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Policy Brief

RETHINKING MONITORING AND THREAT ASSESSMENTS FOR COUNTER-TERRORISM POLICY

BACKGROUND

Threat assessments in the field of counter-terrorism policy have common weaknesses: a judgement formed at one moment in time is recorded, and then persists long after change has taken place. Threat assessments tend to fix an individual's or group's ideological profile at the point of designation and claims of moderation are read from outward-facing statements rather than tested against harder-to-revise evidence. Likewise, disengagement is judged from a single rebrand rather than from a pattern sustained over time. This policy brief addresses national governments and civil society/practitioners and recommends that threat assessments needs to be designed more flexibly as revisable judgements rather than settled facts.

FOUR CHALLENGES

1. Threat Assessments are conducted at an irregular basis.

Most threat assessments tend to fix an individual's or group's ideological profile at the moment of designation, and that profile persists in policy documents long after the organisation or individual has changed. Designations of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, for example, stood for years and were then withdrawn by the United States and the United Nations within months of each other in 2025. Reversals at that speed indicate the underlying assessments were not being revalidated on any regular basis. Sometimes, however, conclusions are reached too early. The disengagement of individuals from terrorist or extremist groups is often recorded without acknowledging that deradicalisation and reorientation of worldviews and behaviour usually takes a long time. The outcomes of the process may, for different individuals (or groups), represent various degrees of change. Some abandon their old views and behaviours completely - managing to reintegrate into mainstream society and embracing democratic values. For others, it is a partial change: moderating their militant views and methods. It may be challenging to assess whether the change is deep and genuine or superficial and tactical.

2. Threat Assessments often miss the context statements are produced in.

Groups' or individuals' statements are commonly read as self-contained expressions of belief. In practice they are produced in a competitive field: they answer rival factions, respond to external clerical critics and are timed to negotiations or offensives. Terrorist, extremist or radical groups seeking international acceptance also invest heavily in an outward-facing register — press offices, foreign-language spokespeople, public guarantees to minorities — which frequently coexists with a separate internal register, in the local language and directed at the group's own base. Similarly, some individuals may have a particular interest in being regarded as more 'moderate'. Moreover, monitoring often relies on machine translation, but this misses the register, genre and specialised doctrinal vocabulary where position-taking actually occurs. Assessing only the outward-facing material makes it difficult to decide whether a claim of moderation is genuine.

3. Change is assessed based on outward communication only.

Judgements about whether a group or individual has moderated rest mainly on the material it produces for outside audiences: interviews with foreign media, guarantees to minorities and assurances about pluralism. That material can be revised without anything changing in what the group or individual tells their own followers. Some far-right groups and movements have also realised that traditional extremist language may be stigmatising, and dress up their messages in more acceptable language — speaking about 'ethnicity' instead of 'race', 'remigration' rather than 'mass deportations' - without their core beliefs having changed.

4. Monitoring is misguided when doctrine and violence are the only measures.

The assessment of armed groups is weighted toward doctrine and violence, treating ideology as an important source of a group's standing with the population it controls. However, where such groups hold territory, authority comes substantially from administration: courts, services, taxation and the predictability these produce relative to the alternatives. Similarly, attention often oriented toward external threats such as attacks abroad, foreign recruitment, transnational networks. Yet, how a group treats the population it claims to represent, and how it justifies coercing civilians, detaining critics and suppressing rivals, is more informative, since those justifications are made to people the group depends on and are harder to abandon than anything it communicates to outside audiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. To national governments

- Make threat assessments repeatedly and engage in continuous monitoring.
Instead of conducting a threat assessment of a terrorist, extremist, or radical group only once or sporadically, the initial assessment should be reviewed regularly, as groups can evolve over time. This also applies to individuals who distance themselves from such groups, since disengagement and deradicalisation are distinct, complex, and nonlinear processes. Continuous monitoring with regular revisions of threat assessments can lead to more evidence-informed policy and practice.
- During monitoring and threat assessment, account for how groups retain and justify administrative authority.
To avoid making misjudgments based solely on ideology or violent behavior, threat assessments and monitoring must take into account that armed groups can establish authority by governing and providing services. The group's internal communication with the people over whom it claims authority and should be taken into account in threat assessments.
- Look beyond superficial changes in behaviour and communication during monitoring and threat assessments.
Monitoring and threat assessment must not only observe and take into account changes in behaviour and communication that terrorist, extremist, or radical groups display to external audiences, but also examine whether these changes represent tactics. Internal group communication must therefore always be part of monitoring and threat assessment.
- Read a group's messaging in context during monitoring.
Read alone, a shift in a group's or individual's language looks like ideological evolution, but read in context - for example, against what rivals published the same month - it often turns out to be ideological positioning. For each significant statement, a monitoring should also record the context of such statements. This can include what rivals and clerical critics were saying at the time, or what significant events occurred at the same time. A position taken under pressure and dropped when the pressure lifts is often positioning, while one held at cost to the group's own base may be a revision.

B. To civil society and practitioners

→ Invest in training in the original language of the groups being monitored.

Machine translations for extremist content are often seen as adequate since they render a text's propositional content. To facilitate a monitoring that is sensitive to register, genre and specialised doctrinal vocabulary, which can better differentiate position-taking versus moderation, linguistic and context-sensitive trainings are needed. Otherwise, organisations risk monitoring a group or an individual for years without detecting change or misinterpreting behaviour.

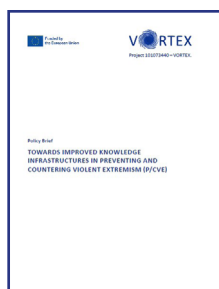
RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

Actors	Timeline	Recommendation
National governments	Mid-term	Read a group's messaging in context
	Mid-term	Account for how groups retain and justify administrative authority
	Mid-term	Look beyond superficial changes in behaviour and communication
	Long-term	Make threat assessments repeatedly and engage in continuous monitoring.
Civil society/ practitioners	Mid-term	Invest in training in the original language of the groups being monitored

CLOSING

Whether the object of assessment is a terrorist or violent extremist group, a radical movement or an individual leaving violence behind: The recommendations presented here highlight opportunities that have so far been missed for continuous and more context-sensitive monitoring, which would enable regular and more accurate threat assessments. Potential improvements also cover capacity building, for example in terms of linguistic skills and the ability to monitor internal communication within groups. Improved monitoring and threat assessments finally allow for more valid conclusions about developments concerning groups and individuals, including their moderation, which ultimately feeds into a better knowledge base for policy-making and practical prevention work.

This brief is based on the “White Paper on Radicalisation into Extremism and Terrorism”. It is part of a series of four policy briefs: “Towards Improved Knowledge Infrastructures in P/CVE”, “Gender, Radicalisation and Prevention”, “Rethinking Monitoring and Threat Assessment for Terrorist, Violent Extremist, or Radical Groups or Individuals”, and “Institutional Continuity and Cooperation”.



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