What is Nihilistic Violent Extremism?

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Nihilistic violent extremism: exploration, response, and challenges

Since the FBI's recent categorisation of nihilistic violent extremism (NVE) as a new form of violent extremism, NVE remains largely unfamiliar. Considering its novelty and therefore its growing and urgent security concern, this article will explore NVE, and its underlying rationale while suggesting response options and challenges that may obstruct these countermeasures.

Definition

The The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) defines nihilistic violent extremism as a form of violence that appears without any clear ideological incentive. Compared to other forms of violent extremism, which are often driven by political, religious, or social beliefs, NVE is driven by hatred toward society and misanthropic worldviews, seeking societal chaos and destruction through horror and disgust.

NVE often manifests as a decentralized environment, referred to by some circles as "The Com" — an abbreviation for "The Community" — comprising various groups and subgroups, including notorious ones such as 764, Order of Nine Angles (O9A), and No Lives Matter (NLM), which alone is responsible for at least 9 school shooting plots.

How does NVE materialize?

The FBI reported that groups affiliated with NVE often glorify violence, promote self-harm, and idolize mass killers. Furthermore, the United States Attorney's Office and the FBI revealed that these groups repeatedly pressure young individuals into producing harmful or sexual content, including child abuse material (CSAM), gore, and self-harm, often ordered through live streams. These live streams are frequently achieved through sextortion, blackmail, or manipulation. Additionally, groups may also pressure young individuals to exploit their siblings for sexual purposes or their pets or, in some cases, force them to attempt suicide. Some members of NVE groups engage in the above-mentioned actions due to a misanthropic and nihilistic worldview, perceiving violence as form of expression.

What motivates NVE?

While several incentives may lead a person to engage in NVE, the most common motives, according to the FBI and ISD, include sexual satisfaction, notoriety seeking, need for significance, acceptance, and social status.

Connection to terrorism

While NVE groups participate in several activities, FBI Director Kash Patel stated that the FBI is currently investigating around 1700 terrorist cases, from which a large portion of cases are linked to NVE. While Europol has launched Project Compass in January 2025, aiming to fight "The Com", it has underscored that its subgroups may encourage acts of terrorism.

Considering both agencies' statements, these highlight that certain NVE groups or subgroups can potentially engage in acts of terrorism.

What are the possible response options?

Two response options are identified within this blog post. While the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator (EU CTC) reached similar options, some differences emerged in terms of scope and approach.

1. Youth education and reporting encouragement

Youth education is crucial in fighting NVE, as young individuals comprise the primary target of perpetrators. Considering education, schools should incorporate cybersecurity classes where designated professionals would provide courses on NVE, highlighting the dangers it contains and how young individuals should respond to contact attempts from NVE groups.

One key element that needs to be emphasized in classes is the encouragement of reporting online suspicious activity—i.e., attempted recruitment, contact, or coercion from NVE groups—to any trusted adult. While the EU CTC has similarly concluded that youth education is crucial, it puts less emphasis on the importance of informal reporting. Since minors often lack experience in these matters, it is crucial to inform a trusted adult that may handle the situation more effectively, such as by reaching out to law enforcement officials if necessary.

Therefore, schools should also hold classes for parents (or any adult interested in taking the lesson) where professionals could explain the importance of remaining calm and understanding when a minor reaches out to further encourage such reporting. Ultimately, youth reporting and parental understanding represent the key in fighting NVE.

2. Global investigative cooperation measures

Since NVE groups operate on the internet, which exists across borders and on a global level, national or regional investigations are unsuitable. Therefore, it underlines the need for global cooperative and investigative measures, such as global Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) that could work on specific cases.

While EU CTC proposes European investigation teams, it remains regionally limited. Global JITs would allow better coordination, resource pooling, and evidence sharing, making the fight against NVE more effective. JITs could be facilitated by Interpol, which comprises a large portion of member countries and police cooperation and information sharing.

Challenges to these responses

Three main challenges emerge when considering these response options.

Legal definition

Legally defining extremism or terrorism remains a major challenge in modern days. Several questions emerge when addressing NVE: “Should we classify NVE as terrorism, extremism, or both? Which NVE group or subgroup may be classified as a terrorist or an extremist organisation? This legal ambiguity could affect global cooperation or JIT, such as by making, as an example, prosecution harder.

Global cooperation and investigation challenges

Global cooperative and investigative measures such as JITs assume mutual trust, reciprocity and good relations between states. If a case occurs across countries that maintain hostile relationships, it may limit or compromise JITs.

The shifting nature of terrorism

Despite the desire to stop terrorism completely, it often never stops but rather shifts. When examining the downfall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Middle East, IS-linked terrorism did not vanish but rather spread and became more present and altered in other regions such as Africa. Therefore, this similar phenomenon may arise when attempting to halt NVE by forcing these groups or subgroups to alter their recruitment methodology, modus operandi or organisational structure.

Policy implications

While NVE constitutes a major growing digital threat, two main response options can be employed to counter this phenomenon. The incorporation of youth education on NVE and global investigative cooperation measures such as JIT remain valuable when considering the cross-border and child targeting nature of NVE. Nevertheless, the legal complexity and shifting nature of NVE, along with the challenges of global cooperation and investigative measures, raise obstacles within the fight against NVE. Therefore, further research should explore potential remedies for the cooperative and investigative challenges, as it comprises the main judicial mechanisms against NVE.