

Extremist Exploitation of the Context Created by COVID-19 and the Implications for Australian Security

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Abstract

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, extremists around the world have to all appearances sought to exploit the disruption to serve their own strategic or ideological means and ends. In order to understand the threat posed by such extremists in the Australian national security context, this study investigates how extremists incorporated contemporary events in Australia and beyond its borders into their COVID-19-related narratives. This article traverses three ideological milieus and examines violent Salafi-Jihadism, the extreme right, and the extreme left. By studying how ideological milieus interact with the current pandemic context, it is possible to observe the fluctuation of ideological constructs through the identified narratives. These narratives were not solely propagated online as may have been expected: instead, there was observable offline dissemination as well. While little was found on the extreme left, this study found that violent Salafi-Jihadist and extreme-right milieus interpreted COVID-19 in ideologically self-serving ways. In some cases, COVID-19 was used to buttress existing narratives, while there was also evidence of narrative diversification, with seemingly ideologically contradictory positions adopted. These impact national security in Australia in three ways: first, buttressing may reinforce extremist distrust of authorities and cement positions; second, diversification complicates the threatscape by challenging efficient identification; third, the co-optation of idiosyncratic conspiracies has exposed the vulnerability of democratic societies to misinformation.

Keywords: Australia, COVID-19, pandemic, terrorism, extremism, ideology, narratives

Introduction

Since the end of 2019, the emergence of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in China's Wuhan province has had a devastating impact around the world. By 25 November 2021, more than 258,164,425 people had contracted the virus and another 5,166,192 people had died as a result of the virus.[1] The impact of COVID-19, however, extends beyond the loss of human lives expressed in casualty statistics. Since early 2020, it has been possible to observe that the pandemic has been incorporated into extremist narratives, and exploited to further extremist objectives. This study examines how extremist milieus in Australia integrated COVID-19 into their narratives and ideologies. We drew on domestic incidents, reporting and online chatter foremost; this was supplemented with international data which provided greater situational awareness. We examined the three main extremist milieus in the Australian threatscape: violent Salafi-Jihadist (VSJ), extreme right-wing (XRW), and extreme left-wing (XLW). To better contextualize engagement with the COVID-19 context, we also reviewed the pre-COVID-19 engagement of extremists with Australian political affairs.

Initially, this study was a response to observations of how the environment created by COVID-19 could be exploited by extremists to achieve strategic goals. Among these goals can be the intention to stoke or enhance community fears, rupture community cohesion, and erode community resilience. In times of uncertainty and fear, extremists tend to believe they will flourish, being desirous of harnessing unrest to achieve their own strategic ends—normally through some form of violent revolution. There were discussions in the media that extremists were undermining community confidence in governments through the online propagation of conspiracy theories and misinformation.[2] These campaigns were also suggested to provide a platform for extremist recruitment and mobilization.[3]

In the Australian context, the two main movements likely to engage in such activity come from VSJ and XRW, as indicated by Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Director-General Mike Burgess

in February 2020.[4] While we were collecting data, ASIO reported that XRW threats had increased, consuming between 30–40% of their priority counter-terrorism caseload, flagging social media as a contributing factor.[5] By October 2020, Deputy Commissioner Ian McCartney of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) told a Senate estimates committee that XRW threats were growing, and increasingly targeting young people online—while also acknowledging that VSJ terrorism remained a substantial threat.[6] A push by the Australian Labour Party (ALP) ultimately led to a bipartisan effort to understand the national security implications of the COVID-19 environment via the Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia—the final report of which remains undisclosed despite a 30 April 2021 deadline.[7] The present study therefore seeks to expand upon this knowledge from an academic perspective by analyzing ideological fluctuations of extremist milieus and assessing the implications for Australian national security.

Our study found that COVID-19 has complicated the national security threatscape due to extremists' ideological buttressing, diversification, and idiosyncratic co-optation. The two primary threats we noted in the Australian context are VSJ and XRW (echoing official statements), while insufficient data were found on XLW to establish it as a major threat. All three milieus interpreted COVID-19 in ideologically self-serving ways, most clearly in the case of VSJ, due to their single text authority (the Quran). XRW and XLW were more diversified, but also interpreted COVID-19 in ways which buttressed their pre-COVID-19 belief systems. Buttressing narratives may serve to deepen the distrust between extremists and authorities by cementing ideological positions. Diversified narratives pose a different challenge, as some have adopted seemingly contradictory beliefs or idiosyncratic conspiracies which can thwart efficient identification. This ideological fluctuation was enabled by information networks, both online and offline, which have connected extremists despite countermeasures. This has exposed the vulnerability of Western democracies such as Australia to misinformation originating from both international and domestic sources.

Approach and Methods

The research for this article employed a constructivist approach, which holds ideology as a central explanation for the beliefs, ideas, behaviors and identities which regulate human behavior.[8] This framework was further informed by Corbin and Strauss and their list of pragmatist and interactionist assumptions which was applied as a paradigm for understanding how extremists interact with each other.[9] To briefly touch on relevant assumptions, Corbin and Strauss suggested these pragmatic and interactionist assumptions: a) actions are the result of interactions across time, past, present, and an imagined future; b) actions may be preceded or succeeded by reflexive interactions and evaluations with oneself and others; c) actions are not always driven by rationality, and are often accompanied by emotion; d) the perspectives of actors are often influenced by their environment, or what Strauss calls “social worlds and subworlds”—which are often overlapping and potentially conflicting.

The approach recognizes the duality of knowing and doing, which, when orientated toward understanding extremists, would suggest symbiosis between knowledge and action, and by extension, ideology, and behavior. Significantly, Corbin and Strauss note that experience cannot be divorced from a multiplicity of overlapping and interacting contexts, spanning ethnicity, gender, society, politics, culture, and the way information is communicated.[10] In turn, this incorporates some measure of naturalistic inquiry, in which we can observe and interpret the activities of particular extremist subcultures and their subjective realities.[11] Naturalistic inquiry, moreover, allowed for a flexible approach to the investigation of the extremist milieus. The approach faces critiques for its limitations, which are routed in understanding issues within contexts based on interactions between material and ideational factors.[12] To overcome this, we aim to explore the interactions between the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ within Australia. This is, by itself, a further limitation as we seek to illuminate past and present engagement with stimuli relevant to this national context—while drawing on international evidence only where related.

With this approach in mind, the milieu selection was guided by findings from official reports on contemporary threats.[13] Then, data were identified and selected by the evidence of ideological alignment with existing

definitions on the nature of each threat over the course of one single year: 2020.[14] Data collection had four dimensions. First, information from the SITE Intelligence Group was examined for primary source material, with its data tagged as VSJ, XRW and XLW. Second, media reporting was canvassed for activities, attacks, artifacts and statements related to the three milieus. Third, data were harvested from Australian websites that were flagged by the media. Fourth, scholarly literature and reports were consulted where relevant to understanding the three milieus or COVID-19's relevance to national security. The use of specific encrypted social media or communication applications was beyond the scope of this study. Qualitative content analysis was then undertaken to highlight and distinguish key features or themes which demonstrated engagement with, or exploitation of, the context created by COVID-19. These key features were then contrasted against extremist engagement with context pre-COVID-19 in order to identify change or continuity. These were then analyzed with respect to the implications for Australian national security.

Emerging Perspectives

Across the literature we consulted, there is some consensus about the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism and national security. The first most dominant theme was the threat of such actors exploiting conspiracies and fear. The second theme was concerns that the virus would be weaponized against ideological targets. The third theme was the expansion of targeting to soft targets, including hospitals and Asians. The Australian far right has long targeted the Asian Australian community, motivated by ethno-nationalism, xenophobia, and the quest for White hegemony.[15] Attention must therefore turn to the specific Australian context, but to do this, we must first explore the critical convergence between national security, terrorism, and COVID-19. At the center of this convergence is ideology, which allows for the interaction between extremists and reality.

The first globally focused national security paper with specific COVID-19 relevance was written by Ackerman and Peterson.[16] They acknowledged that the pandemic would affect terrorism operations and listed ten possible effects of the pandemic. These ranged from the likelihood that some terrorist organizations would engage in social welfare to build legitimacy, to the possibility that COVID-19-related dislocation and disruption could lead to increased susceptibility to radicalization, especially via online networks, as terrorists prey on uncertainty. There may be a pause of mass casualty attacks for lack of populated spaces, or alternatively, hospitals burdened with the COVID-19 response may prove attractive targets. Targets such as shrines, memorials, prisons, and facilities may be selected, as social distancing may leave these areas under-protected. Lockdown measures could lead to a rise in anti-government sentiment due to containment politics and conspiratorial explanations of events. Terrorists may weaponize and deliberately spread the virus, become motivated to engage in bioterrorism, or apocalyptic or millenarian terrorists may simply be inspired by it. Finally, Ackerman and Peterson warn the counter-terrorism community against distraction, as terrorists may use it as an opportunity to launch attacks.

Similar themes were noted in a roundtable on COVID-19 and counterterrorism on an international scale held by Cruickshank and Rassler.[17] Their discussions touched on Salafi-jihadists framing COVID-19 as divine intervention. Meanwhile, the far right sought to exploit uncertainty, propagate anti-Semitic narratives, and champion state collapse and disorder. The roundtable also touched on the degradation of trust and on some disinformation campaigns which at times were leveraged by hostile state actors. While these authors also discussed bioterrorism in general, Cronin flagged that the weaponization of COVID-19 would perhaps kill a limited number of people a few weeks later, but "with hard-to-prove attrition" and limited publicity outcomes.[18] This is a key observation that was not emphasized in other emerging literature.

Some of these concerns were also present in Pantucci's work, such as the increased targeting of Asians as arguably influenced by senior American politicians blaming the "China virus".[19] Pantucci expanded further to discuss the likelihood of increased anti-government activity, the creation of extremist Luddites, and COVID-19 exploitation by fringe actors seeking to exacerbate niche fears. Another author, Basit, suggests that COVID-19 countermeasures have increased the chances of radicalization as people spend more time online, "looking for answers amid uncertainties" which could lead to an increase of lone-actor attacks.[20]

He highlights the propagation of conspiracies by extremists, with Islamic State (IS) incorporating COVID-19 in apocalyptic narratives, while the far right incorporates it as a way to accelerate disorder. Basit warns of terrorists exploiting drone technology, as it may be repurposed from deliveries to attack vehicles.

The weaponization concern is also evident in Stern, Ware and Harrington's research. They examine push and pull factors and the impact on targeting during COVID-19.[21] They argue that conspiracy theories have been exploited by the far right in the United States to control and capitalize on fear. This has resulted in skepticism about COVID-19's origins and the role of science, widespread protests against perceived government infringements on liberty, a repurposing of anti-Semitic tropes and theories, and expansion into anti-5G rhetoric and targeting. They argue that three new targets have emerged: Asian Americans, medical facilities, and 5G infrastructure. Such infrastructure is perceived to be capable of firing radiation beams that cause the respiratory distress of COVID-19 patients: a conspiracy perpetuated by Russian broadcasters since 2016.[22] They suggest target hardening and vigilance against Trojan horse attackers in medical or police uniforms, responsible media reporting, and improved counternarrative and counterconspiracy campaigns.

Kruglanski et al. examined the narratives of VSJ and the far right using the 'Grievance, Culprit, and Method' model to understand justifications of violence.[23] They found that VSJ advanced two theories; one claimed that COVID-19 was created by the West, while the other considered COVID-19 a soldier of Allah. In response, VSJ encouraged using COVID-19 as a bioweapon, or capitalizing on the disorder to launch attacks against the West. By contrast, they argue that the far right attributed COVID-19 to a Jewish or Chinese conspiracy and sought to deliberately spread the virus, that they used COVID-19 control mechanisms like masks to obscure their identities during violent actions, and finally capitalized on it to generally promote chaos. The solution proposed by Kruglanski et al. was increased vigilance and a call to governments to provide "an alternative coherence, one based on science and rationality" as well as "disavow their own supporters who promote bigoted conspiracy theories under the guise of liberty".[24] Ong and Azman also examined XRW and VSJ calls for violence, finding that while IS messaging has focused on encouraging attacks amidst health warnings, the far right promotes conspiracy theories and attacks aimed at weaponizing the virus.[25]

When Daymon and Criezis examined 442 items of IS-supporter content, they found eleven key narratives which exposed IS's COVID-19 framing attempts.[26] Among these were claims that the West or Jews created the virus in a laboratory, that it was divine punishment, and framing COVID-19 as payback against their enemies. Other content, however, was more about mocking enemies. The most prominent of the themes identified by Daymon and Criezis were counting the number of deceased, COVID-19 as divine punishment and payback, and references to holy scripture. Norlen, however, emphasized that jihadi messaging is rarely unified, and often conflicting, which could impact the overall mission and the survivability of the group.[27] Significantly, Norlen also demonstrated how even absolutist and narrow doctrines could become subject to interpretation on the basis of contemporary events such as pandemics, highlighting both theological and operational agility of jihadi terrorism.

State-specific studies are also emerging. Arianti and Taufiqurrohman examined the impact in Indonesia and suggest that pro-IS groups are using the COVID-19 context to call for attacks, portraying the government as having been weakened.[28] Anti-Chinese rhetoric is prominent on Indonesian VSJ channels (although it is not reflected in targeting). Beyond this, Alexander considered the potential impacts in northern Syria detention camps holding members of IS and suggested that COVID-19 would complicate an already complex humanitarian and security challenge.[29] Notably, she flagged that defiance of COVID-19 countermeasures is a way in which detainees seek to change their circumstances, as many also subscribe to the IS interpretation for the virus as the wrath of Allah.

Shire examined terrorist and insurgent activity in Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia throughout the pandemic, based on the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) data set.[30] They found that the Taliban, Ha-at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and Al Shabaab have been forced to step into humanitarian vacuums and deliver health services, set up quarantine facilities, and engage in COVID-19 awareness campaigns, while concomitantly launching attacks and destabilizing activities. Whilst the Taliban and HTS initially framed

COVID-19 as an act of God, Al Shabaab maintained it was a crusader-driven conspiracy. Despite this, all three groups initially leveraged the pandemic to attack hard targets on the one hand, whilst delivering health interventions on the other. Hockey and Jones also examined Al Shabaab's response and noted that neither the group nor the government had sufficient responses to limit transmission and treat those infected.[31]

Other research specifically looks at far-right engagement with the pandemic. Perry, Grubbs and Whitehead examined Christian nationalists in the context of COVID-19 and found that the far right was not driven by religiosity, but instead, showed ideological disregard for scientific expertise.[32] Their control group demonstrated a distrust for mainstream media, a belief that Americans were God's chosen people, and sympathy for Trump-style nationalism, which in turn correlated with incautious behaviors. Vieten examined far-right expressions and mobilization during COVID-19 to suggest that pandemic populism is on the rise. [33] They argue that the COVID-19 has exposed the reterritorialization of governance, increasing fears of the mythic 'other', while driving a 'moral panic' cycle that combines antiestablishment sentiment with ethno-nationalist xenophobia.

Beyond scholarly literature, a substantial body of professional commentary has also emerged. Commentators on the far right have discussed the "conspiratorial cesspool" which rejects the "medical industrial complex" and has thus united Science Denial (SD) groups with anti-lockdown and alternative medicine movements and weaponized the science-denial position.[34] Others note that the pandemic has accelerated recruitment for the far right, buoyed by ethnically focused grievance narratives.[35] Commentary on VSJ terrorism has spanned the opportunity to sow division and distrust through disinformation, to fundraising during the pandemic by exploiting online sales of medical equipment, to making gains whilst government resources are diverted to COVID-19 countermeasures.[36] Byman and Ammunson highlighted that prior to COVID-19, VSJ terrorism during the pandemic tended to accelerate home-grown attacks.[37] Less commentary exists on the extreme left. One commentary piece by Henshaw suggested that COVID-19 has influenced a ceasefire between left-wing guerrilla groups while criminal syndicates step into humanitarian roles.[38] In sum, this brief literature review suggests that more research on ideological constructions of context by extreme milieus is needed.

Ideological Realities and Subjectivities

To reiterate, this study assumes a correlation of knowing and doing, or knowledge and action. Applied to terrorism studies, this approach can demonstrate the potential for ideology to lead to violence.[39] Generally, ideology explains the shortcomings of the existing order, imagines an ideal alternative, and proposes a way to achieve it.[40] Further, ideology organizes social representations and facilitates alignment between actions, interactions, and group goals. Extremist ideology takes these ideas, as its namesake implies, to an extreme: it explains the existing order as flawed beyond redemption, and proscribes a violent (and often purifying or cleansing) revolution to achieve a utopian future. This anchors ideological perspectives in the existing order. As suggested by Althusser, ideology exists in practice, and its existence is material and observable in what its adherents say and do.[41] In the COVID-19 context, it is possible to observe how extremists engaged with current events and context in their narratives. This occurs even where the link between the context and the group is tangential at best.

VSJ: Pre-COVID-19 Engagement with Context in Australia

The alignment between engagement with context and ideological narratives is present in VSJ narratives related to the Australian context. For the purpose of this article, VSJ refers to the adoption of VSJ ideology in which violent action is mandated as both obligatory and necessary. It may be expected that Australian current affairs are hardly prominent for VSJ ideology, and yet they feature in VSJ narratives. By way of example, in 2018 a disgruntled former employee of a major strawberry producer began to insert needles into the produce, creating widespread warnings and recalls from Australian retailers, thereby damaging the Australian strawberry industry for a time. On 21 September, 24 September, and 26 September that same

year, IS supporters such as Muharir al-Ansar and Ansar ul-Haqq began to create and distribute material suggesting that IS was behind the needles. Among their communication were statements transposed upon images of strawberries, such as: ‘Australia, harvest time has come into your homes’, ‘in your food you will find special flavors that we have prepared for you’, and ‘[w]e will never allow you to enjoy the taste of what you desire.’[42]

Strawberries are not the only example of international VSJ engagement with domestic affairs; in 2019, VSJ in *Al Naba* urged violence against the “crusader soldiers” of Australia and New Zealand.[43] Again in 2020, during the Australian Black Summer bushfire crisis, an IS-aligned group interpreted the bushfires as divine retribution: Allah, according to the authors, sends these signs to the “unjust” so that they repent and return to Islam.[44] That Australian natural disasters could feature in VSJ narratives is significant because it demonstrates the incorporation of new—and often unrelated—context into ideological narratives. Obviously, there are strategic considerations beyond this incorporation, as with any propaganda product, but it nonetheless exposes the manner in which extremists ascribe to a certain reality, in this case bushfires as a sign from Allah. In such a way, international narratives show engagement with the domestic Australian context.

XRW: Pre-COVID-19 Engagement with Context in Australia

Interaction with context is also noticeable between domestic and international XRW prior to the COVID-19 context. For the purpose of this study, XRW is conceptualized as a heterogeneous grouping of organizations, individuals and subcultures whose political beliefs align with the core XRW precepts.[45] This definition includes neo-Nazis, fascists, nationalists, and the sovereign citizen/freeman movement. The Australian XRW may be fragmented, but its adherents commonly seek connection and validation with international peers and organizations.[46] In recent years, the international XRW milieus have lauded Australian XRW. In January 2019, by way of example, international Stormfront members feted the Australian XRW for scuffling with anti-fascist activists at a rally, invoking the Cronulla race riots as a combative and righteous tradition. The terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019 by Australian right-wing terrorist Brenton Tarrant was widely celebrated by XRW around the world—a clear demonstration of interaction between international and Australian XRW activities. Tarrant’s international relevance was then observable in further attacks, such as those in El Paso and Baerum, where attackers cited Tarrant’s ideology and manifesto—a further demonstration of ideological interaction. This interaction was also observable domestically: shortly after 15 March, a mosque in Brisbane was subject to vandalism and graffiti, with images of swastikas and phrases such as “remove kebab” and “St (sic) Tarrant”.[47]

An indication of international-domestic engagement can also be found in the Sovereign Citizen Movement (SCM). The right-wing ideological overlap of anti-government, White-supremacist, anti-Semitic, and conspiracist themes has been evident within SCM since its inception. The SCM originated in the United States as an anti-government ideology in the early 1970s before expanding to develop a transnational presence in Canada, the UK, Ireland, Australia, and Russia.[48] The SCM moniker is an umbrella term to numerous anti-government movements that share the core underpinning ideological belief that the government is a corrupt corporate entity that has no legitimate authority to impose taxes, enforce laws, or restrict their free movement.[49]

SCM activity prior to COVID-19 predominantly manifested itself as vexatious litigation to avoid legal and financial recourse by government entities.[50] The increasing presence of SCM proponents in Australia led to terrorism legislation being applied to SCM-adherent John Mathers (pseudonym) after he was found to possess prohibited weapons and instructional material relating to the production of 3D-printed firearms and improvised explosive devices.[51] Mathers sent a death threat to a member of parliament, accusing him of treason and threatening he would “be hung until he was dead” and “no mercy, no prisoners”.[52] The seriousness of these threats and violent actions have resulted in SCMs being regarded as an extremist domestic terrorist threat by the FBI,[53] while in Australia they were noted as a potential terrorism threat

in a 2015 NSW Police report.[54] The international XRW milieus such as SCM therefore have a domestic anchorage prior to the COVID-19 context as was also the case with VSJ and, to a lesser extent, XLW.

XLW: Pre-COVID-19 Engagement with Context

For the purposes of this study, ‘left-wing extremism’ (XLW) refers to disaggregated groupings from milieus associated with hard and soft left-wing ideologies, who hold violence as being necessary and mandated to achieve their goals. Much like other Western democracies, Australia has its own anti-fascist (ANTIFA) movement. However, this movement catalyzes primarily as counter-protest activism, mobilizing against fascism and racism. They have been known to engage in street riots and dox members of the far right. This type of activity does not meet the threshold for violence required to constitute terrorism according to definitions like the Academic Consensus from Schmid.[55] While XLW violence remains a severe and ongoing threat in parts of Europe such as Italy [56], such levels have not been reached in Australia for decades.[57]

In most of the official submissions to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Extremism and Radicalism in Australia in 2020, XLW was noted to be a low security threat. This was supported by submissions from the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF). The Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), noted that “left-wing extremism is not currently prominent in Australia”. [58] The Victorian Police (VICPOL) submission stated there was a “symbiotic relationship” between XLW and XRW—a finding not confirmed in open sources.[59] As we could not identify or collect sufficient information related to XLW in the Australian context, we subsequently redirected our efforts to the two major threat natures identified by authorities: XRW and VSJ.

Engagement with the COVID-19 Context

Based on this brief overview of the pre-pandemic situation, it is possible to identify how international narratives can engage with Australian milieus or contexts. Ideology is interactional, with adherents constantly engaging with and interpreting the current context, regardless of the retrograde nature of some of these interpretations. It was therefore assumed that extremists would engage with the COVID-19 context and interpret reality and events in ideologically meaningful ways. This highlights two things: the subjectivity of ideological realities, and ideological proclivity to adapt and change with context. It should be expected, therefore, that extremists will engage with current events, as exemplified by an IS-aligned media outfit describing the Australian Black Summer bushfire crisis as divine punishment in January 2020. From as early as January 2020, however, extremists also interacted with COVID-19 in their narratives, despite it not being formally recognized as a public health emergency by WHO until 1 February and ultimately labeled a pandemic on 11 March 2020. We now turn to these interactions, beginning with VSJ.

VSJ: Divine Will, Punishment, and Redemption

Internationally, VSJ has interpreted the COVID-19 context in a number of ways, some of which are already detailed above. By 17 March 2020, some VSJ had referred to COVID-19 as being the “soldier of Allah”, while in *Naba* 226 they asked Allah to use it against the ‘crusaders’ in revenge for attacks like those in Mosul and Sirte.[60] Others, such as the second issue of the *Voice of Hind* suggested that COVID-19 was sent by Allah to distract nonbelievers and make them more opportune targets. Al Qaeda Central (AQC) specifically issued a communication advising followers that Allah required them to repent their sins, return to the bosom of Allah, care for the poor, and engage in jihad on behalf of Allah.[61] The *Al Haqq* publication shared similar interpretations, claiming that COVID-19 was a punishment sent by Allah, in which the only cure was to return to Allah.[62] This view was also propagated by leaders of Boko Haram, Al Shabaab and the Afghan Taliban in their communications. They positioned COVID-19 as punishment for transgressions. This was echoed by IS spokesman Abu Hamza Al-Qurashi in May 2020. The anchor for ideological interpretations

of COVID-19 amongst VSJ, then, became divine power and suggestions of divine will. COVID-19 was seen either as a punishment for transgressors (including both Muslims and the West), or a chance for redemption.

By June, this had pivoted slightly as VSJ began to comment on the toll of COVID-19 on Western economies and lives, such as in *Naba* 327 and in *One Ummah*.^[63] COVID-19 was referred to as the “invisible soldier” of Allah, wreaking havoc amongst Western populations. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) joined this conversation in August, celebrating the impact of COVID-19 in the West, which was seen to have drunk from a “cup of torment” not seen by the “naked eye.”^[64] By September 2020 the messaging changed and groups such as AQAP began encouraging lone actor attacks in the West once more. This was reaffirmed in the *Wolves of Manhattan* Issue 1, associated with Al Qaeda, which suggested using face masks to conceal one’s identity during attacks.^[65] This aligns with pre-COVID-19 messaging, but also leverages COVID-19 to pivot to redemption narratives through violent jihad. This relatively coherent messaging is likely related to the singular authority of the Quran (with no single text shaping XRW and XLW milieus). This international context can be used as a comparison point for the domestic context.

In Australia specifically, there were two attacks related to VSJ ideology. In October 2020, incarcerated terrorist Momena Shoma stabbed a fellow inmate.^[67] Shoma was charged with a terrorist offense, but it cannot be established if COVID-19 conditions impacted her prison experience. In December 2020, police shot and killed Raghe Abdi in Brisbane as he allegedly tried to attack them, yelling “Allahu Akbar”.^[66] He is believed to have been aligned to a VSJ ideology, and had been subject to previous monitoring by ASIO and Queensland police. As the inquest is still in progress, we were unable to ascertain the extent to which COVID-19 was a factor (if at all). Beyond this, a Canberra journalist who identified as a White, nationalist Muslim (and who made beheading threats after the Christchurch attacks in 2019) was arrested toward the end of 2020 in connection with terrorism act-related offenses in Brisbane. It was suggested in the media that he planned to obtain and train with firearms.^[68] It is unknown at the time of this writing whether ideological interpretations of COVID-19 were a factor. Reports from ASIO and AFP officials maintained that VSJ remained a significant component of their work throughout 2020, although investigations do not always result in prosecution.

XRW: Blame, Oppose, and Destabilize

Timothy Wilson, an XRW-affiliated individual in the US, was an early exploiter of the COVID-19 context. He encouraged others to deliberately spread COVID-19 to politicians, police officers and those attending synagogues. He was later shot and killed by the FBI while attempting to construct a bomb to be planted at a hospital which was treating people affected by COVID-19. By 2 March, some XRW were encouraging followers to use COVID-19 in the service of accelerationist goals of bringing about the ultimate destruction of society through exacerbating ethnic tensions or destroying immigrant populations. COVID-19, then, was accepted as real and potentially lethal and an element of the contemporary context that could be weaponized against enemies. This included encouragement to catch COVID-19 and maliciously spread it to targets such as mosques, synagogues, ethnic neighborhoods, and public transport. Some, such as the Russian Imperial Legion, maintained COVID-19 was man-made, while others attributed its creation specifically to Jews or the Chinese. XRW narrative creation also incorporated COVID-19 to buttress existing narratives decrying globalism, immigration, and modern society in general. Where other narratives existed, such as those related to Science Denial groups with respect to 5G phone networks, XRW channels encouraged users to exploit them and escalate hysteria.^[69]

Counter-lockdown rallies began to take place around the world, especially in the United States, and were attended by diverse XRW milieus. Some adopted other narratives, e.g., in the case of one rally held in Austin, Texas, on 26 April, with the crowd chanting “arrest Bill Gates”, claiming he created the virus.^[70] Rumors abounded that the COVID-19 vaccine would cause sterility, and that vaccinations would become mandatory. COVID-19 became a focal point for XRW protests in many countries. In the course of 2020, landscapes of XRW became more prominent as they opposed COVID-19 countermeasures. For instance, the

Nordic Resistance Movement claimed that the countermeasures were a manifestation of elite misconduct. [71] Cross sections of 3 Percenters, Oathkeepers, fundamentalist Christian groups, White supremacists, anti-government groups, and neo-Nazis could be found at various rallies and in demonstrations, identifiable by flags, tattoos, signs, and uniforms. This meant that many newcomers were exposed to their ideologies.

Such was also the case in the Australian context. By 15 March, Australian ethno-nationalists posted media content blaming the COVID-19 context on globalism, China, and elite deceit.[72] They incorporated anti-COVID-19 rhetoric into their long-standing racist and xenophobic agenda. As Australia initiated COVID-19 countermeasures, reports began to surface of violence against Australians of Asian descent, with women targeted in the majority of 178 recorded incidences.[73] Such reports indicate ideological alignment with existing anti-Asian narratives in the Australian extreme right.[74] This type of propaganda was subsequently shared by international XRW as reported by SITE Intelligence. Domestic XRW seemed positively disposed toward COVID-19, viewing it as an event they could exploit to keep foreigners out of Australia, in line with their racist and xenophobic beliefs. The attacks against Australia's Asian population also continued. In one notable event, a man cracked a whip outside the Chinese Consulate in Sydney in a threatening manner, with the act being shared to Stormfront.[75] COVID-19 also became a vehicle for anti-Semitism, with the Australian Hate Crime Network (AHCN) noting that Jews were also being accused of creating the virus, aligning with preexisting anti-Semitism in Australia.[76] Australian XRW were also encouraged by US milieus to form small cells, go offline, and coordinate with the Nationalist Socialist Network (NSN) to disrupt Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests.[77] This aligned, again, with preexisting hostilities to left-wing politics. COVID-19 was used to buttress preexisting ideological beliefs, and further highlight the alleged peril posed by Asian immigration, globalism, left-wing opponents, and Jews.

Demonstrations against COVID-19 countermeasures (masks, lockdowns) began in May 2020, with some elements claiming that COVID-19 was a globalist conspiracy, and that the government was tyrannical. Videos of Australian protestors being arrested were shared in American XRW forums. Significant media attention soon focused on the Australian SCM, and the movement quickly gained prominence. Australian police reported an increased trend of people refusing to supply their identification at state border roadblocks, citing their SC status as a means to bypass laws and immunity from countermeasures.[78] The use of force by police to gain entry to vehicles was not limited to border controls, with police also having to smash the window of an SCM individual's vehicle in order to arrest them. The representations of these incidents in the media may have had an adverse effect, with more individuals accessing online forums seeking legal and illegal methods to avoid measures imposed by authorities. SCM ideology also featured in a website supposedly launched by a serving police officer who also disseminated SC material while being involved in frontline active duties.[79] As COVID-19 countermeasures increased, the SC rhetoric was joined by conspiracist and anti-vaccination expressions. This manifestation of the Australian SCM featured anti-government messaging, opposition to vaccines, and COVID-19 denial among others.

The confluence of anti-government, anti-law enforcement, civil rights uprisings, and conspiracist sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic was possibly exacerbated by countermeasures and by increased unemployment resulting from closures of businesses considered as offering only nonessential services. Factors driving the SCM adoption could be related to individuals or groups seeking to avoid financial and legal obligations or consequences, or result from increased negative attitudes toward government and law enforcement representatives. On numerous occasions, law enforcement officers were filmed engaging with SCM supporters or arresting them for a diverse array of breaches related to COVID-19 countermeasures. While traditional XRW sought to weaponize COVID-19 biologically or politically to serve ideological agendas, the SCM could be observed to reject COVID-19 countermeasures as 'evidence' of government oppression and tyranny. Here, engagement with context can highlight the ways through which narratives can become reactive and diversified.

This type of activity is not inconsequential. SC Juha Kiskonen was jailed in mid-2020 for charges associated with using a carriage service to menace or harass, and firearms offenses involving a gel-blaster pistol. He was also alleged to have encouraged the hanging of police as traitors. He had been monitored by the New

South Wales Fixated Persons Unit since October 2019.[80] Court records indicated that “the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to contribute to a sudden interest in conspiracy theories about the virus and concerns over quarantine restrictions. Many individuals searched for answers via social media and encountered sovereign citizen ideology, which appeared to offer an answer to these concerns. Many individuals appeared to draw upon the involvement of Mr. Kiskonen.”[81] SC activity was, however, only part of XRW activism.

Throughout 2020, an influx of newcomers and reformers could be identified in the Australian milieu. The Order of Nine Angles (O9A) claimed to have an Australian presence called the “RapeWaffen Division”. [82] During marches and protests, a variety of XRW flags could be seen among the broader anti-lockdown banners, including those from the Illuminating Army, conspiracists, anti-5Gers, White supremacists, Boogalooers, and SCM. Guy Fawkes masks were sold, popular radical-right commentators were sought, and Bill Gates was demonized (Australians chanted “arrest Bill Gates” only two weeks after such chants at the Austin, Texas rally). This demonstrates interconnectivity and contagion between domestic and transnational milieus and narratives.

There were also counterterrorism raids against XRW-aligned individuals in 2020. In March, two brothers were arrested by the NSW Joint Counter Terrorism Team in relation to terrorism act offenses. While there was no publicly identifiable link to COVID-19, it was nonetheless significant as these were the second XRW terrorism-related arrests in Australian history. Toward the end of 2020, a young man in Albury was arrested in relation to terrorism act offenses underpinned by XRW ideology, allegedly for inciting a mass casualty attack. It is not clear if COVID-19 played any role in this case as it has not yet gone to the courts. In both cases, no attack eventuated. In general, so far violence appears to be largely in the form of small-scale acts, often targeting Australians of Asian descent.

It appears that certain factors associated with COVID-19 have been summarily exploited in the service of a preexisting ideology. We refer to this as buttressing: when existing narratives are integrated with COVID-19 to reinforce narratives against existing targets (e.g., Jewish Australians, Australians of Asian descent, left-wing opponents) who are blamed for COVID-19 in a variety of ways. What also took place is co-optation *between* ideological systems, which we refer to as diversification. This takes place when narratives adopt positions seemingly new or at odds with existing positions. This explains why SCM systems included QAnon conspiracism, and why traditional XRW adopted some SCM positions on government oppression.

XLW: Righteousness, Disobedience, and Revolution

Much as with XRW, the diverse factions and milieus of XLW interpret reality in various ways, with subsequent distinctions in their final utopias. For example, Anarchists Worldwide called for ransomware attacks in lieu of robberies during lockdown, but this does not establish their engagement with COVID-19 specifically. Others may have subscribed to anti-5G conspiracy theories (such as the idea that 5G telecommunications towers caused COVID-19), as one XLW website championed attacks against 5G targets. This was echoed by the 325Nostate blog, arguing that “5G has a direct correlational relationship to the Coronavirus pandemic” by weakening the human immune system.[83] The situation was complicated on 25 May 2020 when an African American civilian, George Floyd, was killed by a White law enforcement officer in Minneapolis. This incident sparked months of Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism in the US and around the world, including in Australia, as anti-racism protestors converged with protestors positioned against police brutality, oppression, and other social issues. There was an observable increase in protest activities across Australia, with many of these events, attended by thousands of protesters, being coordinated across several major cities on the same date in each state.

This had little correlation with ideological interpretations of COVID-19. Elsewhere, XLW adherents were suspected of doxing politicians in Brazil for mishandling COVID-19, while Austrian XLW held that COVID-19 countermeasures unfairly impacted vulnerable societies. This was echoed by German and Argentinian XLW in June, who interpreted COVID-19 countermeasures as a mechanism for oppressing the poor and rebellious and as an excuse for enhancing government controls. In November, American XLW

claimed that politicians had encouraged COVID-19, and that US society was teetering toward civil war. [84] In sum, while international XLW largely accepted the reality of the devastating impacts resulting from COVID-19, it also circulated idiosyncratic narratives as exemplified by the anti-5G conspiracies. It also was deeply suspicious of enhanced government controls, aligning with preexisting ideological antipathy toward established authorities. In Australia, however, we were not able to gather sufficient information to draw substantiated conclusions reflecting this. Because of this and in conjunction with official statements, we instead focused on VSJ and XRW with respect to national security implications.

Implications for National Security

Extremist exploitation of the COVID-19 context has clear relevance to national security. Whenever ideologies proscribe violent action to accelerate the coming of a utopian system, it is imperative to consider the implications of that action. Terrorism is one method for extremists to approach their utopia, with violence being seen as purifying, cleansing, and restorative. As Fine and Sandstrom wrote, the “link between *is* and *ought*, as applied to a sphere of action, is at the heart of ideology.”[85] That is, ideology enables a certain social vision to develop which is then deployed to articulate the gap between how things *are* and how things *ought* to be. That gap is sustained by the imagining of an oppressive or perverse power standing in the way to a golden future. Ideologies claim to provide actionable guidelines for how the problematic current order may be overturned in order to establish the utopian system; that is, measures to achieve how things *ought* to be. In mainstream ideologies, this change may be achieved through the ballot box, peaceful social activism, or by a change of habits. However, for extreme ideologies, violence is frequently considered essential for the new world order to come about. Violent narratives play a role in shaping ideological behavior: they can provide direction as well as a sense of urgency and purpose. This is how, and why, groups like Al Qaeda exalt terrorism tactics and martyrdom operations as legitimate tactics.[86] In the Australian national security context, this means that the threat of lone actors inspired by VSJ ideology endures. There are, of course, other implications for violent narratives found in the following key areas: narratives, truth and trust; and ideological diversification and idiosyncratization.

Narratives, Truth and Trust as Implications for National Security

Narratives are instruments through which ideology can be discursively brought to life, as these narratives usually construct perspectives on the current order. Halverson and Greenberg identified this dynamic in their examination of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) through a systemic analysis of AQIM texts. [87] They found that the embeddedness of myth in master narratives framed the current order in “the context of a discursive past in which the outcome is already known.”[88] Al Qaeda’s narratives for one are anchored in interpretations of Islamist purity and the vision of a Muslim utopia.[89] XRW narratives generally are rooted in dreams of a White ethno-state, while the SCM ideology enshrines noninterference from the state. These narratives serve to buttress ideology: to cement belief systems in which democracy, and democratically elected governments, are deemed illegitimate. Today such narratives are not only created by significant public figures: the Change Institute flagged an increasing democratization of narratives, and the migration of narratives through online and offline networks.[90]

The high volume of narratives constructed about COVID-19 have also highlighted the role of trust and distrust: for VSJ, it was trust in Allah, while both XRW and XLW demonstrated distrust in governments. In Australia, XRW narratives about government power and unjust oppression may have impacted the bond of trust between government and society. This, in turn, may influence some individuals on the margins of society to consider alternative ideologies, such as those associated with the XRW or XLW. Buttressing narratives may cement these positions, and challenge future disengagement efforts. This is impacted by social media portrayals, which can also influence how individuals understand and perceive the world around them. A number of experts have already highlighted the likelihood of increased online radicalization during COVID-19, due to the fact that countermeasures (such as lockdown) would increase user screen time and thereby the likelihood of exposure to radicalizing materials.[91]

However, online communication is not the sole information highway. In some parts of Australia, XRW (notably related to SCM) milieus met in gyms and other locations in person and often in defiance of COVID-19 countermeasures. Letter-drops also occurred in certain regions, with multiple letter disseminations in Canberra, the capital of Australia. One pamphlet dropped in Canberra letterboxes argued that COVID-19 would spread to water sources, eliminate 95% of the world's population as part of an alleged UN's eco-totalitarian Agenda 21, and enhance government control. It also claimed that vaccinations would contain tracking devices. While some such pamphlets may be mere hoaxes, it is still possible that some members of the public could accept such misinformation as truth.

Misinformation was and continues to be rife throughout the pandemic.[92] Traditionally, the media is considered the fourth estate, with an independent and trustworthy media viewed as an essential function in a democratic culture. Unfortunately, mass media sometimes fall short of the fourth-estate notion. In one case, a prominent Australian newspaper reported that COVID-19 had leaked from hotel quarantine due to an illicit love affair. This was proven to be unfounded, and was ultimately retracted, but only after it triggered an inquiry into the Victorian hotel quarantine scheme.[93] In the context of a global pandemic, such misinformation can spur mistrust in traditional media, creating yet another space for extreme ideological narratives to emerge and exploit. Beyond this, it could degrade the trust citizens hold in governments in the midst of a pandemic, and may lead to confusion about what information is trustworthy. This could lead citizens to turn elsewhere for answers, and potentially interact with narratives overtly or covertly disseminated by extremist actors. The way COVID-19 was portrayed and reported highlights the relevance of narratives, trust in institutions, and the dangers of misinformation in the context of national security.

Diversification as a National Security Challenge

COVID-19 countermeasures also became the impetus for demonstrations and rallies, which united diverse milieus in a common space (if not always for a common goal). This was especially relevant to traditional XRW milieus. While competing flags or standards were often seen at the same event, this did not necessarily imply that their ambitions aligned, only their grievances did. In the Australian case, this occurred back in 2013–15 with the protests at the Bendigo Mosque and at the Melton Housing Project, which provided the starting point from which numerous XRW groups emerged and subsequently evolved in various directions, adopting distinct narrative positions sometimes contrary to those formerly held. This means that milieus with ideological diversification may be harder to identify on the one hand, and manage on the other.

For example, the profile of the SCM in Australia during the pandemic is one of a largely reactionary movement, unsupported by the historical and social factors that sustain the SCM in the United States. The global impact of COVID-19 shifted the SCM ideological framework from its origins to another continent where it became a more diverse movement, spurred by the insecurity and economic uncertainty incurred by the Australian government's COVID-19 countermeasures. Limited capability to travel, to attend social events and vaccination mandates might have provided further impetus to turn to alternative authorities and non-mainstream interpretations, such as those offered by members from XRW milieus. While the adoption of SCM positions in the Australian context seems to be mainly informed by opposition to COVID-19 countermeasures, it remains to be seen if the SCM will survive when this pandemic comes to an end.

Beyond such buttressing and diversification, the final implication for national security is emergent idiosyncratic beliefs. COVID-19 exposed the susceptibility and vulnerability of democratic societies to conspiratorial beliefs in times of uncertainty—especially those which, arguably, are crowdsourced such as QAnon. Such beliefs are propagated both online and offline, but nonetheless demonstrate the propensity to insulate adherents from competing information and authorities. Such insulation is also common in extreme belief systems, which often claim exclusive explanatory powers regarding truth. While some idiosyncratic beliefs may align with XRW milieus, it remains to be seen if any will develop the required attributes to be classed as ideologies. Regardless of this, the presence of idiosyncratic co-optation may prove to complexify the threatscape for some time to come, challenging efficient identification, investigation, and prosecution

efforts.

Conclusion

The deployment of an ideological lens for this article has offered insights as to how extremists interpreted and understood the COVID-19 pandemic. This was reflected in extremist narratives and in strategic directions meant to serve ideological goals. In the case of VSJ, COVID-19 was generally seen as a reflection of divine will, offering an opportunity for supposed transgressors to seek redemption, whilst also punishing those beyond redemption, in particular ‘crusaders.’ Lone actor attacks in the West were still encouraged, with countermeasures such as masks seen as providing new strategic opportunities. In the case of XRW, COVID-19 was often accepted as a scientific fact but was construed as being the result of actions by enemies such as Asian immigrants, Jews and left-wing opponents. While some extremists speculated with the idea of weaponizing COVID-19 against their enemies, more realistically, it appears to have been an opportunity for many extremists to broaden and deepen their networks. Other extremists rejected the existence of COVID-19 entirely, and subscribed to conspiratorial and anti-scientific interpretations as propagated by idiosyncratic milieus. This impacted national security overall by complicating the threatscape and operating environment. Buttressing narratives may serve to deepen the divide between the governed and the government, while diversification narratives defy efficient identification and management. Idiosyncratic extremism is yet to be associated with terrorist violence in Australia, but may nonetheless prove problematic in future contexts. All of these outcomes were informed by a troubled information environment, in which trust in institutions such as government and the mass media is degraded. While the post-COVID-19 threatscape has yet to manifest, one thing is already clear: the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the susceptibility and vulnerability of democratic societies to conspiratorial beliefs in times of uncertainty. This creates distinct new challenges for those involved in protecting national security.

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