Introduction

With increasingly high penetration rates and low barriers to entry, the Internet has expanded into a truly global network and left an indelible mark on almost every aspect of 21st-century society. Since its inception, the Internet has revolutionized the way that information is shared around the world, catalyzing development in a myriad of fields including entertainment media, commerce and education. However, just as the Internet is an ever-present force in regular daily life, it has also been exploited for the purpose of terrorist activities.

Through the use of social media platforms, terrorist organizations have been able to circulate recruitment propaganda and form online communities for radicalized individuals. Although this activity is still rife, social media companies have seen some success in reducing the amount of propaganda distributed by adopting private-sector initiatives such as the ‘Redirect Method’. However, despite this progress, it is important to remember that these measures are not comprehensive and consider that the investment required to develop new online counterterrorism security features constitutes a conflict of interest for profit-motivated firms.

Besides facilitating the promotion of radicalized ideology, the Internet also plays a heavy role in financing terrorist activities and laundering money for terrorist organisations. This can be achieved through the establishment of ‘shell companies’, phishing, or selling illicit goods on the so-called ‘Dark Web’. Furthermore, cyberterrorism can be used to disrupt a society directly.

A major complication in tackling this problem is that while terrorist activity is an international problem, there is no international consensus on what the term ‘terrorist’ actually entails. Organisations that are considered legitimate in some countries, such as Hezbollah, are designated as terrorist groups in others. Consequently, some states may regard policies that disrupt the online operations of terrorist organizations as a threat to national security. As such, the United Nations has failed to adopt a clear definition of terrorism. The large disparity between the positions of certain states will likely cause distrust...
that could complicate the establishment of a global framework. However, it is imperative that a borderless problem is addressed with truly borderless solutions.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Non-State Actors**

A Non-State Actor is an individual or organization that has considerable social or economic influence despite a lack of allegiance with any specific government or state. They can wield power on either a domestic or international scale. In the context of terrorism, Non-State Actors threaten or use violence in order to achieve their goals and usually cause grievous harm to innocent civilians in the area. Examples include organizations such as the so-called ‘Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’ (ISIS) and the Donetsk National Republic in Ukraine.

**State-Sponsored Terrorism**

State-Sponsored Terrorism is terrorism conducted or supported by one state against another state. Notable countries that have been accused of sponsoring terrorist activity include the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea, the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is heavily associated with Nationalist Terrorism, where state funding and supplies often transform civil wars into larger proxy wars between greater world powers.

**Nationalist Terrorism**

Nationalist Terrorism is conducted with the objective of achieving greater autonomy for a specific ethnic or national group. This is not a blanket term for racially-motivated attacks as it is defined by its goal of self-determination. However, they may still overlap. Because these organizations often fight against perceived oppressors, Nationalist Terrorism is the most likely to elicit sympathy from the international community and earn political concessions. However, as explained, it can be extremely difficult to determine whether a particular organization should be labeled as ‘terrorist’.

**Encryption**

Encryption is a process that prevents unauthorised parties from accessing digital information by converting it into code. This is one of the most common forms of data protection, but the security provided by encryption can vary widely between organisations.
Background Information

International response to terrorism in the early 21st century

On September 11th 2001, four jet airliners were hijacked by al-Qaeda terrorists to be used as suicide weapons, wreaking havoc across the United States of America. During the notorious attacks, two jets crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, one crashed into the Pentagon in Virginia and one crashed into a Pennsylvania field as a failed attempt at hitting a target in neighboring Washington DC. Having resulted in the deaths of over 2000 victims, the infamous attack shocked the international community and was broadcast on news programmes around the world.

The high-profile attack was pivotal in changing the attitude towards terrorism in the Western world, highlighting the issue as one of the defining challenges of the 21st century. Two days later, on September 13th 2001, NATO decided to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty for the first time, which recognises armed attacks against any member state as an attack against NATO as a whole. On September 14th, the United States Congress decided to pass a bill named ‘Authorization for Use of Military Force against Terrorists’, laying the foundation of an international military campaign dubbed as the ‘War on Terror’.

Initially, the War on Terror was presented as a retaliatory measure against al-Qaeda for the September 11 attacks, bombing al-Qaeda and Taliban training centers in Afghanistan and beginning a ground war on October 19, 2001. However, once Afghanistan was secured, the rhetoric surrounding the war in Western media was shifting from vengeance towards prevention of terrorist activity.

One of the largest consequences of this heavy-handed approach was the notorious American-lead invasion of Iraq. On March 13, 2003, American and coalition forces are sent to Baghdad based on United States intelligence that the Iraqi government had acquired ‘weapons of mass destruction’. The ensuing war was a catastrophe that killed over 4,000 American and coalition servicemen and over 90,000 innocent Iraqi civilians. The situation became even more tragic when it came to light that no such ‘weapons of mass destruction’ truly existed, rendering the war completely futile.

In the end, the War on Terror exacerbated the issue of terrorism. The warfare destabilized the region, creating power vacuums and leaving thousands of vulnerable displaced persons inclined towards radicalization. More notably, the unnecessary bloodshed caused by Western powers provided a galvanizing force for discontented radicals, allowing them to justify accusations of war-mongering and general barbarism that endure in propaganda.
The role of social-media in radicalization

Terrorist organizations employ a myriad of social media platforms in order to spread their radical ideology. Although the promotion of terrorist activity is a violation of the terms of use, social media companies have not been able to stem the flow of terrorist propaganda due to a combination of both the sheer quantity of material to remove and flawed standards of procedure. Besides circulating radicalized videos and photos, terrorist organizations often exploit private messaging features on social media apps to groom and recruit followers. The use of social media can be especially problematic when young people are drawn into terrorist circles as they are more susceptible to manipulation.

Recently, social media platforms have faced an increased level of scrutiny with regards to monitoring the content of their platforms. In early 2019, an Australian terrorist massacred dozens of Muslims at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, and uploaded video footage of the attack online via livestream. In the aftermath of the attack, social media platforms including YouTube and Facebook were found to be incapable of stopping the spread of the chilling footage, encouraging users to report inappropriate content as they scrambled to review requests.
and take the videos down. This warranted much criticism from the court of public opinion, becoming one of the main grievances listed in the overall cultural rebuke against large technological corporations. However, the aforementioned social media firms were not held accountable for their failure.

The role of the Internet in planning terrorist activity

One of the main features of internet technology is that it allows instant communication without any geographical constraints. Unfortunately, however, the system is exploited by radicalized individuals to plan terrorist activity. For example, French investigators found that the 2015 bombings and shootings in Paris were planned by members of the so-called Islamic State using encrypted apps including WhatsApp and Telegram. Information on messaging platforms with end-to-end encryption is not readily accessible to counterterrorism forces, preventing them from discovering terrorist plots before they happen. Even on platforms that are not encrypted, terrorists can use code words in their online conversations to avoid raising suspicion. Furthermore, the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) prevents authorities from discovering the location or identity of potential terrorists.

The role of the Internet in financing terrorist activity

The Internet has become an invaluable tool for terrorist organizations to raise funds in a low-risk format, allowing members to engage in criminal activity while hiding behind the safety of VPNs and fake identities.

An early example of this behavior can be observed in the case of Younis Tsouli, a young British man who had acquired an arsenal of 37,000 stolen credit card numbers and laundered the stolen money through online gambling sites. He also used 72 of the stolen card numbers to register 180 websites for the purpose of disseminating propaganda and purchased weapons through the identity of the card owners. It is important to note that while Tsouli did eventually get the attention of the al-Qaeda leadership of Iraq, the operation was started and largely sustained through the sole efforts of him and his girlfriend.

As hacking tools have become more accessible, recent years have seen a spike in malware created in order to sustain terrorist organizations. This includes computer viruses to steal financial information for fraudulent purchases and the creation of ‘ransomware’, which cripples software functions until a fee has been paid. While most successful efforts have been targeting individuals, there is an increasing risk that terrorist organizations will begin using this technique to obtain funds from more well-endowed organizations such as businesses or government departments.
Terrorism as a spectator sport

Especially during 2019, terrorists seem to have developed a heightened awareness of the Internet, tailoring their attacks on physical targets for worldwide circulation. This disturbing development was widely observed and discussed following the slaughter of Muslim worshippers in New Zealand by a white supremacist on March 15, 2019.

Prior to the attack, the gunman had posted his so-called ‘manifesto’ on social media site 4Chan, detailing his motivation behind the attack. He also live-streamed the horrific affair, murdering innocent people in cold blood while providing commentary littered by pop culture references, making headlines with ironic statements such as “subscribe to Pewdiepie!”.

The Christchurch gunman set a standard for white supremacist terrorists, inspiring copycat attacks such as the Poway synagogue shooting in April, which the attacker had heralded on 4Chan and attempted to livestream.

The theatrical component of these recent attacks are effective in increasing publicity for their horrific crimes, desensitizing and emboldening radicalized viewers to conduct similar attacks. Another issue that needs to be addressed is the impact that this style of attack could affect children and other young people who are exposed to this abhorrent behaviour on the Internet.

![Image of the Great Replacement poster](image.png)

Figure 2: The image used as the front page of the manifesto that Brenton Tarrant, the white supremacist who conducted the horrific Christchurch attacks, circulated online prior to the massacre. (British Broadcasting Corporation)
Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United States of America

Anti-American sentiment is common in terrorist propaganda, which often casts the United States of America as a bastion of Western imperialism. As the leader of the former War on Terror, the United States has remained actively seized on the issue and remained a leading force in counterterrorism efforts for much of the past two decades. However, the United States has begun to reverse some of their interventionist policies, exemplified by the withdrawal of troops from Syria announced in early 2019.

France

Like its neighbours in the European Union, France has seen an uptick in terrorism in recent years. However, the situation in France is exceptionally dire. Soon after the horrific attack on the In the past four years alone, terrorist attacks in France have killed 249 civilians and wounded a further 928. Following the Christchurch attacks in New Zealand, President Emmanuel Macron joined the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, in launching a joint bid to stop the use of social media for terrorist purposes.

New Zealand

After the horrific attacks in Christchurch in early 2019, New Zealand has become a leading voice in the bid to fight online extremism. One month after the shooting, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern joined French President Emmanuel Macron in hosting a conference to address the role of social media in terrorist activity, including government officials as well as executives from the aforementioned social media companies. The New Zealand Government continues to prioritize this issue in their domestic and international agenda.

Iran

Since 1979, Iran has been accused of sponsoring terrorist activity of non-state actors in other countries, including Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamist Jihad groups. As a result, the international community has placed heavy economic sanctions. In early 2019, the United States of America designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the national army, as a terrorist organization.

Iraq

While under the rule of dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraq was invaded by American and Coalition forces as a part of the War on Terror. During this time, 460,000 people were killed, including over 90,000
Iraqi civilians, based on the false premise that the government of Iraq had acquired ‘weapons of mass destruction’. This injustice left fertile ground for anti-Western sentiment to be exploited by terrorist organizations. It is in Iraq that the so-called ‘Islamic State’, often referred to as ISIS, was first established, and the Iraqi government has been struggling with trying to contain them.

Syria

Having been embroiled in a brutal war for the past 8 years, the constant conflict in Syria has left a significant power vacuum. ISIS took advantage of this, occupying entire Syrian cities at the height of their power. After an arduous fight by Coalition forces, ISIS no longer holds any territory in Syria. However, with the withdrawal of American troops and no political stability in sight, there is a very tangible threat that terrorist organizations are capable of re-establishing themselves in the future.

Timeline of Events

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<tr>
<td>September 11th, 2001</td>
<td>19 members of terrorist group al-Qaeda hijack American jet airliners to use as suicide weapons, crashing into the Pentagon in Virginia, a field in Pennsylvania and the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. Over 2,000 victims were killed in the attacks.</td>
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<td>September 20th, 2001</td>
<td>President of the United States, George Bush, declares the beginning of the global War on Terror.</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 19th, 2001</td>
<td>American and coalition troops are deployed to Kandahar, marking the beginning of the ground war in Afghanistan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 13th, 2002</td>
<td>American-endorsed candidate Hamid Karzai wins Afghani elections to become the transitional Head of State. Western military operations slow down after this, but some troops are not withdrawn.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 19th, 2003</td>
<td>American intelligence reports that Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader, is developing ‘weapons of mass destruction’. This prompts American and Coalition forces to invade Iraq, but no such weapons exist.</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 8th, 2006</td>
<td>The General Assembly unanimously votes to adopt the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, resolving to condemn and combat terrorism in all its forms.</td>
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October 15th, 2006 al-Masri announces the creation of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ in Iraq, to be headed by Abu Omar al Baghdadi. The group is affiliated with al-Qaeda.

April 11th, 2013 The so-called Islamic State (ISIS) expands into Syria.

September 2nd, 2014 ISIS releases a video of the beheading of journalist Stephen Sotloff. This video is widely viewed online, strengthening their influence in the Western world.

September 2014 80 countries come together to form the Global Coalition against Daesh, committed to defeating ISIS.

December 16th, 2014 17 people are held hostage in a cafe in Sydney, Australia, by a gunman allegedly acting on ISIS’ behalf. 3 people, including the gunman, were killed, again attracting the attention of international media. Over the course of the next 12 months, ISIS claims responsibility for attacks in Iraq, France, Tunis, Yemen, Libya and Saudi Arabia.

February 4th, 2015 ISIS releases a video of a Jordanian military pilot being burned alive. This video is also widely shared online.

November 13th, 2015 The coordinated teams of ISIS militants carry out horrific attacks in stadiums, eateries and concert halls in Paris, leaving 138 dead and injuring 494. This incident inspired a series of attacks carried out by radicalized individuals living in European countries, including Germany and the United Kingdom.

December 19th, 2018 President of the United States, Donald Trump, declares that ISIS had been defeated in Syria and authorizes the withdrawal of 2,000 American troops.

March 15th, 2019 Australian white supremacist Brenton Tarrant attacks two Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, while live-streaming the event online. The event draws international attention to the role of social media in terrorist activity and inspires copycat attacks in America.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, 8 September 2006 (A/RES/60/288)
- Technical assistance for implementing the international conventions and protocols related to counter-terrorism, 19 December 2017 (A/RES/72/194)
- Measures to eliminate international terrorism, 7 December 2017 (A/RES/72/123)
- United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy Review, 26 September 2018 (A/RES/72/248)
- Security Council Resolution 2462, 28 March 2019 (S/RES/2462)
Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Through the establishment of the Global Coalition against Daesh, states have become more proactive in sharing counterterrorism intelligence. A department of the Global Coalition against Daesh has been dedicated to countering the spread and effectiveness of terrorist propaganda online.

Individual companies, including YouTube and Facebook, have ensured that their terms of use prohibits the circulation of violent content on their platforms and have sought to enforce this by implementing algorithms alongside user reports of inappropriate content. Although this may reduce the amount of radicalized content made available to the public, their efforts have been ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the circulation of terrorist propaganda.

Some regulators, including those in Australia and the European Union, have decided to impose fines on social media companies that fail to remove violent or radicalized content. As these policies were only signed into law in April 2019, it is not yet possible to gauge the success of such a policy. However, it sends a clear message to social media platforms that they are to be held accountable for inappropriate content that is shared on their servers.

Governments have been fortifying their cybersecurity arsenals in order to defend themselves from potential cyberattacks. In states like the United Kingdom, organizations that handle sensitive information, such as banks, must meet a minimum encryption standard so as to prevent data breaches.

Figure 3: French President Emmanuel Macron and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern at their joint conference on tackling online extremism with representatives from social media firms. (The Times of Israel)
Possible Solutions

Considering that the use of the Internet for the purpose of terrorist activities encompasses many areas, delegates should ensure that they consider taking a multifaceted approach when crafting their resolutions.

To combat the use of the Internet for the funding of terrorism, heavier government regulation of financial services may be in order. For example, it could be mandated that online credit card transactions require two-factor authentication before the money is actually transferred, thereby preventing third parties such as hackers from being able to make payments through the account.

To bolster these effects, member states could be encouraged to ensure that money laundering is clearly defined and criminalized within their domestic policy.

However, heavy regulation may raise privacy concerns amongst states, firms and internet users. As such, it is of the utmost importance to specify the scope of any proposed regulation and to detail the framework through which private data will be protected.

Community and school-based education could be used as a means to make people more critical of things that they see online as well as how to identify and report inappropriate content.

If States are to work together to combat terrorism, it is impossible to be completely united until there is an international consensus on what terrorism actually means. As such, a possible solution could be to come up with a formal definition of terrorism. However, it is imperative that proposed definitions are not politicized and that the sovereignty of individual member states is respected.

Bibliography


