

Holding the Line: Why Militant Wings Are Maintained by Politically Engaged Groups

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Abstract

Certain terrorist organizations will engage in the political system; however, many will also maintain militant wings. Understanding the reasons for this may help to provide a lens through which to create policy solutions to reduce violence. Three reasons for this trend are hypothesized: benefit acquisition, continuing recruitment, and lack of trust. These hypotheses are tested against two case studies, the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Hezbollah, who have both engaged in the dual militant/political method. Recommendations on amelioration and benefit denial are then drawn from the conclusions derived from these studies.

Keywords: Counterterrorism/terrorism, Political Affairs, Policy, PLO, Hezbollah

Introduction

Terror is a tactic used to achieve a political end; however, groups that use terror often also participate in more conventional forms of civil activity, usually through the creation of political wings. In fact, for many terror groups, entering into the political system as a means of achieving their policy objectives is equally important to ensuring that those objectives are met through violence. Legitimately entering the body politic is an important step in the life of a terrorist organization, usually associated with greater authority and visibility than previously had. Despite this new legal authority, many groups will continue to engage in simultaneous terrorist tactics, such as violence and disruption. This raises the question: why do these groups maintain this tactic despite the negative impact it may have on their legal activities? In order to answer this question, two groups, Hezbollah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), were analysed which have tried to achieve political goals through both violence and political means and consider the motivation for the maintenance of their militant wing. A variety of causal factors were considered to determine what may be in play for these different organizations, in order to see why the preservation of a militant wing occurs despite political legitimacy. From these causal factors, conclusions were drawn on the cause of maintaining a terrorist wing and propose several potential policy practices that can emerge from the data.

Hypotheses

The question of why these groups maintain terrorist tactics can best be explained by a successful trade-off of opportunity costs. If they are choosing to maintain this tactic, it must provide more benefit to the group than it costs them in political leverage. This assumption follows from previous literature that asserts that terrorist organizations are rational actors who are seeking an end, rather than attempting to create chaos to benefit their situation.¹ Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter posit this in their study of why terrorist organizations choose to launch attacks to break up negotiations. Any chaos that is created is intentional and focused towards the group's objective or with a rational purpose in mind.² As an example, the PLO has been very targeted with their attacks since their entry into the Oslo Accords, choosing only to do so at particular moments rather than maintain an active stream of violence.³ The other key element that must be taken into account for the type of group that is being studied is that political actors are largely considered rational in their action, even if their desires may be viewed as irrational.⁴ While neither of these models are irrefutable, they seem to do the best to explain how the types of militant organizations that develop political wings function on the global stage. The most obvious question posed by the rational actor model is what is being gained by maintaining a militant wing when there are political opportunities available.

The first hypothesis is that maintaining a militant wing is a tactic which succeeds in providing benefit to the group's legal efforts. More precisely, the use of terror tactics helps to create the situations that increase political authority for a particular group or strengthens them in some other manner. It can sometimes increase support for the cause politically when there is an active threat. This active threat is created through the mythos of the militant wing, which breeds a sense of immediate danger. It can also help to dampen opposition support or work to shape public opinion in a more aggressive manner, through intimidating opponents and securing votes to ensure political outcomes. The hypothesis rests on the belief that these groups are seeking to achieve an end through violence as the most viable option presented at the moment.⁵ It also implies that legitimacy is not the sole aim of the group, but rather that there are other benefits that can be gained outside of the political process.

The second hypothesis is that these groups retain their militancy in order to continue recruitment more broadly. There are three sub-areas related to this kind of recruitment. The first is that the political arena is a complicated world full of determined, cunning people. While some leaders of terrorist organizations may have the skill and talent for such an endeavour, not every person accepted into a terror group possesses these abilities. While it is true that the average terrorist is comparatively well educated, there is still a degree of sophistication when it comes to politics that is not seen in all recruits.⁶ This kind of recruitment bias has been described in the literature before, through studies such as the one done by Ariel Marari, Ilan

¹ Kydd, Andrew, and Barbara F. Walter. "Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence." *International Organization* 56, no. 2 (2002): 263-96. www.jstor.org/stable/3078606.

² *Ibid* 263-96. www.jstor.org/stable/3078606.

³ Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements ("Oslo Agreement"), 13 September 1993

⁴ Uhlaner, Carole Jean. "Political Participation, Rational Actors, and Rationality: A New Approach." *Political Psychology* 7, no. 3 (1986): 551-73. doi:10.2307/3791256.

⁵ Merari, Ariel, Ilan Diamant, Arie Bibi, Yoav Broshi, and Giora Zakin. "Personality Characteristics of 'Self Martyrs'/'Suicide Bombers' and Organizers of Suicide Attacks." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 1 (December 22, 2009): 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550903409312>

⁶ *Ibid* (2009), 88

Diamant, Arie Bibi, Yoav Broshi & Giora Zakin. Their study broke down recruitment in organizations to determine where the primary acceptance rate came from and from what section of society.⁷ The conclusion found was that terrorist groups are choosy when they admit members into their ranks. The same logic could therefore be applied to their political wings as well. By maintaining a distinction between the wings, the group can continue to recruit new members to the ideology, regardless of talent. The second sub-area is an organizational component. Like any organization, terrorist groups have a high management cost which requires expertise to upkeep and maintain. This is particularly important for different wings, which require different specialists and methods of communication to maintain.⁸ There are two major benefits for keeping these groups separate. The first is to allow for the group to maintain its terrorist activities while also offering plausible deniability to the political wing. The other is to ensure that the group persists in the face of potential failure. If a terror group is afraid that their legitimate method to achieve their political end could be threatened by traditional means might secure their position through a militant wing. While this is not always the case, it is certainly a consideration for any group that seeks to enter into that space. Lastly, there is the question of ideological purity within recruitment. Altering courses one way or another may drive potential recruits away due to the question of how a group wants to present themselves to the global community. Some individuals may only arrive at the group due to the use of violence, which attracts them. Moving away from that ideological purity would endanger the group and potentially lead to dissolution *in toto*.

Thirdly, groups will maintain a militant wing if they feel that political recognition will not fully achieve their objective. This hypothesis considers the idea that certain types of terrorism may feel more of a need to maintain their wings than others. Nationalist organizations, as an example, may feel more compelled to maintain a militant wing in order to ensure that they are able to defend their people than a leftist group, which is seeking only a political aim, and not a liberation from the current polity at large. This distinction may give greater cause for the roots of terror writ large and thus the impact of establishing a political arm.

The Case of the PLO

The first case study is that of the PLO, which can be described as either a nationalist or an Islamist terrorist organization. This group, founded in 1964, was solely dedicated to the liberation of the Palestinian people, through violence if necessary.⁹ In order to achieve this, it engaged in a large number of terror attacks throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, which earned it a categorization as a terrorist organization by both the United States and Israel.¹⁰ Despite this label, it also established diplomatic ties with other nations, leading to it developing a degree of political legitimacy. The PLO eventually received political recognition from almost 100 nations globally at the height of its sole power over the Palestinian movement.¹¹ The result was a shift in tactics away from violence. One of the most major changes that came from this particular shift was the recognition of two United Nations

⁷ Ibid (2009) , 89

⁸ Shapiro, Jacob N. *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

⁹ Rubin, Barry M., ברי מ רובין, and Barry A. Rubin. *Revolution Until Victory?: The Politics and History of the PLO*. 13 Harvard University Press, 3, 1994.

¹⁰ Ibid, 24, 1994

¹¹ Ibid, 86, 1994

resolutions, 242 and 338, in the mid 1990's, which involved abandoning violence as a tactic.¹² These were followed by further negotiated treaties, such as the Oslo Accords, which created a formal political wing, the Palestinian Authority (PA) to implement policy for Palestinians.¹³ The peace that followed was short lived, as violence resumed in the twenty first century, launched by the never-disbanded militant wing. This wing was run by the same leaders who ran the political wing at the turn of the century. In partnership with other Palestinian groups, the PLO participated in the later Intifadas, continuing the violence that they had perpetuated before recognized political representation.¹⁴ There have not been large efforts within the PA to reduce the presence of these particular militias, to the disdain of Israel.

The question emerges of what has come of the continued presence of the militant wing of the PLO. It appears that maintaining the wing has helped to gain greater benefit for the group in terms of passive and active support among different parts of the Palestinian Independence movement, which had increased in its diversity following the creation of the PA.¹⁵ No longer the sole representative, the PLO was but one party among many in the new body, whose authority came from broad elections. This bred resentment from the PLO, both from losing sole legitimacy and having its political power reduced. Since complete control of Palestine was no longer achievable, they sought other ways to demonstrate their opposition to Israel and support of the Palestinian people in the form of violence. Even as elements of the PLO entered back into the PA, the shift towards violence continued, bolstered by the distinction between the two bodies in Palestinian life.

Additionally, in this political separation, there emerged another actor who would contend for power and political control in the occupied territories of Palestine: Hamas. At present the largest party in the legislature, Hamas emerged as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 1987 and has firmly rejected working on a truce with Israel for many years.¹⁶ This is in part because they have very high standards for a truce, but also because they see the idea of a conflict as necessary for liberation. They stand as the rival to the PLO and its political wing, Fatah.¹⁷ This surge in popularity helps to support the hypothesis that the contest between the two powers has a significant role to play in the alteration of the strategy of the PLO. The maintenance of the militant wing was to ensure that the benefits gained by violent action would not be monopolized by a rival power. This rivalry could very well play a significant role in the continued presence of militancy in the group as a whole.

Legitimacy for the PLO had an impact on supplies, but not recruitment. In a 1974 paper, Ronald Macintyre points out that broad international support originated in more progressive, rather than conservative, Arab states.¹⁸ This meant that conservative states more dedicated to the cause, such as Saudi Arabia, slowly began to reduce material aid.¹⁹ Lack of clear data made publicly available on the topic make specific numbers difficult to come by, but historical trends indicate that this militant wing made recruitment only viable from more revolutionary

¹² Ibid, 45, 1994

¹³ Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements ("Oslo Agreement"), 13 September 1993

¹⁴ Becker, Jillian. *The PLO: The Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. AuthorHouse, 2014.

¹⁵ Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements ("Oslo Agreement"), 13 September 1993

¹⁶ Levitt, Matthew. *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*. Yale University Press, 2006.

¹⁷ Ibid, 2006

¹⁸ Macintyre, Ronald R. "The Palestine Liberation Organization: Tactics, Strategies and Options towards the Geneva Peace Conference." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 4, no. 4 (1975): 65-89. doi:10.2307/2535602.

¹⁹ Ibid, 70., (1975)

countries, but did not harm recruitment numbers.²⁰ This indicates that while the breadth of the pool slimmed, total fighters did not.

Moreover, there does not appear to be any evidence that the maintenance of the military wing was done for the sake of organization efficiency. Rather, it seemed to be a way of having some semblance of a defence force in place. Eventually this force would be subsumed by the Palestinian National Security Forces of the PA, but the principle remains the same. Both sought to maintain the militant wing not for organizational reasons but for practical ones. The benefit of separation for the PLO was that there were fewer restrictions on the use of the force, which led to the use of terror tactics. Now distinct, the PLO has less control on the recruitment of new fighters and not all are dedicated to the PLO's beliefs.

The final variable is that of successful completion of goal. The goal of the PLO is the liberation of the Palestinian people from Israeli rule, which has not been satisfied through political means. The Oslo Accords, which were meant to be the beginning of a lasting peace, did not succeed in that objective. The persistence of a militant wing demonstrates that the Accords faltered in the objective of the PLO in their hope to find their goal of a Palestinian state through political means. One such example is the continued mentioning of the destruction of Israel as a key goal in the PLO covenant, despite the words of the Oslo Accords.²¹ Additionally, the PLO has not been recognized as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, which is a further frustration for the group and reduces its margins to act. These factors point to a failure by the group to obtain its goals through political legitimacy and thus speak to the cause of its renewed violent response. If there was to be a reduction in militancy, the PLO would need greater assurances that it could trust both its rivals, Hamas and Israel, in this peace-making process.

The Case of Hezbollah

A second example can be found just slightly to the north, in Lebanon, in Hezbollah. Formed in the 1980's, the group is an Islamist organization, dedicated to the principles of countering Israel and representing Shia Muslims in Lebanon.²² The group has significant external ties to nations such as Iran, and for its early years much of its activities were associated with violent acts, especially against Western influence. For example, Hezbollah was responsible for the bombing of the United States embassy in Beirut in 1983.²³ These actions placed Hezbollah among the Islamist terrorist organizations listed by many Western nations, including the United States.²⁴

Hezbollah entered the political sphere of Lebanon for the first time in 1992.²⁵ This was a transition from previous activities and marked a semi-legitimacy within the state. Part of the

²⁰ Ibid, 70. (1975).

²¹ "MAJOR PLO VIOLATIONS OF THE OSLO ACCORDS-25-Oct-96." Accessed December 8, 2019. <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/mfadocuments/pages/major%20plo%20violations%20of%20the%20oslo%20accords%20-%2025-oct-.aspx>.

²² Council on Foreign Relations. "Terrorist Groups and Political Legitimacy." Accessed October 23, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/background/terrorist-groups-and-political-legitimacy>.

²³ Research, CNN Editorial. "Beirut Marine Barracks Bombing Fast Facts." CNN. Accessed November 17, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/13/world/meast/beirut-marine-barracks-bombing-fast-facts/index.html>.

²⁴ Rollins, John. , Foreign Terrorist Report, Congressional Research Service, January 15th, 2019

²⁵ Council on Foreign Relations. "Terrorist Groups and Political Legitimacy." (2006) Accessed October 23, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/background/terrorist-groups-and-political-legitimacy>.

appeal of Hezbollah for politics was its explicitly Shia beliefs.²⁶ As with many other Middle Eastern political arenas, political parties tend to divide on sectarian grounds as much as on partisan grounds, due to the centuries of conflict between different sects. The largest divide lies between Shia and Sunni Muslims, who continue to fight for control of the Middle East. This divide provided an opening for Hezbollah to enter the political scene to further its efforts.²⁷ Since 2005, Hezbollah has been a participating member of the governing coalition of the country, granting it even greater authority within the state. Since entering government, its goal seems to be to secure itself as a recognized part of the official government of Lebanon, bolstering the authority it already possesses through force.²⁸ While Hezbollah may not have the largest say in government policy, as a cabinet stakeholder it does have considerable influence, and indeed, often functions as the sole reason the government exists.

Despite its presence in the government, Hezbollah has routinely refused to relinquish its militant activities. The largest example of this remains that of the 2006 Lebanon War, alternatively called the Hezbollah-Israel War due to the near sole involvement of Hezbollah militants on the Lebanese side.²⁹ In mid-2006, these militants launched a cross border raid that saw several rockets land on the Golan Heights, which is territory claimed by both Israel and Lebanon. This led to attacks returning from the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), which launched an invasion of the Lebanese state. The total loss of life numbered in the thousands and there were hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people. A peace was eventually settled by the end of the summer; however, the damage had already been done. The continued presence of militant Hezbollah troops still exists to this day, with an ever-larger stockpile of arms and weapons according to some reports.³⁰

Hezbollah maintains its continued militancy due to one obvious benefit. The military of Hezbollah independently is considered to be better prepared and stronger than that of the Lebanese military, giving little reason for Hezbollah to reduce its personal authority to support the state. Additionally, there is the continued support that comes from Iran, which backs Hezbollah's militant actions. This is evident in studies of the 2006 war, which some have indicated was really a proxy conflict between Iran and Israel, rather than a continuation of the Arab-Israeli Conflict.³¹ Such arguments point to the potential of a secondary source outside of the governing structure, which provides the kind of legitimacy desired by the group. There is also an international scope that must be considered for Hezbollah. Unlike the PLO, whose groups are located totally in Palestine, Hezbollah is a transnational terrorist organization, with members and cells present in countries ranging from Cuba to Korea.³² As such, the group has an incentive to maintain militancy at home in order to ensure that there is continued militancy abroad. This disincentivizes them from engaging in efforts to reduce the amount of terror that they commit in order to ensure that they maintain control abroad. These factors all seem to be

²⁶ Ibid, 2006

²⁷ Ibid, 2006

²⁸ Ibid, 2006

²⁹ Matthews, Matt M. *We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*. DIANE Publishing, 2011.

³⁰ Shaan Shaikh, "Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah," *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 26, 2018, last modified September 27, 2019, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/hezbollahs-rocket-arsenal/>.

³¹ Matthews, Matt M. *We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*. DIANE Publishing, 2011.

³² Council on Foreign Relations. "Terrorist Groups and Political Legitimacy." (2006) Accessed October 23, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/terrorist-groups-and-political-legitimacy>.

potentially significant for the creation of increased amounts of terror. This also speaks as to why the group chooses to not fully remove itself from the sphere of violent action.

Unlike the PLO, recruitment for Hezbollah is impacted due to changes in militancy. While recruitment numbers are not fully known, the group's guiding manifesto is one of ideological warfare. It explicitly states its disdain for an American-centric international system, and a desire to resist it both politically and militarily.³³ This statement indicates an expectation of violence to oppose the standards that are not supported, which draws many to the group. It should also be noted that unlike the PLO, there is a much greater degree of unity between the military and political wings. This unity means that there are limited options to reducing militancy, even to gain local political power. For this reason, it is important for Hezbollah to maintain its military wing so that it can continue to be received positively by its international partners.

There is a final question regarding the political aims of the group. Here there are once again two primary points: success and competition. Success seems to be limited for Hezbollah's political end. While Hezbollah has been a part of the government for over a decade, it has never gained more than two ministers in the cabinet. This minority status makes them both an integral part of the government, but also keeps their power much more limited than they may desire officially.³⁴ This does not prevent Hezbollah from continuing to manifest its power through the political bases that it already possesses, but also does not allow it to expand so that it has far greater control of the region. Additionally, there is competition that exists which threatens Hezbollah's political stability. In recent elections, Hezbollah has been beaten out by the rival Shia party, Amal, by just one minister in the past two governments. Hezbollah may therefore be maintaining its militant forces in order to ensure that it continues to hold seats in this cabinet through the threat of violence. The presence of a rival party always poses a threat that cannot be fully eliminated if political legitimacy is to be maintained. Luckily, Amal is a partner party, which reduces some of the threats it poses to the continued presence of Hezbollah in the region.³⁵ Unlike Hezbollah, however, Amal has no connections to terrorist activities against the West. This leaves them available for future partnerships with foreign powers. Moreover, Amal tends to support Syria and Palestine, even against Hezbollah. This friction has resulted in armed conflicts in the past.³⁶ These factors help to emphasize why, even if a current partnership exists, there is little incentive for Hezbollah to further reduce its militant presence, as it would reduce its ability to push for its goals through the political system.

Evaluating Hypotheses

These cases indicate a common theme in the variables that play a role in the change seen in the use of militant wings of these different groups. Across the groups, the variables of recruitment, benefit acquisition, and achieving political goals were examined in order to see what impact each had on the decision to maintain a militant wing despite political recognition. The first of these variables, benefit acquisition, proved to be a key factor in both cases. When

³³ "Hezbollah Cuts Islamist Rhetoric in New Manifesto." Reuters, November 30, 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-hezbollah-idUSTRE5AT3VK20091130>.

³⁴ Council on Foreign Relations. "Terrorist Groups and Political Legitimacy." (2006) Accessed October 23, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/background/terrorist-groups-and-political-legitimacy>.

³⁵ Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 2007

there was a benefit to be gained, whether that was position in negotiation, support from constituents or countries, or even monetary support, groups did not disband their militant wings. If, however, the benefit of having a militant wing was low or did not exist as there was no support to be gained from the violence, the wing was disbanded.

The second hypothesis was about the role recruitment played in the continuation of militant wings. This hypothesis proved less conclusive for a variety of reasons. The first was that many of the groups that have political and militant wings use different names for those two organizations, which keeps them distinct from one another. They also have wholly different structures, as was noted in the hypothesis. This makes tracking the impact of maintaining the militant on total recruitment difficult. There is also the difficulty posed by a lack of total recruitment numbers. This data being absent makes conclusions being drawn about the broader impact of militancy on recruitment difficult. While not wholly disproven, the case studies do not provide enough evidence to fully support the hypothesis.

The last hypothesis is that militant wings are maintained when the political goal that is sought is not completed. Here the case studies point to a correlation between these two events. In cases such as Hezbollah, where the political goal has not been fully achieved due to both minority status within the government and the broader goal of establishing Shia law not only domestically in Lebanon, but globally.³⁷ The PLO has similarly struggled to fully achieve its objectives.

Limitations of Analysis

There are several limitations that come with the analysis of the case studies above that should be noted. The first of these is the selection of cases. The aim of this article was to find the reasons behind the maintenance of militant wings despite having political legitimacy. As such, cases were selected on the basis of organisations possessing political legitimacy and making comparisons. There are no comparable cases of organisations that lacked political legitimacy and yet maintained a militant wing. It also does not address groups that choose not to enter the militant arena, but solely use the political arena. Both types of organizations represent potential forms of achieving political ends, but their use in this study is limited to examining the relationship between the maintenance of militant wings with political authority. The second limitation is the type of groups that are studied. It should be noted that both of these groups maintain either a nationalist or religious bent; this inadvertently limits the analysis by not examining the impact of more ideological terrorism, such as green terrorism. This is primarily due to the latter's lack of success in gaining significant political power. The last limitation of the study is that it is very causal in nature. The choice of a historical lens means that much of the analysis comes from the flow of events and documents, rather than analysed trends over time. An interesting continuation of this paper would be to see the details of attacks over time in a quantitative time series.

³⁷ Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

Policy Applications

There are several policy applications that can be gathered from studying this phenomenon. The most important that can be seen is that of finding the truly articulated goal of the political organization. As noted above, one of the most impactful questions to answer when asking if a group will cease its militant activity is the extent a group has achieved its political end to the point of being satisfied with its own security. If this is the case, then the likelihood of the group disbanding their militant wing increases. Ultimately, this results in finding a compromise to end the violence and fully bring the group into the political arena without caving to unreasonable demands. This can only be done through a peace process or simply getting them to the table, as was done with the PLO with mixed success. The mixed success can also be attributed to other factors such as acquisition of benefit winning out over achieving the goal; in both cases, the potential was present because the primary goal seemed achievable. This also helps governments recognize the groups they cannot negotiate with. Some groups publish manifestos that posit a different goal than their underlying driver of their violence. These differences can explain the persistence of violence that follows and allows for a change in tactic by the government to address the true goal. In some cases, this goal will not be met; in other cases, the real goal can be addressed, allowing for a reduction in violence even as the group continues to fight for a differently stated objective.

The other key element of policy application comes from the benefit acquisition side of the equation. If violence is benefiting the terrorist organization, then its benefits need to be re-evaluated. The clear example in the case of the PLO is that of international support; this support derived from continuing to defend the Palestinian people which comes mostly from more radical nations.

Conclusion

This article has worked through case studies to make an argument for the rationale behind organizations keeping a militant wing, despite acquiring significant political power. Through these case studies, the determinant cause seemed to be an incomplete acquisition of the end goal through that political power. This provides a useful lens for policy makers that attempt to integrate terrorist organizations into the political system. Further studies could be conducted, focusing on quantitative evidence, looking for a correlation between political success and violent activity. This further research, paired with the current qualitative one, will provide new tools to prevent the growth of new organizations and advance the further deradicalization of those that already exist.