



# Jihadism and Far-Right Extremism: Shared Attributes With Regard to Violence Spectacularisation

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## Abstract

This article argues that similarities between jihadism and far-right radicalism are increasing, particularly with regard to the *spectacularisation* of violence. Spectacularisation means representing and performing violence in the form of a show, for instance through live-streaming, with a renewed emphasis on captivating symbols and much less attention paid to the ideological foundations on which the radical project is supposed to rely. After the March 2019 shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, the spectacularisation of racist, anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic violence increased, thus consolidating that event as a turning point in the evolution of the contemporary far right and the history of jihadism—which has far-right affinities. Lured by the performance of violence, the number of contemporary far-right sympathisers is steadily growing in a virtual environment that closely resembles that of jihadists, where patterns and mechanisms of online recruitment and grooming are proliferating.

## Keywords

Jihadism, Far right, Radicalisation, Christchurch attack, Spectacularisation, Violence, Online grooming

## Introduction

Historically, multiple analogies exist between far-right radicalism and jihadism. Tommaso Virgili highlights a number of features that bring together the two worldviews, such as the Machiavellian way of thinking, in which any means is legitimate in the achievement of goals, and the identification of a chosen enemy within the out-group that does not conform to the group's ideology (Virgili 2019). This article will scrutinise two

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further similarities: the transition from valuing what is revolutionary to valuing tradition, and the cult of heroism.

A distorted relationship between revolutionary stances and conservatism is systematically adopted by both jihadism and the far right, and relies on a dual attitude in relation to revolution and tradition (Brzuszkiewicz 2019). Jihadism and the far right give priority to the revolutionary component whenever they enjoy minimal consensus and represent the ideological minority. In this phase, they both support a wholesale transformation of society, with the goal of sweeping away the alleged contemporary decadence (Brzuszkiewicz 2019). During the second phase, which starts whenever their ideologies are gaining momentum, they proceed to the meticulous sanctification of tradition and rely on alignment with a glorified past, be it the rise of Islam or the Roman expansion (Brzuszkiewicz 2019). Both ideologies choose first to embrace the revolutionary transient chaos, through which movements have to go in order to reinstate the norm of tradition later.

The second major feature that jihadism and far-right radicalism share is the cult of heroism, which involves the celebration of physical and mental strength. In newspapers and magazines such as *Dabiq* or *Rumiya* on the jihadi side, and *Il Popolo d'Italia* (The People of Italy) or *La Fiamma Nazionale* (The National Flame) on the fascist side,<sup>1</sup> the heroic virtues of the members of the group are glorified through similar narratives centred on honour, pride and revenge. In its hierarchical worldview, the fascist state in Italy grouped each generation into a different layer of its social pyramid. From the ages of 14 to 18, Italians had to join the *Avanguardisti* (avant-gardists), part of the Italian fascist youth organisation. Interestingly, this term is the same as that later used by the radical Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb. In his *Ma'ālim fi ṭariq* (Milestones), Qutb states the need for a 'vanguard', a select group in charge of paving the way for the spread of the new movement (Qutb 1964).<sup>2</sup> Among radicals, the idea that a brave vanguard will bring a new era of order to the world is far from outdated and can be found in the forums of many far-right and white-supremacist groups (Brzuszkiewicz 2019).

The historical similarities between jihadism and far-right radicalism could be further elaborated. This article, however, focuses on new similarities, arguing that the contemporary far right no longer takes inspiration from 'classical' jihadism and recognised jihadist ideologues. What is gaining priority, however, is the increasing *spectacularisation* of violence, even as radicals are paying much less attention to doctrinal knowledge. Spectacularisation—the process of representing and performing violent acts as if they were a show—suggests that the far right is now drawing inspiration from international jihadism, embodied most notably in the strategies and narratives of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Since the March 2019 shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, the spectacularisation of racist, anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic violence seems to have increased, transforming the event into a turning point in the evolution of far-right radicalism. Indeed, between

2015 and 2019, far-right terrorist attacks increased by 320% in North America, Western Europe and Oceania (Institute for Economics and Peace 2019). Since Christchurch, every major far-right attack (i.e. an attack that created victims) has been posted on the Internet, whether in the form of an announcement beforehand, through live-streaming during the event or both.

From a methodological perspective, the present article carries out a qualitative analysis of four case studies involving far-right attackers. It relies both on academic literature and on op-ed sources. It should be noted that, with the exception of *The Great Replacement*—the manifesto circulated by Brenton Tarrant—the other manifestos written by the perpetrators are no longer available on the Internet. Therefore, studies that contain excerpts from those manifestos support the critical discourse analysis throughout this article.

## The Christchurch attack

On 15 March 2019, Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old Australian citizen, opened fire on Muslim worshippers at two mosques in the city of Christchurch in New Zealand. Improvised explosive devices were also found under his car and in an alleged accomplice's car and defused. Tarrant was arrested; on 17 March, New Zealand police confirmed that the death toll had climbed to 50 (Chavez and Holcombe 2019).

In the last few years, far-right violence has taken on characteristics that closely resemble the latest dominant currents in jihadism, and the attacks on the Christchurch mosques are a case in point. In the planning and staging of attacks, the priority of long-term goals and the focus on patient, paramilitary training have been replaced by spectacularisation. Furthermore, the importance of doctrinal knowledge is being replaced by a chaotic collection of particles from a multitude of ideological sources. This is exactly the same simplification trend that can be found in the latest wave of jihadism, embodied mainly—though not exclusively—by Islamic State.

As far as spectacularisation is concerned, it is worth remembering that Tarrant had posted his intentions on 8chan, a chat forum, along with a link to a 17-minute livestream from his headcam. On the ideological side, the attacker left a 70-plus-page manifesto that points to the political motive for the attack. Titled *The Great Replacement: Towards a New Society*, it promotes a xenophobic narrative about how immigrants are racially and culturally replacing native populations in the West (Davey and Ebner 2019). The decision to produce a manifesto is far from unique. The 2011 bombing and shootings by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway, for instance, followed the publication of a 1,500-page statement containing his radical world view.

Besides his theorisation on the alleged racial replacement, Tarrant identifies himself as an 'eco-fascist' and a racist 'by definition' (*European Eye on Radicalization* 2019). None of these terms is explained, which confirms the hypothesis of the increasing ideological and doctrinal shallowness among contemporary far-right attackers.

Confirming the priority placed on spectacularisation over doctrinal knowledge, Tarrant urges his supporters: ‘Create memes, post memes, and spread memes. Memes have done more for the ethno-nationalist movement than any manifesto’.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, in an attempt to raise the intellectual tone, he produces a mishmash of references—some of which also appeared on the gun he used—chaotically mixing grandiloquent references to historical battles between Christendom and the various Islamic empires with racist jokes and slogans derived from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

His non-existent selectivity in the choice of inspirational figures further confirms the tendency to embrace a ready-to-go and sensational form of radicalisation: to the names of Anders Breivik and Alexandre Bissonnette,<sup>4</sup> Tarrant added those of individuals such as Luca Traini, whose attack caused no deaths.<sup>5</sup> Far from providing a solid ideological background for his actions, the only purpose of mentioning these names was for Tarrant to connect himself with a long line of like-minded fighters (Neumann 2019). More broadly, in terms of narrative and rhetoric, the increasing overlap between the far right and radical Islamists is striking. Far-right groups, for instance, have begun theorising about the need for what they call a ‘white jihad’, as was the case in the British neo-Nazi organisation National Action, which was banned by the UK government in 2016 under the Terrorism Act 2000<sup>6</sup> (Allen 2019).

## **Poway, El Paso and Halle**

Nineteen-year-old John Timothy Earnest was one of the disciples of Brenton Tarrant. On 27 April 2019—the last day of the Jewish Passover holiday—he fired shots inside a synagogue in Poway, California. One woman was killed and three people were injured, including the synagogue’s rabbi. After fleeing the scene, the gunman phoned 911 and reported the shooting. He was arrested in his car approximately three kilometres from the synagogue (Helsel 2019).

Like Tarrant, Earnest had no previous criminal record. He had also used 8chan to post an anti-Semitic and racist open letter in which he blamed Jews for the ‘meticulously planned genocide of the European race’ (Hankes et al. 2019). Conspiracy theories are a notoriously typical feature of most radical ideologies, and the contemporary far-right galaxy is no exception.

The obsession with conspiracies has always been used successfully by radicals to reinforce the ‘us versus them’ worldview and to trigger in-group feelings of anger and marginalisation (Rickenbacher 2019). Far-right conspiracy theories suggest that progressive politicians, the media and liberals are working in concert to destroy ‘native European’ culture.

In a new and chaotic collection of sources, Earnest cited Jesus, Paul the Apostle, Martin Luther, Adolf Hitler, Ludwig van Beethoven and others as the figures who inspired him to commit the shooting.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, to justify his action, he quoted the Bible and condemned President Donald Trump as a pro-Zionist traitor (Davis 2019).

Earnest also claimed responsibility for the Escondido mosque fire on 24 March 2019 (Collins and Blankstein 2019). The arson attempt had been extinguished with only minor damage to the building. Earnest, however, had left graffiti in the car park that made reference to the Christchurch shooting, proving that strong imitational trends exist among far-right radicals.

On 3 August 2019, another mass shooting occurred at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas. Patrick Crusius killed 22 people and injured 24 (Romero et al. 2019). In the framework of what is now becoming a recurrent pattern, Crusius was the most likely author of a manifesto containing white nationalist and anti-immigrant themes that was posted on 8chan shortly before the attack. Even though analysts are not certain of the manifesto's authorship, we know that it cites the Christchurch mosque shootings as Crusius's inspiration for the attack (Eligon 2019). He told investigators that he came to his views through research online (Ailworth et al. 2019). In the manifesto, Crusius expressed a desire to kill as many Hispanics as possible, claiming that they were culturally replacing native-born Americans.

A few months later, a new far-right attack hit Germany. On 9 October 2019, Stephan Balliet shot and killed two people and injured a further two near a synagogue in Halle, Saxony-Anhalt. The perpetrator committed the attack out of anti-Semitic, anti-feminist and racist beliefs. For 35 minutes he live-streamed the attack on Twitch, a live-streaming service operated by a subsidiary of Amazon (Herrera and Needleman 2019). It has also been revealed that Balliet had posted a manifesto online a week prior to the attack, in which he talked about attacking the synagogue in Halle and outlined his plan to kill 'anti-whites', including Jews (Koehler 2019). Once again, Balliet was not a known extremist and appears to have become radicalised online while living with his mother in Heldbra, a village not far from Halle. He called himself a 'weeb'—a derisive term for a non-Japanese person who is obsessed with Japanese culture—and an 'anon' (short for 'anonymous'), the term used to describe users of 4chan, 8chan (now 8kun) and other image boards<sup>8</sup> that have been used by mass shooters to share manifestos. The document, written in English, called for 'discontent white men' to murder Jews, non-whites, communists and 'traitors' (Oboler et al. 2019).

## Consuming violence online

In all four cases that have been analysed (Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and Halle), the attackers seem to be ascribable to the 'lone wolf' typology, that is, they were individuals who acted alone, with no formal affiliation to any organised group, and who had mostly been self-radicalised online. Things, however, are more complex than they seem.

Indeed, although it might be premature to talk about 'grooming' when analysing far-right radicalisation patterns, we can see that all the attackers described here were lured into radicalisation through various forms of online consumption of violent content and, in all probability, interactions with like-minded individuals.

Lone actors do not really become radicalised in isolation. They are typically radicalised in both online and offline radical milieux, and through diverse interaction within those milieux they develop social ties with other radicals (Schuurman et al. 2019). Socialisation occurs even through partial, peripheral and discontinuous interactions, which is why talking about lone wolves (or lone actors) can often be misleading.

A real process of grooming<sup>9</sup> has been observed within the jihadi galaxy (Schuurman et al. 2019), whereas it is still unclear whether this is taking place among far-right radicals. This, however, should not lead us to underestimate the role of the diverse forms of interaction within the far-right environments, and it is not a stretch to say that grooming strategies, if they have not already been used, might be implemented in the near future.

## Conclusion

Similarities exist between jihadism and far-right extremism. The transition from revolution to tradition and the cult of heroism that celebrates in-group virtues are just two examples. In the last few years, the far-right galaxy has been undertaking an evolution that closely resembles that occurring in jihadism, characterised by gradual ideological simplification and the massive spectacularisation of violence. The attacks in Christchurch, Poway, El Paso and Halle are cases in point that show how contemporary radicals perform violence.

In spite of the alleged self-radicalisation of the attackers, the article suggests that no radicalisation process occurs in complete isolation. On the contrary—and this is a further striking similarity between far-right radicals and jihadists—individuals are radicalised through online (and offline) socialisation, be it continuous and long-lasting or irregular and erratic. Indeed, as the article explains, all of the most recent far-right attacks have been perpetrated by individuals who had regularly visited online environments in which racist, anti-Semitic and Islamophobic content is increasingly easy to find. The emerging far right, like its jihadi counterpart, will soon master an ever-expanding spectrum of recruitment strategies and its chaotic ideological foundations will not imply a lower level of risk.

Monitoring the evolution of different forms of radicalism, learning from previous experiences, and being aware of in-group and intergroup imitation behaviours—namely within the far-right galaxy and between jihadism and the far right—will be crucial for assessing the threat. Furthermore, since the contemporary far right can rely on the Internet much more than the far-right movements of the past, the virtual world will be the best place to combat it. This will require European governments to improve their cooperation with tech companies and Internet providers in order to jointly monitor radical activities online and implement effective counter-narratives that keep pace with the ever-changing nature of radicalisation. Finally, given the increasingly transnational profile of extremism, it will soon become crucial for the EU to acknowledge the need for deeper coordination when it comes to designing new strategies to fight the phenomenon both online and offline.

## Notes

1. *Dabiq* and *Rumiya* were magazines published by the media outlets of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. *Il Popolo d'Italia* and *La Fiamma Nazionale* were magazines published by the National Fascist Party organs in Italy.
2. Sayyid Quṭb (1906–66) was an Egyptian thinker convicted of plotting to assassinate President Gamal Abd El Nasser and subsequently executed. His writings contain harsh criticism of the alleged moral decadence that was spreading in Muslim countries because of Western influence, which was creating a corrupt culture obsessed with material goods and pleasures. He was a leading theorist of offensive jihad: 'Those who say that Islamic Jihad is merely for the defence of the "Homeland of Islam" diminish the greatness of the Islamic way of life' (Quṭb 1964).
3. The full text of Tarrant's *The Great Replacement* is available at [https://www.ilfoglio.it/userUpload/The\\_Great\\_Replacementconvertito.pdf](https://www.ilfoglio.it/userUpload/The_Great_Replacementconvertito.pdf).
4. On 22 July 2011, Anders Breivik perpetrated the Utoya (Norway) massacre, killing 77 people. On 29 January 2017, Alexandre Bissonette killed 6 worshippers and injured 19 others at the Islamic Centre of Quebec City (Canada).
5. Luca Traini is an Italian neo-Fascist attacker who, on 3 February 2018, wounded six African migrants in a drive-by shooting in Macerata (Italy).
6. The Terrorism Act 2000 was the first in a series of such acts passed by the UK Parliament.
7. The manifesto was removed from the Internet. For an in-depth analysis of its relevance see Evans 2019.
8. Image boards are Internet forums focused on the posting of images that can be shared among members of the forum.
9. The term 'grooming' derives from the behaviour of sexual predators (Reeves and Crowther 2019). Grooming involves someone (the groomer) building a relationship of trust and emotional connection with the designated individual (the victim) in order to manipulate and abuse him or her. The notion of grooming has been introduced in terrorism and radicalisation studies to highlight that part of recruiting that involves a persistent effort made by the recruiter(s) to create a personal relationship with the victim and to influence his or her choices through the use of psychological mechanisms that are very similar to those that occur between sexual predators and their prey (Krasenberg and Wouterse 2019, 4).

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