THE NEXUS OF MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES WITH VIOLENT EXTREMISM

EBSCO HOST

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Editorial Note

The Nexus of Misinformation, Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories with Violent Extremism

In a hyperconnected world, the decentralised flow of information on social media has mainstreamed conspiracy theories, allowing violent extremists to recruit and radicalise young people by weaponising misinformation and disinformation campaigns. The World Economic Forum's annual Global Risk Report 2024 outlines misinformation and disinformation as the top short-term risks to states around the world. The far-right riots in the United Kingdom in August 2024 following the Southport attack exemplify the nexus of disinformation with violent extremism.

The role of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories as radicalising agents becomes even more acute against the backdrop of a meteoric increase in online self-radicalisation among young people, as noted in the UN Monitoring Committee on ISIL and Al-Qaeda's 35th report. Alarmingly, the age of online radicals is not only getting younger, including minors and teenagers, but "the gestation period from radicalisation to activation" has also gotten shorter.

The impact of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories with reference to violent extremism varies across regions and countries. Countries with high digital literacy rates and robust laws and policies against misinformation, such as Singapore, are better positioned to address such a threat. However, for fragile states such as those in South Asia and the Middle East, the security challenges from online radicalisation are stark, especially as people consume unverified and malicious information less critically.

Against this backdrop, the current issue features four articles examining the role of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories in facilitating and fomenting violent extremism in Syria, the UK, South Asia, and Singapore. In the first article, **Ghada Soliman** examines the role of disinformation campaigns in the battle for influence and power in post-Assad Syria. Disinformation in support of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) emerged in the lead-up to the operation that took Damascus and have since proliferated to improve the group's credibility as a legitimate and unifying authority. However, disinformation campaigns against HTS also exist, as other groups, such as the Southern Operation Room, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Islamic State terrorist group, continue to vie for power. Disinformation campaigns will likely persist amidst this rivalry, obfuscating public perception and further polarising communities in Syria.

In the second article, **Siddharth Venkataramakrishnan** discusses the disinformation campaign by far right groups that underpinned one of the worst violent riots in the UK in recent times. The violent riots of July and August 2024 marked the high-water point for far right violence in the UK in the last two decades. The riots erupted in the aftermath of a stabbing attack in Southport on 29 July. Initial social media posts falsely identified the attacker as a recently arrived Muslim immigrant, sparking attacks on Islamic sites. Subsequently when it was revealed that the attacker was a man of Rwandan Christian background, the violence expanded to broader anti-immigrant aggression. The article examines how far right disinformation on social media instigated these attacks. It explores the UK far right's transition from structured organisations to decentralised networks and analyses disinformation on Telegram and X, focusing on narratives targeting Muslims, immigrants, and Jewish communities.

In the third article, **Abdul Basit** explores the link between disinformation, conspiracy theories, and violent extremism in South Asia. Through anti-minority rhetoric, theories about superpower intervention in the region, or anti-vaccination sentiments, extremist groups in the region have exploited conspiracies to legitimise their violent cause and radicalise others. The author highlights how disinformation and conspiracy theories have become integral components of violent extremists' toolkits in South Asia, enabling groups to recruit, fundraise, and call for violent action.

In the fourth article, **Gulizar Haciyakupoglu and Yasmine Wong** note that while Singapore has been spared from the types of disinformation triggered violence seen in other parts of the world, Singapore is not immune to disinformation campaigns or the possibility of disinformation triggered violence. The authors point to various instances of disinformation in Singapore that were meant to influence perceptions on various issues, organisations and communities. Even where disinformation does not lead to physical violence, it causes trauma and psychological harm. The authors make a case for broadening interpretations of violence to include psychological violence.

SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS

Our centre has launched the **Southeast Asia Militant Atlas**, a dynamic and growing interactive map designed to provide researchers with a consolidated visual database of ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. Please access it via **https://tinyurl.com/ru8mjwbd**

Disinformation and the Battle for Influence and Power in the Emerging Post-Assad Syria

Ghada Soliman

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, spearheaded by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has created a power vacuum and a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns. As HTS aims to establish legitimacy and expand its influence, the Southern Operation Room (SOR) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are also vying for power in a new Syria. This volatile competition is further complicated by the potential regrouping and resurgence of the Islamic State (IS), which could exploit any rivalry among the competing factions to its advantage, putting Syria on another warpath. Against this backdrop, the first section of this article examines the aftermath of the ouster of Assad's regime. Then, it explains HTS' transformations and rebranding efforts to position itself as a legitimate military and political force within the complex landscape of post-Assad Syria. It also explains how disinformation campaigns have become a critical tool used by various rebel factions, including HTS, aiming to shape public perception, manipulate narratives, and influence both domestic and international audiences. The rest of the article discusses HTS' rivalry with the SDF and the SOR, the continued threat of IS, and the broader implications of these developments for Syria and the Middle East.

Syria's Power Vacuum: A Fertile Ground for Disinformation

Disinformation campaigns have played a crucial role in shaping narratives of competing sides during conflicts. The collapse of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime has resulted in a power vacuum that various competing factions have sought to fill. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)[1], an Islamist militant rebel group, has emerged as a dominant force in Syria's current political landscape. HTS successfully toppled Assad's regime on December 8, 2024 under the leadership of Ahmed al-Sharaa[2], who has become Syria's transitional president.[3] The group has immensely benefited from disinformation,[4] that is, the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information aimed at deceiving or influencing public perception. Social media platforms have become battlegrounds in a conflict that mirrors the physical fighting in Syria; they are rife with disinformation intended to demoralise local and external forces loyal to Assad.[5]

On December 1, 2024, two misleading videos surfaced on YouTube[6] and X,[7] allegedly showing al-Assad's resignation and power transfer to the Speaker of the People's Assembly. In these videos, he was also shown expressing regret to the Syrian people and claimed to end all agreements with Iran. However, this was later debunked[8] as the audio in the video clip was discovered to be artificially generated and originally released on September 2, 2023. On December 6, 2024, the Syrian Ministry of Information denied the video's authenticity, coinciding with HTS-led rebel factions capturing Hama, Syria's fourth-largest city. HTS effectively took advantage of disinformation campaigns during the critical period leading up to December 2024 to enhance its standing amidst ongoing conflict in Syria.

However, HTS' position as a key player in the Syrian conflict has significant implications for other rebel factions that view it as a competitor. These rival groups are motivated to assert their influence and control over Syria, disseminating their own disinformation to advance their respective agendas. This context helps explain the proliferation of numerous fake websites[9] titled "Presidency of the Syrian Arab Republic"[10] which emerged during HTS' military engagements. On December 1, 2024, the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF), the military forces of Syria, issued a statement that disinformation was being spread by armed terrorist groups – not explicitly identified in the

statement – and emphasised that these groups are engaged in a coordinated media campaign to undermine public morale and the effectiveness of military forces.[11] Another significant instance of disinformation in December 2024 involved fraudulent online webpages with fake accounts on Facebook,[12] which attracted more than a hundred thousand views. These pages were designed to imitate legitimate human rights organisations and appeared to target the pro-Assad Alawite community.[13] By adopting names of recognised human rights organisations, these misleading accounts sought to enhance the credibility of their false narratives to ultimately instil fear within the Alawite community.[14]

HTS: The Dual Strategy of Rebranding and Legitimacy Seeking

HTS, a listed terrorist organisation,[15] has emerged as a dominant force from the remnants of Jabhat al-Nusra, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda (AQ). With an estimated 16,000 fighters, HTS managed to topple Assad's regime within two weeks by leading a coalition that included Ahrar al-Sham,[16] the National Front of Liberation (NFL),[17] the Free Syrian Army (FSA),[18] the Syrian National Army (SNA)[19] and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement.[20] The group successfully expanded its territorial control[21] to include significant centres – notably Aleppo, one of Syria's largest cities – and solidified its control over other strategic areas in northwestern Syria. HTS has positioned itself as a quasi-government in Syria, providing civil services and managing local issues despite facing claims of human rights violations.[22] HTS aims to establish a *sharia* state but has sought to present a more palatable image to gain local support and legitimacy in Syria.[23]

In Syria's emerging political landscape, HTS employs propaganda to present itself as a legitimate entity by distributing news through official media channels, referring to itself as 'the Military Operations Department in Syria'[24] to emphasise its role in delivering governance and services in post-Assad Syria. It has also warned of disinformation campaigns against it.[25] However, concerns persist regarding the extent to which Al-Sharaa and HTS have truly distanced themselves from their extremist past.[26]

Post-Assad Syria: HTS Rivalries and Emerging Challenges

The emergence of HTS has intensified rivalries among various rebel groups operating within Syria. Notably, groups such as the Syrian Operation Room (SOR) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have continued to compete for territorial control and influence over local Syrians. They may seek to enhance their influence and exploit HTS' vulnerabilities to strengthen their power and control in an ever-changing Syria.

The SOR[27] rebel coalition, originating in southern Syria (Suwayda, Daraa, and Quneitra) and led by Ahmad Al-Awda,[28] is a looming threat to HTS. This coalition was established on December 6, 2024, with the objective of coordinating military efforts in southern Syria to support HTS during the conflict in December 2024. However, Al-Awda chose not to participate in a meeting convened by the HTS-led interim government on December 25, 2024, to unify different rebel factions in Syria into a singular national defence force. Al-Awda has asserted that his faction remains operational and that the SOR has not been disbanded. The faction's propaganda often focuses on unity among moderate rebels while attempting to distance itself from more radical elements within the opposition. The SOR coalition could be a threat to HTS as concerns among southern factions continue to grow over how the interim administration can unify the different former rebel groups, each with its own leaders and distinct ideologies.

Similarly, the Kurdish-led SDF,[29] which is composed of Kurdish fighters, is another challenge to HTS. Since 2015, the SDF has emerged as a key player in the fight against the Islamic State (IS),[30] which emerged in Syria in 2013 to establish a self-styled global Sunni caliphate. The SDF has since gained significant territorial control in northeastern Syria, operating as a quasi-state there due to its established governance and territorial control of major cities like Qamishli and Kobani, collectively known as Rojava. Since the collapse of the Assad regime, the SDF controls roughly 40 percent[31] of Syria, following their deployment to regions previously under the control of the Syrian army in Deir ez-Zor province.

As a Kurdish-led force, the SDF faces hostility from Turkey due to its ties with the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), both of which are considered terrorist organisations by Turkey. The SDF aims to maintain control over its territories while working towards the establishment of an independent state. It has, however, refused[32] to relinquish its weapons or disband, and was not invited[33] to the meeting convened by the HTS-led interim government on December 25. The rise of Kurdish militia in northeastern Syria poses a direct threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. This is perhaps why Turkey supports HTS – to counterbalance Kurdish influence and prevent the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region along its border.[34] The SDF, which also oversees IS prisons in Syria, has refused[35] to transfer the control of these prisons to the new administration. This is interpreted as their strong desire to maintain influence in northeastern Syria. The YPG, a key SDF component, has acted as Iran's proxy militia in Syria and is not aligned with HTS.[36] It is promoting narratives that primarily accuse HTS of eliminating members of the Syrian army and of targeting the Alawite, Kurdish and Christian minorities in Syria.

HTS' Major Challenge: The Lack of Credibility

The combination of HTS' radical background and its controversial governance practices has resulted in a significant lack of credibility among many Syrians. While some may view HTS as a necessary force against the Assad regime or IS, others consider it as the new IS regime in Syria. A notable incident highlighted this challenge: on January 1, 2025, Fadel Abdul Ghany, the Executive Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) – an independent organisation that has come under scrutiny for its potential connections to HTS and Turkey, particularly following the collapse of Assad's regime[37] – tweeted his deep concern over the extensive disinformation prevalent in Syria and urged the community to rely on credible sources.

Ghany's followers responded by accusing HTS of hypocrisy.[38] One follower pointed out that HTS had previously reported on the assassination of a family near Manbij in December 2024, attributing the crime to the SDF. However, this same crime had been documented 11 days earlier and implicated the SNA, now under HTS, in the murder and associated looting. It is crucial to note that Manbij has been the site of intense conflict[39] between the SDF and HTS since the ousting of Assad in December 2024. Another follower described HTS as the new evolution of IS in Syria,[40] claiming that there will be a surge of propaganda portraying life under the new HTS regime in Syria as idyllic and utopian. He cautioned to remain sceptical of such narratives. This comment was made in response to a post on X on January 1, 2025, which discussed a meeting between social media influencers and bloggers with Syria's new HTS-led administration;[41] the post had attracted more than a hundred thousand views. Another follower accused the SNHR Executive Director of being a propaganda agent serving Al-Sharaa and his masters, referring to the United States (US) and Israel, while stating that his false narratives would not serve the Syrian people.

While it is unclear which rival faction is behind the disinformation campaigns, if not all of them, numerous images and videos have been shared online, especially on X, highlighting offences and implying that they are attributed to HTS. One notable video[42] was posted on December 8, 2024, allegedly showing "opposition fighters", in reference to HTS, forcibly moving civilians into a ditch before executing them; in fact, these images document a massacre carried out by soldiers of the Assad regime in Damascus in 2013.[43] This instance exemplifies that HTS is also a target of disinformation.

The Persistent Challenge of Countering IS

IS, which has historically positioned itself as the authentic representative of jihadist ideology, views al-Sharaa as an adversary and has employed extensive propaganda campaigns aimed at undermining his credibility. It has disseminated narratives that portray HTS as a proxy for Western interests.[44] Moreover, the group published fatwas calling for al-Sharaa's assassination in December 2024 in its biweekly online newsletter, Al-Nabaa.[45] Additionally, IS has threatened to continue with military operations within Syrian territory, claiming a 'vendetta against the remnants of al-Assad's regime'.[46] This strategy mirrors the response from the Islamic State in Khorasan

(ISK)[47], which also initiated an anti-HTS campaign based on a series of conspiracy-driven allegations to discredit HTS and portray the takeover of Damascus akin to the Taliban's August 2021 takeover of Kabul, which ISKP perceives as a political settlement.[48]

While IS has lost much territory since its peak between 2014 and 2015, it remains active in northern Syria.[49] Following the collapse of the Assad regime, the US has continued its anti-IS operations[50] and plans to sustain its military presence in the region to thwart any attempts by the terrorist organisation to regroup. Reportedly, al-Hawl[51] and al-Roj prison camps[52] are currently home to over 40,000 displaced persons, the majority affiliated with IS. There is a concern that these camps will contribute to the rise of a new generation of IS fighters who are looking to exploit the existing power vacuum in Syria. Additionally, the SDF oversees various detention centres housing more than 8,000 individuals associated with IS from over 50 different nations. There are growing apprehensions[53] that IS could free these detainees by conducting jailbreaks, taking advantage of vulnerabilities in HTS' governance, and subsequently regroup and resurge.

From January 2023 to December 2024, there were about 404 terrorist incidents in Syria, with 130 of those incidents attributed to IS, making it the single most dangerous group in Syria (See Figure 1). A significant challenge lies in how IS and other factions in Syria will undermine the HTS leadership.
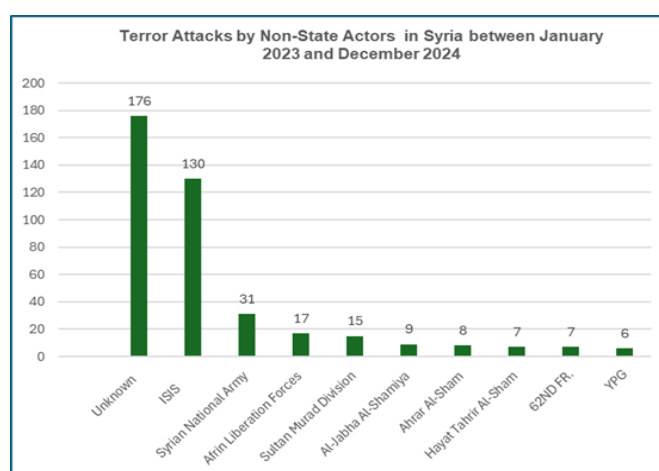

Figure 1: Number of terror attacks by non-state actors between January 2023 and December 2024.
Source: GTTAC Records of Incidents Database (GRID).[54]

The rivalry between HTS and IS has been marked by violent confrontations. Both groups vie for control over territory and influence among local Syrians. HTS has actively engaged in military operations[55] against IS fighters, viewing them as a direct threat to its authority in Syria. This animosity is not merely tactical; it is deeply rooted in their ideological differences, especially regarding governance and jihadism.

Implications

Military Resolutions That Could Incite Civil War in a New Syria

Despite HTS' negotiations[56] to integrate both the SDF and the SOR into the national army, a military resolution looms.[57] While the SOR has not responded to HTS' proposal to integrate into the national army, the SDF has officially rejected it, especially following recent clashes with Turkish-backed factions in northern Syria. HTS emphasised that it would be prepared to use force if necessary.[58] This escalation of tension presents significant challenges given that since 2015, the US forces have been providing training and support to the SDF, putting HTS and its principal backer Turkey, on a potential war footing with the US.

HTS could escalate tensions with SOR as well, potentially leading to civil war in Syria as the competition for resources and territory intensifies. Skirmishes are likely to escalate into larger confrontations which may lead to the fragmentation of alliances, given the factions are backed by external powers like Turkey and the US. Furthermore, public sentiment cannot be ignored as Syrians become increasingly polarised along factional lines due to disinformation campaigns. As different factions vie for power and legitimacy in post-Assad Syria, disinformation can serve as a tool for inciting conflict between groups with historical and sectarian grievances against one another.

Potential Resurgence of IS as Lone Wolves in a New Syria

IS has consistently urged its supporters to engage in 'do it yourself' attacks. Since the onset of the Israeli offensive in Gaza in October 2023, there has been an increase in 'lone wolf' attacks linked to IS. Notable incidents include a mass stabbing at a festival in Solingen, Germany, [59] which was linked to a Syrian individual who was affiliated with IS. In March 2024, Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, the spokesperson for IS, urged lone wolves to carry out attacks against Christians and Jews in Western nations and Israel, declaring that Ramadan signified a period of jihad.[60] As outlined above, HTS has actively engaged in military operations against IS fighters; should these operations fail, IS and its lone actor militants could re-emerge as an even bigger threat, especially if it recruited individuals disillusioned with HTS or any of its main rivals.

Conclusion

The ongoing rivalry between HTS, the SDF, and the SOR represents a significant challenge for HTS as it seeks to establish itself as a legitimate and unifying authority in the post-Assad Syria. The rivalry threatens HTS' survival and risks escalating tensions that could lead to a renewed civil war. The potential for civil war is exacerbated by the potential resurgence of IS, which might take advantage of the rivalry between the three factions.

The current landscape in Syria indicates that if HTS fails to navigate its relationships with rival factions effectively, it may inadvertently contribute to further disunity in Syria. This fragmentation could empower extremist elements that thrive in chaotic environments, undermining any progress made toward stability in Syria. Moreover, disinformation campaigns are likely to proliferate amidst this rivalry, obfuscating public perception and further polarising communities. Ultimately, the future of Syria hinges on whether HTS can adapt and forge alliances while addressing internal divisions to avoid a more destabilised Syria.

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From Disinformation to Violence: The UK Far Right and 2024 Riots

Siddharth Venkataramakrishnan

In the summer of 2024, the United Kingdom (UK) faced serious rioting following a stabbing attack in the town of Southport on July 29. Social media accounts initially claimed that the attacker was a Muslim who had recently arrived illegally via boat; these claims drove attacks on targets associated with Islam, including a mosque in Southport.[1] When it was revealed that the attacker was Welsh and of Rwandan Christian background, the violence pivoted towards more general anti-immigrant attacks. In two cities, rioters attempted to set hotels housing refugees on fire.[2] This paper seeks to build on existing quantitative work[3] and reporting[4] on social media to assess disinformation promoted by far-right groups which aimed to elicit violent physical reactions. The paper is divided into two sections. The first summarises the UK far right's shift from traditional organisational structures towards more amorphous and post-organisational networks. The second is a qualitative analysis of content across Telegram and X, assessing disinformation targeting Muslims, immigrants and anti-Semitism which underpinned the violence.

The UK Far Right in 2024

The UK far right has evolved significantly over the course of the 21st century, most notably shifting away from organisations such as the English Defence League (EDL). The EDL emerged in 2009 in response to Islamist disruption of the Royal Anglian Regiment's homecoming parade[5]; it drew early supporters from football hooligan firms, 'anti-Jihad' groups and existing far-right groups such as the British National Party (BNP).[6] Ideologically, the EDL characterised itself as being "anti-Islamist", pitting itself as an opponent to groups such a Sharia for Europe[7]; members describe themselves as focused purely on the threat of "Islamisation".[8] While academic research on the EDL found more general anti-Muslim sentiments[9], the group repeatedly sought to position itself as anti-racist and open to non-white participation (in contrast with older groups including the BNP and National Front).[10]

Although not a "card-carrying organisation", the EDL was marked by the high profile of its leaders – particularly co-founder and leader Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (better known by his moniker of Tommy Robinson), who left the group in 2013.[11] The organisation entered a terminal decline from the mid-2010s; scholars Morrow and Meadowcraft argue that this was due to indiscriminate recruitment of "marginal members" who had little loyalty to the group and left soon after joining.[12] Although former members of the EDL are alleged to have taken part in counter-protests in November 2023, the group is largely viewed as moribund.[13]

Today, the UK far right is typified by a number of smaller groups, loose networks of ideologically similar individuals and informal channels rather than a single dominant street movement. It encompasses both the "extreme right", which supports the overthrow of liberal democracy, as well as members of the "radical right" who wish to achieve their goals within existing constitutional frameworks.[14] This "broad church" includes organisations such as Patriotic Alternative, which combines advertising for "baking contests, film nights and video game sessions" with explicit far-right propaganda and can mobilise hundreds of activists,[15] and extreme-right networks that include the amorphous Terrorgram Collective, whose members "glorify terrorism, call for violence, spread

extremist ideological material and demonise minority groups."[16] On 22 April 2024, the UK became the first country in the world to proscribe the Terrorgram collective.[17]

Beyond these organisations, a range of other actors contributed to the spread of disinformation related to the riots. Their connections through channels and chat groups on Telegram are focused on a range of topics including football hooliganism, conspiracy theories related to health and climate change and combat footage. Individuals can join or leave multiple groups and there is no singular membership; unlike the EDL, these groups typically lack a clear leadership figure. The affordances of Telegram allow users to rapidly forward content from other channels; as forwarded content is typically labelled with the channel from which it originated, it also makes it easier for users to find similar content.[18]

Across organisations, networks and loose groups, a unifying factor has been an emergence of generalised anti-immigrant hate and white nationalist beliefs. This marks a break from earlier groups such as the EDL, which sought to build connections with non-Muslim immigrants for legitimacy.[19] A search through the Telegram channel belonging to Patriotic Alternative, for example, has repeatedly characterised immigrants as "invaders" or an "invasion". Another Telegram channel which promotes far-right football hooliganism (described in the selection below as Channel 1) includes explicit support for white nationalism through symbols such as the Celtic Cross and veneration of white power band Skrewdriver.[20] Although anti-immigrant sentiment was particularly obvious during the 2024 riots, it was not the catalyst. An analysis of the 2022 Leicester riots between Hindus and Muslims found that almost all far-right groups analysed on Telegram promoted narratives that were equally antipathetic to both faiths.[21]

It is significant to note that anti-migrant sentiment has become significantly more prominent in mainstream discourse both in the UK and internationally.[22] Polling of the British public in September 2024 found that 32% of Britons named immigration as the most important issue, ahead of the National Health Service and the economy.[23] Although this analysis focuses on social media, it is important to note analysis of mainstream newspapers points to similar dehumanising language in these publications.[24]

Methodology

The analysis seeks to analyse far-right efforts to stoke violence using disinformation from 29 July until 7 August 2024. This covered the period from the stabbing attack and the start of the spread of disinformation until the day that large-scale anticipated riots failed to materialise.

Telegram channels and X (formerly Twitter) accounts were chosen as they play different roles for the far right and other extreme ideologies. Telegram has traditionally enacted less strict moderation than other platforms, leading to its adoption by a range of extremists[25]; the wide range of channels which can be created on the platform also makes it ideal for mobilisation, disseminating propaganda and sharing content.[26] A "similar channel" feature which came into effect in 2023 has been found to promote extremist content to users who are browsing channels which are ostensibly apolitical or focused on other ideologies.[27]

By contrast, X is a larger and more public-facing platform; by default, most content on X is readily accessible to any user, whereas on Telegram, users need to know the name of a channel to search for it or have its address to join it. Previous research has noted the use of X by far-right parties and actors.[28] Assessing two platforms rather than focusing on a single one also allows for evidencing of cross-platform pollination, demonstrating how far-right groups and networks build on each other.

Telegram channels were found through a combination of methods, including searching for keywords such as "Southport", looking for content forwarded from other channels, using Telegram's "similar channels" feature and drawing on a seed list of existing accounts identified by

researchers as promoting anti-immigrant narratives.[29] Content from X was surfaced using the advanced search function. The accounts are not named here to reduce amplifying hate speech.

Based on this analysis, ten content producers (six Telegram channels and four X accounts) were chosen to represent a range of far-right actors. A primary focus was on whether the narratives they produced could constitute "disinformation", following Wardle and Derakhshan's definition of "information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country".[30] As the line between disinformation and misinformation (i.e. false information shared without the aim of causing harm) is blurred, this analysis particularly focuses on misleading narratives that sought to undermine official statements rather than more unclear videos of clashes with counter-protesters.

Designation	Description	Location
Channel 1	Football hooliganism and white nationalism	Members mainly located in Europe
Channel 2	Neo-Nazi content focused on Southport	Administrator located in Finland
Channel 3	News aggregator with a nationalist ideology	UK
Channel 4	White nationalist political figure	UK
Channel 5	White nationalist podcast	Sweden
Channel 6	White nationalist group	UK
Account 1	British nationalist account	UK
Account 2	British nationalist account	UK
Account 3	Anti-woke account	No location provided
Account 4	Alternative news account which has promoted far-right claims	No location provided

Table 1. List of Telegram channels and X accounts analysed.

One data limitation is that some relevant content has been deleted on both X and Telegram. While this makes it difficult to perform a fully exhaustive search for relevant material, the Telegram content captured during the riots and in searches on X was sufficient to perform a qualitative analysis.

Previous academic research has identified the correlation between disinformation about target groups and violence perpetrated against them in a variety of contexts and countries.[31] The disinformation outlined below often did not call explicitly for violence; however, it provided the rationale for attacks. In many cases, this content emerged in a milieu where extreme threats of violence were being discussed: for example, in a Telegram Channel which promoted neo-Nazi content designed as Channel 2 (see table below), misinformation accusing the attacker of being a Muslim continued to circulate while other members of the channel said those reading should "burn"

any buildings "housing immigrants", days before attempts by rioters to burn down two hotels housing asylum seekers.

Primary Narratives

Anti-Muslim hate appeared repeatedly throughout far-right channels, with disinformation seeking to blame the attack on Islamism based on false reports that the attacker was a Muslim. Even when confronted with evidence that this was wrong, far-right groups sought to promote anti-Muslim hate and, in some cases, promoted explicit calls for retributive violence.

A Telegram channel (Channel 1), focused on white nationalist football hooliganism with more than 19,000 subscribers, alleged on July 29 that the attacker was a "Muslim immigrant". Similar content received high levels of engagement on X. An X account which promotes British nationalist content (Account 1) with more than 100,000 followers also claimed on August 29 that a "Muslim [had] kill[ed] kids" and accused the Muslim community of silence, receiving 39,000 likes and almost 800,000 views.

At 12:30 on August 1, a reporting restriction was lifted, revealing that the attacker was a Christian of Rwandan origin who had been born in Wales.[32] However, far-right accounts on both Telegram and X repeatedly promoted disinformation to undermine this. At 21:57, Account 1 claimed that the attacker had "been radicalized recently" and stated he had "done what Allah wanted". The post, which received 14,000 likes and 1.7 million views, also alleged that the police and the government were engaged in covering up his religion. The evidence for this is an image of a supposedly forwarded message on WhatsApp from an unnamed former police officer. In total, the posts from Account 1 which promoted the disinformation that the attacker was a Muslim after this had been disproved received more than 88,000 likes; they repeatedly accused authorities of covering up the truth on the basis of their own unverified claims.

The same image was posted at 22:27 on August 1 by the administrator of a Telegram channel focused on Southport with significant white nationalist content (Channel 2). While the message on X focused on the alleged state conspiracy to hide the attacker's faith, in the white nationalist Telegram channel, it was used to further support calls to violence. On August 2, an administrator in Channel 2 also alleged that the perpetrator had attended a Southport mosque based on an unclear reading of Google Maps, using it to allege that he was a Muslim in a post that also used a dehumanising anti-black slur. This claim does not appear to have been supported by any other sources.

Another common narrative sought to claim that Muslims were the primary cause of violence in the ensuing riots, providing further support for claims that Islam is incompatible with the West and legitimising anti-Muslim violence. On Telegram, a far-right news aggregator channel (Channel 3) with more than 37,000 members claimed that a Muslim had been arrested while carrying a knife. On X, a video was posted by another account (Account 2) at 11:16 on 1 August, showing the arrest of the same individual and accusing him of being Muslim, receiving 4,600 likes and almost 230,000 views. The same claim was made by an alternative media channel with almost 130,000 followers (Account 4) which has repeatedly promoted far-right content. It described the attacker as "a migrant man of North African appearance", and implied that the violence in Southport was due to his arrest. In reality, the man arrested was not Muslim and was accused by the sentencing judge of seeking to "stir up trouble". [33]

However, disinformation related to Southport was not singularly focused on Muslims. On both X and Telegram, the attacker was repeatedly referred to as a "migrant" despite being born in Wales and growing up there. A Telegram post in a far-right channel with almost 20,000 members described him as a "knife wielding migrant" (Channel 4); another post in a channel with more than

22,000 subscribers referred to the attacker as an example of "migrant occupiers" (Channel 5). On X, an 'anti-woke' account (Account 3) also accused the attacker of being a "migrant" in three separate tweets on July 31, receiving a total of 19,000 likes and 789,000 views.

Far-right accounts also promoted disinformation that the attacker was African, promoting the idea that ethnicity and nationality are intrinsically linked. A white nationalist channel which has over 4,000 subscribers (Channel 6) described the attacker as a "state imported African", drawing on the antisemitic Great Replacement conspiracy theory.[34] Channel 4 described the perpetrator as an "African", accusing media of hiding this fact by describing him as being a "Cardiff boy" despite this being accurate; in a later post, they described him as an "African invader".

Conclusion

The events of July and August 2024 marked the high-water point for far-right violence in the UK for the past two decades. However, it is notable that anti-migrant narratives have continued to dominate British media headlines till recently. In the months since the UK riots, there has been significant anti-migrant sentiments on X - firstly targeting Indians in the US[35] and secondly targeting Muslims in relation to abuse perpetrated by gangs of British-Pakistani men.[36] Narratives which portray migrants as inherently disloyal, untrustworthy and dangerous are likely to fuel further violence.

This conclusion seeks to provide some recommendations for public stakeholders to mitigate these risks. For law enforcement, the messaging on social media was extremely complex and at times contradictory. Some channels promoted calls to violence enthusiastically, while others accused them of being a ploy to entrap far-right supporters. The post-organisational nature of the network also meant that even when channels were removed, messages continued to circulate among a loose network of supportive accounts. This was further amplified by elements of the transnational far right online[37]; these accounts were able to help drive significant disinformation narratives and support members of the British far right, both amplifying existing narratives and driving the promotion of new ones. Engagement with these accounts and the spread of their propaganda further obfuscated the likelihood of violence at specific locations.

Security service assessments of which calls to violence are likely to manifest offline will always be a fraught decision. The confusing media ecosystem outlined in the paragraph above further amplifies this. One recommendation is for continued monitoring of major far-right groups online; a number of these played a significant role. Having an understanding of the transnational element is also vital, to understand how messages spread across borders. As noted above, the UK has sought to combat post-organisational networks such as the Terrorgram Collective through a proscription order. However, even more informal networks – such as that which sprang up around Channel 1 – can arise rapidly and lack the formal nature for proscriptions. As such, proactive media monitoring coupled with close partnership with specialist organisations is vital to assess the significance of these entities.

There are also implications for other public service stakeholders and the private sector. Ofcom, the UK regulator in charge of the Online Safety Act, found a "clear link" between social media messaging and violence, and noted "uneven" platform responses.[38] For regulators seeking to hold social media accompanies to a high standard – and the companies themselves – the amorphous nature of these networks provides a similar challenge to law enforcement. Even when platforms act to remove channels or accounts, they can be rapidly re-formed. As Ofcom's full powers under the Online Safety Act are yet to enter effect, it remains to be seen their significance in reducing the noxious impact of disinformation on society.

Anti-migrant rhetoric remains common in the UK, even with the sentencing of the Southport perpetrator.[39] Media reporting on mainstream parties suggests that they are continuing to push stronger stances on migration,[40] reflecting concerns about being outflanked politically. A search for "Southport" on far-right channels on Telegram shows that it remains a focal point for promoting propaganda and attempting to build support. It is vital that all stakeholders remain vigilant about these discussions and maintain wariness about potential violence.

About the Author

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Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism in South Asia

Abdul Basit

Disinformation and conspiracy theories have long shaped extremist ideologies, but in South Asia, they are not just pathways to radicalisation; they also serve as ideological tools for extremist groups to validate their narratives and sustain violence. Keeping in view the proactive and tech-savvy nature of extremist groups, eager to learn and survive in a digitally interconnected world, as well as the weaponisation of disinformation and conspiracy theories as bait for extremist recruitment, the security and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) initiatives in South Asia face far-reaching consequences. South Asia is one of the youngest regions in the world. If regional governments do not prioritise proactive policies that channel young talents into national development, empower youth with key knowledge to delegitimise extremist ideologies, promote critical thinking and refute extremist narratives, extremist groups will continue to thrive on the vulnerabilities of the region.

Introduction

In the last few years, hyperconnectivity and decentralised flows of information have brought disinformation and conspiracy theories to centre stage.[1] Here, disinformation refers to the deliberate spread of false or inaccurate information to deceive the masses,[2] while conspiracy theories depict an event or a situation that is the result of a secret plan made by powerful people.[3] Sometimes, disinformation fuels conspiratorial extremist beliefs, and vice versa. Hence, in this article, disinformation and conspiracy theories will be used interchangeably due to their overlapping nature within the extremist milieu. They have become an integral part of violent extremists' toolkit to recruit, radicalise and incite violence, adding a new dimension to the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) work.[4]

Historically, conspiracy theories have played a crucial role in shaping extremist ideologies, serving as tools for both justification and mobilisation.[5] However, the Covid-19 pandemic was a turning point in the weaponisation of disinformation and conspiracy theories for propaganda dissemination and violent attacks. For instance, while neo-luddites carried out arson attacks in Europe, conspiratorially believing that radiation from 5G-towers spread the coronavirus,[6] the anti-vaxxer movement grew suspicious of the Covid-19 vaccinations based on misleading information.[7] Jihadist groups like the Taliban, Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) have not only weaponised conspiracy theories but also embedded them within cultural and political discourses to assert legitimacy and challenge state authority.[8] For example, the Taliban's and AQ's framing of the war on terror as a war against Islam has been a recurring theme in jihadist propaganda, invoking grievances and violence.[9] Until recently, the role of conspiracy theories in extremist ideologies remained underexplored due to a greater focus on understanding terrorism's root causes and pathways. However, the surge in attacks linked to online extremism has led terrorism scholars to explore this subject in depth.[10]

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the prevalence of disinformation and conspiracy theories in South Asia's extremist landscape and their consequences for security and PCVE initiatives. South Asia, with a median age of 28 years, is one of the youngest regions in the world. It is also home to a plethora of extremist groups trying to lure alienated youth through different strategies, including disinformation campaigns.[11] According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), around 54 percent of South Asian youth leave school without the necessary skills to secure a job by 2030. The region contributes the largest labour force to the world with an estimated 100,000 young people entering the job market every year.[12] If South Asian governments do not turn this youth bulge into an advantage, the extremist networks, hungry for their attention, will.

The first section of this study outlines the correlation of disinformation and conspiracy theories with violent extremism while using the two overlapping concepts interchangeably as both reinforce and complement each other. The second section situates the South Asian extremist landscape in that discussion before concluding it with a discussion on the implications of this concerning trend. The paper posits that at any rate, the surge in online radicalisation underscores the dangerous consequences of and the link between disinformation, conspiracy and violent extremism.[13]

Link between Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism

Recent research in terrorism studies has established the correlation between disinformation, conspiracy theories and violent extremism.[14] The rapid progress in information communication technologies has made disinformation and conspiracy theories accessible to a broader audience on the internet.[15] Violent extremists have exploited the internet's broad reach to prey on individual and collective fears, powerlessness, anxieties, uncertainties and cognitive biases, pushing disinformation and conspiracy theories as plausible explanations for their situations. In doing so, they have opportunistically prescribed violent extremism as a remedy.[16] In a way, disinformation and conspiracy theories provide simple (and unsubstantiated) answers to complex world problems.[17] Research shows that extremist content that provides a black-and-white explanation of a complex world offers clear guidance to its consumers on social hierarchies, and thus provides them a comforting (but misleading) clarity.[18]

Disinformation is a powerful radicalisation tool due to its propensity to arouse emotions, especially surprise, anxiety, anger and disgust, resulting in shares, likes and comments on social media.[19] Typically, it radicalises people who lack critical thinking, have low cognitive flexibility (the black-and-white worldview, us-versus-them mentality), experience self-uncertainty and grievances, and suffer from social exclusion.[20] Emotional aspects of disinformation also impact its speed: the stronger the feelings of anger and disgust, the faster disinformation is spread.[21]

Violent extremists proliferate disinformation and conspiracy theories through social media echo chambers, where vulnerable users consume content that corresponds to their cognitive biases, inspiring some to join online fringe communities and perpetuate such narratives, while others react violently.[22] The UK's far-right riots in August 2024 exemplified this, as the proliferation of disinformation on social media about the religious identity of the murderer[23] of three teenage girls sparked nationwide violence against migrant communities, especially Muslims.[24] Extremist views packaged through disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories are presented as irrefutable, misleading consumers to feel superior to those who are different.[25] As a result, they withdraw from the mainstream, develop a delusion of superior knowledge and reject broader perspectives, which they view as flawed or evil.[26]

The Role of Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in South Asian Extremism

In South Asia's diverse and multi-actor threat landscape, disinformation and conspiracy theories have been an integral part of extremist groups' ideological narratives and propaganda campaigns.[27] However, unlike in Western far-right movements, where disinformation and conspiracy theories may act as pathways to violent extremism, in South Asia's extremist context, they are employed as legitimacy tools. These tools serve to validate pre-existing ideological beliefs, perpetuate violence, and further harden radical attitudes rather than merely inciting them.[28]

In South Asia, conspiracy theories amplified through disinformation campaigns can be divided into three categories: anti-minority conspiracies, rumours about superpowers' intervention and interference in the region and anti-vax sentiments. Whenever disinformation proliferates on social media around these issues, intentionally or unintentionally, it sparks riots, sectarian clashes,[29] vandalism, vigilante killings and other forms of violence.[30] Extremist groups in South Asia use such opportunities to validate their worldviews as well as recruit, radicalise and justify violence.[31] In South Asian conflict zones, especially in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh – where the state-society gap is high, the trust level is low and polarisation is rampant – disinformation and

conspiracy theories serve as catalysts for violent extremism.[32] The 2024 riots in Bangladesh in the wake of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina's ouster were amplified by Hindutva groups' online disinformation campaign on social media, especially on X and WhatsApp. Hindutva groups deliberately mischaracterised political violence against Sheikh Hasina's Bangladeshi Hindu supporters, about eight percent of the country's 170 million population, as acts of communal violence.[33] The disinformation campaign, propagated through sensationalist doctored images and unrelated videos, resulted in retaliatory violence by Hindutva mobs against Muslim workers living in a shanty town in India's Ghaziabad district. The latter were accused of being Bangladeshi citizens.[34]

Individuals in South Asian conflict zones subscribing to the ideological worldview of extremist networks develop strong in-group identity and discount alternative and competing narratives that undermine in-group/out-group divisions.[35] During a crisis emanating from riots, protests, clashes and heavy-handed state crackdowns, among other factors, people of conflict-hit areas in South Asia are more susceptible to violent extremists' disinformation campaigns. In such scenarios, the in-group's survival and success is dependent on hostile action against the out-group.[36] To retain their influence and relevance in conflict zones and undermine that of the states, violent extremists try to strengthen the in-group/out-group divisions. Critically, any deviation from or questioning of the in-group's worldview is considered treason and treachery.[37]

Conspiracy Theories About Superpower Military and Economic Interventions

Since the "Afghan Jihad" of the 1980s, conspiracy theories about superpowers' military and economic interventions have been a constant feature of jihadist groups' recruitment, radicalisation and fundraising campaigns in South Asia. For instance, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 following the Saur Revolution (communist rebellion) was framed as an effort to reach the Arabian Sea's warm-water ports, i.e. the real target was not landlocked Afghanistan but Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province.[38] Similarly, after the United States (US) intervention in Afghanistan, anti-American sentiments not only fueled jihadist recruitment, funding and violence, but also gave birth to a plethora of conspiracy theories, such as the war on terror as a cover to attack Islam.[39] In spreading such conspiracies, jihadist groups gained sympathies, recruits and finances for their militant campaigns.[40] Likewise, Pakistan-backed jihadist proxies framed the war on terror and the US presence in Afghanistan as a cover to denuclearise Pakistan.[41] Subsequently, this rhetoric was employed to rationalise the policy of tolerating and supporting the "good Taliban".[42] The covert presence of American private military contractor Blackwater[43] and the arrest of the CIA contractor Raymond Davies from Lahore in 2011 lent further credence to such rhetoric.[44]

Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, China has found itself at the receiving end of conspiratorial propaganda of some jihadist and ethno-nationalist groups in the region.[45] China's economic footprint through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been targeted by groups like AQ, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) for varying reasons. For instance, a key AQ ideologue, Mufti Abu Zar al-Burmi, framed the US exit from Afghanistan as a victory for the Taliban while calling China a "new superpower" and an enemy of Islam.[46] In a video titled "Let's Disturb China", al-Burmi reminded the mujahideen "that the coming enemy of the Ummah is China, which is developing its weapons day after day to fight the Muslims".[47]

Meanwhile, ISK has targeted China's rise as a great power in its propaganda publications, generating an impression that, unlike the Western powers, Chinese global dominance will be short-lived as it lacks a decisive military edge over its Western competitors, i.e. the US and Europe.[48] For instance, the September 2022 issue of ISK's monthly flagship English-language magazine, the Voice of Khorasan, ran an article titled "China's Daydream of Imperialism" which critiqued China's global rise.[49] In that article, ISK compared the BRI with the United Kingdom (UK)'s East India Company, which facilitated British imperialism in the Indian Subcontinent. ISK referred to China's economic footprint in different Muslim countries across Asia and Africa as an effort to rob their resources.[50]

The Baloch separatists, especially BLA, have also spread numerous conspiracy theories about the BRI's flagship project, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor in Balochistan.[51] For instance, BLA conspiratorially maintains that in collusion with the Pakistani military establishment, China is stealing Balochistan's resources and furthering the pre-existing socio-economic, political and ethnic grievances of the Baloch people.[52] BLA has carried out several high-profile attacks against China in Balochistan and Karachi.[53]

Anti-Polio Narratives

Scepticism about polio vaccinations has been prevalent in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the US' May 2011 operation in Abbottabad to kill AQ chief Osama bin Laden.[54] Since then, the Taliban's propaganda against polio vaccination has hindered efforts to eliminate the polio virus in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[55] Though the Taliban have dropped their opposition to polio vaccination in recent years,[56] the polio virus persists in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[57] ISK has also targeted polio immunisation through propaganda and physical attacks.[58] In 2024, as many as 27 terrorist attacks were recorded against polio vaccinators and police teams protecting them in Pakistan.[59] Reportedly, since July 2012, around 70 health workers have been killed in terrorist attacks in Pakistan while administering polio vaccine.[60]

In 2011, the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) organised a Hepatitis B vaccination campaign with the help of a local doctor, Dr Shakil Afridi, as a cover to get the DNA samples of children living in the compound where Osama bin Laden was believed to be residing.[61] The US planned to compare the collected DNA samples with the DNA of bin Laden's sister who had lived in Boston and died in 2010, to obtain definite proof that bin Laden was indeed living in that residential compound.[62] The outcome of the Hepatitis B vaccination campaign was unclear. Unfortunately, using vaccination as a cover to gather intelligence destroyed the credibility of the polio vaccination programmes.[63]

Two months after Bin Laden's killing, the Guardian ran a story disclosing the CIA's collaboration with Shakil Afridi. Following publication of this story, the Taliban banned polio vaccinations and linked polio programmes to the war on terror and hence a threat to Islam.[64] A fatwa issued by the Taliban in June 2012 maintained, "Polio agents could also be spies as we have found in Dr Shakil Afridi's case."[65]

Concurrently, TTP also launched an aggressive anti-polio campaign, framing it as an espionage effort by the US-backed non-governmental organisations to gather intelligence. For instance, then TTP head for Swat, Mullah Fazlullah, through his radio sermons upheld that the polio eradication campaign was a "conspiracy of Jews and Christians to make Muslims impotent and stunt the growth of Muslims".[66] TTP's propaganda spread three rumours about polio immunisation. First, the group labelled health workers as CIA agents. Second, it alleged that the polio vaccination was a cover to sterilise the Muslim population. Third, the group falsely claimed that the polio vaccination was made of pig fat and hence it was not halal.[67]

Anti-Ahmadiyya Conspiracies in Pakistan

The heterodox Ahmadiyya community has been facing persecution in Pakistan due to its religious beliefs both at the state and societal levels.[68] After Pakistan's inception in 1947, Ahmadis held several high-ranking positions due to their educated backgrounds, not faith.[69] For instance, Pakistan's first foreign minister Zafrullah Khan was an Ahmadi.[70] The disproportionately high number of Ahmadis in influential positions was viewed conspiratorially by Pakistan's right-wing groups. As a result, a coalition of religious-political parties, Majlis-e-Ahrar,[71] started an agitation campaign in the 1950s, demanding the then Pakistani government to declare Ahmadis non-Muslims and remove them from key positions.[72]

The state ex-communicated Ahmadis from Islam through a constitutional amendment in 1974, paving the way for extremist groups to justify violence against them.[73] Since then, extremist groups have framed the Ahmadiyya community as a threat to Islam and Pakistan, notwithstanding that it

is only 0.22 percent of the country's 242 million population.[74] As a result, a large majority of Ahmadis have left Pakistan while those living in the country reside in ghettos or gated residences.[75] In 1984, military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq's constitutional amendments to anti-blasphemy[76] laws criminalised the Ahmadis' efforts to preach their faith, build mosques or make the call for Muslim prayers.[77] In sum, open proselytisation of the Ahmadi faith and worship became a criminal offence.[78]

During the 2000s and 2010s, TTP carried out several attacks against the Ahmadis, portraying them as enemies of Islam and hence a threat. In recent years, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a Barelvi extremist group, has embraced blasphemy activism as the mainstay of its politics.[79] The party has positioned itself as the defender of Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws and Prophet Muhammad's honour. TLP emerged from the protest movement which demanded the then Pakistani government to free Mumtaz Qadri, a police bodyguard accused of murdering former Punjab governor Salman Taseer on false blasphemy accusations.[80] Following Mumtaz Qadri's hanging in February 2016,[81] TLP registered as a political party and used blasphemy activism as one of the main planks of its politics.[82] Since then, TLP has protested any efforts by successive Pakistani governments to give the Ahmadiyya community religious freedom or amend the anti-blasphemy laws.[83] TLP, while showcasing Ahmadis as a threat to Islam and Pakistan, has popularised slogans suggesting death sentences for alleged blasphemers.[84] TLP vigilantes have ransacked the Ahmadi community's properties, worship places and graveyards across Pakistan.[85]

"Love Jihad" Conspiracy in India

The conspiratorial notion of Love Jihad refers to alleged "attempts by Muslim men to lure Hindu women into romantic relationships with the hidden aim of converting them to Islam through marriages".[86] Hindutva groups view inter-faith marriages as a weapon used by Muslims as part of their "jihad" against the Hindu faith. The term Love Jihad gained prominence in the 2000s and early 2010s, especially in the states of Kerala and Karnataka.[87] Under the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s rule, 11 out of 28 Indian states have passed anti-conversion laws to curtail the so-called Love Jihad.[88]

Critically, the Love Jihad narratives "deprive Hindu women of any agency and portray them as passive recipients of romantic advances by Muslim men.[89] They use Hindu women as tools to gain sympathies and incite Hindu men to protect them through politicised emotions."[90] For instance, in July 2023, the Global Hindu Heritage Foundation, a US-based Hindutva group, published a statement about Love Jihad alleging that "Muslim youth are groomed to act like Hindu, dress like Hindu, look like Hindu, adopt Hindu names and spend liberally to attract the Hindu Girls. Lot of money is pledged to the Muslim youth to trap and marry and convert (them) to Islam."[91]

Such narratives also urge Hindu families to protect their daughters and women while calling for the restoration of family and community honour.[92] They are intrinsic to broader Hindutva majoritarian and patriarchal structures and include appeals to Hindu males to protect their women from Love Jihad.[93]

Implications

In a digitally interconnected world marked by rapid technological developments, extremist groups have been successful in negotiating the shifting sands through mutual learning and resilience.[94] South Asian extremist groups have employed disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories for ideological validation rather than using them as potential pathways towards violent extremism. It is important to mention that during crisis situations in South Asia, disinformation and conspiracy theories have occasionally incited violence.[95] However, this dynamic can change quickly as South Asian extremist groups would learn to weaponise disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories to recruit, radicalise and fuel violence. This trend will particularly affect new generations of South Asian militants who are frequent consumers of social media for information and communication.

Simultaneously, the permeation of disinformation and conspiracy theories within the South Asian extremist milieu, beyond ideological legitimisation, would lower the threshold (entry barriers) of radicalisation. However, it does not mean vulnerable individuals falling for such campaigns will almost always perpetrate violence. Nonetheless, they will keep online cultures sustaining these groups in the digital space alive. Extremist groups adopt a variety of frames and tools to lure vulnerable individuals into their folds, such as memes, jokes and cartoon characters.[96] In doing so, they normalise violent narratives while evading content moderation campaigns, especially during crisis situations. The troll armies of extremist actors try to target online fence sitters with highly emotive content to stir their emotions and evince reactions through likes, shares and comments.[97] During crisis situations, when the truth is hard to ascertain and emotions are high, people consume and process information less critically and can fall for extremist narratives.[98] Unfortunately, the lack of adequate content moderation on social media of South Asian local and regional languages, combined with heavy reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) tools, have facilitated the unhindered proliferation of disinformation campaigns.[99] The tumultuous power transitions in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have also brought into sharp focus the dangers of disinformation campaigns by malignant actors during a crisis.

Finally, the weaponisation of disinformation and conspiracy theories by South Asia extremist networks will have far-reaching consequences for PCVE initiatives which are over reliant on kinetic interventions. In the past, extremist networks in South Asia have shown digital resilience in the face of deplatforming, account suspensions and content removal by social media companies.[100] They have persisted in the digital space with a great degree of success.[101] On the contrary, the strategic communication of South Asian states in the digital space has left a lot to be desired. Effective legislations against disinformation campaigns and the incorporation of social media components into non-kinetic interventions in PCVE frameworks are crucial. There is also a need to be responsive and accommodative towards youth who are searching for answers about their identity, sense of belonging and purpose in life. If respective governments in South Asia fail to satisfy youth on these questions and fail to resolve their issues by strengthening state-society bond and citizen-centric policies, governance and development, extremist networks will show them an alternative way through violence.

Conclusion

In South Asia's ever-evolving extremist landscape, disinformation and conspiracy theories validate extremist narratives and sometimes foment violence as well. The diffusion of internet and communication technologies in South Asia's peripheral areas where regional government's control is tenuous at best, means violent extremist networks will continue to harness disinformation and conspiracy theories as important components in their toolkits to prey on grievances related to a sense of belonging and identity. The success of extremist groups with the youth population is directly proportional to the magnitude of anger and grievances that youth may have against their respective governments. Hence, the South Asian states will have to match security responses against this threat with adequate people-centric governance and development. At the same time, they will have to spread digital literacy through public awareness campaigns to alert the masses about the perils of disinformation campaigns.

PCVE initiatives in South Asia will have to incorporate strategies to counter disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories by extremist networks as part of their non-kinetic interventions. Promoting digital literacy, critical thinking, introducing youth engagement policies as well as enhanced social media monitoring are crucial in securing youth against extremist conspiracy theories and disinformation.

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The Question of Misinformation-Triggered Violence in Singapore: The Interplay between Misinformation, Faultlines and Violence

Gulizar Haciyakupoglu and Yasmine Wong

This article explores the link between misinformation, faultlines, and the escalation to violence, in the context of Singapore. Singapore has not experienced misinformation-triggered violence to the extent seen in other parts of the world, despite instances of misinformation tapping on existing faultlines. However, the article argues that the absence of cases of misinformation-triggered violence and the presence of laws and policies to prevent violence, does not necessarily mean that there is no risk for Singapore. The article also highlights the importance of considering violence in a broader sense to include psychological violence.

Introduction

Online misinformation has kindled violence in different parts of the world in recent years. In 2024, following the murder of three girls in the United Kingdom (UK), misinformation about the attacker, including a fake name and allegations on his background, found traction online and stirred violence in the country.[1] Some extreme right wing accounts were among those that called people to join the protests.[2] India has also had various cases of misinformation aggravated violence over the years. In 2013, the Muzaffarnagar riots in Uttar Pradesh, sparked by misinformation claiming a Muslim mob was killing Hindu youth, resulted in deaths and displacement.[3] In 2018, fake videos where children are abducted from the streets kindled child abduction rumours, which led to lynches and mob attacks.[4]

In most of these cases, the misinformation appealed to existing faultlines in the society and led to tensions between different groups. While some view misinformation (and disinformation) as a symptom of societal faultlines, the relationship between the two is mutually reinforcing. Misinformation and disinformation (dis/misinformation from here onwards)[5] have been identified as a "meta-risk", which impacts perceptions of other risks (e.g., climate change), and thus how these risks are managed.[6] Definitionally, misinformation refers to the spread of false content that is shared without knowing it is false while disinformation is "intentionally false and designed to cause harm".[7] The effects of misinformation and disinformation however, can be similar, even without strategic intent.

Singapore has had its own share of misinformation circulation over the years. Although some of this misinformation targeted the faultlines in the country, they have not sparked physical violence to the extent seen in other parts of the world. Singapore has various levers in place to keep violence, including that fomented by misinformation, at bay. However, the lack of cases does not mean an absent threat of violence. Besides, some cases of misinformation (as well as hate) targeting faultlines have also raised the question if more attention should be paid to psychological violence[8] when exploring dis/misinformation-triggered violence in the Singapore context. This article explores this question as well as the relationship between dis/misinformation, faultlines and violence with attention to dis/misinformation cases in Singapore.

Misinformation and Violence: Cases from Around the Globe

The incitement of hate, whether through disinformation, misinformation or hate speech, can be a predictor of violence.[9] At the same time, not all acts of hate lead to violence and hate is not the only instigator of violence. The cases explored below illustrate the interplay and interconnectedness between hate (speech) and dis/misinformation, where "verbal attacks and distortion of facts" are employed to effectively "incite violence and discrimination against specific populations".[10] These distortions and attacks occur along existing societal faultlines and practices of othering (i.e., anti-immigrant sentiments, Islamophobia etc.).

From July 30 to August 5, 2024, riots broke out across many parts of the UK, "led by the far right and fuelled by anti-immigrant hate".[11] In Rotherham, rioters attempted to set a hotel housing migrants on fire.[12] These racially motivated instances of violence were fuelled by dis/misinformation on social media surrounding the fatal stabbings at a children's dance class on July 29, speculating that the suspect was an illegal migrant.[13] Social media analysis of the mobilisation behind the riots revealed a network of far-right influencers amplifying dis/misinformation on their platforms, which then proliferated across social media platforms, reaching a sizable audience.[14] Some claims portrayed this audience as "racists and terrorists", while others hypothesised that they are "left-behind communities whose legitimate anger has been warped by the far right".[15] Both examples point to the resonance of certain narratives (in this case anti-immigrant narratives) among communities with deeply held beliefs about an "othered" group.

Dis/misinformation has also been linked to mob killings in India, where WhatsApp vigilante lynchings are spurred by dis/misinformation on a range of issues from cow theft and other bovine-related misdemeanours to child kidnappings.[16] The content often included Islamophobic hate speech, religious nationalist propaganda and misogyny.[17] Widespread dis/misinformation in the Indian instant messaging and social media spheres cannot, however, be attributed solely to digital illiteracy and ignorance. Research has found that those who participate in the spread of dis/misinformation and the mobilisation to violence have a range of digital skill sets – the common factor between them being "deeply held and widespread prejudices… against minority groups".[18] The anti-Muslim statements expressed by elements of the current ruling party of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have potentially created a lucrative ground for such prejudices to flourish.[19]

There have also been well recorded instances of discursive practices combining hate speech and dis/misinformation against minority groups in the Rwandan and Yugoslavian genocides of the past and more recently, the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar.[20] Additionally, disinformation can also be weaponised by extremists across the ideological spectrum.[21] According to a 2021 study, the extreme right-wing "utilises and benefits from disinformation campaigns more than any other group".[22] In the lead-up to the United States (US) Capitol riots in 2021, for example, disinformation was amplified online, reinforcing conspiracy theories and divisions along partisan lines.[23]

Faultlines and Dis/Misinformation in Singapore

In 2019, the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) released a study on faultlines in Singapore that listed race, religion, immigration, class/socio-economic status (SES), and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender)[24] as faultlines in Singapore.[25] While the report was not focused on dis/misinformation, misinformation concerning these faultlines could potentially create polarisation and division in society. There have been various instances of misinformation appealing to the faultlines listed in the IPS report in the past. The Ministry of Digital Development and Information's (MDDI) 2024 Online Safety Poll found that there has been a 13% jump in the witnessing of race and religion-related content that can spark tension within society, as well as a 19% increase in violent content compared to the 2023 survey.[26] While the survey focused on online harms and the content in question may not necessarily be misinformation, this finding exposes a troubling trend. There has been some race-related

misinformation in the past, including those claiming that the people accused of the Orchard Towers murder received a "preferential treatment because of their Chinese ethnicity", and misinformation claiming that the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS) and the Standard Chartered Bank in Singapore were hiring foreigners as opposed to locals.[27] The latter instance brought into focus the intersection between existing class, immigration, and racial faultlines in society.

On religion, intersecting with scams, a fake Facebook account using Singaporean Archbishop William Goh's name and photo solicited donations online.[28] More importantly, dis/misinformation concerning major geo-political conflicts can appeal to sentiments in Singapore, including Israel's ongoing operations in Gaza that might tap on religious sentiments.[29]

On gender, there have been various cases of deepfakes in Singapore, including those targeting public-facing individuals and women. While women were not the only targets, some studies suggest that they are at greater risk of being targeted by image-based sexual abuse.[30] A Singapore-based study also revealed that more than half of the youth participants see the "sexualisation/objectification of women" as "a negative effect" of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI).[31] A recent case of deepfakes targeting women involved the creation and circulation of deepfake nude photos of women studying at the Singapore Sports School by male students.[32] Recent technological advancements have made it easier to manipulate audio, video and images and make the end product more realistic, although the targeting of women with doctored content is not new and does not always involve sophisticated technologies. In early 2020, a doctored ("digitally altered") photo of a banner which portrayed Member of Parliament Tin Pei Ling in revealing clothes with an edited message encouraging residents to vote for the People's Action Party (PAP) circulated online.[33]

Despite potentially deepening fissures along identity lines, these cases of dis/misinformation did not necessarily escalate to physical violence, unlike the aforementioned cases in other countries. While the question of if and who believes such misinformation and acts on them is one dimension of the issue, the reasons why such misinformation did not lead to violence partly has to do with the preventive measures in place in Singapore.

Where is Violence in Singapore?

Dis/misinformation appealing to Singaporeans have circulated in information spheres. However, many instances of such dis/misinformation have not led to protests or physical violence as defined in examples cited from cases around the globe. This could be due to the misinformation narratives not being strongly compelling; consumers of such misinformation not falling for them for various reasons; or those who fell for them not having a strong urge to initiate violence. Besides, Singapore has various laws and policies to combat misinformation, such as the Protections from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), and to ensure social harmony, the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) and Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA). Moreover, there is also the Public Order Act to regulate "public assemblies and processions".[34] Fittingly, in response to the 2024 misinformation-triggered riots in the UK, the Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam pointed to Singapore's policies and laws that are designed to "pre-empt such a situation from arising" and that "give priority to law and order".[35]

A lack of experience with significant cases of misinformation (or disinformation) triggered riots and violence does not mean, however, that there has not been or there is no such risk for Singapore. Some cases of disinformation in the past have allegedly sought to create panic or violence. For instance, Minister Shanmugam, speaking on misinformation alleging that a foreign worker "committed suicide in Singapore because of a lack of money and work", argued that such false information is spread "to create panic [...] unhappiness, anger, and hopefully violence".[36] Although the number of such cases is limited, it cannot be assumed going forward, that Singapore will always be safe from dis/misinformation-fuelled violence and that the country's laws can keep harms at bay at all times.

There have also been cases where harmful narratives came close to sparking violence. Singapore has had cases of self-radicalisation triggered by consumption of online extremist narratives. While such content cannot necessarily be classified as dis/misinformation, the people consuming these narratives are likely misinformed. The latest string of arrests in recent years concerning radicalisation reflect a shift in extremist spaces online – self-radicalised individuals are younger,[37] and they consume a variety of extremist narratives, including far-right discourses.[38] In late 2024 and early 2025, three people were subject to Singapore's Internal Security Act due to self-radicalisation.[39] Among them, an 18-year-old Singaporean who subscribed to "violent far-right extremist ideologies", "search[ed] for and consum[ed] extremist online content" and considered attacking Malays and Muslims in Singapore.[40] The two other cases demonstrated the influence of global conflicts on people living or working in Singapore. A 56-year-old Singaporean was also self-radicalised upon consuming online content on the Israel-Hamas war, in addition to a 34-year-old Malaysian national who consumed pro-Islamic State (IS) content online. [41]

Many articles on dis/misinformation consider the societal threats dis/misinformation may pose and some focus on the exploitation of faultlines by an external actor to instigate societal violence. While dis/misinformation tapping on faultlines like race, class and immigration may not result in violent protests in Singapore, online debates that follow may feature hate and discrimination against particular groups and are indicative of potential fissures in social cohesion. For instance, anti-Indian sentiments rampant in online discourses during the pandemic exposed the intersection of race and nationality as social divides in Singapore.[42] If not adequately safeguarded against, these fissures in social cohesion and the widening of faultlines may bring about the risk of violence, including psychological violence.

Beyond violence in its more physical manifestations (i.e., extremist attacks etc.), there is also psychological violence that needs to be taken into account when analysing dis/misinformation-triggered violence, including in the Singapore context. Fittingly, while focusing on society, experts should not forget that it is individuals who form society. Taking psychological harm into consideration is key to approaching evolving harms in the information and digital spheres, which are often overlooked for lacking physicality.[43] In the cases of deepfakes, for example, the consequences include psychological trauma, the withdrawal of participation in digital spaces and reputational damages.[44] In her analysis of violence against women in politics, Mona Lena Krook argues for a typology of violence that covers "traditional understandings of violence (physical, sexual, and economic)" and also psychological and "semiotic violence".[45] This can also be applied to dis/misinformation-linked violence against other identity groups, where hate and dis/misinformation targeting identity faultlines can create hostile environments for certain groups of people.

Furthermore, on the use of deepfake nudes targeting women in Singapore, for instance, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) has used "gender-based violence"[46] as a framework of analysis, adding a layer of nuance to "technology-facilitated sexual violence"[47] which describes the medium of violence. Indeed, such an intersection of dis/misinformation and misogyny should be analysed for its centrality to, and indication of, societal change and development. More specifically, it should be examined as a phenomenon that intertwines interpersonal violence[48] with structural violence against women more broadly. This is especially true given that much of the attention on deepfakes focuses on their potential political dangers, while many deepfakes are "used to target women".[49]

Conclusion

Dis/misinformation as well as hate speech do not thrive in a vacuum. Many appeal to faultlines existing in a society and kindle violence and unrest under specific conditions. This article attempted to explore the link between faultlines, dis/misinformation and violence within the context of Singapore. Where hate can be a precursor to violence (here we embrace a wide definition of violence as argued above),

it is essential to monitor the spread of dis/misinformation and more generally, to manage the faultlines it might exploit. Accordingly, the countermeasures required are not limited to those that target dis/misinformation, such as media literacy, but also include those that seek to mend faultlines, such as civil society and government initiatives towards racial and religious harmony.

Singapore has multiple countermeasures targeting dis/misinformation and the aforementioned faultlines. In addition to the creation of new countermeasures and the improvement of existing ones against the changing threat and technological landscapes, the link between the measures targeting faultlines and misinformation could be strengthened through regular exchanges between civil society, government and industry groups driving these initiatives. Furthermore, experts can question the presence of dis/misinformation-triggered psychological violence in cases where physical violence is absent, acknowledging that society is a group formed by individuals. Accordingly, future research could further unpack the relationship between misinformation and violence, taking the wider definition of violence into account.

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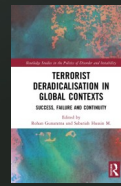[49] Hao, "Deepfake porn is ruining women's lives."

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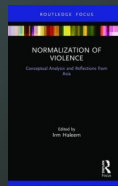
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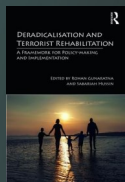
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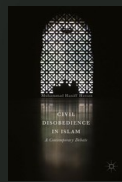
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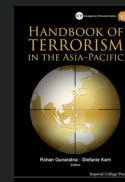
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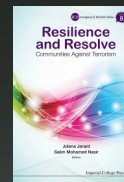
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