



# Extremism in Europe: From immediate threats to long-term risks

European View  
1–10© The Author(s) 2026  
DOI: 10.1177/17816858261477292  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)**Sara Brzuszkiewicz<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

This article examines the evolving trajectories of extremism in Europe across short-, medium- and long-term horizons. In the short term, extremist dynamics are increasingly being shaped by hybrid ecosystems that blur the boundaries between online and offline mobilisation, and between fringe and mainstream narratives. In the medium term, structural drivers such as conflicts, political polarisation and generational shifts are likely to consolidate more fluid and decentralised forms of extremist engagement. In the long term, the article highlights the risks of the potential growth in radicalisation among diasporas, including communities that have not traditionally been associated with extremist dynamics or have so far shown limited levels of mobilisation. By adopting a temporal framework, the contribution aims to support policymakers in anticipating both immediate threats and the deeper transformations affecting the landscape of extremism in Europe.

## Keywords

Extremism, Radicalisation, Europe, Gen Z, Political violence, Diasporas

## Introduction

Extremism in Europe is undergoing significant transformations. While policy responses have traditionally focused on identifiable groups, structured organisations and clearly defined ideologies, the current dynamics point to a more complex and evolving

---

<sup>1</sup>Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

### Corresponding author:

Sara Brzuszkiewicz, Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Largo Fra Agostino Gemelli 1, Milan 20123, Italy.  
Email: [sara.brzuszkiewicz@gmail.com](mailto:sara.brzuszkiewicz@gmail.com)



landscape. Today, extremist narratives circulate across digital platforms, social networks and political spaces, often escaping clear categorisation and blurring the boundaries between fringe and mainstream discourse (Boccia Altieri et al. 2025, 3).

At the same time, the European extremist environment is increasingly being shaped by external geopolitical developments. Ongoing conflicts—particularly the war in Ukraine and the escalation involving Iran—are not merely crises happening elsewhere. They act as accelerators of polarisation and reference points for identity formation within European societies. Through media exposure, diaspora connections and online ecosystems, these conflicts are continuously reframed and internalised, contributing to the diffusion of emotionally charged and often antagonistic narratives.

These dynamics challenge traditional analytical frameworks. Extremism can no longer be understood solely as the product of isolated ideologies or marginal actors. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between global events, domestic grievances and evolving communication environments. This interaction produces hybrid forms of engagement that are more fluid, decentralised and difficult to detect. Mythen et al. (2026) highlight that increasing attention is now being paid by EU intelligence agencies and law enforcement officers to the growing number of individuals engaging in hybrid and fluid forms of extremism that cut across multiple ideological frameworks.

In this context, a temporal perspective becomes particularly useful. This article proposes a three-level framework—short, medium and long term—to capture both immediate developments and deeper structural trends. By adopting this approach, the article aims to support a more anticipatory understanding of extremism in Europe. Moving beyond a purely reactive lens is essential, not only to address current risks but also to identify the underlying trajectories that will shape the European security and political landscape in the years to come.

### **Short-term dynamics: hybridisation and narrative convergence**

In the short term, extremism in Europe is increasingly characterised by hybridisation, which refers to the convergence of various ideological strands, communication practices and mobilisation strategies.

One key feature is the centrality of online ecosystems. Digital platforms facilitate rapid dissemination, cross-ideological borrowing and the formation of loosely connected communities. These environments enable individuals to engage with extremist content without formal affiliation, lowering the threshold for participation (Conway 2021).

At the same time, issue-based mobilisation plays a growing role. Topics such as migration, the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza function as catalysts for radical narratives. These issues are not inherently extremist, but they are increasingly framed in polarising and absolutist terms. This creates opportunities for extremist actors to insert their narratives into broader public debates.

The war in Ukraine is contributing to the circulation of militarised narratives, combat aesthetics, and polarised pro- and anti-alignment identities (Brzuszkiewicz 2022). At the same time, the Iran-related escalation is feeding Islamist mobilisation and grievance narratives, tensions around Jewish and Israeli targets, and transnational identification dynamics.

The concrete risk is the sustained import of war logics into European societies, with foreign conflicts becoming the drivers of local radicalisation, identity formation and mobilisation.

The Iran conflict also highlights a shift towards state-enabled or state-influenced extremism within Europe, with European authorities having already observed attempts by Iranian-linked networks to orchestrate or inspire attacks in Europe. Europol warns that the conflict may increase terrorism and violent extremism risks as well as cyber-attacks and influence operations (Michalopoulos 2026).

In this context, the short-term risk is not only the occurrence of violent acts, but also the gradual normalisation of polarising narratives. These narratives shape perceptions, redefine boundaries of acceptable discourse and prepare the ground for further radicalisation.

In parallel, other forms of issue-based mobilisation will continue to play a crucial role. Topics such as migration, Gaza and geopolitical alignment are framed in absolutist and polarising terms. This creates opportunities for extremist narratives to be inserted into broader public debates.

A further and increasingly relevant development concerns the emergence of forms of mobilisation that do not rely on deep or structured ideological indoctrination. While traditional models of radicalisation have often emphasised gradual processes of socialisation into coherent ideological frameworks, current patterns suggest a partial shift towards more immediate and accessible forms of engagement. In this evolving landscape, the threshold for participation is being progressively lowered, enabling individuals with limited prior exposure to extremist doctrine to become involved in radical milieux.

This shift is closely linked to transformations in propaganda strategies. Contemporary extremist communication—particularly within certain jihadist ecosystems—places less emphasis on doctrinal depth and more on emotional resonance, moral clarity and behavioural activation. Radical outlets such as the Islamic State's *An-Naba*, for instance, illustrate how complex theological or political reasoning can be replaced by simplified narratives that prioritise action over understanding. The underlying message is not necessarily to fully comprehend a given ideological system, but rather to align with it in practice.

Within this framework, analytical engagement with political or social realities is often portrayed as unnecessary, misleading or even dangerous. Instead, individuals are

encouraged to rely on pre-defined moral binaries, where the distinction between right and wrong is presented as self-evident and non-negotiable. This dynamic reduces cognitive barriers to engagement and facilitates faster pathways from exposure to mobilisation.

At the same time, the diffusion of what could be described as ‘terrorist-like’ rhetoric contributes to blurring the boundary between discourse and action. Language that echoes operational or militant registers circulates widely in online environments, even among individuals who are not formally affiliated with extremist organisations. This does not automatically translate into violent behaviour. However, it creates a discursive space in which the expression of radical intent becomes normalised, and where symbolic alignment can more easily evolve into concrete action.

### **Medium-term trends: polarisation, generational shifts and conflict internalisation**

Over the medium term, the impact of ongoing conflicts—particularly the war in Ukraine and the escalation involving Iran—is likely to become more deeply embedded within European societies. Rather than acting only as short-term triggers, these conflicts are being progressively internalised in domestic political and social dynamics.

From this perspective, three interrelated trends are particularly relevant: polarisation, institutional distrust and generational change.

First, political and social polarisation continues to deepen. External conflicts contribute to this process by reinforcing binary alignments and identity-based positioning. The war in Ukraine and tensions involving Iran are increasingly refracted through domestic debates, shaping how groups define themselves and their adversaries. This dynamic strengthens antagonistic worldviews and reduces the space for compromise, with divisions consolidated during conflict tending to endure and continuing to structure political and social interactions over time.

Second, declining trust in institutions interacts with these conflict-driven narratives. When institutions are perceived as inconsistent, ineffective or biased in their responses to international crises, this can reinforce perceptions of injustice and selective legitimacy. Extremist actors exploit these perceptions, positioning themselves as more coherent and authentic alternatives.

Third, generational shifts are reshaping how these dynamics are experienced and processed. Digitally native cohorts are exposed to a constant flow of conflict-related content, including war imagery, emotionally charged narratives and real-time information streams. This contributes to the formation of personalised and hybrid belief systems, in which geopolitical conflicts are integrated into individual identities and worldviews. This trend is reflected in the fact that, in the EU in 2024, approximately one-third of individuals arrested for terrorism-related offences were under the age of 20 (Sulmoni 2026, 66).

At the same time, radicalising agents and extremist groups excel at exploiting the features and tropes of 'Gen Z', thus appealing to younger cohorts of recruits. Jihadi propaganda, for instance, has progressively adapted both its form and content in order to resonate more effectively with Generation Z audiences and, increasingly, with young women. This evolution reflects not only technological transformations, but also a growing awareness among groups such as Daesh and al-Qaeda of changing social identities, digital practices and expectations, and their relation to agency, participation and empowerment.

Generation Z generally refers to individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s. As the first fully digital-native generation, they have grown up in environments shaped by constant Internet access, social media and algorithm-driven communication. Unlike previous generations, their social interactions, identity formation and political perceptions are deeply embedded in participatory online cultures and continuous connectivity. At the same time, many members of this cohort have come of age amid economic uncertainty, global crises and declining trust in traditional institutions, factors that contribute to heightened sensitivity to questions of belonging, recognition, justice and personal agency (Sawab 2026, 3).

As a result, extremist engagement is becoming more individualised, increasingly shaped by transnational reference points and embedded in ongoing conflict narratives. Traditional ideological categories have therefore become less stable, as individuals draw simultaneously from different repertoires—political, religious and geopolitical.

Due to these factors, the biggest medium-term risk is the consolidation of conflict-internalised radicalisation, where external wars are no longer episodic triggers but become enduring reference frameworks that structure identity, grievance and mobilisation within European societies.

## **Long-term risks: normalisation of extremist dynamics and mobilisation of diasporas**

In the long term, extremism may shift from opposing the state to selectively penetrating it, particularly at the local level.

This may involve extremists entering local administrations, schools and community organisations; the use of legal and participatory channels to influence decision-making; and the gradual normalisation of exclusionary or radical agendas within everyday governance. In other words, the concrete risk is the emergence of hybrid governance spaces, where formal institutions coexist with informal norms shaped by extremist worldviews.

Related to this, rather than large-scale attacks, long-term trajectories may favour targeted intimidation, harassment (online and offline) and low-intensity, repeated acts of violence, often directed at minorities, journalists and public officials.

This would imply a gradual lowering of the threshold for acceptable violence, with cumulative effects on political participation, freedom of expression and the quality of

public debate. This risks creating a landscape characterised by persistent, low-visibility radicalisation, producing sporadic acts of violence and making detection and prevention more difficult.

In the long term, an even more significant and under-estimated risk concerns the radicalisation and mobilisation potential within diasporas that have not traditionally been regarded as central actors in European extremist landscapes. While previously security attention has often focused on communities already associated with established jihadist or extremist networks, current geopolitical transformations suggest that new trajectories may emerge from diaspora environments historically considered peripheral to these dynamics.

The first relevant dimension concerns the Iranian context and the growing overlap between geopolitical confrontation, proxy activity and forms of state-linked extremism. The escalation involving Iran has already demonstrated how external conflicts can generate repercussions inside Europe through the presence of intimidation campaigns, influence operations, proxy networks and attempted attacks linked directly or indirectly to Iranian interests. In this framework, parts of the Iranian diaspora may become increasingly exposed to polarised identity dynamics, transnational political mobilisation and competing narratives shaped by the confrontation between the Iranian state, opposition movements and external actors. The long-term risk is therefore not limited to classical radicalisation pathways but also includes the emergence of hybrid environments where political activism, disinformation, intimidation, espionage and extremist practices partially overlap. This reflects a broader evolution in which extremism inside Europe is no longer exclusively non-state in nature, but increasingly intersects with geopolitical competition and state-enabled influence strategies.

At the same time, a second and potentially even more consequential trend related to diasporas concerns the growing strategic centrality of African theatres within contemporary jihadist propaganda and mobilisation ecosystems. Over recent years, groups affiliated with Daesh and al-Qaeda have progressively reframed Africa not as a peripheral battlefield, but as a core operational and symbolic centre of global jihad. Propaganda outputs increasingly focus on African insurgencies, African fighters and the legitimacy of non-Arab jihadist actors, contributing to what may be described as the partial ‘Africanisation’ of the global jihadist narrative (Brzuszkiewicz 2026).

Operationally, Daesh has consistently maintained a strong focus on multiple African theatres, regularly claiming and documenting attacks carried out across the West African and Sahelian *wilayat* (Islamic State’s provinces). From a communicative and symbolic perspective, however, the ideological centre of contemporary jihadism had, for more than a decade, remained firmly tied to the Levant. Syria and Iraq simultaneously represented an eschatological arena, a political project and a territorial manifestation of the so-called caliphate.

This symbolic configuration now appears to be undergoing a gradual transformation. Recent official propaganda increasingly positions Africa not merely as an operational

periphery, but as a central theological and strategic space within the broader jihadist narrative.

This evolution is particularly evident in recent editorials published in *An-Naba*, as well as in an extended speech delivered by Daesh spokesman Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari.

Africa is no longer portrayed as a secondary front or a residual refuge for jihadist activity. Instead, it is increasingly presented as a central and exemplary arena of contemporary jihad, a model to be replicated rather than merely supported. This growing institutional and symbolic recognition contributes to enhancing the prestige of the African *wilayat* and reinforces their mobilising potential across transnational audiences.

At the core of this narrative lies one of the most enduring and powerful motifs in jihadist propaganda: redemption, framed simultaneously as the restoration of the dignity and honour of the *umma* (the global Muslim community) and the personal recovery of meaning, agency and purpose. The narrative combines themes of grievance, humiliation and moral empowerment, creating an emotionally resonant framework that has historically proven effective not only at mobilising fighters within conflict zones, but also at activating sympathisers operating in diaspora and online environments.

Within this evolving symbolic architecture, Africa is increasingly depicted as a space of rebirth, empowerment and militant agency, where participation in jihad is presented not only as warfare, but as a pathway towards dignity, recognition and historical significance.

This transformation may carry important implications for Europe. African diasporas that have not historically produced significant numbers of radicalised individuals may become exposed to transnational narratives linked to identity, belonging and victimhood. The concern lies in the possibility that small but influential milieux may emerge within fragmented digital ecosystems where local grievances, experiences of marginalisation, online propaganda and emotionally charged global narratives begin to intersect.

## Conclusion

Extremism in Europe cannot be understood solely through the lens of immediate threats. While short-term dynamics highlight the importance of hybridisation and narrative convergence, medium- and long-term trends point to deeper transformations.

The increasing fluidity of extremist engagement, combined with structural drivers such as polarisation and institutional distrust, suggests that traditional approaches may be insufficient. A more comprehensive perspective is needed—one that integrates security, social and political dimensions.

Ultimately, the challenge is not only to counter specific actors or ideologies, but to strengthen the resilience of democratic societies. This requires paying sustained attention to the conditions that allow extremist narratives to resonate and spread.

In the short term, the influence of ongoing conflicts—particularly the war in Ukraine and the escalation involving Iran—acts as a powerful accelerator. These crises provide narratives, symbols and emotional triggers that can be rapidly appropriated by extremist actors, amplifying polarisation and lowering the threshold for engagement.

In the medium term, these dynamics will likely be progressively internalised. External conflicts are no longer perceived as distant events, but are becoming embedded in domestic debates, identity formation and patterns of mobilisation. This will contribute to the consolidation of more individualised and decentralised forms of extremism, which are harder to categorise and anticipate, while also leveraging the younger generations' symbols, grievances, narratives and tropes.

In the long term, the cumulative effect of these processes points towards a more structural transformation. Extremism risks becoming a persistent feature of the European landscape, sustained not only by internal grievances but also by continuous exposure to conflict-driven narratives and geopolitical tensions. At the same time, the emergence of hybrid threat environments—where state and non-state actors, online and offline dynamics, and domestic and international factors intersect—further complicates prevention and response strategies.

These developments have direct implications for policy. First, there is a need to move beyond siloed approaches that treat different forms of extremism in isolation. Increasingly, individuals engage with hybrid and fluid ideological ecosystems in which anti-government narratives, conspiracy theories, misogynistic content, accelerationism and jihadist propaganda overlap with and reinforce one another. This requires more integrated and adaptive analytical frameworks, capable of capturing ideological convergence and cross-platform mobilisation dynamics, rather than ones that focus exclusively on fixed organisational affiliations.<sup>1</sup>

Second, greater attention should be paid to the external dimension of radicalisation, particularly the role of ongoing conflicts in shaping domestic dynamics. International crises such as the wars in Ukraine and Iran increasingly function as symbolic and emotional reference points within domestic political debates, contributing to identity polarisation, grievance construction and online mobilisation across different ideological milieux. Since Operation Epic Fury against Iran began on 28 February, several incidents across Europe have illustrated the current terrorist threat matrix. In particular, Jewish institutions and community sites have increasingly become the targets of these attacks: a synagogue in Liège was struck by an explosion on 9 March, Rotterdam's synagogue was set on fire on 13 March and a Jewish school in Amsterdam was bombed the following day (Soufan Center 2026).

Third, prevention efforts must account for decentralised and low-visibility forms of engagement—which may not fit traditional indicators but can nonetheless produce significant long-term risks—as well as the growing relevance of Generation Z audiences, whose political and social identities are increasingly shaped within digital, transnational

and emotionally driven information environments. These trends include forms of participation that are centred less on formal group membership and more on content production, meme culture, algorithmically reinforced communities and diffuse online activism. In this context, radicalisation processes may become harder to detect, precisely because they emerge gradually through everyday digital consumption and networked socialisation rather than through direct organisational recruitment.

Ultimately, the challenge is not only to counter specific threats, but to strengthen societal resilience in a context of permanent exposure to polarisation and conflict. This requires sustained investment in institutional trust, critical media literacy and inclusive political participation. Without such efforts, the risk is not simply the persistence of extremism, but its gradual normalisation within European societies.

The cumulative effect of the present extremism dynamics is the emergence of mobilisation pathways that are faster, more fragmented and less predictable than in the past. Extremism, in this sense, is becoming less dependent on structured organisations and more reliant on dispersed networks of influence and individual trajectories. This transformation complicates both detection and prevention, as it challenges existing assumptions about how radicalisation unfolds.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Note**

1. Devon Arthurs's story is a defining example of mixed ideologies extremism. In 2017 Arthurs, a co-founder of the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division, murdered two of his roommates after converting to Salafist Islam. He claimed his former associates 'disrespected' his new faith, yet he famously described himself as a 'Salafist National Socialist', illustrating how distinct extremist frameworks can be merged. A useful more recent example is Guy Edward Bartkus, the attacker behind the 2025 bombing outside an in-vitro fertilisation clinic in Palm Springs. Investigators and analysts described his worldview as a mix of nihilism, anti-natalism, online conspiracy culture and broader anti-system grievances rather than a coherent single ideology. Another recent case involved a 14-year-old secondary student in Singapore who was detained in September 2025 for what authorities described as 'salad bar extremism'. This case illustrates the growing trend of adoption of mixed, unstable and unclear ideologies, where attackers or potential attackers do not follow a single, coherent belief system but instead select from a diverse 'menu' of grievances and ideologies that are often contradictory. The boy in question staunchly supported the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, subscribed to anti-Semitic beliefs espoused in far-right extremist ideologies and also identified as an incel.

## References

- Boccia Artieri, G., Bruns, A., Dehghan, E., & Iannelli, L. (2025). Fringe democracy and the platformization of the public sphere. *Comunicazione Politica*. doi:10.3270/116607.
- Brzuszkiewicz, S. (2022). The war in Ukraine through far-right and jihadist lenses. *European View*, 21(2), 163–70. <https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/7.pdf>. Accessed 11 May 2026.
- Brzuszkiewicz, S. (2026). “Non importa se il vostro arabo inciampa”: l’ascesa dei mujahedin africani nella propaganda di DAESH. *Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies*, 4 March. <https://www.itstime.it/w/non-importa-se-il-vostro-arabo-inciampa-lascia-dei-mujahedin-africani-nella-propaganda-di-daesh-by-sara-brzuszkiewicz/>. Accessed 12 May 2026.
- Conway, M. (2021). Online extremism and terrorism research ethics: Researcher safety, informed consent, and the need for tailored guidelines. *Terrorism and Political Violence*. doi:10.1080/09546553.2021.1880235.
- Michalopoulos, S. (2026). EU terrorism threat heightened due to Iran, Europol says. *Euractiv*, 5 March. <https://www.euractiv.com/news/exclusive-eu-terrorism-threat-heightened-due-to-iran-europol-says/>. Accessed 12 May 2026.
- Mythen, G., Horton, J., & Astley, J. (2026). *Researching forms of mixed, unclear and fluid extremism: Risks, challenges and best practices. A practical toolkit for researchers*. Conceptualising, Understanding and Preventing Mixed Forms of Extremism Project and Network. University of Liverpool. <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3197820/1/Toolkit%20FINAL-2%20%281%29.pdf>. Accessed 12 May 2026.
- Sawab Center. (2026). Changing the script: How contemporary jihadi propaganda appeals to Gen Z audiences. <https://sawabcenter.org/changing-the-script-how-contemporary-extremist-propaganda-appeals-to-gen-z-audiences/>. Accessed 12 May 2026.
- Soufan Center. (2026). Iran war exacerbates the terrorist threat landscape in Europe. 17 April. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2026-april-17/>. Accessed 12 May 2026.
- Sulmoni, C. (2026). Radicalizzazione 2025: il nuovo volto dell’estremismo in Europa, in ReaCT 2025. In ReaCT Observatory on Terrorism and Radicalization, *#ReaCT2025 – 6th Report on Terrorism and Radicalization in Europe* (pp. 65–73). [https://www.osservatorioreact.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/react2025\\_web.pdf](https://www.osservatorioreact.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/react2025_web.pdf). Accessed 12 May 2026.

## Author biography



**Sara Brzuszkiewicz** is a researcher and lecturer specialising in radicalisation, jihadism and the manosphere. She is a Research Fellow with the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies and teaches in the Master in Middle Eastern Studies programme at the Graduate School of Economics and International Relations, where she lectures on Gulf monarchies. Her publications cover jihadist and far-right narratives, inceldom, political Islam and counter-extremism strategies.