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The radical ties that bind Barcelona and Charlottesville

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On both sides of the Atlantic, there are urgent investigations into the radicalization of young men who have committed acts of politically inspired violence.

In Spain, people are seeking to understand the motivations of a dozen young men who plotted terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils that left 14 dead and scores more injured last week. Meanwhile, in the United States, police are looking into the background of 20-year-old Kentucky native James A. Fields Jr., who killed one woman and injured 19 others when he drove his car into a crowd of counterprotesters following a far-right rally in Charlottesville.

It would be a mistake to draw too neat a line between the two incidents, but any similarities between Islamist terrorists like those in Spain and white nationalists like Fields are worth examining for what they reveal about radicalization across the globe.

In the small Spanish town of Ripoll, [The Washington Post's Souad Mekhennet and William Booth reported](#) that the local community is itself wondering how its kids could have taken part in an attack claimed by the Islamic State. These were young men, they say, some barely old enough to drive. Eight or so of them were from Moroccan-immigrant backgrounds.

One local, the father of two men implicated in the attacks, described the older of his sons as a “problematic” child who fought in school, though he says he was more worried about drugs than religion. In hindsight, he told *The Post*, he believes his sons may have been radicalized by a local cleric.

Fields' background in Kentucky was the subject of another story by [The Post's reporters](#), who again found hints of a troubled life: struggles with mental illness and multiple reports that Fields abused his disabled mother. **“He looked like he was always lost,” one neighbor told my colleagues. “Always quiet and always alone.”**

Teachers recall that Fields had a fixation on Hitler as far back as high school. In Charlottesville, he was photographed posing with members of Vanguard America, [a self-proclaimed fascist group](#) that recruits online. The group has denied that Fields was a member.

What ties these two incidents? Aside from the obvious practical parallel — the use of vehicles, a crude method of violence that's now a staple of Islamic State-inspired attacks — there are other important similarities.

While there's no “one-size-fits-all” for the type of person who ends up radicalized, isolated young men are clear and frequent targets, recruited by groups who offer excuses for the problems in their lives. Writing in the Guardian, longtime terrorism follower Jason Burke points to a number of similarities in the belief system of the Islamic State and America's far right — an overall “perverted sense of grievance.” **Burke suggests that anger over the loss of the Islamic caliphate may echo the Lost Cause of the Confederacy for the far right — not in real historical terms, but “as a mythic symbol of betrayal, of conviction and of what might, indeed should, have been.”**

Experts in the field also see parallels in different ideologies. “In some respects, it’s not that different from Islamist extremists,” said Ryan Lenz of the Southern Poverty Law Center to The Post's Terrence McCoy in an article about alt-right radicalization. In some cases the parallels can be painfully obvious: Earlier this year a former neo-Nazi who converted to Islam was arrested for allegedly killing his roommates after they disrespected his new faith.

In the public rhetoric of the Trump administration, there is no acknowledgment of these parallels. President Trump has been famously willing to point quickly to the motivations behind attacks inspired by the Islamic State or other Islamic militant groups — even when such beliefs don't end up being the reason for the attacks. In the case of Charlottesville, Trump and other Republican politicians focused instead the actions of the so-called “violent left” rather than the motivations of the far-right.

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While there's no doubt that radicalized members of the left have been responsible for political violence — there were plenty of deadly terrorist attacks by left-wing groups in postwar Europe — the evidence suggests they're no longer as dangerous as they once were: Alex Nowresteh, a policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, has found that right-wing terrorists have killed 10 times as many people on U.S. soil as left-wing groups since 1992.

Nowresteh's research also shows that Islamic militant-inspired terrorism was deadliest in the U.S., killing 14 times the number of people as right-wing plots had in the same period. But things may change: Jonathan Evans, the former head of British spy agency MI5, recently suggested that Islamist extremists might only pose a terror threat for another 20 to 30 years. Responding to these comments, Raffaello Pantucci of London's Royal United Services Institute warned in the Financial Times that “once we have dealt with that strain of the virus, it will simply morph into a new form.”

This is why its so important to look through the personal histories of attackers in Spain and Fields in Kentucky along with others of their ilk. The threat of violence posed by the Islamic State or far-right groups specifically will eventually dissipate, or morph into some other cause. **It's the threat posed by radicalized young men in general — and our present difficulties in stopping them from becoming extremists — that should worry us in the long term.**