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MENA-Based, Far-Right and Far-Left Extremist Groups: A Date-Based Analysis

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Executive Summary

This study identifies symbolically significant dates for extremist groups based in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as for far right and far left groups located around the world. Given the high frequency of terrorist attacks worldwide, identifying useful patterns based on the dates of their past occurrences of political violence remains a challenge for developing effective tracking and response. This report uses Google Trends scores and Nexis Uni data to identify important dates for extremist groups based on the largest spikes in online views and international news items.

The report concludes that technology companies should combine symbolically significant dates into their algorithms for detecting hate speech by groups. The mention of dates that have elevated public attention in the past could serve as useful indicators for future acts of violence, extremist messaging or other events critical to such groups. Algorithms should be refined to assess attention spikes and be updated on a regular basis. They should be disaggregated for lone actors and extremist groups and entities, as the two produce distinct patterns related to attention spikes. Any changes in events associated with attention spikes should be evaluated against proto-state definitional characteristics, as those criteria serve as indicators of the goals and violent activities posed by extremist groups.

Key Findings:

- Dates associated with extremist events are important for attracting online and offline attention in ways that reinforce the perception that such groups appear as lasting entities, guide the beliefs and behaviours of followers and predict future events.
- Key dates for MENA-based extremist groups tend to be those associated with the six definitional characteristics of a proto-state: group-based ideology, lethal attacks, territorial control, population control, governance, and capacity to enter into alliances with other states or other non-state groups.
- Dates associated with the prediction of future attacks for MENA groups are those involving events linked to ideology. Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, are the dates that have attracted the greatest number of high-profile attacks over time.
- Symbolic dates associated with attention spikes for far-right groups tended to focus on issues of governance, population control, and alliance building. Those associated with far-right lone actors, however, emphasized lethal attacks and an ideological project.
- Only one date focused on the far right's insistence on territorial control, and that incident dated back to 2014.

- Symbolic dates associated with far-left groups mainly addressed issues of governance and population control. Like the far right, the far-left groups had only one date that involved issues of territorial control.
- In the last five years, events corresponding to online attention spikes are more associated with far-right groups than far-left groups.
- Spikes in global news items mostly focus on dates associated with the activities of MENA-based groups, followed by far-right groups and then far-left groups. A likely reason is that extremist groups in the MENA region have produced more lethal attacks, including ones that cross national borders, while the far right and far left tend to be more localised and less violent in their activities.
- Far-right groups are far more likely to link their contemporary events to historically significant dates associated with their causes than far-left groups.

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1 Introduction

Events by terrorist groups and lone actors occur every day. The Global Terrorism Database, for example, reports that the Islamic State (IS) alone carried out 6,451 attacks from its inception in 2014 until 2018.¹ Even after its territorial losses between 2017 and 2019, the group's official newsletter *al-Naba* claimed that IS had committed 1,414 attacks in the first half of 2021 alone.² Groups located in the MENA region, however, account for only a portion of global terror attacks. A 2020 Center for Strategic and International Studies report, for example, found that “the United States faces a growing terrorism problem”, with far-right terrorism “significantly outpac[ing] terrorism from other types of perpetrators, including from far-left networks and individuals inspired by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.”³ With the high frequency of terrorist attacks worldwide, identifying useful patterns based on the dates of past occurrences remains a challenge for developing effective responses. The fact that groups change their names, leaders, alliances, messaging strategies, methods and platforms adds to the challenge.

Nevertheless, the search for key dates for extremist groups should remain a priority for a variety of reasons. First, symbolically significant dates can prompt elevated levels of public attention. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan publicly explained why at the 1985 American Bar Association. Bemoaning the fact that media networks had provided a week's worth of coverage on the daily developments involving a Shi'ite Muslim group hijacking Trans World Airlines flight 847, both explained that media attention serves as “oxygen” to terrorism groups.⁴ In the contemporary environment, extremist groups capitalise on symbolism to magnify the audience for their messaging through a combination of their own independent media systems, online platforms and traditional news outlets.

Second, symbolically significant dates can strengthen the collective identity of extremist groups.⁵ Extremist groups often refer to past glories or past wrongs experienced by members and supporters to underscore the belief that that their collectives are not transitory. The media-based campaigns of MENA-based groups, for example, often reference battles and martyred fighters dating back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad.⁶ The historical framework implies that a

1 START (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism), 2022, *Global Terrorism Database 1970-2020*, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

2 Ayse D. Lokmanoglu, Carol K. Winkler, Monerah Al Mahmoud, Kayla McMinimy & Katherine Kountz, “Textual Messaging of ISIS's al-Naba and the Context Drivers That Correspond to Strategic Changes,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, August 7, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2109245>.

3 Seth Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, “The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States,” CSIS - Center for Strategic & International Studies, June 17, 2020, 1, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>.

4 Margaret Thatcher, Speech to American Bar Association, July 15, 1985, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106096>; Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Bar Association,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, July 8, 1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-annual-convention-american-bar-association>.

5 Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Québécois,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383799>.

6 For examples of how extremist groups use past glories to establish their sense of timeless identity, see Carol Winkler and Kareem El Damanhoury, *Proto-State Media Systems: The Digital Rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS*, New York: Oxford UP, 2022; and Jeffrey R. Halverson, H. L. Goodall, Jr., and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.

group can overcome obstacles and eventually achieve its objectives. If successful, potential recruits may be more likely to join entities that they see as resilient in the face of outside pressures.

Third, symbolically significant dates can inspire and reinforce the beliefs and behaviours of extremist actors. Dates can serve as audience cues for societal narratives by recalling past events. Potential recruits, current members, supporters and even the groups' enemies can identify with certain characters and model their own beliefs and behaviours after those enacted and reinforced in the narratives.⁷

Finally, in certain cases, symbolically significant dates can serve as predictors of future extremist events. Anniversaries associated with earlier successes can portend future extremist activity, as they can serve as points of inspiration. There can be no doubt that a date's capacity to capture public attention, facilitate recruitment of like-minded members and guide beliefs and behaviours all help to explain how and why such patterns emerge. An early example of this phenomena was al-Qaeda's annual video release celebrating the anniversary of its September 11 attacks in 2001. An even more important question harder to answer is "which dates across the broader landscape are most likely to correlate with future attacks?"

This study identifies symbolically important dates for extremist groups based in the MENA region, on the far right and on the far left. It builds on the early insight offered by Weimann and Winn that a critical link exists between contemporary terrorist events and standards of newsworthiness in foreign news.⁸ It also draws upon and adds to previous work by Winkler and Damanhoury who offered an analysis of groups based only in the MENA region that connected attention spikes associated with newsworthiness to events associated with definitional characteristics of proto-states.⁹

7 Peter Wignell, Sabine Tan, and Kay L. O'Halloran, "Under the Shade of AK47s: A Multimodal Approach to Violent Extremist Recruitment Strategies for Foreign Fighters," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 10, no. 3 (September 2, 2017): 429–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2017.1319319>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The War between ISIS and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* 20, no. 1 (2014): 1–11.

8 Gabriel Weimann and Conrad Winn, "Theater of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism | Office of Justice Programs" (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1994), <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/theater-terror-mass-media-and-international-terrorism>. The foreign newsworthy standards that Weimann and Winn use in their analysis are based on Galtung and Ruge's widely cited study (Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge, "The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers," *Journal of Peace Research* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 1965): 64–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336500200104>). Updates on standards of newsworthiness for the online environment include: Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill, "What Is News? Galtung and Ruge Revisited," *Journalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (January 1, 2001): 261–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700118449>; and Deirdre O'Neill and Tony Harcup, "What Is News?: News Values Revisited (Again)," *Journalism Studies*, March 1, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193>.

9 Winkler and Damanhoury, *Proto-State Media Systems*. The definition of proto-states used in this analysis, the method for determining online and offline attention spikes and the examples provided in the MENA group section of this report were first reported in Winkler and Damanhoury, *Proto-State Media Systems*. This report presents those findings and expands upon them by examining the same analytical measures for far-right and far-left groups, as well as MENA-based items circulated within US governmental agencies.

2 Method

To analyse what dates were associated with the actions of extremist groups corresponded to attention spikes, we relied on Google Trends scores to assess online viewership and Nexis Uni data to assess international news items. A Google Trends score normalises web searches performed using Google to assess relative levels of interest in a topic over time. It compares online searches for a topic in relation to other search terms over time on a scale of 0 to 100. Google Trends scores are not indicators of the total number of searches, as those could increase, decrease or stay the same even as the Google Trends score increases. Here, we searched Google Trends scores for the name of the extremist group or the name of the lone actor in most cases. When multiple groups were present, we examined both names of the groups present in isolation and/or we assessed the Google Trends score for the event names (for example, the Unite the Right rally or the January 6th assault on the US Capitol). When a group changed its name over time, we examined each of its multiple iterations (such as ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State). When no group took responsibility for the incident, we searched for the name of the individual perpetrator or the name of the incident (such as the London Underground bombing).

To determine what, if any, dates related to attention spikes involving the names of MENA extremist groups, we examined Nexis Uni data from 2013 to 2020 that mentioned “Qaeda”, “Qaida”, “AQ”, “ISIS”, “ISIL” or “Daesh” to find the largest spikes in international news items. We charted the resulting data by year and month. Then we used the months where spikes occurred to search Google Trends scores for the same months. After identifying the days when the spikes occurred, we identified events associated with the spikes by qualitatively analysing new items occurring on or around the same time period.¹⁰

To identify key dates associated with far-right extremist groups, we tested the following list of far-right groups: Proud Boys, The Base, Atomwaffen Division, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Incels, QAnon, Blood & Honour, Combat 18, Nordic Resistance Movement, Order of Nine Angles, NSC-131, National Action, Feuerkrieg Division, Generation Identity and Sonnenkrieg Division. We also analysed lone actors linked to far-right violence, including Andres Behring Breivik, Dylann Storm Roof, Peyton Gendron, Philip Manshaus, Robert Bowers, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, Patrick Wood Crusius and John Timothy Earnest.¹¹ We assessed the attention to the groups and individuals by examining when Google Trends scores spiked to 100 for the name of each of the groups or individuals over the past five years. In the three cases of the Christchurch shooting, the El Paso shootings and the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, we relied on the event/place name rather than an individual’s name to search for Google Trends spikes. We followed up on each spike derived from the five-year analysis with

¹⁰ We also inserted key dates involving MENA-based groups that circulated between US government agencies that produced a Google Trends score of 100 for the group name, lone actor or event in the 30-day period around the incident.

¹¹ We also identified key dates involving far-right groups circulating amongst US government agencies that prompted a Google Trends score of 100 for the group, lone actor or event name within 30 days of the event.

an examination based on thirty days to identify the specific day when attention spiked. We then conducted a Nexis Uni analysis of the month that included the dates before and after the date-based spike identified in the Google Trends analysis to determine if news items mentioning the group, individual, event or place name also increased. Cases where spikes occurred only offline or online were excluded to narrow in on the dates most likely to acquire symbolic meaning for the groups.

To assess the left-wing extremist groups, we examined the Animal Liberation Front, Antifa, Black Bloc, Black Liberation Army, Black Panther Party, Communist Party USA, Democratic Socialists of America, Earth Liberation Front, Independent Media Center, Jane's Revenge, John Brown Gun Club, Not Fucking Around Coalition, Rainbow Coalition, Redneck Revolt, Weather Underground and the Youth Liberation Front. We used the same process described above in relation to the far right.

To track recurrent patterns at work within the MENA-based, far-right and far-left groups, we used Winkler and Damanhoury's attention model. Their work examined the events of MENA-based extremist groups in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, discovered what events produced attention spikes for both online audiences and international news outlets and explored whether the events aligned with six definitional components of a proto-state. The criteria for qualifying as a proto-state are:

- (1) ... the presence of an ideological project (Islamist; far-right, far-left, etc.)
- (2) a pattern of committing acts of violence against local, regional, national, and/or international governments;
- (3) temporary control over territory of at least 100 square kilometers;
- (4) temporary authority over a population of at least 1,000 people;
- (5) at least a temporary alternative governance system; and
- (6) the capacity to enter relations with state and other proto-state actors.¹²

We assessed whether the events of far-right and far-left groups corresponded to definitional characteristics in general, rather than relying on a strict adherence to the standard. For example, we assessed far-right and far-left events associated with efforts at controlling some territory regardless of whether the group had fully achieved control over at least 100 square kilometres.

To determine if recent events by the extremist groups corresponded to dates that could serve as historical cues, we identified key moments that aligned with the ideological perspectives of the groups or attacks claimed to be inspired by earlier events. We did not include dates for the MENA-based groups, as their history dates back hundreds of years and their calendar does not correspond to the Gregorian calendar.

As we present the study's findings, we begin by reporting some overarching conclusions about the full dataset. Then we provide a more in-depth analysis of examples that demonstrate the patterns related to the three subsections of extremist groups.

¹² Winkler and Damanhoury, 8.

3 A Date-Based Analysis of Extremist Groups

Overall

Across the MENA-based, far-right and far-left groups, this study identified 81 calendar dates as “symbolically significant” in that they corresponded with attention spikes both online and offline. Some 49 of these events related to groups based in the MENA region, 23 to groups on the far right and nine to groups on the far left. The lower level of symbolically significant dates associated with the far left can likely be explained by the lower number of violent events that such groups have perpetrated over the past five years.

The number and level of attention spikes for online searches and international news items also differed by group type. Over the last five years, for example, online attention spikes were higher for far-right than far-left groups. Further, higher numbers of global news items focused on dates associated with the activities of MENA-based groups, followed by the far right and then the far left in descending order. The reasons for such differences may be that extremist groups in the MENA region perpetrated more lethal attacks and acts of violence that posed a threat beyond national borders, while those of the far-right and far-left groups tended to be more localised within national boundaries and less violent.

Far-right groups were also far more likely than far-left groups to link their contemporary events to historically significant dates associated with their causes. Far-right groups often chose to time their events according to high profile moments in the past associated with Nazi Germany and the Confederacy in the US civil war. With many of the far-right groups operating as newly formed collectives (or offshoots of earlier censored or banned groups), the need to solidify the identity of the group to its membership may have served as a paramount concern. Far-left groups, by contrast, tended to focus on a wide range of concerns that differed based on the cause of the extremist group, such as abortion rights, police brutality, animal rights, climate change, environmental degradation and so on. The broad set of concerns of each had different historical origins making each only suitable for a more diffuse pattern of identity formation.

MENA-Based Groups

As previously noted, significantly symbolic dates for MENA-based extremist groups tend to be those associated with the six definitional characteristics of a proto-state.¹³ An example of the first definitional characteristic – the presence of an ideological project – is December 25, a date that MENA-based groups use to underscore the distinction

¹³ For these and other examples of MENA-based group event dates that sparked attention levels, see Winkler and Damanhoury, 113–47.

between their Muslim-based ideologies and Christianity. On Christmas Day in 2009, for example, Nigerian assailant and al-Qaeda member Umar Farouk attempted to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight travelling to Detroit, Michigan. Farouk successfully carried the bomb through airports in Yemen, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and the Netherlands before a technical malfunction prevented its full detonation in American airspace.¹⁴ By the time al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the planned attack, global media outlets had quadrupled their number of news items mentioning al-Qaeda. The Google Trends score associated with online searches for al-Qaeda also soared. For individuals in 16 countries who conducted such online searches, the Google Trends score moved from 21 on Christmas Day to 75 on December 26 to the maximum peak of 100 on the day al-Qaeda claimed responsibility.

Six years later, Rizwan Farouk and Tashfeen Malik, apparently inspired by IS media, shot 14 people attending a Christmas party and training session at the San Bernardino County Public Health Department in California.¹⁵ News items mentioning IS spiked 71% the day of the attack and another 50% the day following the attack. The Google Trends score tracking the online searches that occurred for IS in 284 countries also experienced a surge, from 73 the day before the attack to a peak score of 100 on the day after the incident.

Finally, in 2016, an IS-inspired young man, Anis Amri, hijacked a large tractor and ploughed it into a Berlin Christmas market next to a church, killing twelve and injuring around 50 others. Individual searches for IS on the day of the Berlin market attack corresponded with a 30-point increase in the Google Trends score.

MENA-based groups also relied on dates associated with the second definitional characteristic of the proto-state: a pattern of committing acts of violence against local, regional, national and/or international governments. The most noteworthy date in terms of attention spikes was the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. Al-Qaeda militants attacked the Pentagon in the District of Columbia and the World Trade Center towers in New York City, as well as downing a hijacked flight in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. The resulting 2,996 deaths surpassed those of any previous attack on US soil. International news items mentioning al-Qaeda jumped to around 20,000 in the two days following the attack and Google Trends scores spiked to 100.¹⁶

An example of a symbolic date associated with the third definitional characteristic – territorial control – is June 10. Iraqi parliamentary spokesperson Osama al-Nujaifi announced that Mosul, the second

14 For additional information on the attack, see *Why Did Security Checks Fail to Spot Explosives?* CNN, December 27, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/12/27/airline.attack.qanda/index.html>; Anahad O'Connor and Eric Schmitt, "Terror Attempt Seen as Man Tries to Ignite Device on Jet," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/26/us/26plane.html>; "Passenger Lights Explosives on Airplane," CBS News, December 29, 2009, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/passenger-lights-explosives-on-airplane/>.

15 For more information, see Steve Almasy, Kyung Lah, and Alberto Moya, "At Least 14 People Killed in Shooting in San Bernardino; Suspect Identified," CNN, December 3, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/02/us/san-bernardino-shooting/index.html>; "Everything We Know about the San Bernardino Terror Attack Investigation so Far," *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-san-bernardino-shooting-terror-investigation-htmlstory.html>.

16 For additional details, see the following press accounts: "9/11 and After," *The New York Times*, [n.d.], <https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/911-anniversary>; "Inside 9/11: The Day That Never Ends," CNN, [n.d.], <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2016/09/us/inside-9-11-the-day-that-never-ends/>; "Remembering 9/11," Fox News, [n.d.], <https://www.foxnews.com/category/us/terror/september-11>.

largest city in Iraq, had fallen to IS militants on June 10, 2014.¹⁷ Global news items mentioning IS in Arabic news outlets spiked by 122% on the day of al-Nujaifi's announcement and by another 59% the following day. The jump in English outlet news items was even higher, jumping 452% on the day of the announcement and another 219% of the day after the territorial proclamation. The relative number of online searches for IS also rose as individuals located in 70 countries searched on Google for IS. For those searching in English, the Google Trends score jumped from 1 on the day before the announcement to 20 on the day IS took Mosul to 37 on the day after the declaration. For those searching in Arabic, the scores rose from 20 to 97 to 100 over the same three-day period.

A key date associated with the fourth definitional characteristic – population control – was May 11. Following the lead of Chechen rebels, the future leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi posted a five-minute video online on May 11, 2004, showing the beheading of Nicholas Berg, an American independent contractor in Iraq.¹⁸ The violent act demonstrated that the group had control over the entire population in Iraq regardless of the individual's country of origin. The video received more than 15 million views before its removal. International news stories mentioning al-Qaeda rose by over 30% on the day of Berg's beheading, followed the next day by another almost 70% hike. The relative number of internet searches for al-Qaeda also grew, moving from the low 60s in the two days before to 100 on the day of the video's release.

Perhaps the most noteworthy example of a date associated with the fifth definitional characteristic – governance – was June 30. On June 30, 2014, IS proclaimed itself as the long-awaited caliphate prophesied in Islamic religious texts.¹⁹ Global news items mentioning IS increased by 55% over the next month beginning two days after the caliphate announcement, followed by a heightened, sustained level of media attention on the group in the months ahead. The relative number of online searches by individuals for IS also surged, with the Google Trends score moving from 49 the day before the announcement to 60 on the day of the proclamation to 81 the following day.

A date corresponding to attention spikes in relation to the sixth definitional characteristic – the capacity to enter relations with state and other proto-state actors – was February 9 in 2012. On that date, al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane pledged his group's allegiance

17 For additional details, see the following press accounts: "Militants Seize Iraq's Second City of Mosul," BBC News, June 10, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27778112>; Martin Chulov, "Isis Insurgents Seize Control of Iraqi City of Mosul," The Guardian, August 31, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/iraq-sunni-insurgents-islamic-militants-seize-control-mosul>; "Iraq City of Mosul Falls into Hands of ISIS Jihadists after Police, Army Abandon Posts," CBS News, June 11, 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iraq-city-of-mosul-falls-into-hands-of-isis-jihadists-after-police-army-abandon-posts/>.

18 For more information, see Maria Newman, "Video Appears to Show Beheading of American Civilian," The New York Times, May 11, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/11/international/middleeast/video-appears-to-show-beheading-of-american.html>; "Arrests in Abduction of American Worker," NBC News, May 11, 2004, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4953015>; "Beheaded Man's Father: Revenge Breeds Revenge," CNN, June 8, 2006, <https://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/06/08/berg.interview/>.

19 For more information, see Chelsea Carter, "Iraq Developments: ISIS Establishes 'Caliphate,' Changes Name," CNN, June 30, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/29/world/meast/iraq-developments-roundup/index.html>; "Isis Rebels Declare 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria," BBC News, June 30, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28082962>; *Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State* | Wilson Center, [n.d.], <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>; Mark Tran and Matthew Weaver, "Isis announces Islamic caliphate in area straddling Iraq and Syria," The Guardian, June 30, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/30/isis-announces-islamic-caliphate-iraq-syria>.

to the leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri.²⁰ Global news items mentioning al-Qaeda increased from 300 the day before the attack to 400 on the day of the pledge. The relative number of online searches conducted by individuals located in 28 countries moved from a Google Trends score of 62 the day before the pledge to 90 on the day of the announcement.

The MENA-based groups were unique from far-right and far-left groups in that they produced online and offline attention spikes on dates associated with each of the proto-state definitional characteristics. The use of the full complement of criteria suggests that the MENA-based groups have a greater intention to disrupt the system of international recognition of state actors, at least for now.

Far-Right Groups

The date patterns emerging from the far right was not only distinct from MENA-based extremist groups, but it also differed based on whether the far-right unit under consideration comprised an extremist group or a single actor. Far-right extremist groups mainly garnered attention on dates associated with governance and population control, but several dates did focus on alliance-building. Lone actors, in contrast, spiked online and offline attention solely based on two criteria: the presence of an ideological project and lethal attacks.

One prominent example of a far-right event focusing on governance occurred on September 29. On September 29, 2020, a US presidential debate was held between the incumbent, Donald J. Trump, and his Democratic challenger, Joseph Biden. When the debate moderator asked Trump whether he was willing to denounce white supremacist groups in general and the far-right group the Proud Boys in particular, he responded that he did not know who the Proud Boys were but told the group to “stand back” and “stand by”.²¹ Trump’s words emboldened the members of the Proud Boys and arguably served as a precursor to the group’s participation related to the January 6 insurrection in 2021. The date of Trump’s comments also had historical significance, as September 29 in 1933 was the date of the passage of the German Hereditary Farm law.²² The law implemented Hitler’s “Blood and Soil” ideology and restricted the inheritance of farms to German citizens with Aryan blood. Google Trends scores for the Proud Boys rose from 0 to 100 the day following the presidential debate. News items mentioning the group jumped from 56 on the day of the debate to 1,092 on the day after Trump’s statement.

20 For more information on the alliance, see Brian Rym Momtaz and Ross Lee Ferran, “Match Made in Terror? African Jihadi Group Al Shabaab Joins Al Qaeda,” ABC News, February 9, 2012, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/al-qaeda-allied-somali-terror-group-al-shabaab/story?id=15548647>; Matt Zabriskie, “Al-Shabaab Joining al Qaeda, Monitor Group Says,” CNN, February 10, 2012, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/09/world/africa/somalia-shabaab-qaeda/index.html>; Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “Shabaab Formally Joins al Qaeda,” FDD’s Long War Journal, September 21, 2018, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/02/shabaab_formally_joi.php; Katharine Houreld, “Somali Militant Group Al-Shabaab Formally Joins al-Qaida,” The Guardian, February 9, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/09/somali-al-shabaab-join-al-qaida>.

21 For additional details, see the following press accounts: Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny, “Proud Boys Celebrate after Trump’s Debate Callout,” NBC News, September 30, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/proud-boys-celebrate-after-trump-s-debate-call-out-n1241512>; Maegan Vazquez and Paul LeBlanc, “Trump Refuses to Condemn White Supremacists at Presidential Debate,” CNN, September 30, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/30/politics/proud-boys-trump-white-supremacists-debate/index.html>; Paul P. Murphy, “Trump’s Debate Callout Bolsters Far-Right Proud Boys,” CNN, September 30, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/30/politics/proud-boys-trump-debate-trnd/index.html>.

22 J. K. Galbraith, “Hereditary Land in the Third Reich,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 53, no. 3 (1939): 465–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1884418>; “The Hereditary Farm Law (September 29, 1933),” German Historical Institute, 2003-2019, www.ghi-dc.org; “1993: Key Dates,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/1933-key-dates>.

April 21 serves as a symbolically significant date for far-right groups seeking population control around the globe. On this day in 2018, a group of more than a hundred protesters associated with Les Identitaires set up what appeared to be a border checkpoint on Col d'Échelle, an Alpine route located between France and Italy. The corridor was important to the group because it served as a route used frequently by migrants coming into France. On the French side of the border, members of the groups dressed up in blue jackets to give the impression that they were policemen patrolling the checkpoint, while circulating helicopters, cars and even an airplane lent gravitas to the surveillance operation. A banner at the "checkpoint" read "Closed Border, you will not make Europe home!" On the Italian side, Les Identitaires-associated activists informed migrants that the border was closed.²³ The date of the border closure corresponds with the date of Adolf Hitler's birthday on April 20, 1889; this correspondence could be argued to emphasise a desire for racial exclusion in Europe. On the day of the operation, Google Trends scores for Les Identitaires rose to 78 and news items mentioning the group rose from 2 the day before to 25 the day of the closure to 56 the following day.

August 11, by contrast, reinforces the alliance-building capacity of far-right groups. On August 11, 2017, hundreds of white nationalists including neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan members and other white supremacists descended on Charlottesville, Virginia to protest the city's vote to remove a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee from Lee Park. The date had important symbolic significance because in 1829 on the same date, Lee received his first assignment in the Civil War. Demonstrators carried the Confederate flag and expressed antisemitic and Islamophobic views during the rally, including chants of "You will not replace us" and "Blood and Soil". The Blood and Soil chant referred to Hitler's ideological doctrine about Aryan-based land ownership (as noted above). By the next day, the protest turned violent as counter-protesters denounced the white nationalists. Neo-Nazi James Fields rammed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters and killed Heather Heyer. Dozens of others were injured. The rally took on even more symbolic significance when Donald Trump equated the actions of the protesters and counter-protesters.²⁴ Google Trends scores spiked from 0 on the 11th to 90 on the 12th and 100 the following day. News items mentioning the Unite the Right rally trended upwards from 12 on the first day of the rally to 154 the day of the vehicle ramming to 222 the following day and finally to 477 the next day. The first-year anniversary rally of the original Unite the Right protest was held in Washington D.C. and also prompted increased attention, but far-right attendance was much lower than expected and protesters were outnumbered by counter-protesters. On the anniversary, Google Trends scores spiked to 100 on August 12 and the news items mentioning the rally's name increased from 98 on August 11 to 112 on the 12th and 169 the following day.

23 For more information, see Kim Willsher, "French Court Jails Far-Right Activists over Anti-Immigrant Alps Stunt," *The Guardian*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/29/french-court-jails-far-right-activists-over-anti-migrant-alps-stunt>; Andy Gregory, "Key Figures in Far-Right Group Jailed after Anti-Migrant Operation in French Alps," *The Independent*, August 30, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/far-right-generation-identity-members-jailed-alps-france-asylum-seekers-a9084976.html>; "French Far-Right Activists Handed Jail Time for Alpine Anti-Migrant Operation," *France 24*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190829-france-far-right-activists-generation-identity-prison-sentence-alps-anti-migrant-operation>.

24 For more information on the Unite the Right rally, see "Charlottesville: 'Unite the Right' Rally, State of Emergency," *Time*, [n.d.], <https://time.com/charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally-clashes/>; "How a Rally of White Nationalists and Supremacists at the University of Virginia Turned into a 'Tragic, Tragic Weekend,'" *Washington Post*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/>; "'Unite the Right' Rally in Charlottesville Turns Violent," *ABC News*, [n.d.], <https://abcnews.go.com/US/photos/white-nationalists-counterprotesters-clash-charlottesville-49178539/image-56939351>.

In short, while symbolically significant dates linked to far-right events held by extremist groups generally focused on population control, governance and alliance-building, the timing of their occurrence is often tied to historical events ripe with substantial ideological import. For lone actors associated with far-right groups, however, such dates served more limited goals, namely the carrying out of a lethal attack and the presence of an ideological project. One example is June 17. In 2015 on that date, 21-year-old Dylann Storm Roof shot and killed nine black members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Before firing his weapon, Roof, an avowed white supremacist, had participated in a Bible study group. Roof murdered the parishioners after they bowed their heads in prayer.²⁵ A recent federal appeals court upheld Roof's death sentence. In the aftermath of the Charleston church shooting, South Carolina proposed the removal of Confederate commemorative spaces and other symbols honouring the Confederacy. Google Trends scores rose from 0 to 100 on the day following the shooting. News items mentioning Roof rose from 0 on the day before the attack to 138 on the day of the attack to 367 on the following day. Subsequently, a 40- to 50-member Bowl Gang – a white supremacist group naming itself for Roof's distinctive hairstyle and claiming inspiration from Roof's violent act – substantially increased its activity on social media, particularly on right-wing sites. One of the active members of the Bowl Gang group was subsequently arrested in D.C. for threatening a journalist. The Google Trends score spiked to 100 on the day that researchers associated with the Anti-Defamation League reported the existence of the copycat group.

While far-right extremist groups have remained less violent than their MENA-based counterparts and their activities have predominantly focused on population control, governance and alliance-building, this date-based analysis underscores the future threats that such groups pose. The groups have timed their events in ways that work to create associations with moments of historical ideological significance. If understood or reinforced on social media, such links could strengthen the identity-building of a group and create belief and behavioural expectations for members. The fact that far-right groups have also attempted activities associated with each of the six proto-state elements is also troubling, however small or seemingly insignificant such attempts may be. Whether the groups were simply testing the strength and range of their collectives' activities or they were in pursuit of their own proto-states remains an open question, but one with potentially troubling consequences.

Far-Left Groups

Far-left extremist groups were much less likely to participate in events that relied on symbolically significant dates. The few incidents where far-left groups garnered significant online and offline attention generally occurred during events connected to population control or governance. However, far-left groups were much less likely to time their events to

25 For more information, see Alan Blinder and Kevin Sack, "Dylann Roof Found Guilty in Charleston Church Massacre," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/15/us/dylann-roof-trial.html>; Matt Zapposky, "Charleston Church Shooter: 'I Would Like to Make It Crystal Clear, I Do Not Regret What I Did,'" *Washington Post*, January 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/charleston-church-shooter-i-would-like-to-make-it-crystal-clear-i-do-not-regret-what-i-did/2017/01/04/05b0061e-d1da-11e6-a783-cd3fa950f2fd_story.html; "Charleston Shooting," *CBS News*, June 18, 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/charleston-shooting/>.

dates with high levels of historic meaning for group-building, belief formation or behavioural expectations.

One date associated with the far left that could emerge in the future as historically significant is June 24, the day that the US Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jenkins* overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision that had previously granted women the right to have abortions. In anticipation of the ruling due to a leaked draft released several months earlier, a pro-abortion group, Jane's Revenge, vowed a night of revenge for the *Dobbs* decision on May 31, 2022. Anti-abortion Pregnancy Crisis Centers and religious organisations were attacked in Wisconsin, Washington, Oregon, Texas, North Carolina, New York and Florida. The event, however, did not correspond to the January 22 date of the previous *Roe v. Wade* decision and seemingly lacked any other connection with other historical dates of related importance. On the 22nd, just two days before the *Dobbs* decision, the Google Trends score for Jane's Revenge spiked to 100 and news items mentioning the group grew from 14 on the day of the *Dobbs* decision to an average of 24 per day on the three days following the action undertaken by the Supreme Court.²⁶

Examples of far-left groups conducting events associated with population control are probably best exemplified by May 1. May Day has historical significance because it has served as International Workers' Day since 1889. While the historical date was initially set up to celebrate the working class, extremist groups have seized upon it to elevate the grievances felt by many in the same group. On May 1, 2018, for example, violence broke out at the May Day protests in Paris, France. Yellow Vests and the anti-capitalist Black Bloc participated, with individuals associated with Black Bloc throwing rocks and other objects at police and posting on social media that May Day would be "Armageddon" that would turn Paris into the "Riot Capitol of Europe". French authorities deployed tear gas and a regiment of 7,400 police in Paris to quell the protests. More than 165 arrests took place. Over the years, violence has erupted on May Day around the globe in areas such as Cleveland, Ohio (1894), and Paris (1968).²⁷ After the Paris violence on May 1, 2018, Google Trends scores spiked to 100 and news items jumped from 6 on April 30 to 88 on May 1 to 353 on May 2.

While the far left has typically restricted its events to protesting population control and governance, a recent incident demonstrated that such groups may also seek territorial control. On June 11, 2020, the John Brown Gun Club, an armed Puget Sound group that provides defence for anti-racist events, along with members self-identified as Antifa and Black Lives Matter, asserted its control over a six-block

26 For additional details, see the following press accounts: Dan Mangan and Kevin Breuninger, "Supreme Court Overturns *Roe v. Wade*, Ending 50 Years of Federal Abortion Rights," CNBC, June 24, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/24/roe-v-wade-overturned-by-supreme-court-ending-federal-abortion-rights.html>; Mark Sherman, Associated Press, "Supreme Court Overturns *Roe v. Wade*, Ends Constitutional Protections for Abortion," PBS NewsHour, June 25, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/supreme-court-overturns-roe-v-wade-ends-constitutional-right-for-abortion>; Ariane de Vogue et al., "Supreme Court Overturns *Roe v. Wade*," CNN, June 24, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/24/politics/dobbs-mississippi-supreme-court-abortion-roe-wade/index.html>.

27 For additional information, see Elliott McLaughlin, "May Day Rallies Turn Violent as 'Anarchists' in One City Throw Smoke Bombs, Police Say," CNN, May 2, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/01/world/may-day-celebrations-protests-around-world/index.html>; Nicole Acevedo, Istra Pacheco, and Carmen Sesin, "In Puerto Rico, Protesters and Police Clash as Thousands March in May Day Rally," NBC News, May 2, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/puerto-rico-crisis/puerto-rico-protesters-police-clash-thousands-march-may-day-rally-n870556>; "Police Arrest Dozens at Paris May Day Protests," The Guardian, May 2, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/01/police-arrest-hundreds-at-paris-may-day-protests>.

area surrounding a Seattle police precinct in Capitol Hill.²⁸ The group's activities came in the aftermath of the Minnesota police killing of George Floyd. The seized location, the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone, served as a physical embodiment of the protest denouncing police brutality and racism. Instead of relying on law enforcement, the groups announced that they would instead be "policing" the area and resolve conflict through negotiation. The seizure took on added symbolic importance when Donald Trump called on the Seattle mayor and the Washington governor to "take back their city." If the leaders refused, he insisted that he would do it for them with federal troops. Google Trends scores for the John Brown Gun Club spiked to 100 on June 11 and the number of news items increased slightly from 0 to 3 stories on the date of Trump's public call for an immediate resolution.

Lacking a coherent ideological project with a clear set of unifying priorities for like-minded followers and having demonstrated less capacity for creating a strong alliance of other extremist groups, far-left groups today appear to pose less of a threat than either MENA-based groups or those of the far right. The apparent lack of a long-term project designed to acquire territorial control and their seeming reluctance to engage in attacks producing high casualty counts render the dates a lower priority, but far-left groups should still not be ignored entirely.

28 For more information, see Hallie Golden, "Seattle Protesters Take over City Blocks to Create Police-Free 'Autonomous Zone,'" *The Guardian*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/11/chaz-seattle-autonomous-zone-police-protest>; Gregory Scruggs, "Activists Take over a Seattle Neighborhood, Banishing the Police," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/activists-take-over-a-seattle-neighborhood-banishing-the-police/2020/06/11/7172e1e6-ac24-11ea-a9d9-a81c1a491c52_story.html; Peter Allen Clark, "Seattle Protesters Are Occupying 6 City Blocks as an 'Autonomous Zone.' Some Fear a Police Crackdown Is Imminent," *Time*, June 11, 2020, <https://time.com/5851774/seattle-police-capitol-hill-autonomous-zone/>.

4 Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, we recommend four actions associated with future date-based analyses. First, technology companies should include symbolically significant dates, as defined by attention spikes, in their algorithms currently detecting hate speech. Combining group names, hateful/violent speech indicators and significant dates might help to refine searches in ways better designed to predict future attacks. Those dates should include days that both have long-term historical significance and those that have garnered significant attention in the last five years.

Second, when determining symbolically significant dates, tracking should include a consideration of whether the events link to proto-state definitional characteristics (ideology, attacks, population control, territorial control, alliances and governance). Algorithms should include common word indicators of the six criteria. If a group typically uses one or two of the indicators (such as population control and governance) and moves into others (for instance, alliance-building and territorial control), careful consideration is warranted as the posed threat level has likely changed.

Third, lone actor terrorists and groups should not only be aggregated into far-right, far-left and MENA-based groups, or other taxonomic terminology used to describe such groups. This study has clearly indicated that the types of symbolically significant dates differ based on whether the event is associated with an individual or a group. Date patterns related to future events will likely remain distinct for violent political acts carried out at the behest of the group or solely based on an individual's motivation.

Finally, refinement of symbolically significant dates is still needed. With access to more refined tools than Google Trends scores and Nexis Uni databases, a more precise identification of the level of public attention and potential symbolic value can be carried out. Given that extremist groups are not static entities, routine updates to maintain a meaningful list of significant dates should occur.

Policy Section

This policy section has been authored by Nicola Mathieson, Research Director, at the Global Network for Extremism and Technology (GNET) at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. This section provides policy recommendations and is produced independently from the authors of this report. Recommendations do not necessarily represent the views of the authors.

This report identifies symbolically significant dates for extremist groups and individuals using Google Trends scores. In addition, Winkler et al. also provide a calendar of historically important events for MENA-based, far-right and far-left extremist groups. The key findings of this report carry corresponding policy implications for technology companies and policymakers.

This policy section ensures that GNET reports provides actionable research outcomes that can inform and support technology companies and policymakers to identify and prevent extremist and terrorist exploitation of digital platforms. The policy section fulfils GIFCT's core pillar of learning to improve prevention and responses to terrorist and violent extremist attacks.

1. Technology Companies

This report has identified two core areas for action for technology companies:

- The authors provide a clear agenda for technology companies. This report recommends that companies integrate the calendar of important dates presented here into their algorithms. Combining important dates, group names and hate-speech indicators may help tech companies to build better predictive measures of violence. While this report utilised Google Trends scores and access to Nexis Uni databases, there are additional resources that could be incorporated into the analysis of dates symbolic to extremist actors. Tech companies could work together to build a collaborative monitoring program that utilises a greater range of sources and that regularly updates algorithms in response to violent attacks and attention spikes.
- Importantly, this report found that lone actors should be treated as separate to extremist groups. Although one could expect ideologically aligned lone actors and extremist groups to share a focus on the same symbolic dates, this report identifies that this is not the case. Symbolic dates associated with attention spikes for far-right groups tended to focus on issues of governance and population control. Those associated with far-right lone actors, however, were ideologically based attacks. When developing algorithms, technology companies should disaggregate lone actors and extremist groups into separate categories.

2. Policymakers

In addition to the report findings and their implications for technology companies, this report has also identified three core areas for action by policymakers:

- Predicting the timing and nature of future violence by extremist groups is a significant challenge for states and law enforcement. This report provides an in-depth overview of dates of significance, as well as the core themes and terms related to extremist groups. Both elements can be leveraged by law enforcement agencies to bolster the surveillance and monitoring of extremist actors to improve efforts to prevent violent attacks.
- This report indicates that there should be a further breakdown in how we categorise extremist actors. Extremist actors are often categorised by ideology. This report indicates that these actors should be disaggregated further into categories of ideology—for example, far-right, jihadist, or accelerationist—and then also separated by actor type—lone actors or extremist group. This finding has important implications for understanding and identifying symbolic dates, the motivations and goals of extremist actors, and events likely to attract attentions from offline and online viewers. Policy guidance on violent actors could be improved with further research into the distinct characteristics of extremist groups and lone actors.
- In addition to providing important information to prevent terrorist violence, this report may also act as a useful guide into the histories of extremist and terrorist violence. The link between contemporary attacks and symbolic historical dates can help policymakers to understand how extremist actors connect their ideologies and actions to historical events and movements to increase their credibility.



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