both the source of the information and its distribution. Specifically, the nature of forwarded data presents two different roles, that of the forwarder and the forwarded, which in turn forms a directed network structure. Furthermore, the temporal dimension of the network will be ignored in this analysis, thus being collapsed into a single snapshot.

Following the application of a community detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008), descriptive network metrics are examined to address the first research question, which focused on understanding the dynamics of the hacker group ecosystem and its key actors. Specifically, the community detection algorithm is employed to partition the network into clusters of nodes that are more closely related within a particular community of hacker groups than with nodes outside of it. This approach enables the identification of hacker groups that are more likely to forward and receive forwarded messages from other hacker groups within that community.

### 3.3 Research Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The outlined methodologies are crucial for gathering insightful information on how hacking groups act and interact on Telegram. However, it is also necessary to consider the limitations and ethical implications of these approaches.

First, since the seed list is not compiled through a random process, the nature of the sampling procedure introduced some distortions in the data collection. Specifically, the use of a non-random sampling technique in the compilation of the seed list can introduce various distortions, such as over-representation of certain groups, under-representation of others, and the failure to capture the diversity of the population of interest. Second, the research is limited to a subset of hacker groups active on the Telegram platform. Therefore, the findings might not fully reflect the interactions and connections between hacker groups and other communities because of insufficient network coverage. Specifically, it is possible that these communities may utilise other similar platforms or mediums to engage within each other's and other communities (e.g., Element, Matrix.org, Signal, Tox). Furthermore, the challenges of identifying and accessing small or closed channels and groups adds to the limitation of having an incomplete network, as their interactions, dynamics and the valuable information they share are not accessible. It can be defined 'Unknown Recommendation Problem' (Peter et al., 2022).

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The visualization of the mapped hacker groups' digital ecosystem on Telegram based on forwarded messages is presented in Figure 1, providing a visual representation of the network's structure and properties. The ForceAtlas algorithm implemented in Gephi is used to generate the network's representation (Bastian et al., 2009). Specifically, the illustration captures the interconnections and the direction of information exchange, without considering the time component. Considering the nature of the research, for security reasons no labels will be included in the graphical representations and no mention will be made of specific chats, groups or users.

*Figure 1 - Network layout of the hacker groups' ecosystem on Telegram*



In analysing the entire network, it is crucial to examine the density of the network as a metric that reflects the general level of connectivity among the constituent nodes. This measure is calculated by dividing the total number of actual connections by the maximum number of possible connections, resulting in a proportion that ranges from 0 to 1. In the context of the present research, the computed density is 0.001, indicating a relatively low degree of interconnectivity among the hacker groups' network. This implies that information transmission between individual channels and groups within the network may be suboptimal, since many potential paths for information flow may not exist. Nonetheless, the network is likely to be more resilient to disruptions and damage than net-

works with higher densities values. Specifically, the removal of few nodes would not significantly impair the overall functioning of the network, given that there are relatively few connections to begin with.

Furthermore, to deepen the dynamics at the node level, degree centrality measures are examined to quantify the number of connections incident upon a node (i.e., the number of ties that a node has). Specifically, in the case of a directed network, such as in the current research, it is necessary to perform two separate measures of degree centrality, namely, outdegree and indegree. Accordingly, outdegree refers to the number of relationships originating from a node to other nodes, while indegree refers to the number of relationships directed towards the node from other nodes. It is important to note that a high degree centrality score does not necessarily indicate of a leadership position, but rather demonstrates that the node has an extensive number of direct connections with other nodes.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 represent the hacker groups' digital ecosystem on Telegram by respectively scaling the node size and colour to emphasise the weighted outdegree and indegree values. Specifically, a larger node size indicates a higher weighted outdegree or indegree score. Moreover, to support the interpretation, the values are also scaled according to the legend displayed in both Figure 2 and Figure 3: nodes with higher weighted outdegree or indegree values are coloured with a tone closer to red, while nodes with lower values tend towards blue. This colour scheme is likewise applied to the relative edges of the nodes. The nodes or clusters of nodes that emerge as most relevant from the degree measures have been identified by numbers both in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Figure 2 - Weighted outdegree of the hacker groups' ecosystem on Telegram

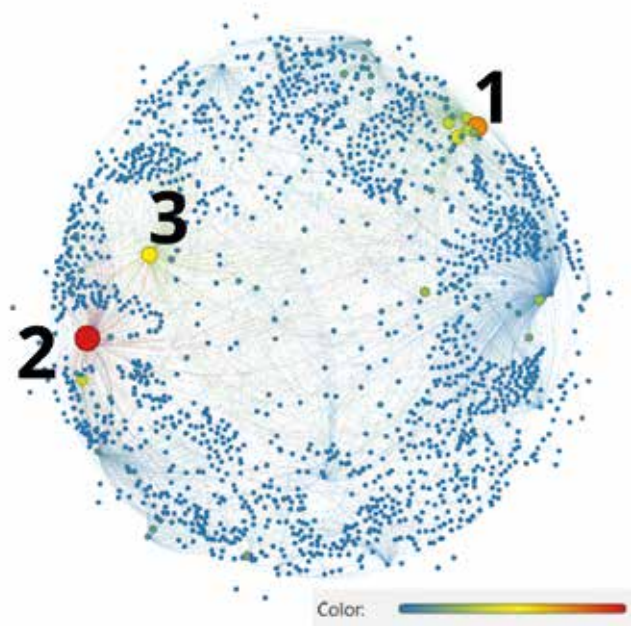
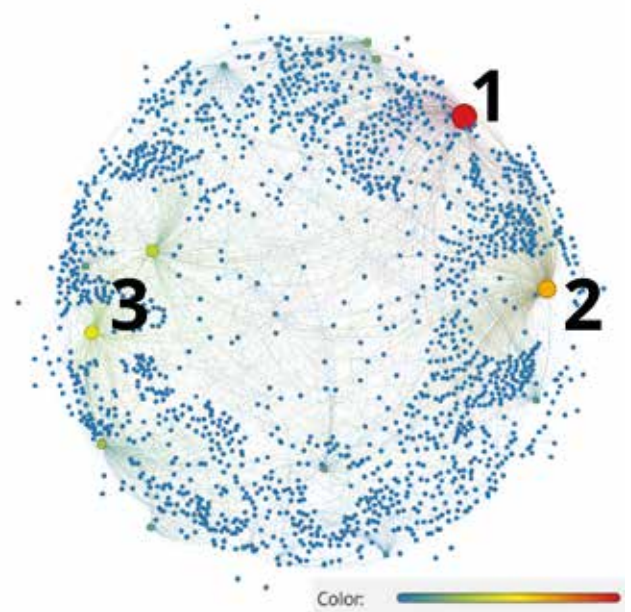


Figure 3 - Weighted indegree of the hacker groups' ecosystem on Telegram



Regarding Figure 2, it can be observed that certain nodes play a leading role in producing the most widely shared material within the network. Specifically, nodes identified with number 1 consist of pro-Russian groups and information channels involved in news spreading and propaganda around the ongoing Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Meanwhile, nodes identified with number 2 consist of groups and channels associated with a well-known pro-Russian hacker collective known for launching DoS<sup>1</sup> and DDoS<sup>2</sup> attacks against government institutions and private companies since the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Lastly, node identified with number 3 corresponds to a channel related to and probably run by members of the hacker collective previously described and identified with number 2, which disseminates wide-ranging material ranging from informative to satirical.

On the other side, Figure 3 identifies the nodes that forward a considerable amount of content, encompassing material, news, and user messages in other channels or groups. Similar to Figure 2, node identified with number 1 corresponds to a specific pro-Russian information channel, which is actively involved in spreading news and propaganda regarding the ongoing Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Meanwhile, node identified with number 2 relates to a less-known pro-Russian hacker group affiliated with the aforementioned better-known hacker group, with which has also participated in DoS and DDoS attacks against government institutions and private companies since the onset of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Lastly, nodes identified with number 3 comprise groups and channels associated to a well-known pro-Russian hacker collective, known for launching DoS and DDoS attacks against government institutions and private companies since the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Overall, it is possible to observe that some nodes present a relevant degree score both in Figures 2 and Figure 3. Specifically, it can be stated that certain channels, groups, or users perform a dual function in the network by generating a substantial amount of original content that is shared by other nodes while concurrently serving as a connector between different

<sup>1</sup> Denial of Service (DoS) is a type of cyber attack that involves overwhelming a network or server with traffic or requests in order to make it unavailable to users. The goal of a DoS attack is to disrupt the normal functioning of a system, either to cause inconvenience or to extort money from the target.

<sup>2</sup> Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) is a type of cyber attack that is similar to a DoS attack, but involves multiple sources of traffic or requests, often from a network of compromised computers or devices, known as a botnet. The goal of a DDoS attack is to overwhelm a target with traffic or requests from multiple sources, making it more difficult to mitigate and defend against.

nodes. These observations lead to the conclusion that these prominent nodes have a central role in shaping the network's dynamics and may be the main participants of the network itself.

Analysing the subgroups of the network, Figure 4 represents the hacker groups' digital ecosystem on Telegram basing on the modularity class values. Specifically, the network is color-coded based on each node's modularity class, and the edges are correspondingly coloured. The modularity score of the hacker groups' network is found to be 0.66, which indicates the presence of distinct communities within the network. As posited by Newman and Girvan (2004), elevated modularity scores are indicative of greater community structure in a network. Nevertheless, in the present study, the modularity score of 0.66 does not attest to a distinctly delineated community structure.

*Figure 4 - Community layout of the hacker groups' ecosystem on Telegram*



Specifically, Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of the eight different communities detected in the network. The size of each community is expressed as a percentage of the total nodes in the network. To support the interpretation of the data, a reference system has been implemented in the form of a 'community number' column. This column allows for each community's location within the network to be easily matched to the corresponding colour legend presented in Figure 4.

*Table 1 - Distribution of communities in the network by share of nodes*

Community number	Share of nodes	Brief description
11	25.22%	Lesser-known pro-Russian hacker groups
8	21.21 %	Most notorious pro-Russian hacker groups
99	10.25%	Pro-Russia news spreaders on the ongoing conflict
69	7.67%	Other hacker groups involved in the ongoing conflict
97	6.47%	Bottom-up propaganda related to PMC Wagner
104	5.15%	Pro-Russia news spreaders on the ongoing conflict
112	4.43%	Russian language bot chatroom
46	4.13%	Iranian anti-regime hacker groups

The concept of modularity class extends beyond the identification of specific communities within the network, as it can also provide an introductory understanding of their behaviour and ideologies basing on the common ground of the content they disseminate.

Communities identified with numbers 11 and 8 have been identified as pro-Russian hacker groups whose constituent appear to be motivated by political motives rather than being driven by profit-oriented goals. Specifically, community number 8 is composed of highly skilled groups whose names have also come to the public's attention on more than one occasion., whereas community number 11 is composed by groups considered lesser-known due to the lack of evidence to suggest that they have independently executed cyberattacks against public or private institutions of national strategic importance. However, this does not necessarily mean that they do not have the internal competencies to conduct such complex cyberattacks. On the other side, while the communities identified with numbers 11 and 8 appear to have close affiliations with the Kremlin and other pro-Russia entities, the community, the community identified with number 69 seems to be comprised of more technically and organisationally prepared groups than those in the former two communities. Furthermore, the groups belonging to community identified with number 69 appear not to be homogeneous in supporting one or the other side in the ongoing Ukrainian-Russian conflict, even committing with different levels of involvement.

Communities identified with numbers 99 and 104 have been identified as pro-Russian news spreaders, mainly concerning the Ukrainian-Russian conflict (Aleksejeva & Mammadova, 2023). Disseminating news articles, photographs, and videos that portray the conflict from a pro-Russian per-



spective, these actors aim to control the information environment on Telegram and influence public opinion and legitimise Russia's involvement in the conflict. Specifically, they employ various techniques to reinforce their narratives, such as spreading disinformation and propaganda, highlighting conspiracy theories, and discrediting opposing views.

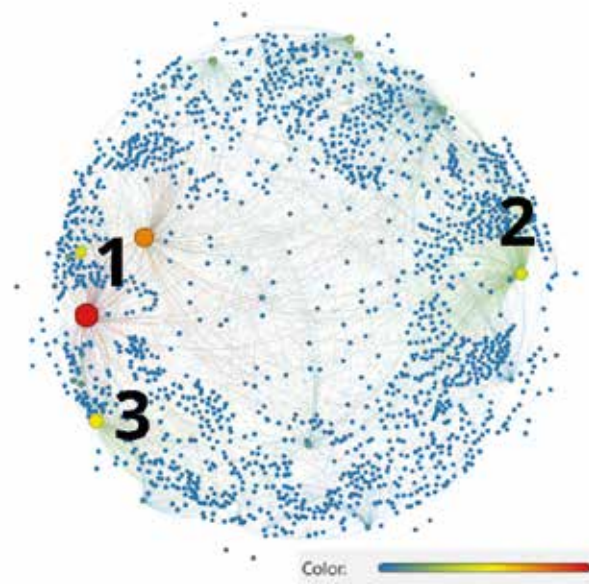
Community identified with number 97 has been associated with the Private Military Company (hereinafter, PMC) Wagner's grassroots propaganda efforts, which are disseminated by Wagner members themselves (Porrino & Borgonovo, 2023).<sup>3</sup> These individuals draw inspiration from the official top-down repertoire and generate a plethora of content that primarily revolves around war bulletins and enlistment-encouraging imagery. It is worth noting that these actors are also involved in financial support operations. Typically, these individuals, who are often mercenaries, attempt to establish a sense of membership within the war context by showcasing guitars, flags, and weapons while functioning as primary recruiters.

Community identified with number 112 has been associated with a chat of Russian hackers who employ a bot to relay user messages and maintain anonymity in the conversations. Specifically, rather than writing directly to the chat, users compose messages to a chatbot that masks their unique identifier before forwarding the message to the chat as if sent directly. The chatroom appears to serve as an unrestricted venue for discussing topics and issues pertaining to the underground cybercrime world, as well as anonymous discourse between users on non-digital matters. Community identified with number 46 has been identified as Iranian anti-regime hacker groups. These groups appear to be politically motivated and have been observed encouraging to target government and military institutions in Iran. Specifically, the goals of these groups include disrupting government operations and exposing sensitive information, as well as promoting anti-regime sentiment. Furthermore, these groups are observed exchanging materials and instructional resources pertaining to the perpetration of cyberattacks, as well as discussing the development of the online cybercriminal community. Figure 5 represents the hacker groups' digital ecosystem on Telegram scaling the node size and colour basing on the PageRank algorithm measurement. Specifically, a larger node size corresponds to a higher PageRank value. Furthermore, the va-

<sup>3</sup> The Wagner Group is a Russian PMC that has been linked to several conflicts around the world. The group has been described as a "shadow army" that operates in a grey area between the Russian military and private enterprise and is also believed to be closely linked to the Russian government and to have ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle.

lues are colour-scaled according to the legend presented in Figure 5: a node with a higher PageRank value is coloured with a tone closer to red, while a node with a lower value tends towards blue. This colour scheme is also applied to the edges of the nodes.

*Figure 5 – PageRank measurement of the hacker groups’ ecosystem of Telegram*



PageRank measurement shows how important a node is to other important nodes. Specifically, the PageRank algorithm calculates the importance of a node based on the number and quality of connections it has with other nodes in the network. The algorithm assigns a score to each node, with higher scores indicating greater importance within the network.

As previously assumed, certain nodes with relevant weighted outdegree and indegree scores are also identified in Figure 5 as the most important nodes of the network. Specifically, nodes identified by the numeral 1 correspond to groups and channels associated with a well-known pro-Russian hacker collective recognised for its involvement in DoS and DDoS attacks against governmental institutions and private enterprises since the commencement of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Meanwhile, node denoted with number 2 relates to a lesser-known pro-Russian hacker group that has collaborated with the previously mentioned prominent hacker group in carrying out DoS and DDoS attacks against government entities and private companies since the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Lastly, node identified with number 3 pertains to a national fringe of an international activist

and hacktivist movement that has gained recognition for its multiple cyberattacks targeting various governmental institutions and private companies. This group is siding with the Kremlin in the ongoing Ukrainian-Russian conflict and has mobilised alongside the hacker collective previously described and identified with number 1.

## 5. Conclusions

In this research, a first attempt is made to reconstruct the digital ecosystem of hacker groups on Telegram using a seed list of channels and groups compiled from open-source and third-party information, and then expanded through a non-discriminatory snowball sampling approach. The network is constructed by using the forwarding of a message as an indicator of a connection between nodes. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the structure and content of the network, which yielded valuable insights into the interactions and activities of the hacker groups.

Performing a social network analysis, it is observed that nodes comprising the hacker groups' network are not extensively interconnected, which suggests a certain level of closedness within the different groups. It is also shed light on the dynamics between different nodes within the network, highlighting those that produce a greater amount of original content and those that act primarily as disseminators of material produced by others. Notably, some nodes emerge as playing a dual role, serving as both significant disseminators of original content and relayers of material produced by other nodes. Furthermore, the network is also analysed at the subgroup level using a community detection algorithm to identify the common constituents of each community present in the network. Lastly, the study identified the main nodes in the network by computing the PageRank measurement of each node, which results identify a similarity with nodes that held a dual role in the network. It must be highlighted that those profit-oriented hacker groups that use Telegram to sponsor and sell leaked datasets obtained from their cybercriminal activities do not emerge as important nodes in the network. This result may be attributed to their lack of interest in formally interacting with other hacker groups, as their objectives are primarily monetary. Furthermore, it is possible that other hacker groups may not be interested in promoting or sponsoring the activities and sale of datasets from their competitors. Thus, it is suggested that research regarding monetisation-oriented hacker groups should take place through different approaches other than social network analysis. In conclusion, this study demonstrates the capacities of social network analysis methodology to extract significant insights from the hacker groups' digital ecosystem on Telegram. The findings of this research demonstrate that the complex ecosystem

of hacker groups can be successfully examined to draw valuable information by analysing the structure and content.

In consideration of this, it is suggested that further research could explore deeper network mapping, including access to closed channels and groups, while taking appropriate measures to ensure security and privacy. Additionally, other network analyses and measures could be performed to verify the obtained results. Regarding the content analysis, future research could examine the sentiment of the content disseminated through the network, considering a larger number of key nodes and considering weighting for each identified cluster. Furthermore, analysing mentions in addition to forwards could provide additional insight into the nature of the content shared within the network. These approaches could enhance the understanding of the hacker groups' digital ecosystem on Telegram structure and content dissemination, leading to more nuanced and comprehensive insights.

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# Exploring the Whitejihad Digital Ecosystem

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## Abstract

A new generation of extremist is raising and it's becoming able to establish self-created communities combining Salafi-Jihadism and extreme right. Such community originally hinged on a few influencers and self-named Islamogram has grown and contaminated within various platforms. Using a set of metaphors and visual motifs typical of the alt-right and far-right, they accuse a loss of tradition and a corrupt view of life. The community build networks, drive narratives across several platforms and spread violent propaganda. One way to study how this type of extremist develops and branches out within social platforms through the covert observation of their interactions. Reconstruct the morphology of the network in which these interactions occur. This article attempts to contribute to an advance of the literature on terrorism studies, through a combination of content analysis and ethnographic observation.

Una nuova generazione di estremisti sta crescendo e sta diventando in grado di stabilire comunità auto-create che combinano salafismo-jihadismo ed estrema destra. Tale comunità, originariamente imperniata su alcuni influencer e autodefinitasi Islamogram, è cresciuta e si è contaminata all'interno di varie piattaforme. Utilizzando una serie di metafore e motivi visivi tipici dell'alt-right e dell'estrema destra, accusano la perdita della tradizione e una visione corrotta della vita. La comunità costruisce reti, guida narrazioni su diverse piattaforme e



diffonde propaganda violenta. Un modo per studiare come questo tipo di estremisti si sviluppa e si ramifica all'interno delle piattaforme sociali è l'osservazione occulta delle loro interazioni. Ricostruire la morfologia della rete in cui avvengono queste interazioni. Questo articolo cerca di contribuire a un avanzamento della letteratura sugli studi sul terrorismo, attraverso una combinazione di analisi dei contenuti e osservazione etnografica.

## Keywords

Islamogram, Whitejihad, alt-right, propaganda, content

## 1. Introduction

The Digital World has been home to various extremist groups. Among them, two digital ecosystems have become particularly known in the past years: the jihadist and the far-right ones. The two ecosystems always had some degree of connection: some communities of the far-right ecosystem shared jihadist videos due to their fascination for violence, others were simply attracted by the success and recognition that IS and al-Qa'ida had obtained. Recently, a new digital ecosystem connected to both the jihadist and the extreme right networks has become more prominent: the Islamogram. In this paper we argue that this ecosystem is part of a wider one, for which is proposed the definition of Whitejihad. This definition is proposed to include every form of contamination between the right extreme wing networks and the jihadist ecosystems, including the Islamogram, in order to understand how they are connected, how does the ecosystem work and why this contamination has born in the first place. Starting from the concept of Islamogram and *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures* by Moustafa Ayadi, through scientific and grey literature and based on the observation of the ecosystem on Telegram, it is proposed a definition of Whitejihad digital ecosystem.

It is then defined the type of actors present in the digital environment and the material they produce. This is done through a process of observation of channels and chats connected to the ecosystem.

### 1.1 Islamogram

Moustafa Ayad in *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*<sup>1</sup>, analysed a community that emerged in 2016 and self-defined as Isla-

<sup>1</sup> Ayad M., *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 16 November 2021, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>

mogram. The name they've chosen for themselves stems from the platform where the community was born: Instagram.

Ideologically heterogenous, Islamogram is a network of young Salafi propagators who use the Instagram platform but draw heavily on the visual and linguistic culture of 4Chan, Reddit and Discord.<sup>2</sup>

The Islamogram, is mainly composed by Gen Z<sup>3</sup> Salafis, that, by using chan<sup>4</sup> and gaming language, imagery and memes, are actively spreading various type of propaganda. Said propaganda can range from pro-Islam to radical Islam content and even to pro-jihad material.

The usage of meme and gaming languages typical of the chan led to the creation of content easy to spread, easy to understand for a wider audience and more easily defendable due to its ironic nature. The choice of using memes led to a form of contamination with another group that already co-opted their language as their own in order to spread extremist ideas: the alt-right.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

<sup>3</sup> Gen Z are people born from 1997 to 2012. Gen Z and Gen Y, people born from 1987 to 1996, are considered to be true digital natives.

Missier A. C., *Fundamentalism and the search for meaning in digital media among Gen Y and Gen Z*, Journal for Deradicalization, Issue No. 33 (Winter 2022/23), p. 258, <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/679/397>

<sup>4</sup> "Chan" is short for "channel" and is an alternative way of calling imageboards. «Imageboards, such as 4chan [...], are online discussion forums where anyone can post anonymously and which have developed their own peculiar subcultures. They are online spaces of cultural consumption and production, and birthplaces of various memes and discourses, which sometimes cross over to the mainstream».

Ylä-Anttila T., Eranti V. Hardwick S., *Going Overboard: How Ironic Group Style Becomes Political on an Anonymous Imageboard*, Social Media + Society 6, no. 4 (October 2020), p. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120969912>

In figure 1 and 2 it is shown the adaption of the chad<sup>5</sup> meme in order to fit the Islamogram community: instead of a white man with blonde hair, the chad is depicted as an Arab. The idea behind the meme remains the same: a reply to an attempted mockery for an idea or an opinion, but the appearance of the alpha male proud of his ideas is adapted in order to fit different communities. Another important effect is the mingling between both worlds: in figure 3 there is an example of that. Despite their differences, both the alt-right and the Islamogram have enemies in common: one of them is the LGBTQ+ community. In figure 3<sup>6</sup> there is an example of that: both chads are aware of their differences, but unite to confront a member of the LGBTQ+ community, represented as a variant of the soyjack<sup>7</sup>. Despite being native of Instagram, the Islamogram<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The “Chad” meme, also known as “Yes Chad” or “Nordic Gamer”, represents a man with blonde hair and blue eyes. There are numerous variants of the meme, but usually it also has a beard.

*Yes Chad*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/yes-chad>

«‘Chad’ is a term used in toxic masculinity movements [...] to describe an alpha male [...] that is sexually attractive and socially succesful. [...] he is cool and self-confident and brushes off complex whiny ethical and societal dilemmas with a strong and simple ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘so what’». De Smedt T., Cauberghs O., Jaki S., Voué P., *Handbook of hate memes*, European Observatory of Online Hate, June 2022, p. 86

<sup>6</sup> In figure 3 it is represented a meme format known as Soyjack vs Chad. The first gets disappointed by something, the second either laughs about the soyjack, about the topic of their discussion or simply accepts any drawbacks of the latter. Soyjaks vs. Chads, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/soyjaks-vs-chads>

It is part of a broader format known as Wojack comics. It generates from the Wojack meme, also known as Feels Guy, generally used to represent melancholy, regret or loneliness. By combining variants of the wojack memes with elements of comics the Wojack comics meme was born.

*Wojack*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak>

*Wojack Comics*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/wojak-comics>

<sup>7</sup> The Soyjack or Soyboy Face refers to a facial expression showing surprise or excitement with their mouth agape. It is associated with men described as nu-male, men who do not conform to traditional masculine gender role, or Soy-Boys, a term used in right-wing online communities to describe men lacking masculine characteristics.

*Soy Boy Face / Soyjak*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/soy-boy-face-soyjak>

*Nu-Male*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/nu-male>

*Soy-Boy*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/soy-boy>

<sup>8</sup> On Instagram, between 2020 and 2021, Ayad found 60 Salafi Influencers.

Ayad M., *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 16 November 2021, p. 12, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>

has rooted itself in many other social media platforms: among them, Reddit<sup>9</sup>, Facebook<sup>10</sup>, Discord<sup>11</sup> and Telegram<sup>12</sup>.

After a wave of ban on Instagram and Facebook, the Islamogammers reach on those two social media was reduced. Along with the “retirement” of some important figures in the community like Abu Anon<sup>13</sup>, this effectively triggered a migration of the community towards the home of the Digital Caliphate<sup>14</sup>. Telegram may have been chosen for numerous reasons. The first one could be its functions: it is very user-friendly, messages are encrypted and can self-destruct, it can be synchronised on multiple devices, it has no limits on media and chat size, it has an open API and open-source code and groups can have up to 200,000 members<sup>15</sup>. Telegram has been perceived for a long time as the most secure messaging service, that also has the ability of hosting channels: according to Telegram FAQs,

Channels are a tool for broadcasting public messages to large audiences. In fact, channels can have an unlimited number of subscribers. When you post in a channel, the message is signed with the channel’s name and not yours. You can appoint additional administrators to help you manage the channel. New subscribers can see the entire message history in a channel once they join.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On Reddit, between 2020 and 2021, there were 3 main threads with 7203 subscribers.

*Idem*

<sup>10</sup> On Facebook, between 2020 and 2021, there were 21 central pages and groups with 88596 followers.

*Idem*

<sup>11</sup> On Discord, between 2020 and 2021, there were 6 dedicated servers.

*Idem*

<sup>12</sup> On Telegram, between 2020 and 2021, there were 22 channels with 24709 subscribers.

*Ibid p. 13*

<sup>13</sup> Abu Anon was a Salafi Islamogammers that had 36200 followers on Instagram, 6949 on Twitter and 3749 on his Discord server.

*Ibid. p. 24*

The 20th of November 2021 he announced his retirement through an Instagram post. abu.anony, *Goodbye*, 20 November 2021 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWg4qe7v5So/?hl=it>  
<sup>14</sup> ‘Digital Caliphate’ is used to refer to the digital ecosystem built by IS. «Salafi-Jihadi groups adopted The Telegram messaging platform around 2016. Since then, it has been a mainstay of the Salafi-Jihadi information ecosystem for groups such as al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) and other foreign terrorist organisations (FTO)».

Prucha N., Fisher A., “*Working and Waiting*”: *The Salafi-Jihadi movement on Telegram in 2021*, Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società, Vol. 15, Issue No. 1 (2022), p. 150, <https://www.sicurezza-terrorismo-societa.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SicTerSoc-15-I-2022-Fisher-Prucha.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Telegram, <https://telegram.org/>

<sup>16</sup> Telegram FAQ, [https://telegram.org/faq\\_channels/it?setln=en](https://telegram.org/faq_channels/it?setln=en)

Telegram basically allows to build and administrate a community, while also giving the ability to create groups where users can chat.

The second reason could be the presence on the platform of numerous Salafi channels, spreading content vital to Islamogram communities, and of jihadist content.

According to our monitoring on Telegram, started in November 2022, the number of channels and chat related to the Islamogram has increased compared to the data presented by Ayad: as of now, more than 50 relevant channels or groups, with even more gone inactive or banned due to Telegram's TOS violations. While observing the Islamogram ecosystem on Telegram, we encountered numerous channel and groups that, despite being linked to it, did not correspond to the definition of Islamogram, nor they defined themselves as part of that community.

It is therefore argued that the Islamogram on Telegram is part of a wider digital ecosystem, for which in this paper is proposed a new definition: Whitejihad digital ecosystem.

## 2. Whitejihadism

The Whitejihad digital ecosystem is an environment composed by the Islamogram and its contamination with the jihadist digital ecosystem and the extreme right terrorist networks. The jihadist ecosystem is present in all its form, including the official propaganda apparatuses and the spontaneous media houses. The extreme right terrorist network both influences and is influenced by the Whitejihad digital ecosystem, with members of both environments sharing groups and materials.

The presence of members coming from both extremist ecosystems in the same digital space can also be attributed to some features that they both share: they both believe that any means is legitimate in order to achieve their own goals, they identify as enemies those that are not part of the group ideology, a transition from revolutionary stances to conservative ones after their ideologies gain momentum and the sanctification of heroes<sup>17</sup>. In the case of the Whitejihad ecosystem, the second element is particularly important, because the common enemy is the key element that allows them to coexist.

The name proposed to define this phenomenon tries to include the two main aspects of the ecosystem. White refers to one of the main topics of

<sup>17</sup> Brzuszkiewicz S., *Jihadism and Far-Right Extremism: Shared Attributes With Regard to Violence Spectacularisation*. European View, Vol. 19, Issue No. 1 (April 2020), pp. 71-72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1781685820915972>

propaganda spread by the extreme right networks: white suprematism. Jihad refers to the extremist Islamic networks being part of the environment.

Despite the focus of this work on Telegram, the Whitejihad digital ecosystem is present on many other social media: TikTok, Instagram, Discord, Reddit, Twitter and Facebook. The communities, channels and groups produce different types materials. Every community has its specific characteristics and some are more influenced by a high presence of extreme right members<sup>18</sup>. The more a channel or a group is connected to the extreme right digital networks, the higher the chances that pure extreme right material is spread. In certain cases, there have been also evidence of material produced by an accelerationist collective<sup>19</sup> forwarded by Whitejihad channels, proving how deep the connection with the extreme right-wing network can be.

Another key element is the potential support of terrorism: not every community supports jihadism, and if they do, it does not mean they are in favour every branch of it. Some groups and channel will only support one between Islamic State (IS) and al-Qa'ida (AQ), some will support both. Generally speaking, IS is more popular inside the ecosystem. This is probably due to the young age of the average member of the community, which makes them more familiar with the self-proclaimed caliphate propaganda and attacks.

Certain communities will produce material that glorifies the Taliban, others will condemn them. This is a particularly complex topic for the Whitejihad ecosystem, since the majority of the communities expected the formation of a sort of caliphate after the Taliban gained control of Kabul in 2021.

The link between Islamogram and jihadism is granted by Haramposters and Akh-right communities. The first produces material attacking perceived enemies of Islam, like the West, the US, the LGBTQ+ community and liberal Muslims. The latter, whose name is a wordplay merging akh<sup>20</sup> and alt-right, are almost always directly supporting the glocal jihad. They tend to produce memes where the jihadists are portrayed as based<sup>21</sup>, brave and extremely ma-

<sup>18</sup> Extreme Right is a definition used to include the more extremist and violent members of the far-right digital ecosystems: among those there are neo-Nazis that incite to violence and accelerationists.

<sup>19</sup> Accelerationism «is a fringe philosophy that promotes mass violence to fuel society's collapse». Accelerationist collectives indoctrinate right wing individuals with fringe political ideas, usually a Nazi, in order to fuel a "us against them" mentality, inciting them to commit attacks.

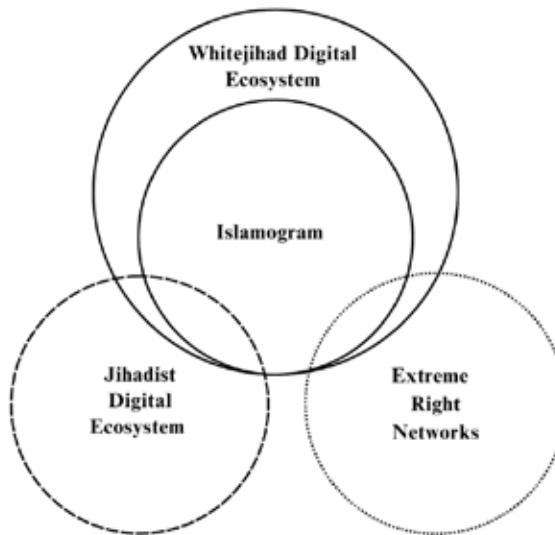
Antwi-Boasiako K. B., Hill C. G., *Terrorism and Right-Wing Extremism: History and Comparative Definitions*, Political Preference, Vol. 26 (2020), p. 87, <https://doi.org/10.31261/polpre.2020.26.77-94>

<sup>20</sup> Akh in Arabic means 'brother'

<sup>21</sup> Based is a term with different meanings depending on the context. Based typically means something that is «agreeable» and «cool,» but it can also be used to mean something is con-

sculine. Inside the chat and groups of the Whitejihad digital ecosystem, there are also some official and unofficial members of IS. They forward material produced by official and spontaneous media houses and actively participate in the life of the community, contributing to the creation of propaganda. In certain cases, chats that started as a Islamogram communities were completely cannibalized by the jihadist propaganda, becoming just echo-chamber for IS materials.

*Figure 4*



In figure 4 it is proposed a graphical exemplification of the structure of the Whitejihad digital ecosystem. Starting from the Islamogram community, which is an endonym and easily recognizable, we can determine other sub-categories influenced by the overlapping of different extremist entities. The alt-right influence manifests itself in a frequent use of their typical language and slang, in particular memetic warfare<sup>22</sup>. The main topics overlapping

sidered anti-woke.

Based, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/based>

<sup>22</sup> «Throughout different definitions, there is a clear sense in which memetic ‘warfare’ involves elements which are beyond the mere usage or virality of memes, but rather consists of a defined objective (military, political, economic, psychological, and/or disruptive), a concerted effort involving or aiming to involve one or more organised groups in executing it (albeit the form of organisation can vary), and that this is conducted in opposition to an ‘opponent’,

between those digital ecosystems are conservative narrative, misogyny and antisemitism.

The Islamogram produces mainly two categories of content, defining also the community which created them: Halalposting and Haramposting, which are endonyms as well<sup>23</sup>. Halalposting consists of memes used for proselytising and jokes about Muslims' conditions and the West<sup>24</sup>. The great majority of the Islamogram production is characterized by the absence of open support for jihadist groups. Channels dedicated to the Halalposting will frequently forward post and links from purely theological channels, contributing to the spread of the Salafi ideology.

Haramposting involves more direct attacks towards the perceived enemies of Islam, taking political stances and frequently exalting the use of violence. Most of the production still consists of memes, but sometimes official and spontaneous propaganda material will be posted in groups and channels. Haramposters also are apparently aware of being observed and pay attention to publications and articles related to them.

Despite being easy to differentiate between them conceptually, in practice the two types of posting can overlap, especially on key issues as LGBTQ+ rights<sup>25</sup>. The overlapping between Halal and Haramposting frequently occurs in case of social bombing<sup>26</sup>, raid<sup>27</sup> and public shitposting<sup>28</sup> with the purpose

whether the opponent is an individual, organisation, political force, set of values/policies, or a nation state». Memes become the means of the attack, not its focal point.

Peacock, T.N., "Son – you'll be a soldier one day": *reconceptualising YouTube discourses on participation in memetic warfare*, Digital War, Vol. 3, Issue No. 1 (2022), p. 85, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-022-00051-8>

<sup>23</sup> Ayad M., *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 16 November 2021, p. 20, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*

<sup>26</sup> Social-Bombing consists in the attempt by users or communities to force a new association of terms on a person or organisation. This is often done in a harmful way, trying to associate someone to a pejorative.

<sup>27</sup> Raiding is an 'invasion' of another community space online. This is often done with disruptive intent, with the invading force shitposting for as long as they can. The objective can range from simply being annoying to force a ban on a public community.

<sup>28</sup> Shitposting is a term used to describe a range of user misbehaviours and rhetoric on forums and message boards that are intended to derail a conversation off-topic. This can be done with a malicious intent or for no apparent reason.

*Shitposting*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/shitposting>

Shitposting has also taken other meanings: in 2016 it was frequently considered as form of misinformation spreading or as a subcategory of trolling, a behaviour intentionally done to anger or frustrate another user.



of being disruptive against specific targets and communities. The Akh-right<sup>29</sup> is an sub-group of the Haramposting focusing on glocal jihad battlefields, combining white suprematism with Salafism. This group adds an element of ethnicism to Islam, glorifying the jihad in the Balkans and supporting what they define as “White-sharia”<sup>30</sup>. Their content is characterized by a strong influence from fashwave<sup>31</sup> edits and is focused almost exclusively on white Muslims. Members of the Akh-right are frequently mocked by members of the wider Islamogram community for their stances. The Influenced-accelerated is a group of media actors contaminated by pro-jihad and accelerationist propaganda, but entirely focused on memetic warfare and forwarding of materials. Those actors are the link between the terrorist communities and the rest of the ecosystem.

The last type of actors present in the Whitejihad digital ecosystem is the terrorist one, composed by actors spreading terroristic propaganda. The most diffused type of content is the pro-jihad propaganda, but often they spread also accelerationist one and their own original materials. The latter usually have features determined by different influences, such as glowing laser eyes and skull mask, taken from the extreme right networks, applied on jihadist figures such as Bin Laden.

Cavanaugh D. A., “User not found” *Shitposting and the labour of visibility on Instagram*, The IJournal: Student Journal of the Toronto’s Faculty of Information, Vol. 7, Issue No. 1 (December 2021), p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.33137/ijournal.v7i1.37895>

Troll / Trolling, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/trolling-troll>

29Ayad M., *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 16 November 2021, p. 20, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> “White sharia” began as a white nationalist and anti-feministe meme in late 2016. White sharia quickly became a way for a part of the far-right to express a misogynistic vision in which women should be stripped of all rights and only stay at home. The creator of the meme, wanted «an extreme tribal patriarchy in the ethnostate».

Kelley B. J., “White Sharia” *And Militant White Nationalism*, Southern Poverty Law Center, 27 November 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism>

In the Akh-right case, white-sharia has nothing to do with the original context of the meme. They instead re-appropriated the term in order to show their support to the jihadists fighting in the Balkans, exalting their white “identity”.

Ayad M., *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 16 November 2021, p. 21, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>

<sup>31</sup>Tuters M., *Fashwave and the False Paradox of Ironic Nazism*, Krisis: Journal for contemporary philosophy, Vol. 1, Issue No. 1 (2021), p. 175, <https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.41.1.37162>

Figure 5

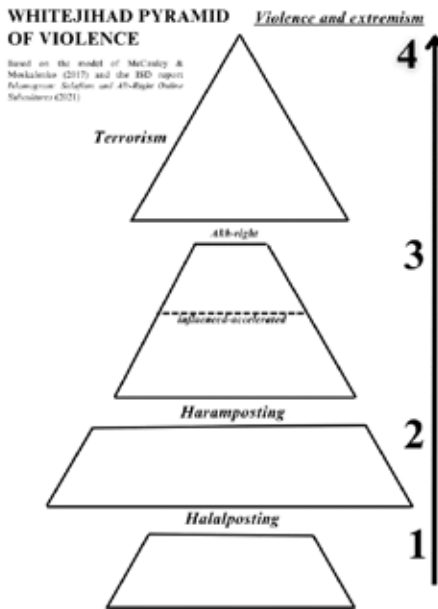
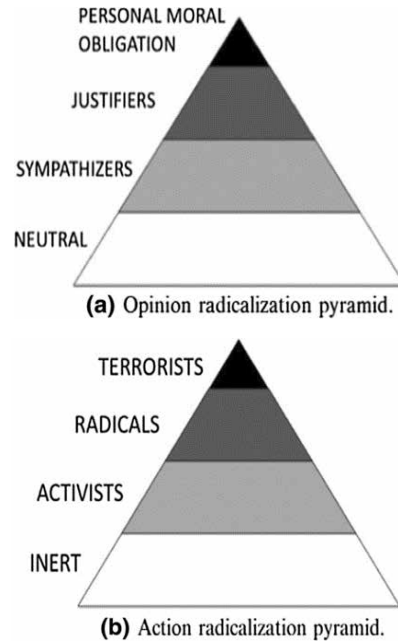


Figure 6



In figure 6, based on the model of McCauley and Moskaleiko<sup>32</sup> and on the work of Ayad, it is presented a graphical representation of the content produced in the Whitejihad digital ecosystem. The higher the level of the pyramid, the more violent and extremist is the content.

### 3. Content

The content produced in the Whitejihad digital ecosystem is widely differentiated: memes are the main focus, but there are also channel doing video edits, posting historical materials, *nasheeds*, news or theological materials. Channels spreading historical content, *nasheeds* and news are common and their function is mostly to create a bond in the chats. For example, channels dedicated to news regarding Islamic persecution are very common since this news get more reactions in the chats.

<sup>32</sup> C. R. McCauley, S. Moskaleiko, *Understanding political radicalization: The two-pyramids model*, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 72, Issue 3 (2017), pp. 205-216, <http://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>

*Nasheeds* and historical content are greatly diffused as well: this kind of material contributes to create nostalgia for the golden age of the Islam<sup>33</sup> and for the period when the *Dar al-Islam*<sup>34</sup> was in the hands of Islamic rulers. This nostalgia is used as fuel for the spread of Salafi ideas and has the side effect of radicalization towards those deemed responsible for the current state of thing in the Islamic world. Theological channels are extremely important in the ecosystem because Salafism and jihadism are based on theology<sup>35</sup>.

Theological channels simply post extracts from the Quran, hadiths and interpretation of scholars: this material is extremely important in the process of radicalization of an individual, and due to its religious nature is generally safe from any kind of ban. Users will always be able to find theological materials and Whitejihad channels will always be able to spread this type of content.

Ali Fisher and Nico Prucha in *Working and Waiting: The Salafi-Jihadi movement on Telegram in 2021*, point out a similar behaviour inside the jihadist's ecosystems: analysing the network, they note that<sup>36</sup>.

As said earlier, the great majority of the content produced in the Whitejihad digital ecosystem are memes. Rather than categorising their material based only on the concepts of Halal and Haramposting, in this work it is argued that what characterize the material produced for memetic warfare is its target. Memes are a powerful tool of propaganda to spread ideas, but also a weapon that can be used to attack someone perceived as an enemy.

Based on the observation of the ecosystem, there are two categories towards which the content created is directed: targets of hate and targets of radicalization. The first ones are the enemies of the ecosystem, and as such they are attacked and mocked. The second ones are those representing a potential pool of supporters for Whitejihadism. The categories identified as

<sup>33</sup> This golden age has to be interpreted through the lenses of Salafism. Since «Salafism is [...] a philosophical outlook which seeks to revive the practices of the first three generations of Islam, who are collectively known as the al-salaf al-salih, or “pious predecessors”», this is what the usually refers to.

Maier S., *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 7

<sup>34</sup> The *Dar al-Islam*, or house of Islam, historically, corresponded almost identically to the territory where the Muslims lived and where an Islamic State ruled.

During the colonial period, the principle to define *Dar al-Islam*, the faith of the regime ruling the state, loses of validity: Dar al-Islam begins to indicate a territory in which there is Muslims witnesses, despite the form of government or the faith of the governors.

Amoretti B. S., *Il Mondo Musulmano*, Carocci Editore, Roma, 2014, pp. 29-30

<sup>35</sup> Prucha N., Fisher A., “*Working and Waiting*”: *The Salafi-Jihadi movement on Telegram in 2021*, Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società, Vol. 15, Issue No. 1 (2022), pp. 158-159, <https://www.sicurezzaeterrorismosocieta.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SicTerSoc-15-I-2022-Fisher-Prucha.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* P. 155

targets were determined after analysing all the materials posted by channels deemed part of the Whitejihad digital ecosystem during the process of monitoring. Every category will be presented alongside a meme posted or forwarded by Whitejihad channels, in order to clarify the type of content directed towards it.

The first target of hate is the LGBTQ+ community, considered *haram* due to the nature of homosexuality<sup>37</sup>. It is also accused of corrupting, along with feminists, the Islamic communities in the West, destroying the purity of the Ummah. The LGBTQ+ community is perceived as a puppet of the big corporations in the West, often believed to be controlled by Jews, and a result of the corruption that plagues modern society.

In figure 7 there is a meme depicting the contrast between the chad Muslim and the soyjack part of the LGBTQ+ community. On the back there are various logos of social media platforms, magazines, tv channels and political ideologies. The soyjack accuses the chad of indoctrinating people through the use of the Quran, not acknowledging the fact that he has been indoctrinated by all the organizations on the background.

Feminists and liberal leftists are frequently targeted because they promote women rights, heavily criticizing Islamic countries about the lack of them. They are also seen as part of the corruption process of the Islamic communities in the West. In particular, they see them as a key part in giving birth to the “Liberal Muslims”: not only they are corrupting women, but they are weakening the men at the same time, leading them to a sinful life.

Another common topic in this confrontation is the Sharia, particularly the aspects concerning violations of human rights. An exemplification of this can be seen in figure 8, where a crying soyjack argues that the Hijab does not protect from sexual assault, implying that the need of it is victim blaming and a violation of the freedom of women. The chad Muslim then simply replies

<sup>37</sup> «Many Muslims view homosexuality as a choice, and perceive gay men and. Therefore, same-gender relationships are considered deviant and viewed as haram, or forbidden, in the eyes of Allah».

Yeck A. T., Anderson V. N., *Homosexuality as Haram: Relations among Gender, Contact, Religiosity, and Sexual Prejudice in Muslim Individuals*, Sex Roles, Vol. 81 (2019), p. 194, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0989-2>

According to the fatwas website Islamic Question & Answers, which is supervised by a Salafi scholar, «they (gays and lesbians) both go against the natural disposition (fitrah) which Allah has created in mankind – and also in animals – whereby the male is inclined towards the female, and vice versa».

*Why Does Islam Forbid Lesbianism and Homosexuality?*, Islamic Question & Answers, 04 April 2009, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/10050/why-does-islam-forbid-lesbianism-and-homosexuality>

that, to protect women from rapists, the latter are punished with stoning leading to the soyjack being “triggered”<sup>38</sup> from an application of death penalty.

As mentioned earlier, feminists and liberal leftists are considered to be directly creating the liberal Muslims. Liberal Muslims are considered apostates, corrupted by the life style and ways of the Kuffars, the unbelievers. They are identified as those who align with feminist ideals and support the LGBTQ+ communities, but in general with those believing that Islam should be influenced by the western ideas, laws and states. This is perceived as treason due to Salafism being a cornerstone of the Whitejihad digital ecosystem.

In figure 9, it is used a different style of meme from the previous ones: while in figure 7 and 8 the images were part of an established meme format, this one is a n illustration. The author depicts a Muslim man working hard to be able to afford an apartment, marry and, as subtext, live like a good Muslim should. In the second panel it is shown a Muslim woman affected by the western style of life, taking away all the hard earned money of the man for futile items. These are compared to what the man desired, something noble towards which most of the Whitejihad community strives, in order to make them appear even less important.

Another target of hate are the atheists. They are despised, considered worse than almost every other category because they do not believe in the existence of God, which is a cardinal sin.

In figure 10, there are depicted a liberal man, discrediting the idea of homosexuality being wrong, and a Muslim man. Asked to quote something different from the Bible to prove his point, the Muslim man replies that also the Quran condemns homosexuality.

This meme is not only an attack to non-believers and homosexuality, but also a form of support towards another religious source. In the extreme right networks, there are many members that identify themselves as Christians: this meme could be posted by a member of the Whitejihad ecosystem just as likely as being posted by an alt-right supporter. The common enemy identifiable in the LGBTQ+ is the link between the communities.

The West is perceived as harmful, invading Islamic countries and forcing them to adapt to its liberal ideology. It is frequently depicted as a hypocrite, concerned with human rights and peace only in regards to other regions and religions. In particular, the main targets are the US and the NATO, who are considered the main force of invasion in the *Dar al-Islam*.

<sup>38</sup> Triggered is a term used to indicate someone that gets upset or offended by someone saying something trivial or innocuous.

*Triggered Comics*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/triggered-comics>

In figure 11 the “united we stand” slogan under the World Trade Center covered in an US flag is mocked with the phrase “Unlike the Twin Towers”. This is the first example of Haramposting in this work: there is a reference to the terrorist attack of the 11 September 2001, used to mock the US using an event that traumatised and influenced them since it happened.

Israel and the Jews are considered enemies of Islam and of the Arab countries in the Middle East. They are also considered to be one of the main forces behind the West Attacks on the *Dar al-Islam*. Memes frequently occurs in correlation to Palestinian news, but content related to Jews stereotype are also very common: the greediness, the idea of them being behind most of the powerful corporation in the world and the accusation of being attracted by children.

In figure 12 it is depicted Roman Reigns, a WWE wrestler that has been previously associated with the gigachad meme<sup>39</sup>, accusing paedophiles of being fan of Israel. This stems from the Oral Suction<sup>40</sup> used by certain Rabbis to clean the wound after circumcision. This practice is one of the reasons why Jews are associated with paedophilia from members of the extreme right networks, along with a great numbers of conspiracies theories regarding children. Shia Muslims are not considered Muslims, and as such they are targets of attack. Frequently they are associated with Iran, seen as the main spreader of the Shiism in the Middle East and in the world.

In figure 13 there is a simple top text-bottom text meme in which Shias are described as “not humans”. The concept is considered to be so important that it has to be taught to children, suggesting at the same time that Shias should be treated like animals or not even as a living being. This is a concept strongly pushed by almost every Telegram Whitejihad channel, with some being dedicated only to belittling Shiism.

The first and most important target of radicalization of the Whitejihad digital ecosystem is its main demographics: Gen Z Muslims, especially Salafis. The Islamogram, which represents a sizeable portion of the ecosystem, was created by Gen Z Salafis and uses the language of meme and chan culture in order to be as catchy as possible. Through the use of irony, they spread radical messages of various nature, exploiting the self-irony of young Muslims

<sup>39</sup> The gigachad is a meme used to define the internet archetype of the most masculine and sexually attractive male possible.

*GigaChad*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/gigachad>

<sup>40</sup> «When a baby is circumcised, some ritual Jewish circumcisers (mohelim) do a practice called metzitzah b'peh. Metzitzah b'peh is when the mohel uses their mouth to suck blood away from the baby's circumcision wound as part of the circumcision ritual».

*Metzitzah B'peh (Direct Oral Suctioning)*, NYC Health, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/safe-bris.page>

that joke about stereotypes directed towards them. In figure 14 it is shown such an example: the meme is supposed to simulate a discussion between a Muslim and a random interlocutor, most likely a white western man. When questioned about any family members being a religious extremist online, he identifies himself in the description.

This is a case of a meme that could reach almost anyone on any social, even someone that is not in contact with the Whitejihad digital ecosystem, due to the common format and the ironic nature of it. Another common target of radicalization is the alt-right. They share most their enemies with the Whitejihad digital ecosystem, which lead them to perceive each other as the last conservative opposers to the degeneracy of the liberal society, and thus as natural allies. This feeling is not necessarily true for every alt-righter, especially for those that believe that the Muslims are invading Europe and the US. Nevertheless, there are communities in which the common hatred for the Jews, the LGBTQ+ communities and other targets is strong enough to make them bond.

In figure 15 there are a crusader and an Arab soldier, mortal enemies during the crusades, standing shoulder to shoulder against the degeneracy of the modern world: this meme also highlight the religious nature of both men. All the degeneracies of the modern world, which include the LGBTQ+ communities, the request for equalities, mainstream movement such as the Black Lives Matter and political ideologies like anarchism and communism. They are backed up by a giant spider with a men face and a Star of David over his head, representing the Jews.

Another potential target of radicalization are incels<sup>41</sup>, redpilled<sup>42</sup>, and misogynists. In their belief, modern women are believed to exploit their new-found freedom and rights to choose only men that are handsome, rich or have a higher social status. Imsny incels believe to be too ugly to have a sexual intercourse, and many of them accuse the modern world and women for their own status.

<sup>41</sup> Incels, which stands for Involuntary Celibates, believe that the society is a hierarchy in which beauty determines your role and that women are responsible for said hierarchy: in such a society the incels believe that they will not find a woman because they are too ugly. In their worldview the chads, the most attractive men, attract the Stacys, the most beautiful women. The normies, everyone else, are left with unattractive women and the incels remain alone.

Hoffman B., Ware J., Shapiro E., *Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence*, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Vol. 43, Issue 7 (2020), p. 567, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1751459>

<sup>42</sup> Redpillers are those that claim to be the only aware of the feminists' conspiracies that run society. Often, they coincide with incels.

The name of the community is taken from the duality of red pill-blue pill from the Matrix films. *Male Supremacy*, Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy>

The anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-feminist ideologies of the Whitejihad digital ecosystem are welcomed by the incel and redpill communities. They believe that in the Islamic culture women are kept in their place by men. Some also believe that in an Islamic society they could find a woman and marry, something not possible in a modern western society.

In figure 16 there is a picture of Andrew Tate holding a Quran: Tate is an influencer that has attracted numerous attentions for its misogynist ideas and who recently converted to Islam. The use of his image by Whitejihadist channels, the generic attraction that some incels and redpilled have towards a salafism and the fame of Tate are all elements that make this picture potentially viral in certain communities.

The last target of radicalization are the Islamic communities at large. In a world where almost anyone uses or sees memes as a form of communication, many Muslims could simply search memes or material on Islam. As said earlier, the Halalposters produce mostly proselytism, apparently innocent materials that is easily spreadable by any Muslims, independently by how much he is radicalized. In figure 17, it is shown a classic format adapted to an Islamic context: on the left we have a doomer girl<sup>43</sup>, wearing a niqab, and on the right a chad. The chad, the epitome of the masculine man, when asked if he would commit to two jobs just to keep his wife home so she can be with their children full time simply replies “Yes”. This meme both promotes Salafi ideas, with a woman fully covered a niqab, and exalts the Muslim man, who is ready to commit to a much heavier workload to provide for his family and to be a good Muslim.

Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



<sup>43</sup> Doomer girl or Doomerette is a female wojack created as a counterpart the wojack character Doomer. She is usually a love interest or a girlfriend for the latter. The Doomer represents a man in his early 20s who is depressed and has a bleak outlook on the world, in contrast to the boomers.

*Doomer Girl*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doomer-girl>

*Doomer*, Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doomer>



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



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# Pro-Wagner gaming subculture: how the PMC gamified recruitment and propaganda processes

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## Abstract

With the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, several new players have emerged. Among these, PMC Wagner has assumed an ever-increasing role and has been described as a Russian proxy in warfare. Internet and social media have become essential, and the group uses video games to spread propaganda and recruit mercenaries. The gamification of propaganda tools, extremist online communities, and, ultimately, radicalization processes not only move forward but accelerate given the rising popularity of online gaming and the fact that extremists frequently take advantage of new technological advancements first. Also, the PMC Wagner has begun to exploit the use of video games for various purposes, from recruitment to fascination with violence. At the same time, using classic game-based marketing methods, they managed to reach not only the users of gaming platforms but also the citizens who, walking through the streets of the Russian capital, come across the illuminated billboards. More investigations are required into the precise workings and varied gamification strategies used by PMC Wagner and their supporters under various conditions.

Con lo scoppio del conflitto russo-ucraino, sono emersi diversi nuovi attori. Tra questi, la PMC Wagner ha assunto un ruolo sempre più importante ed è stata descritta come una "proxy" russa. Internet e i social media sono diventati essenziali e il gruppo utilizza i videogiochi per diffondere la propaganda e reclutare mercenari. La gamification degli strumenti di propaganda, delle comunità estremiste online e, in ultima analisi, dei processi di radicalizzazione non solo avanza, ma accelera, data la crescente popolarità dei giochi online e il fatto che gli estremisti spesso sfruttano per primi i nuovi progressi tecnologici. Inoltre, la PMC Wagner ha iniziato a sfruttare l'uso dei videogiochi per vari scopi, dal reclutamento alla fascinazione per la violenza. Allo stesso tempo, utilizzando i classici metodi di marketing basati sui giochi, sono riusciti a raggiungere non solo gli utenti delle piattaforme di gioco, ma anche i cittadini che, camminando per le strade della capitale russa, si imbattono nei cartelloni illuminati. Sono necessarie ulteriori indagini sul funzionamento preciso e sulle varie strategie di gamification utilizzate dalla PMC Wagner e dai suoi sostenitori in diverse condizioni.

## Keywords

PMC Wagner, Gamification, Video games, Russia, War

### 1. Introduction

With the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, several new players have emerged<sup>1</sup>. Currently, the fighting is spread over different fields, also observed by the presence of private militias. Among these, stands out PMC Wagner, a private military company based in Russia, founded in 2014. Before going to Lugansk in 2014, the PMC Wagner conducted operations in Crimea during special operations of the Russian military. Up to the present, PMC Wagner has continued these deployments, taking part in missions in Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Burundi, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and, most recently, Mali and Burkina Faso<sup>2</sup>.

They provide intelligence, instruction, logistical assistance, infrastructure security, and financial backing to proxy militias and paramilitary groups operating in strategic hotspots across the world. For this reason, PMC Wagner has frequently been described as a Russian proxy, particularly in Africa, in the context of proxy warfare. Their covert actions, real or imagined, have a big effect on how Moscow handles hostilities with allies as well as enemies<sup>3</sup>. Although this may oversimplify the nuanced relationship between the PMC Wagner and the state, it appears that Russia has, to a certain degree, outsourced its involvement in Africa to Yevgeni Prigozhin and the PMC Wagner. Wagner has official backing and autonomy as a result, but the group is

<sup>1</sup> Marco Lombardi, 'Russia-Ucraina: Oltre La Guerra Ibrida, Verso Il Techno-Cognitive Warfare', *Sicurezza Terrorismo Società*, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Kimberly Marten, 'Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (4 May 2019): 181–204; Emmet Foley and Christian Kaunert, 'Russian Private Military and Ukraine: Hybrid Surrogate Warfare and Russian State Policy by Other Means', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (30 July 2022): 172–92; Andreas Heinemann-Grüder and Stephen Aris, 'Russia's State-Sponsored Killers: The Wagner Group', application/pdf, 22 December 2022, 9 p.; Raphael Parens, 'THE WAGNER GROUP'S PLAYBOOK IN AFRICA: MALI' (Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2022); Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon, and Julian Rademeyer, 'THE GREY ZONE Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa', February 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Candace Rondeaux, 'Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare' (New America, November 2019).

also under pressure to generate revenue and show how it can help Moscow politically<sup>4</sup>.

PMC Wagner has been instrumental in reinforcing Russia's troops in Ukraine, but as its own deaths increase, it needs more mercenaries to fight. Although it had been spending months recruiting from Russia's jail system, it abruptly ceased doing it in February 2023. Because of this, online propaganda has grown in importance for the recruiting process. An increasing number of videos on social media make the war look like a video game and trivialize violence against Ukrainians. Given its nature, it is increasingly important to investigate how PMC Wagner moves in the digital world to spread its propaganda using gamification as one of the main communication strategies.

## 2. PMC Wagner propaganda ecosystem

Similarly to other terrorist organizations, PMC Wagner uses social media to communicate, spread propaganda and recruit new mercenaries. According to the communication channels utilized, the content generated, the language and style, frequency, and dispersion target, users and propaganda have been categorized<sup>5</sup> (figure 1):

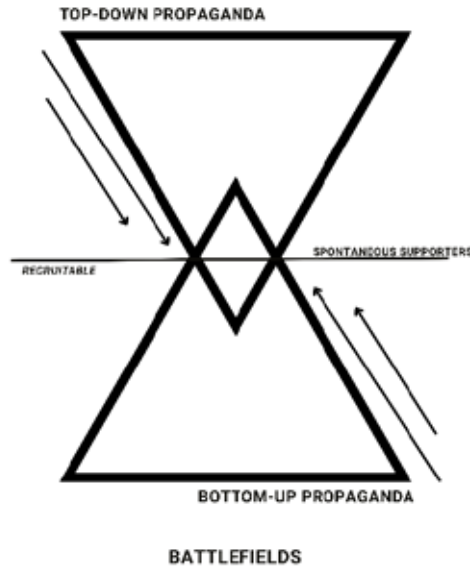
- Top-down propaganda highlights, appeals to, and advances the Wagner group's narrative in favour of violence. It is composed of subjects who work directly under Yevgeni Prigozhin direction. An example is the production of movies by Aurum Production, owned by Yevgeni Prigozhin himself.
- Bottom-up propaganda gives recruits a look into the field of war and motivates them. It is characterized by actors who have some connection to the combat field, either directly or indirectly. Frequently, these subjects are the same soldiers who post images of their exploits.
- Users from across the world who follow PMC Wagner's activities make up the spontaneous ecosystem. They create their own content and memes. Telegram is where the spontaneous ecosystem largely spreads materials.

PMC Wagner actions are supported by subjects, not (yet) recruited, who are the object of bottom-up propaganda and a spontaneous ecology. These are the individuals who have a greater chance of being recruited.

<sup>4</sup> Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer, 'THE GREY ZONE Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa'.

<sup>5</sup> Giulia Porrino and Federico Borgonovo, 'PMC Wagner Propaganda Ecosystem', 13 February 2023, <https://www.itstime.it/w/pmc-wagner-propaganda-ecosystem-by-giulia-porrino-federico-borgonovo/>.

Figure 1 (elaboration of the authors): Wagner Digital Ecosystem framework



### 3. Gaming subculture

The term “gamification” was first used in 2010 in relation to research on the structure and usage of digital media<sup>6</sup>. It describes the use of game design elements, such as badges, leaderboards, or points, in circumstances other than games<sup>7</sup>. Extremist groups have been known to use video games as a tool for recruitment and spreading propaganda due to their widespread popularity and accessibility. There have been several cases that pertain to various groups, movements, and ideologies, including jihadists, far-right violent extremists, and ethnonationalist groups, when looking at studies on the overall overlap between violent extremism and video games. Gamification encourages users to take part in activities that will earn them points and advance

<sup>6</sup>Sebastian Deterding et al., ‘From Game Design Elements to Gamefulness: Defining Gamification’, in *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*, MindTrek 2011, vol. 11, 2011, 9–15.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Sailer et al., ‘How Gamification Motivates: An Experimental Study of the Effects of Specific Game Design Elements on Psychological Need Satisfaction’, *Computers in Human Behavior* 69 (2017): 371–80. {\i}Computers in Human Behavior} 69 (2017

them on leaderboards to change their desired behaviours<sup>8</sup>. In their efforts to recruit and radicalize new members, extremist organizations are increasingly drawing on themes from videogames, gaming culture, and real games. Some ways in which extremist groups may use video games for these purposes are:

- Recruitment: video games may be used by extremist organizations to find and enlist new members. Through online gaming groups, they may seek out people, especially those who are lonely, disenchanted, or want a feeling of community, and get them to adopt their philosophy. To enlist others in their group, they could start talks, cultivate ties, and gradually convey radical ideologies.
- Ideology promotion: video games can be made or modified by extreme groups to advance their ideologies and views. This could entail making original mods or alterations to already-existing games that feature extreme ideas, symbols, or storylines. To spread their ideologies and find like-minded people, these games may be distributed inside their online networks.
- Propaganda dissemination: video games may serve as a vehicle for the spread of extremist propaganda. This might entail making in-game material, such as unique levels or scenarios, that promote extreme ideologies or behaviors. It could also entail sending players to websites or social media pages that disseminate extremist material by way of links or other methods.
- Radicalization: by propagating violent and extreme views, extremist groups may utilize video games to radicalize people. They could spread hate speech, conspiracies, and extreme rhetoric through in-game conversations and forums, influencing impressionable players and leading them to hold extreme views and take extreme acts.
- Fundraising: extremist organizations could exploit video games as a method of generating money. They may utilize gaming events as a platform to raise money for their endeavors, ask gamers for donations, or offer in-game goods or custom game items.

Daesh was the first organization to employ gamification as a tool for facilitating communication. They create a pathway for the voluntarily engaging in an activity that is acknowledged as pleasurable by transposing ordinary actions on a fun level<sup>9</sup>. Video games have been a revolutionary means by which Daesh has spread its recruitment message, amplifying it exponentially<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Eliza Mackintosh and Gianluca Mezzofiore, 'How the Extreme-Right Gamified Terror', 10 October 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/10/europe/germany-synagogue-attack-extremism-gamified-grm-intl/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Marco Lombardi, 'IS 2.0 and Beyond: The Caliphate's Communication Project', in *Twitter and Jihad: The Communication Strategy of ISIS*, ed. MONICA MAGGIONI and Paolo Magri, 2015, 83–124.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*.



An efficient and convenient technique to address the target audience, which in the case of PMC Wagner comprises persons of recruitable age, mostly men between the ages of twenty and fifty, interested in videogames with a military theme. The visuals and verbiage of the games encourage audience participation. In the context of violent video games, play fosters a familial setting where individuals feel secure and comfortable, fostering the development of networks, groups, and connections.

Based on our observation inside the online pro-Wagner community these are the most quoted and played video games:

- Arma III;
- Player Unknown’s BattleGround (PUBG);
- World of Tanks;
- War Thunder;

A large gaming community with nicknames that specifically reference PMC Wagner and the channels connected to it has evolved, *for example*, within Arma III (figure 2).

Figure 2: Arma III community and nicknames associated with PMC Wagner. RSOTM refers to the PMC Wagner Telegram channel “Reverse Side of The Medal”



These video games could be used to find new recruits and assess their military front. Recruits could be trained to learn key military strategies, how to handle weapons, and other skills important to PMC Wagner operations. In addition, PMC Wagner can spread propaganda using video games, portraying mercenaries as valiant and patriotic warriors defending Russian interests or fighting enemies. To do so, with in-game information, such as made-up news stories, conversations, or plot points, they can influence players’ opinions and beliefs,

promoting a pro-Russian narrative. To spread false information, PMC Wagner could also make fake video games or alter existing ones.

Finally, PMC Wagner could potentially employ psychological warfare using video games. They can design video games that showcase their military might, power, and invincibility in a way that inspires terror in its players or demoralizes their opponents (figure 3). This could be used to demoralize rivals and frighten them.

*Figure 3: PMC Wagner channel post on Telegram  
(Trad. "When I tried to storm the orchestra")*



In this scenario, in addition to the use of video games to encourage online recruitment, PMC Wagner has been using gamification marketing techniques since March 2023. In Moscow, bright billboards have been put up, and PMC Wagner via its bottom-up Telegram profiles is inviting everyone to join the game starting April 1 (figure 3). To accomplish this, individuals need to take a photo with one of the PMC Wagner billboards that have been placed throughout Moscow's streets, post it to social media, and then present the resulting image in the company's recruitment center to receive branded goods as a gift. On the April 7, PMC Wagner provided a reward to the person whose shot of the billboard has the most likes. A brief film of PMC Wagner and recruitment contacts is shown on the billboards. It is a clear tactic using the game to promote PMC Wagner recruitment propaganda online and lure viewers with the promise of prizes.

*Figure 4: PMC Wagner billboard for prize game in Moscow (April 2, 2023)*



#### 4. Conclusion

Extremist actors appear to be aware of the advantages of gamification and want to take use of them strategically. Video games and related platforms are used daily by extremists and terrorist organizations to spread violent content. Their compelling storylines, ritualistic repetitious mechanics, and community-building possibilities all work together to create a digital ecology that provides a place for extremism to prosper. The gamification of propaganda tools, extremist online communities, and, ultimately, radicalization processes not only move forward but accelerate given the rising popularity of online gaming and the fact that extremists frequently take advantage of new technological advancements first.

Also, the PMC Wagner has begun to exploit the use of video games for various purposes, from recruitment to fascination with violence. At the same time, using classic game-based marketing methods, they managed to reach

not only the users of gaming platforms but also the citizens who, walking through the streets of the Russian capital, come across the illuminated billboards.

More investigations are required for the understanding of gamification strategies used by PMC Wagner and their supporters under various conditions. Furthermore, it will be necessary to focus on the challenges of limiting gamification's effects on digitally mediated radicalization processes.

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# L'*androsfera*: marginalità e minacce

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## Abstract

The term *androsfera* – the Italian translation from the English *manosphere*, describes the heterogeneous and complex set of websites, blogs, and online forums promoting non-mainstream and – at times – radical forms of masculinities.

Users in these communities are active and passive consumers of contents and values that openly oppose feminism and what they believe to be the unbalance of power that favors women over men from both a social and a sexual perspective in contemporary society.

In Italy the *androsfera* is still largely unknown. Researchers and journalists do not really talk *about* its users, let alone *with* its users and, if any effort is made, it is usually carried out in simplifying and sensationalist terms. For this reason, the author chose to write the paper in Italian. The present work aims at partly filling these gaps, scrutinizing the major components of the *manosphere*, their worldviews and narratives, with particular attention to the *inceldom*, i.e. the involuntary celibates galaxy.

The paper will then include the account of the major incel-inspired attacks, which are crucial to understand the potential threat, and will later focus on the Italian *androsfera*, which is not as known and radical as the anglophone *manosphere*, *yet*, and this is what makes it particularly worth researching further.

Indeed, the relative delay in the Italian *manosphere*'s radicalization process compared to what has been happening in other contexts represents an opportunity for terrorism experts and counter-terrorism actors to act with farsightedness, implementing crucial lessons learned elsewhere.

Il termine *androsfera*, con cui di recente si è iniziato a tradurre l'inglese *manosphere*, indica l'insieme diversificato e complesso di siti, blog e forum online che promuovono forme di mascolinità non mainstream e a tratti radicale. I frequentatori di queste comunità online sono fruitori e produttori al tempo stesso di contenuti e ideali di opposizione al femminismo e a quello che percepiscono come maggiore potere sociale e sessuale delle donne rispetto agli uomini nella società contemporanea.

Nel contesto italiano l'androsfera è ancora molto poco conosciuta. Si parla poco *dei* suoi utenti e ancor meno *con* i suoi utenti e spesso lo si fa in termini semplicistici e sensazionalistici e proprio per questa ragione si è scelto qui di scrivere in italiano.

Il presente contributo mira a colmare almeno in parte queste lacune analizzando le maggiori componenti dell'androsfera, le loro visioni del mondo e le narrazioni che le caratterizzano con particolare attenzione all'*inceldom*, la galassia del celibato involontario.

Si vedranno poi alcuni dei maggiori attacchi già perpetrati da attentatori influenzati dall'ideologia incel, le cui dinamiche sono illuminanti circa le potenziali minacce. A ciò seguirà un approfondimento sull'androsfera italiana, ad oggi non conosciuta e probabilmente non radicale quanto quelle di altri Stati e regioni, prima tra tutte l'area anglosassone. Proprio questa sorta di basso profilo rende l'androsfera italiana estremamente interessante e meritevole di ulteriore ricerca: il relativo ritardo dei processi di radicalizzazione al suo interno paragonati a quelli di altri contesti rappresenta un'opportunità per sfruttare alcune lezioni apprese altrove con reale lungimiranza.

## Keywords

Androsfera; Celibi involontari; Misoginia; Terrorismo; Radicalizzazione.

Manosphere; Involuntary Celibates (Incels); Misogyny; Terrorism; Radicalization; Locus of Control.

## 1. L'androsfera e le sue componenti

Il termine androsfera è un recente adattamento dall'inglese *manosphere*, col quale si indica l'insieme estremamente composito ed eterogeneo di siti, blog e forum online che promuovono forme di mascolinità non mainstream e sovente tossica.

Negli intenti dei frequentatori dell'androsfera, questo spazio virtuale serve a trattare tematiche legate al mondo maschile come reazione alla crescente femminilizzazione della società contemporanea, che viene percepita come sbilanciata a beneficio delle donne in ogni suo aspetto, dalle relazioni sessuali alla custodia dei figli.

Il termine *manosphere* è stato reso popolare da Ian Ironwood, autore nel mondo della pornografia, nel suo *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity*, una collezione di blog e forum sulle battaglie maschili (Ging, 2017).

Tanto agli individui che si riconoscono all'interno di questo universo quanto a chi lo studia per comprenderlo, il termine androsfera è necessario per descrivere lo sfaccettato continuum sul quale si posizionano le sue componenti, primi tra tutti i Celibi Involontari (Incel), gli Uomini che Vanno per la Propria Strada (Men Going Their Own Way, MGTOWs), i cosiddetti Artisti del Rimorchio (Pickup Artists, PUA).

La *manosphere* include anche gruppi e utenti dal profilo più ibrido, quali gli attivisti per i diritti degli uomini e i movimenti a tutela dei diritti dei padri.

I più noti componenti dell'androsfera sono gli incel, i celibi involontari che ritengono di non essere in grado di avere relazioni amorose e sessuali a causa delle maggiori possibilità di cui godono le donne in quello che viene spesso definito *mating market* e del fatto che le donne, nella scelta del partner, valorizzano attributi quali la bellezza e la ricchezza invece della gentilezza e della fedeltà. A breve ci occuperemo più estesamente degli attacchi violenti già compiuti da individui autodefinitisi incel.

Meno noti, soprattutto in Europa, sono i Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOWS), traducibile come Uomini che Vanno per la Propria Strada.

Gli individui che si riconoscono come MGTOW ritengono che la scelta migliore per un uomo sia quella di sottrarsi alle relazioni sentimentali con le donne in quanto esse hanno luogo in un contesto sociale sbilanciato a favore di queste ultime: in ogni relazione chi ci guadagna è solo la donna.

Si rifiutano di sottostare a quelle che percepiscono come norme sociali ingiuste, impossibili da contrastare in altro modo visto che l'unica strada per divenire appetibili all'occhio femminile è possedere denaro o altre risorse.<sup>1</sup>

Il matrimonio e in generale le relazioni a lungo termine, sono ritenute svenienti per gli uomini, spesso penalizzati dal diritto matrimoniale, dal sistema di affidamento dei figli in caso di divorzio e dall'aspetto economico di questo.

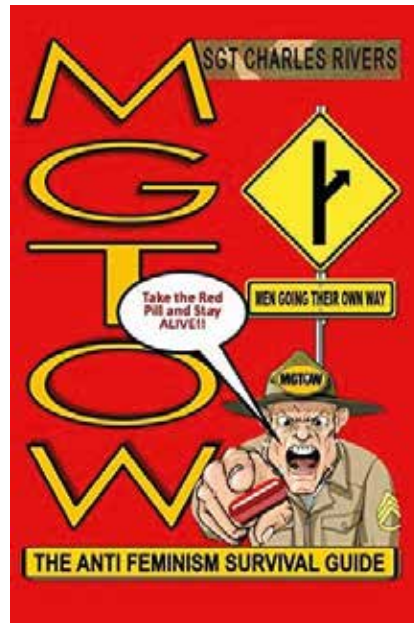
Uno dei problemi maggiori che la maggior parte dell'androsfera pone a fondamento di queste circostanze avverse è la cosiddetta ipergamia, ovvero la tendenza sviluppata in natura dalla femmina, la quale mira a selezionare e proliferare solo con il maschio più forte. Questo avviene allo scopo di ottenere una prole a sua volta più forte e con maggiori probabilità di sopravvivenza.

Tra gli esseri umani questo processo viene ritenuto dannoso per l'equilibrio sociale perché non più determinato dalla natura: *la vera e unica cura all'attuale squilibrio relazionale e sessuale fra i generi, è la riduzione (o eliminazione) dell'ipergamia femminile, che oggi è dovuta più a ragioni culturali e di costume che a necessità biologiche.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Post disponibile al sito: <https://medium.com/@expatunchained/mgtow-how-i-got-started-f3f0760465ab> (17 marzo 2023).

<sup>2</sup> *L'ipergamia delle donne. Perché oggi è dannosa per la specie*, su The Red Pill Forum Italia: <https://redpill-forum-ita.forumcommunity.net/?t=62057270> (17 marzo 2023).





Accanto agli incel e agli Uomini che Vanno per la Propria Strada, un'altra comunità presente nell'androsfera sono i Pickup Artists (PUAs), talvolta reso in italiano come gli Artisti del Rimorchio.

Il termine Pick Up Artist nacque durante gli anni Settanta dal libro di Erik Webber *How to Pick Up Girls* e il principale obiettivo di ogni Pick Up Artist è sviluppare l'abilità di incontrare, approcciare e sedurre ogni donna lui desideri.

Non si tratta di una comunità dai tratti violenti e ad oggi le narrazioni sulle donne e sulle relazioni sessuali non risultano, dalla ricerca, particolarmente allarmanti. Allo stesso tempo, tuttavia, sarà necessario continuare a monitorare questi gruppi come possibili breeding ground di ulteriore oggettificazione del sesso opposto.

Dayter & Rüdiger (2018) ad esempio, nella loro analisi quantitativa sul lessico utilizzato online nelle comunità di PUA, evidenziano le modalità di ricorso a strategie di framing da parte degli utenti. Per framing intendiamo la contestualizzazione di una situazione attraverso l'uso di parole chiave, ambiti semantici, analogie, similitudini e metafore proprie di un altro contesto.

Per quanto riguarda i PUA, la maggior parte dei meccanismi di framing sfrutta il dominio militare, della caccia, e del gaming e degli affari:

*A causa della musica alta e della nostra dislocazione non sono stato in grado di avvicinarmi né all'ostacolo né all'obiettivo. Ero in piedi dietro al mio*

*obiettivo e ho messo in atto alcune manovre standard di attrazione<sup>3</sup> su di lei, mentre contemporaneamente facevo alcuni commenti con l'ostacolo* (tradotto da Dayter & Rüdiger, 2018).

Qui un estratto del gergo PUA italiano:

**AFC** : Average Frustrated Champ. Una persona che non sa nulla sul mondo PUA, e non ha risultati con il sesso femminile.

**ALPHA** : Un Uomo, un Leader, un Maschio che eccelle nella sua persona, dotato di quei tratti in grado di attrarre una donna.

**AMOG** : Alpha Male Of the Group. È un altro uomo di alto valore presente nel set, che ti rende difficile il Gioco.

**ASD** : Anti-Slut Defense. È la protezione che una donna alza per non sembrare facile.

**APRIRE (set o target)** : Iniziare un'interazione con una donna, o un gruppo di donne.

**BETA** : Un uomo passivo, non dominante, suddito, zerbino.

**BS** : Bitch Shield. Prima difesa di una donna quando l'andiamo ad aprire.

**CB** : CockBlock - Un ostacolo che si pone tra noi e il target. Solitamente amici o amiche, o AMOG.

**C&F** : Cocky & Funny. Atteggiamento sopra le righe e divertente. Esempio : TU : Stasera è la tua serata fortunata ! - LEI : Davvero ? Perché ? - TU : Perché hai incontrato me !

**CANNED** : Materiale preconfezionato da usare con le ragazze. Vd. Routines.

**CLOSE** : Chiudere, arrivare ad una conclusione con una ragazza. Esistono varie tipe di chiusura.

## 2. Focus Incel

La componente dai tratti spesso più radicali all'interno dell'androsfera è quella dei celibi involontari. Il termine indica gli individui che descrivono se stessi come impossibilitati a trovare donne che vogliano intrattenere relazioni sentimentali e sessuali con loro.

Il primo uso documentato della parola risale al 1993, quando una studentessa universitaria canadese, nota su internet come Alana, lanciò il sito Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project per discutere pensieri ed esperienze di chi, contro la propria volontà, non ha partner per relazioni amorose. Nel 1997 Alana creò una mailing list sugli stessi argomenti che usava l'abbreviazione INVCEL, poi abbreviato in INCEL, ma sembra aver cessato la propria attività su sito e mailing list intorno al 2000.

<sup>3</sup>Ad esempio, quelli che i PUA chiamano *cold reads and teases*. Per *cold reads* si intende la tecnica in base alla quale l'uomo legge il target (la donna) e le dice qualcosa di lei a dimostrazione di come sia in grado di capirla senza ancora conoscerla a fondo. I *teases* sono invece prese in giro scherzose per seminare nel target l'idea di non essere intimiditi o impressionati da lei. Si veda: [https://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/how\\_to\\_use\\_the\\_cold\\_read\\_technique\\_to\\_approach\\_and\\_flirt\\_with\\_women](https://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/how_to_use_the_cold_read_technique_to_approach_and_flirt_with_women) (17 marzo 2023).

Come altri nell'androsfera, la maggior parte degli incel ritiene che, storicamente, siano esistite strutture sociali in grado di controllare l'ipergamia femminile, primi tra tutti i sistemi giuridici che garantivano meno diritti alle donne in materia legale, finanziaria e riproduttiva.

Con la crescita dell'ipergamia, si è creata quella che spesso gli incel definiscono la regola 80/20, in base alla quale il 20% degli uomini – percentuale costituita dai i più attraenti - ha accesso alla maggioranza delle donne, lasciando il restante 80% impossibilitato ad avere relazioni sessuali.

INCEL				
B	I	N	G	O
Moderately Racist	Ali attempts resulted in friend-zone	Anime numbs the pain	Humiliated online or in public	Asshole/ Abusive Parents
Video Games numb the pain	Convinced the World is against you	fw MGTOW	Bullied in school	Active on Reddit/4chan
Misogynistic	Treat women like objects	Dickskin as dry as your notifications feed	Doesn't understand modern fashion	Quarantine has not changed your lifestyle
Indulges in excess Pornography	Treat objects like women	Alcoholic/ Drug Abuser	Has crush on girl that is not aware of your existence	Have been or is a Beta Orbiter
Watches Hentai	Only negative Tinder experiences	Politically Right-Wing	Creeped out 3+ girls	Social Anxiety

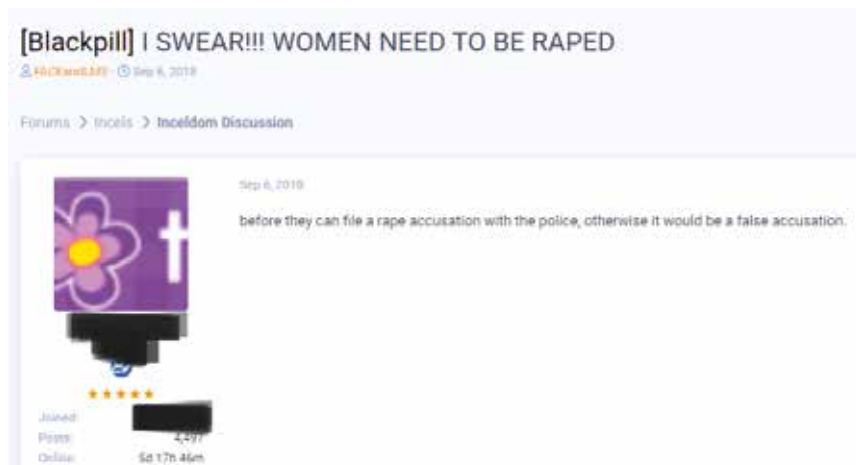
La galassia incel è un sistema in costante evoluzione in termini di narrazioni e marcatori identitari. Al suo interno, tuttavia, nonostante i rapidi cambiamenti e la crescita del numero di utenti, risulta possibile individuare alcuni nuclei tematici le cui caratteristiche fondative sono comuni all'ecosistema in esame: la percezione di se stessi e della propria identità; la visione delle relazioni sessuali e delle donne; l'inutilità di rispettare la componente femminile della società.

La percezione di se stessi è improntata all'idea di essere sistematicamente rifiutati dalle donne, mentre per quanto riguarda il discorso dell'inceldom sulle relazioni di genere, le donne vengono sovente descritte come inaffida-

bili, altamente promiscue ed attratte da un esiguo numero di uomini – gli Alfa – che dominano il mercato sessuale.

Siamo dunque al cospetto di una prospettiva unica: le ideologie misoginiche classiche basano le proprie convinzioni su dinamiche di potere in cui la donna occupa la posizione subalterna. Con gli incel al contrario, il soggetto non odia le donne da una posizione di presunta superiorità ma, invece, il risentimento deriva da una percezione di sé come inferiore e svantaggiato, in quanto si crede che tutti gli aspetti della sessualità e delle relazioni siano controllati dalle donne.

Ovviamente esistono profonde continuità tra la misoginia classica e quella incel, in particolare perché entrambe guardano con nostalgia verso un passato in cui i modelli sociali e famigliari non erano sbilanciati in favore delle donne, ma risulta innegabile che gli incel e l'androsfera in generale abbiano complicato l'ortodossia misogina (Lily 2011, p. 16).



Il terzo pilastro dell'ideologia incel nasce dai primi due ed è probabilmente quello a più alto potere radicalizzante: rispettare le donne è inutile in quanto loro preferiranno sempre gli Alfa, a prescindere da quanto inaffidabili questi possano essere. Per la maggioranza degli individui che si definiscono incel le donne sono creature promiscue e suggestionabili affascinate da status, avvenenza e denaro e sono incapaci di apprezzare gentilezza e sensibilità.

Popolari online sono gli acronimi AWALT per "All Women Are Like That" e EWALT "Enough Women Are Like That."

A sostituire queste qualità troviamo invece l'istituzionalizzazione del linguaggio offensivo e a tratti violento: l'ostilità nei confronti delle donne è legittimata al punto da divenire il cardine di questo ecosistema.



A proposito del linguaggio usato, una cifra distintiva dell'androsfera – e dunque comune tanto nei forum dei celibi involontari quanto in quelli degli altri orientamenti sopra descritti – è la categorizzazione e classificazione di uomini e donne, solitamente – ma non in via esclusiva - sulla base del loro grado di attrattività.

Talvolta i marker identitari su base etnica e stereotipizzante si aggiungono a quelli del presunto successo sessuale, e quindi un incel di origini indiane sarà un *currycel* e un *incel* di origini asiatiche un *ricecel*.



Una categoria fondamentale risulta inoltre quella dei Chad. Chad è l'anti-incel per eccellenza. Attraente, sessualmente soddisfatto e popolare. Anche i Chad hanno origini differenti, e diffuse nell'androsfera anglofona sono le

varianti Tyrone (Chad afroamericano), Chang (Chad asiatico), Chaddam (Chad mediorientale).<sup>4</sup>

Al risentimento verso l'archetipo del Chad si accompagna anche una sorta di ammirazione per i suoi successi con le donne, mentre più netta è la visione negativa delle Stacy, il corrispettivo femminile di Chad.

Lo stereotipo di Stacy è quello di una donna esteriormente attraente ma superficiale, promiscua e poco intelligente.

Le donne sono poi sovente definite *foids* (*female humanoid organisms*) e, in inglese, indicate col pronome *it*, il neutro che indica una cosa e non una persona.

Sebbene la maggioranza degli individui che si autodefiniscono incel non sia assolutamente violenta, questi ed altri elementi del gergo incel, insieme alla diffusa mitizzazione degli attentatori incel del recente passato, contribuiscono alla creazione di un *milieu* radicale che rappresenta una minaccia potenzialmente crescente (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020).



### 3. I maggiori attacchi incel

Il 23 maggio 2014 il ventiduenne Elliot Rodger uccise quattordici persone a Isla Vista, vicino al campus di Santa Barbara dell'Università della California, per poi suicidarsi.

Prima dell'attacco, secondo una tendenza ormai codificata già tra gli attentatori più noti della galassia dell'estrema destra, Rodger rilasciò il proprio

<sup>4</sup> Incel Inside Forum. Contenuto disponibile al sito: [https://incels.wiki/w/Incel\\_Forums\\_Term\\_Glossary](https://incels.wiki/w/Incel_Forums_Term_Glossary) (17 marzo 2023).

manifesto, oltre 140 pagine sulla propria privazione sessuale e sui mali personificati dal genere femminile (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020).

Il 23 aprile 2018 a Toronto un furgone investì la folla di pedoni, uccidendone dieci e ferendone altri sedici in quello che è ad oggi l'attacco di questo tipo più sanguinario della storia del Canada. L'attentatore era Alek Minasian, autoproclamatosi incel, che venne poi arrestato.

Nello stesso anno, il 2 novembre, Scott Paul Beierle sparò a sei donne, uccidendone due, in uno studio di yoga a Tallahassee, in Florida, per poi suicidarsi. L'intelligence statunitense ha ufficialmente definito l'attacco un atto di terrorismo misogino (Department of Homeland Security, 2022).

I video su YouTube postati da Beierle negli anni precedenti all'attacco dimostrano che il soggetto si autodefiniva celibe involontario e simpatizzava per Elliot Rodger, diventato nel frattempo un eroe delle frange più violente nella comunità.

*L'immagine del profilo di questo utente è un fotogramma del video di Elliot Rodger, girato prima del suo attacco*



Al di qua dell'Atlantico, il 12 agosto 2021, il ventiduenne Jake Davison uccise a colpi di arma da fuoco cinque persone e ne ferì altre due prima di spararsi e uccidersi nel Devon, in Inghilterra.

Davison era solito caricare video su YouTube - sotto lo pseudonimo Professor Waffle - caratterizzati da frequenti riferimenti all'inceldom e alla galassia blackpill.

Anche su Reddit il giovane esprimeva visioni profondamente misogine e omofobiche, nonché un costante risentimento per la propria madre, che sarebbe poi diventata la sua prima vittima.

L'elenco degli attentati terroristici di matrice incel potrebbe continuare. Ancora più numerosi sono i casi in cui il perpetratore, in un mix and match ideologico sempre più frequente (Brzuszkiewicz, 2023), è motivato da elementi di ideologie differenti una tra le quali è quella incel:

Anno	Luogo	Vittime
1989	École Polytechnique, Montreal, Canada	15
2014	Campus universitario di Isla Vista, California, USA	14
2014-2015	Portsmouth, Inghilterra	0
2015	Umpqua Community College, Oregon, USA	10
2017	Aztec High School, New Mexico, USA	3
2018	Studio di yoga, Tallahassee, Florida, USA	3
2018	Harris County, Texas	0
2020	Toronto, Canada	1
2020	Glendale Westgate Entertainment District, Arizona, USA	0
2021	Spa, Atlanta, Georgia, USA	8
2021	Plymouth, Inghilterra	5
2022	Central Visual and Performing Arts High School, St. Louis, Missouri, USA	3

#### 4. Prospettive italiane

Il 21 settembre 2020, a Lecce, il ventunenne Antonio De Marco uccise una coppia di fidanzati suoi amici con 79 coltellate. Durante gli interrogatori avrebbe spiegato di aver compiuto il gesto perché le vittime *erano troppo felici*.

L'omicida – da pochi giorni condannato all'ergastolo in secondo grado – stava scrivendo dei racconti con influenze anime il cui protagonista era un suo alter ego chiamato Vendetta.

Sul proprio diario inoltre aveva scritto: *Ucciderò Daniele e se non troverò una ragazza ucciderò ancora. [...] Perché nessuno mi ama? Qualcuno dovrà pagare.*

Nel gennaio 2021 Andrea Cavalleri, un ventiduenne di Savona, venne arrestato nell'ambito di un'operazione antiterrorismo in ambienti della destra suprematista. L'attività investigativa era diretta dalla procura di Genova e condotta dalle Digos di Genova e Savona e dal Servizio per il Contrasto dell'Estremismo e del Terrorismo Interno della Direzione Centrale della Polizia di Prevenzione-UCIGOS.



Il soggetto aveva creato un gruppo di ispirazione neonazista chiamato Nuovo Ordine Sociale allo scopo di reclutare altri radicali e commettere atti violenti.

Il giovane savonese arrestato dalla Digos si ispirava al gruppo suprematista AtomWaffen Division e aveva redatto e diffuso sul web documenti di matrice neonazista e antisemita con i quali incitava alla rivoluzione violenta contro “lo Stato occupato dai sionisti” ed all’eliminazione fisica degli ebrei. L’indagato venne accusato di associazione con finalità di terrorismo e propaganda e istigazione a delinquere per motivi di discriminazione razziale aggravata dal negazionismo e detenzione di materiale pedopornografico.

Nel 2019 Cavalleri, con altri uomini poi indagati, aveva creato Sole Nero - uno dei simboli neonazisti - un canale Telegram che ai tempi raggiunse circa 500 follower (Marone, 2021).

Il ragazzo sosteneva di essere un incel. *Voglio fare una strage* scriveva, e progettava di uccidere donne alle manifestazioni femministe o studenti in una scuola. *Meglio morire in uno school shooting che vivere da soli una vita di merda*, ripeteva.

In entrambi i casi i topoi incel sono decisamente evidenti. In particolare, quanto scritto da De Marco e Cavalleri si ricollega a due dei pattern di radicalizzazione più forti e diffusi all’interno dell’androsfera.

Il primo è l’assoluta dominanza del locus of control esterno tipico di ogni milieu radicale. Per Locus of Control (LOC) si intende la visione delle proprie responsabilità in rapporto a quelle esterne ed a congiunture ed eventi che si percepiscono come oltre qualsivoglia controllo da parte del soggetto. Nelle comunità incel il locus of control esterno, ovvero l’idea che la propria esistenza insoddisfacente dipenda da fattori esterni, dalla sfortuna nella cosiddetta *lotteria genetica* e più in generale dalla società ingiusta in cui viviamo oggi, occupa un posto primario, è a fondamento delle comunità stesse.

In alcuni casi, gli incel chiedono la stessa empatia riservata ad altri gruppi sociali marginalizzati, in quanto ritengono che la loro condizione frustrante dipende esclusivamente da fattori socioculturali esterni agli stessi incel, che non hanno dunque particolari responsabilità.

In molti casi la critica incel alla contemporaneità si radicalizza dunque in maniera crescente, andando oltre la rabbia verso i Chad e le Stacy. Quando questo accade, aumentano i punti di contatto con le visioni proprie dell’*accelerationism* e *collapsitarianism* di chi ritiene che la società stessa per come noi la conosciamo debba collassare per essere rifondata.

*Perché diamo per scontato che il sesso e le relazioni siano sempre controllabili? Che se ci impegniamo a sufficienza non importerà quanto bassi o brutti siamo, saremo comunque sempre ricompensati con un rapporto d’amore?* (Dr. Castle 2019, p. 26).

Questo secondo gli incel è uno dei cortocircuiti ideologici più insensati della storia umana. Nella visione del mondo incel più pura, la società è ossessionata da meritocrazia e crescita personale, che in realtà sono semplici modi per opprimere i celibi involontari con aspettative irrealistiche.

Se la solitudine, il senso di impotenza e la frustrazione sessuale sperimentata dagli incel sono causate dalla società iniqua, sarà compito di questa stessa società trovare soluzioni a questi problemi, ammesso che sia possibile senza, come detto sopra, smantellare questo sistema sociale in modo coatto.

Il secondo pattern riscontrabile nelle due vicende italiane e caratteristico dell'inceldom è il cosiddetto *aggrieved entitlement*. Michael Kimmel (2013) è stato il primo a introdurre la nozione di *aggrieved entitlement*, "diritto leso" per parlare delle nuove forme di mascolinità non mainstream in crescita negli ultimi anni.

L'*aggrieved entitlement* consiste nel meccanismo secondo il quale molti uomini bianchi negli Stati Uniti stanno reagendo all'aumentare dell'uguaglianza sociale e alla perdita della propria superiorità economica con rabbia e risentimento, proprio come se fossero al cospetto di una lesione dei propri diritti.

Nell'androsfera l'*aggrieved entitlement* si applica alla sfera sessuale: molti incel, in particolare, ritengono che avere relazioni sessuali sia un diritto del quale vengono privati dalla società contemporanea e dalle donne.

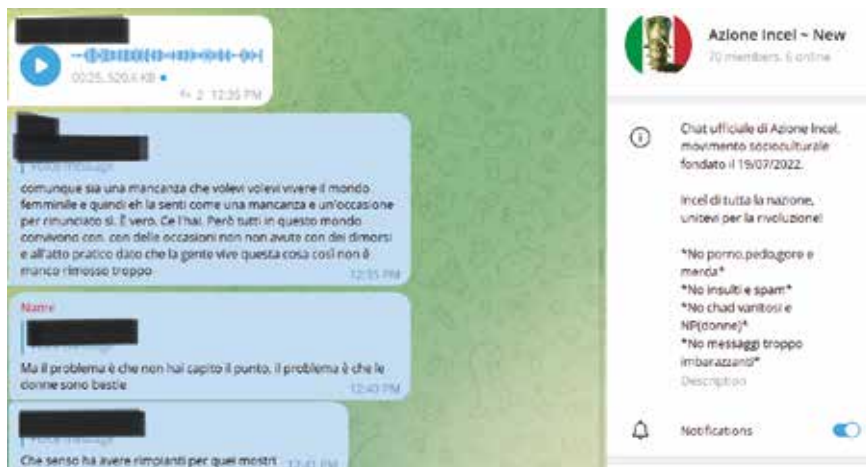
Il mancato ottenimento di ciò che si ritiene un proprio diritto è uno dei trigger più potenti dell'umiliazione che, a sua volta, può rappresentare un terreno fertile per la violenza.

La ricerca sugli incel europei è ancora agli albori, e quella sull'inceldom e l'androsfera italiana risulta essere in una fase ancora più embrionale.

Alcuni dati raccolti da Moonshot tra il 2017 e il 2020 aiutano tuttavia a stimare il fenomeno dal punto di vista quantitativo. L'Italia sarebbe al quarto posto dopo Germania, Regno Unito e Svezia per numero di utenti sulle piattaforme incel (Commissione Europea 2021, p. 12).

Si noti però che la ricerca esaminava dati tratti dai maggiori forum incel anglofoni, escludendo quindi le piattaforme e i canali social in lingua italiana, che oggi sono già decine e in costante crescita.

Durante il monitoraggio di alcuni tra i più popolosi forum e soprattutto canali Telegram di ispirazione incel in lingua italiana, è stato possibile riscontrare la presenza di un altro elemento caratteristico degli ecosistemi online radicali o in via di radicalizzazione. Si tratta del funzionamento di questi spazi virtuali come *echo chamber*, o casse di risonanza.



## 5. Conclusioni

L'androsfera, in Italia e altrove, costituisce una realtà complessa, acefala e caratterizzata da un'evoluzione particolarmente rapida tanto in termini quantitativi quanto guardando alle narrazioni diffuse al suo interno.

I numerosi attentati di ispirazione incel già avvenuti in altri Paesi, l'istituzionalizzazione del Locus of Control esterno, le lenti dell'*aggrieved entitlement* attraverso cui l'androsfera guarda alla società e la glorificazione di perpetratori incel del passato recente rendono necessario inserirla a pieno titolo tra le minacce emergenti.

Il fatto che, fortunatamente, la maggior parte dei suoi frequentatori non passerà mai all'azione violenta non esclude affatto che l'androsfera rappresenti un ecosistema radicale che è necessario conoscere e monitorare in modo più approfondito e capillare di quanto non si sia fatto finora in Europa. Nel contesto italiano, scegliere di non lavorare sull'androsfera oggi significa rischiare di perdere il vantaggio relativo di cui siamo in possesso rispetto a Paesi in cui gli attacchi sono già stati più numerosi e letali.

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La Rivista semestrale *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* intende la *Sicurezza* come una condizione che risulta dallo stabilizzarsi e dal mantenersi di misure proattive capaci di promuovere il benessere e la qualità della vita dei cittadini e la vitalità democratica delle istituzioni; affronta il fenomeno del *Terrorismo* come un processo complesso, di lungo periodo, che affonda le sue radici nelle dimensioni culturale, religiosa, politica ed economica che caratterizzano i sistemi sociali; propone alla *Società* – quella degli studiosi e degli operatori e quella ampia di cittadini e istituzioni – strumenti di comprensione, analisi e scenari di tali fenomeni e indirizzi di gestione delle crisi.

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