

## Themed articles

# COVID-19: A Positive Result for Online Recruitment to Extremist Organizations

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Infamous violent extremist organizations such as Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Al Shabaab and most recently the Islamic State (ISIS) have been known to use a variety of methods to encourage recruitment (Bloom, 2017). While many methods of recruitment are used such as face to face recruitment by members of these extremist groups, family members who have joined the groups and members of the Islamic worshipping community who support the ideologies of engaging in violent extremism, online recruitment is perhaps less known but certainly utilized (Mahood and Rane, 2017). Besides the purporting of an idealist Islamic society by these violent extremist organizations as the main argument to lure new members, they have been well known to provide recruits with handsome weekly monetary rewards or the promise of a financially secure future for their families (Speckhard and Yayla, 2015).

The rapid global spread of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has threatened worldwide economies (Atkeson, 2020) which may have propelled many individuals to frequently use the internet. Unemployment rates have skyrocketed globally (Coibion, Gorodnichenko and Weber, 2020) and more persons may turn to social media and other networking sites either to seek new employment opportunities or as an escape from the daunting realities of being unemployed at such a critical time in the world's history. For some, joining an extremist organization could signal the start of a positive future after the effects of COVID-19. Can the economic fallout predicated by COVID-19 propel individuals to join extremist organizations? This article seeks to examine the very real possibility of this from two criminological perspectives; the Rational Choice Theory and the Routine Activities Theory (RAT).

The Rational Choice Theory purported by Cornish and Clark (1987) postulates that individuals are propelled into criminal activities based on a rational choice that they make. This choice can be based on beliefs, rewards, self interests and the "invisible hand" which is likened to one's moral values. Persons join extremist organizations for much of these same rationalized reasons (Hunter, Shortland, Crayne and Ligon, 2017). The propensity to join these organizations may increase even more during the COVID 19 pandemic based on the sole purpose of rewards. The use of digital technologies enhances the ease of online recruitment especially since lockdown and

stay at home measures were enforced by several governments around the world in an effort to curb the spread of the disease. The use of networking sites has increased significantly as reported by popular search engines during the COVID 19 pandemic and this increase is not limited to nations of the developed world but also those of the developing world (Effenberger, Kronbichler, Shin, Mayer, Tilg, and Perco, 2020). One of the most reported search categories during this global pandemic occurs on job seeking sites (Beirne, Doorley, Regan, Roantree, and Tuda, 2020). This may be an avenue for online recruitment to extremist organizations as desperation for financial security may take precedence over morality.

Sustainable and diversified world economies though faced with the same challenges as weaker ones would perhaps be better able to withstand the pressures of predicted long term unemployment rates due to the measures implemented to decrease the spread of this novel, deadly disease. While citizens of these countries are at risk of falling prey to online recruitment, the real threat lies within countries that have fewer strategies in place to sustain economies. These individuals may become the prime targets of violent extremist organizations as these organizations may paint the picture that they are providing hope in a hopeless situation in the name of Islam (Berribi, 2009). From a psychological perspective, the innate need that individuals possess to become part of something while providing for their families drives the rational choice of some to join these extremist organizations. The economic fallout of COVID 19 could very well be considered a push factor and indeed a rational choice for persons considering joining these extremist organizations, made simple through the use of strategic online recruitment.

Online recruitment to violent extremist organizations have reportedly pivoted on the use of particular online games, searched sites and social media posts by individuals who may have an interest in joining but have not yet fully decided to join as well as those who may not have an interest in joining (Chang, 2015). Likened to scouts searching for the next remarkably talented football player, violent extremist organizations have members monitor the players of online games and the types of games that they play, internet sites visited and social media posts of persons who they deem as being possible recruits. The frequency and relative consistency at which persons engage in particular online games, visit certain internet sites and express their views which relate to moving away from societal norms may be considered as their routines in the virtual world.

The Routine Activities Theory (RAT) postulated by Cohen and Felson (1979) is another theoretical perspective that can be used in an attempt to examine the relationship between online recruitment to violent extremist organizations and the increased usage of the internet because of the COVID 19 pandemic. The global economic downturn has certainly caused more frequent internet usage and what were perhaps seen as leisure activities have now become part of individuals' new normal or more specifically, part of their routines.

These new, or in some cases, overindulgent routines follow the trajectory of what the extremist organization's recruitment agents may consider as suitable targets, a motivated offender and the lack of capable guardians. These three aforementioned elements form the basis of the RAT (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Suitable targets for these recruiters may be individuals who have lost their main source of income and have begun to frequent various gaming and networking sites; those who have not lost their income but now work for reduced salaries and have more time to spend on the internet; young persons who have been unable to attend school because of COVID 19 restrictions and those who are opposed to the new rules put in place by leaders and use social media to vent their frustrations. COVID 19 is responsible for these four categories of individuals being spread out across the globe and as such, it means that online recruiters for violent extremist organizations have a very large pool of possible persons to recruit.

Members of these violent extremist organizations whose job is to recruit persons are motivated to do so for a plethora of reasons (Bakker, and De Bont, 2016). Researchers speculate that reasons for persons joining violent extremist organizations are money and forming a utopian Islamic society. What is certain is that whatever the rationale and justification used there are several thousand persons who joined and will continue to join these violent extremist organizations.

The economic tailspin that COVID 19 has caused globally can perhaps be seen as a positive result for recruiters to violent extremist organizations. This may indeed be the main driving force behind getting individuals who frequent particular internet sites and gaming rooms to join their organizations. Some recruiters to violent extremist organizations may be even more motivated now to get new members than before because of the loss of control over cities and the numbers of fighters who are either imprisoned or have been killed. The increase in internet usage and traffic to certain sites make a clear path for recruitment to take place. These motivated offenders of violent extremist organizations may take advantage of the routine activities of individuals and try their utmost best to entice them to join. The true success rate of these motivated offenders who are recruiters for violent extremist organizations can and will only be measured if there are notable increases in their violent extremist activities globally in the coming months and even years.

The final element of the RAT is what is considered as the lack of a suitable guardian. In the context of this paper, the lack of a suitable guardian means malfunctioning or out of date anti-virus computer software or simply ignorance of the possibility of being recruited to a violent extremist organization while playing a game and being promised money for services that are made to sound rational and idealistic. The lack of a suitable guardian may also be taken literally as there may be limited parental supervision of teenagers while they interact in cyberspace even more now during the COVID 19 pandemic than previously. Recruiters for these violent extremist organizations are highly skilled professionals who are trained to infiltrate computer software and put their recruitment skills to work when contact is made. During the COVID 19 pandemic, it is

entirely possible that virtual recruitment to violent extremist organizations have increased significantly based solely on the many facets of the lack of suitable guardians.

The COVID 19 pandemic has undoubtedly wreaked havoc in a variety of ways. One of the most obvious and damaging is based on economic changes that have occurred and will continue to occur in the near future. Rising economic concerns such as job losses and decreases in salaries may result in persons finding alternative ways to support themselves and their families. What may have seemed farfetched and not a reality for some may become their new normal if recruiters to violent extremist organizations use technological tools to successfully lure new members to join these groups. Based on the arguments put forward and supported by the two theoretical perspectives, the Rational Choice Theory and the Routine Activities Theory, the economic fallout predicated by the COVID 19 pandemic and the advantage of this taken by online recruiters to these violent extremist organizations can indeed cause persons to join. While most of the world reels from the effects of COVID 19, positive results are possible for recruiters to these extremist organizations. Only time will tell the effects of COVID 19 on the success rate of online recruitment to violent extremist organizations.

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