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How Islamist Extremists Forge Relationships with Accomplices

The study by a researcher from the University of Bern provides extraordinary insights into the networks of Islamist accomplices in the USA. These are characterized by common socio-cultural features, geographical proximity and ideological affiliation. In particular, the results could well contribute to the fight against terror networks at a local level.

Anina Schwarzenbach from the Institute for Penal Law and Criminology (ISK) at the University of Bern examined a new data set of 494 Islamist criminals who were radicalized between 1993 and 2020 in the USA. Ms. Schwarzenbach is a postdoctoral researcher at the ISK and uses her background in sociology, criminology and computer-aided social sciences to examine social injustice, social cohesion and resilience.

It was on this basis, and in collaboration with Michael Jensen (University of Maryland), that a new study was created encompassing data from almost three decades and providing insight into the structure of Islamist networks in the USA. In their work, the two researchers analyzed the extremely violent social network and discovered that mutual contacts, common socio-cultural features, geographical proximity and ideological affiliation have a significant influence on the forging of relationships between Islamist extremists. The scientific online journal PLOS One recently published the study.

How important are local networks for complicity?

The study illustrates the significance of local network structures and trusting relationships for preventing and combating terrorism. The researchers are convinced that the digital combating of terrorism needs to be supplemented with traditional, conventional police work at a local level if there is going to be any effective intervention in terror networks. “To combat terrorism effectively, we must determine, understand and tackle the mechanisms of complicity in terrorist networks,” says lead author Anina Schwarzenbach. In their study, the researchers use a broad definition of the term “complicity” that encompasses both people who committed crimes together and those who communicated with each other but committed separate crimes.

Detection of two important mechanisms

Ms. Schwarzenbach and Mr. Jensen focused on two key mechanisms in their investigations. “First of all, the mechanism of social homophily – the inclination of individuals to forge relationships with others who have similar characteristics – creates collaborative connections between extremists. Islamists who have the same socio-cultural background, belong to the same terror group and who

geographically live close to each other are highly likely to demonstrate complicity,” says Ms. Schwarzenbach. Secondly, she continues, extremists find new collaborators with whom they can plan and execute terrorist crimes with the mechanism of transitivity – which is based on mutual contacts. These informal verification processes allow extremists to forge trusting relationships which help them to strengthen the resilience of their networks. According to the researchers, both mechanisms have a major influence on the structure of the network and influence the creation of complicity within the network.

Other results of the study indicate that the Islamist extremist network in the USA has a highly concentrated structure. As in other violent social networks, the co-offending takes place in small close-knit communities. This results in a decentralized and robust organizational structure, which facilitates the internal coordination of the group and at the same time makes the networks more resilient to interference from outside. “We must take both individual and structural features into consideration because both explain the establishment of complicity in Islamist extremist networks,” says Ms. Schwarzenbach.

Groundbreaking insights for the prevention of violence

The results underscore the significance of local connections and personal interaction in the mobilization of extremist activities. Complicity usually necessitates a high degree of trust. The results suggest that extremists enter into such relationships because of shared contacts, similar values and socio-cultural experiences.

Thanks to this research into the mechanisms that promote complicity in Islamist networks in the USA, the study offers insights into the development of intervention strategies and initiatives to prevent violence that target this type of network. “Combating terrorism requires a multifaceted and localized approach, combining efforts in the digital area with traditional police work at a local level,” explains Anina Schwarzenbach. It is also important to note that, when investigating the momentum of local networks, the law enforcement authorities must be very careful not to stigmatize religious or diaspora groups. “Islamist extremism is a rare phenomenon in the United States, and the participation of individuals in crimes motivated by Islam can and should by no means be used to make generalizations about entire population groups or religious communities,” stresses Ms. Schwarzenbach in conclusion.

Details on the publication:

“Extremists of a feather flock together? Community structures, transitivity, and patterns of homophily in the US Islamist co-offending network”, Anina Schwarzenbach and Michael Jensen, 2024, published in PLOS One on June 5, 2024.

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Institute for Penal Law and Criminology

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