Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research

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Author Biography

Dr. Randy Borum is a Professor in the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences at the University of South Florida. He conducts strategic analyses and research focused on armed groups, countering extremist violence, and complex operations/irregular warfare.

Abstract

Over the past decade, analysts have proposed several frameworks to explain the process of radicalization into violent extremism (RVE). These frameworks are based primarily on rational, conceptual models which are neither guided by theory nor derived from systematic research. This article reviews recent (post-9/11) conceptual models of the radicalization process and recent (post-9/11) empirical studies of RVE. It emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between ideological radicalization and terrorism involvement, though both issues deserve further empirical inquiry.Finally, it summarizes some recent RVE-related research efforts, identifies seven things that social science researchers and operational personnel still need to know about violent radicalization, and offers a set of starting assumptions to move forward with a research agenda that might help to thwart tomorrow's terrorists.

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Abstract

Over the past decade, analysts have proposed several frameworks to explain the process of radicalization into violent extremism (RVE). These frameworks are based primarily on rational, conceptual models which are neither guided by theory nor derived from systematic research. This article reviews recent (post-9/11) conceptual models of the radicalization process and recent (post-9/11) empirical studies of RVE. It emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between ideological radicalization and terrorism involvement, though both issues deserve further empirical inquiry. Finally, it summarizes some recent RVE-related research efforts, identifies seven things that social science researchers and operational personnel still need to know about violent radicalization, and offers a set of starting assumptions to move forward with a research agenda that might help to thwart tomorrow's terrorists.

Introduction

Since 2001, social scientists and security agencies around the world have proposed several frameworks designed to explain the process of radicalization into violent extremism (RVE), generally, or into militant Islamism, specifically. Primarily, these efforts are conceptual, rather than empirical, and with very few exceptions have not been coherently guided

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by social science theories. Instead, these conceptual models typically offer a logical, descriptive narrative of a "typical" transformative process, often with reference to a particular extremist group, a specific incident, or a couple of cases. Nevertheless, some of these efforts may be useful for organizing the concepts, mechanisms, and processes involved in violent extremism.

The preceding Part I article examined the basic concepts of RVE, including the terms *radicalization* and *radicalism*, the framing of RVE as a pathway rather than as an event, and the possible utility of social science theories for understanding the RVE process and the embedded social-cognitive mechanisms that might facilitate violent action. The present Part II article continues the inquiry, picking up where the first part left off. The following sections will review recent (post-9/11) conceptual models of the radicalization process and recent (post-9/11) empirical studies of RVE. This review is offered with the understanding that each model remains underdeveloped: none of them yet has a very firm social-scientific basis as an established "cause" of terrorism, and few of them have been subjected to any rigorous scientific or systematic inquiry.

This analysis—like its Part I counterpart—also carries an important caveat: Radicalization does not equate with terrorism. Most people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists—even those who lay claim to a "cause"—are not deeply ideological and may not "radicalize" in any traditional sense. Radicalizing by developing or adopting extremist beliefs that justify violence is one possible pathway into terrorism involvement, but it is certainly not the only one. The broader question is how people become involved, stay involved, and sometimes disengage from terrorism. The objectives of this review, therefore, are simply to aggregate existing knowledge and stimulate new ideas that might lead us to ask better questions about the RVE process.

## Conceptual Models of Radicalization into Violent Extremism

In an article first published in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Borum proposed a four-stage conceptual model for the emergence of a "terrorist mindset." The concepts were derived from analyses (though anecdotal and unsystematic) of multiple violent extremist groups with a span of diverse ideologies in an attempt to discern whether some common factors might exist among them in the processes of radicalization. The conceptual model attempts to explain how grievances and vulnerabilities are transformed into hatred of a target group, and how hatred is transformed—for

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some—into a justification or impetus for violence. Fundamentally, the four-stage process begins by framing some unsatisfying event, condition, or grievance (*It's not right*) as being unjust (*It's not fair*). The injustice is blamed on a target policy, person, or nation (*It's your fault*). The responsible party is then vilified—often demonized—(*You're Evil*), which facilitates justification or impetus for aggression. The model was developed originally as a training heuristic for law enforcement, not as a formal social science theory.[1]

Figure 1: Borum's Four-Stage Model of the Terrorist Mindset
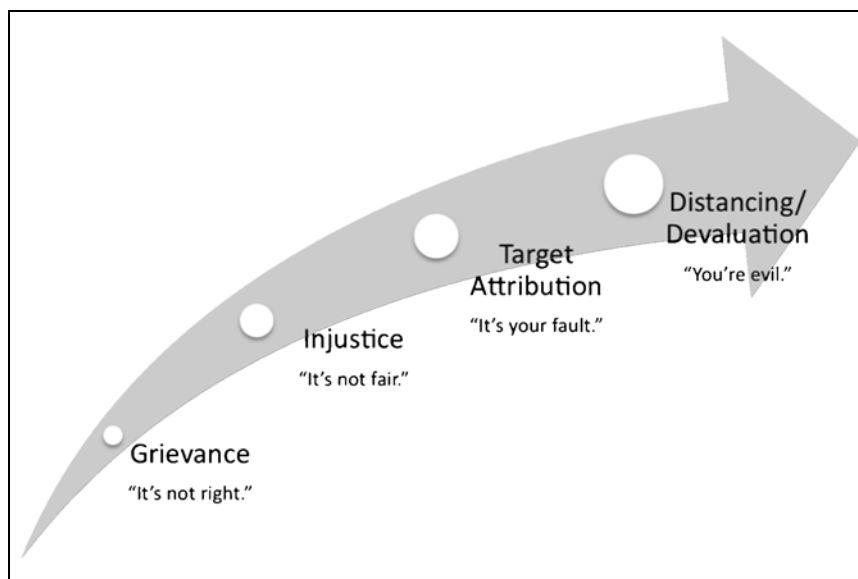
Moghaddam, drawing broadly from a variety of psychological constructs, developed the "Staircase to Terrorism" as a metaphor for the process of violent radicalization.[2] The "staircase" narrows as it ascends from the ground floor and through five successive levels. As in most popular models, Moghaddam argues that feelings of discontent and perceived adversity (framed as perceived deprivation) form the foundation and fuel for stepping initially onto the path to terrorism. Fewer and fewer people ascend to each successive level, though, leaving a relatively small number of people who actually progress to the point where they engage in terrorism.

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Figure 2: Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism
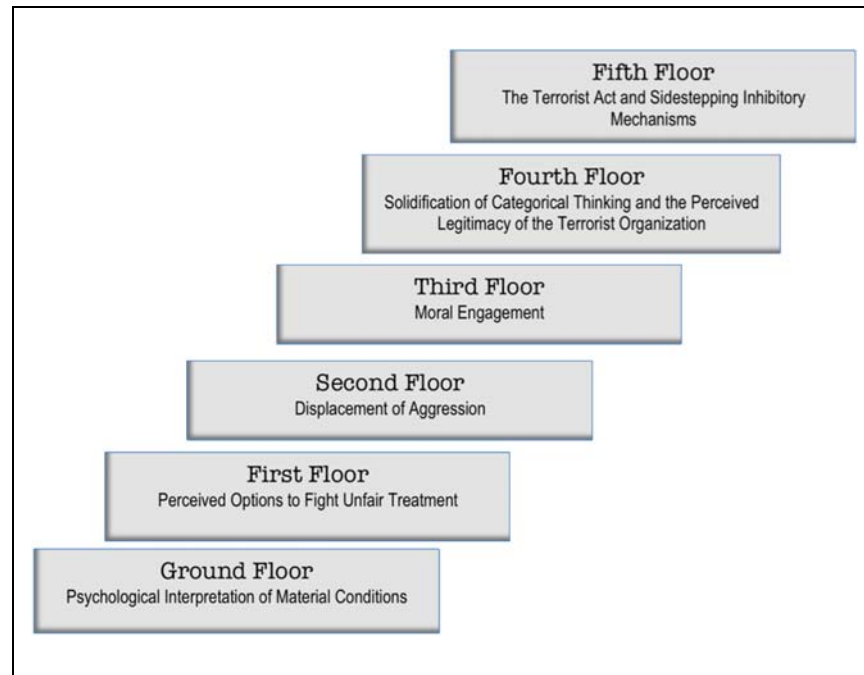
According to Moghaddam's model, people begin with a desire to alleviate adversity and improve their situation. Unsuccessful attempts, however, lead to frustration, producing feelings of aggression, which are displaced onto some perceived causal agent (who is then regarded as an enemy). As their anger towards the enemy builds, some become increasingly sympathetic towards violent, extremist ideology and to the terrorist groups that act against them. Some of those sympathizers eventually join an extremist group, organization, or movement that advocates for, and perhaps engages in, terrorist violence. At the "top" or final level among those who have joined are those who overcome any barriers to action and actually commit a terrorist act.[3]

One of the most widely circulated models of *Jihadi-Salafi radicalization* came from the New York Police Department's (NYPD) Intelligence Division, with input from terrorism researchers and other experts. The NYPD report suggested that citizens of a Western home-country who ultimately adopt a *Jihadi-Salafi* ideology do so through a linear four-stage process which aligns closely with the terminology and sequence used in the FBI

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model (Silber & Bhatt, 2007): *Self-Identification*; *Indoctrination*; and *Jihadization*.[4] According to the report, *Pre-radicalization* characterizes the period before an individual is exposed to jihadi-Salafi ideology. *Self-Identification* marks the process of exploring Salafi Islam, adopting its ideological tenets, and affiliating with its proponents. *Indoctrination* is the intensification stage, both for the individual's beliefs and for his commitment to the ideas, to action, and to his like-minded collective. Finally, rather than referring to the end stage as "action," the NYPD model calls it *Jihadization*, but the character of the stage is essentially the same as in the FBI assessment. The hallmark is the individual's acceptance of, and commitment to, his individual duty to act on behalf of the cause.

**Figure 3:** NYPD Model of Jihadization
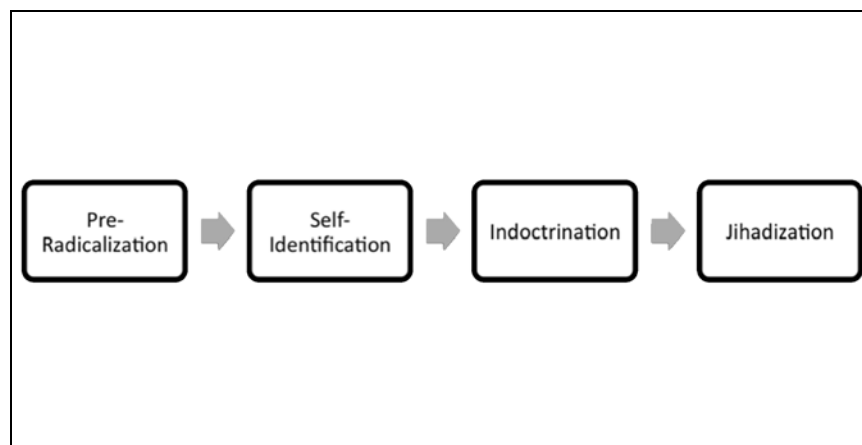
European researchers have been exploring the RVE problem for at least as long as American researchers, and often with a greater sense of urgency. Precht, in a qualitative review commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Justice, summarized the broad contours of radicalization in the following way:

> "Radicalisation often starts with individuals who are frustrated with their lives, society or the foreign policy of their governments. A typical pattern is that these individuals meet other like-minded people, and together they go through a series of events and phases that ultimately can result in terrorism. However, only a few end up becoming terrorists. The rest stop or drop out of the radicalisation process at different phases."[5]

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Precht's report outlines a four-phase "typical pattern of radicalization" that also parallels the conceptual models advanced by the FBI and the NYPD Intelligence Unit, the stages of which he calls: *Pre-radicalization; Conversion and identification with radical Islam; Indoctrination and increased group bonding; and Actual acts of terrorism or planned plots.* Precht notes, however, that small group dynamics and identification are often powerful accelerants of commitment to extremist ideology.

Figure 4: Precht's Model of a "Typical" Radicalization Pattern
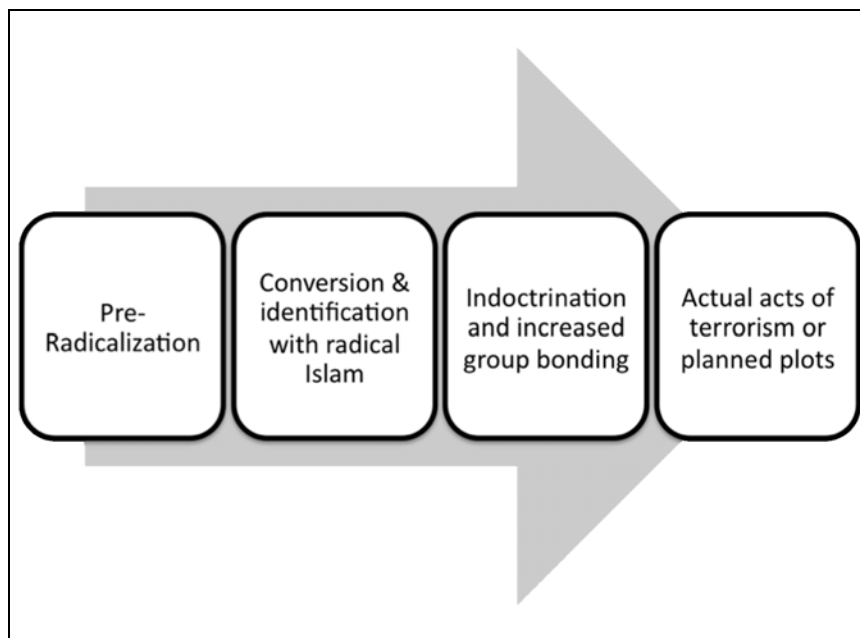
Precht also sought to identify and analyze the factors influencing the militant Islamist radicalization process in Europe. The report outlines three categories of motivational factors for radicalization.

• The first is "*Background Factors*," which include personal struggles with religious identity, experiences with discrimination, and lack of social integration.

• The second category Precht calls "*Trigger Factors*," to include people— such as a mentor or charismatic leader—and events—such as policy actions—that might provoke or incite either antipathy or activism.

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- The third category is that of "*Opportunity Factors*," which account for an individual's degree of access and likelihood of exposure to extremist ideas or adherents within her or his sphere of activity. These include physical and virtual spaces such as the Internet, mosques, penal institutions, and social groups/collectives.[6]

From his analysis, Precht makes the following conclusion:

> "Largely, homegrown terrorism can be viewed as a sociological phenomenon where issues such as belonging, identity, group dynamics, and values are important elements in the transformation process. Religion plays an important role, but for some it rather serves as a vehicle for fulfilling other goals. A common denominator seems to be that the involved persons are at a crossroad in their life and wanting a cause."[7]

Though the conceptual models posed by NYPD and Precht are certainly consistent with each other and have become quite popular among some law enforcement groups, they seem more appropriately to describe a linear sequence of stages rather than a "process" or pathway. Moreover, the accuracy and stability of this type of sequence model has not been rigorously tested. Despite the idea's intuitive appeal, it may be premature to conclude that RVE always—or even generally—progresses though a series of discrete stages.

In 2008, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, was tasked by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence's Intelligence Science Board to convene a conference of invited experts to study the "hearts and minds" aspect of the problem of radicalization. The CSIS staff did not initiate any independent empirical data collection, but staff attempted to synthesize the plurality of opinion that existed among presenters and attendees. The report of that conference begins with the observation that:

> "There is a lack of clear understanding or consensus on what motivates an individual to become a terrorist and to engage in violent acts. Without such an understanding, we are limited in our ability to employ appropriate strategies and tools for preempting terrorism."[8]

Drawing on views expressed at the conference, the report constructs a framework for understanding radicalization based on "three overlapping, but distinct elements that motivate individuals to becoming radicalized or committing terrorist acts," which they describe as follows:

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- The ideas of the radical narrative that provide a filter for understanding the world;

- The sociological factors that compel an individual to embrace this radical narrative; and

- The psychological factors, characteristics, pathologies, and triggers that may prompt an individual to use violence in order to promote or consummate this narrative.

The CSIS report further suggests that neither demographic nor socio-economic factors emerge as strong predictors of radicalization. Feelings of shame and humiliation, the report says, often serve to forge a bond between a vulnerable individual and a charismatic leader, and catalyze acceptance of the radical narrative and its associated values and attitudes. Travel to Pakistan or Afghanistan seemed to be one of the most consistent behavioral factors observed among those who became radicalized into violent extremism. The CSIS effort, however, did not propose a specific process model for radicalization.

Attempting to take a somewhat broader and more integrative approach, psychologists and behavioral scientists at the Joint Military Information Support Center (JMISC) surveyed existing conceptual models of radicalization and associated empirical research, attempting to create an integrated analytic framework. Their working definitions drew largely from the work of McCauley and Moskalenko, viewing radicalization generally as "increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict and violence." An individual's escalating commitment is ostensibly driven by changes in "beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup."[9] It is explicitly a model framed around conflict between groups.

Unlike some other linear, sequential models, however, the JMISC framework sought as a foundation to identify the major components of the radicalization process that different models appeared to have in common. They identified the following seven interacting components:

- *Motivations*: Motivations may or may not be the ultimate "why" of terrorist activity, but in this model they do function as an initial impetus. Motivations are composed of both "push" factors, such as grievances, and "pull" factors, which may serve as instrumental (e.g., money) or expressive (e.g., perceived importance) incentives.

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- *Socially-Facilitated Entry*: Several studies have observed that a person's introduction to extremist ideas and to an extremist collective very often occur through family and kinship networks or social institutions, such as schools, religious training centers, or sometimes prisons. The inferred common wisdom has been that the initial bond of relationship usually precedes the acceptance of extremist ideas. Growing through connections also adds a layer of screening and security to cautious groups who may be engaged in subversion.

- *Splintering/Progression*: The framework recognizes that becoming a violent extremist is typically not an abrupt, one-time decision, but one that occurs incrementally over time. This is the "progression" referenced in this component's label. One might view this as a gradual escalation, or as a series of discrete actions or decisions that prime an individual for what should occur at the next level.

- *Intensification*: Because this is a group-based framework, an individual's increase in extremity and deepening of commitment are believed to be driven primarily by in-group socialization. Group leader influence and dynamics among its members shape the individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward those of the group and nurture intolerance for those outside the group.

- *Ideology*: The role of ideology in violent extremism is a matter of some controversy, but in this model the core of the ideology is a narrative that follows some form of a script about something that is wrong/"not right" and some person or entity being to blame for it.

- *Threat/Defense*: Out-group threat is a key factor binding the in-group together. This is a key element of the narrative that suggests violence is necessary to defend the cause or the in-group and that rationalizes offensive action as "defensive."

- *Belonging/Identity*: This element recognizes that people sometimes are drawn to violent extremist ideologies and groups because they feel a need for belonging or because they lack some kind of identity or a sense of personal meaning, which group affiliation can provide.[10]

Whereas the NYPD stage model focuses on individual transformation and works from an assumption that radicalization is a "bottom-up" process of "joining," the Danish intelligence service (PET) has a phase model that focuses more on the influencer/"radicalizer," placing greater emphasis on "top-down" processes of radicalization. Veldhuis and Staun describe PET's model in the following way:

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"The process starts by being 'susceptible' to radical ideas and meeting a 'radicaliser,' and advances on to new religious practices and changed behaviour. Subsequently, the process involves a narrowing of the person's circle of friends and family and results in the so-called 'hardening phase,' which includes 'reviewing of and interest in very violent videos' displaying terrorists in battle and the killing of hostages."[11]

Recent Empirical Research on Radicalization

Despite the surge in terrorism-related publications since 2001 and the burst of recent interest in radicalization, empirical studies are rare. But knowledge development achieved through science ideally should be a systematic, incremental, and cumulative process. It should consider what information to gather from what sources (to ensure we are measuring what is most important, and doing so as accurately as possible), how to gather and record the information (so that it is consistent across the cases), and how to use and interpret that information to test assumptions and hypotheses (so that we are not just "fitting" the information to our preconceived notions). Some of the conceptual models seem rather sensible, and potentially useful, but they are not in complete agreement. Conceptual models—whether or not they are empirically validated—can have a significant "real world" impact. However, persons charged with trying to prevent terrorism should have the best knowledge possible so they have a sound basis on which to make the best decisions. So which "sensible" approach should be followed, and can it be assumed that each of the models is equally sensible for assessing any given offender in any given context? This is where systematic inquiry really comes in handy. Anecdotal observations may be useful. More useful are systematic, carefully drawn stories and lessons. Such systematic work begins to approximate generalized, empirically-derived knowledge. That kind of knowledge is what is desperately needed at this juncture, both to advance our understanding of radicalization processes and to guide operational assumptions about how violent extremists sustain and grow their collectives.

Recent empirical inquiries have used a range of methodologies and approaches. Most have relied on historical biographical information from various news sources and public documents. Some researchers have directly interviewed violent extremists (mostly either in open discourse or with semi-structured protocols). Some have blended both approaches.

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Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and former CIA Case Officer, has reviewed and collected information from media and open-source documents (e.g., courtroom testimony) on several hundred Al-Qaida-related cases. Sageman has published most of his analysis in his two books: *Understanding Terror Networks* and *Leaderless Jihad.* He suggests most of the militants came from middle class families with secular upbringing and education. They had some college-level education, but often worked in unskilled occupations. They mostly joined the movement while in their early twenties and often as expatriates. Most were married, many had children, and rarely did they have significant criminal backgrounds. Sageman characterizes their radicalization as a "bottom-up" process populated by "Young men chasing thrills, fantasies of glory, and sense of belonging to group and cause," who mobilize through social networks. This is sometimes referred to as Sageman's "bunch of guys" theory of radicalization.[12] These collectives, he finds, often share a sense of global or local "moral outrage" and grievous personal experiences, and are driven more by Anti-American and Anti-Semitic sentiment than by deep Islamic doctrine.

Similarly, Thomas Hegghammer analyzed two hundred and forty biographies—including seventy "extensive" ones—of (post-2002) Saudi militants, compiled over a two-year period from a broad range of primary and secondary sources, mostly in Arabic. He also conducted numerous interviews with former radicals, as well as families and acquaintances of militants. He framed the analyses to ask who joined "al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula" (AQAP) and why, and—to facilitate comparisons—what radicalization and recruitment factors might be specific to Saudi Arabia.

The militants in Hegghammer's sample—almost all males—were mainly in their late twenties (average age of twenty-seven), many of whom were veterans of al-Qaida training camps in Afghanistan and armed jihad in Bosnia. Some of the wives had accompanied their husbands to the AQAP campaign, but none were directly involved in attack operations. A substantial majority were Saudi nationals, but their geographic and tribal distribution was widely distributed throughout the country—not concentrated in particularly conservative or particularly poor regions. Most had a high-school education, roughly comparable to the education level of the general Saudi (male) working population, and very few had a pre-radicalization criminal record. A number of them had served prison time for extremist-related offenses.

Hegghammer also observed that the older veterans of Afghanistan (before 1996) had a certain cohesiveness among them as a result of their shared training and combat experiences. In particular, he notes that AQ training

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camp recruits between 1996 and 2001 "underwent four important and interlinked processes: violence acculturation, indoctrination, training, and relations-building. These processes are the key to understanding the extremism, ideology, abilities, and intra-group loyalty of the militants who returned from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia in late 2001."[13]

Qualitatively, Hegghammer groups their roles into three categories. First are the "top commanders," who were "lifestyle jihadists" who came to Afghanistan as teens, worked through al-Qaida's growth in the 1990s, and had practical experience with armed jihad. Second are the "ideologues" with no battle experience, only religious training and mediocre achievements. Third are the "fighters"—a diverse group composed of young jihad veterans, older veterans (who couldn't lead) coming out of retirement, and new recruits. They had a mix of political (more nationalist than social-revolutionary), religious, and personal motivations, and often embarked on a radical path even before enlisting in AQAP.

Bakker collected information on a sample of more than two hundred terrorists and their networks to examine their characteristics and the circumstances in which they became involved in militant jihadism. Between 2001 and 2006, these individuals had been involved in thirty-one operations within Europe.[14] They varied widely in age from sixteen to fifty-nine years old, but most were in their mid-twenties while engaged in militant jihadist activity. Nearly all were European residents (and joined the armed jihad in their resident countries), but most were from non-European countries of origin, mainly North Africa. More than half were from the lower socio-economic strata, perhaps reflecting the general status of Muslim immigrant communities in Europe. Fewer than one in four were raised in religious families, and another quarter were converts to Islam. Nearly a third are estimated to have completed college. Fifteen percent were unemployed, and almost a third worked in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Only one in three appeared to be single at the time of his arrest. Nearly one in four had a prior criminal conviction, sometimes for illegal weapons possession, and perhaps 5% were known to have a mental illness of some type. About 20% were related through kinship, and another 18% by friendship and social bonds, emphasizing the importance of social networks in facilitating entry into the militant Islamist movement.

With a more in-depth and individualized focus, John Horgan recently conducted a series of fifty-two semi-structured interviews (with twenty-nine former terrorists and twenty-three of their supporters, family members, and friends) over an eighteen-month period from late 2006 to early 2008, producing some deeply personal, detailed, and complex portrayals

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of former terrorists in Belfast, Beirut, Oslo, London, Paris, Tripoli, and Jakarta. Horgan has long espoused the research merits of directly interviewing former terrorists, particularly to illuminate questions at an individual level.[15]

Horgan has led much of the research into what is known as terrorist disengagement—an individual's departure from terrorist-related activity.[16] As a result of his research interviews, he concluded that terrorists can and—not infrequently—do disengage from violence, but often without abandoning their radical views, and sometimes even without "leaving" or disavowing the group. This can be a rather complex process. Terrorists do not abruptly and spontaneously "de-radicalize;" but over time and as a result of certain experiences, they often reassess the necessity and justifications for violence, and lose faith in the tactic of terrorism. As he explored that transformation in some depth, Horgan found a very common theme: people often leave after becoming intensely disillusioned with the reality of life in terrorist movements. Sometimes this is because the fantasy of a terrorist life is more dynamic and appealing than the reality of living it. At other times, the burden of their own internal moral limits clash with the ethos of the group, leading them to reflect more deeply on the group and its behavior.

Even as Horgan suggests that "push" and "pull" factors both operate in the radicalization process, he finds these factors involved in disengagement as well. Among the major "push" factors, disillusionment was a clear standout. People became disillusioned that perhaps the group's ideals or objectives were ultimately unattainable; that the violent methods or persons victimized were not completely legitimate; or that the leaders and group dynamics were flawed with jealousies and other human imperfections. In some cases, terrorists became disillusioned with their own suppressed or diminished status within the movement. Beyond disillusionment, some succumbed to the accumulation of stress and pressures attendant to the terrorist lifestyle. Others wrestled profoundly with group loyalties and demands that competed with family bonds and obligations.

Among the more alluring "pull" factors, some former militants were looking to escape the lifestyle pressures and normalize their lives. Some wanted to start families, free from terrorist group competition. Others were attracted by the incentives of "rehabilitation" or "alternatives" programs that offered education, employment assistance, new social networks, and sometimes even economic relief—all in exchange for shedding the burden of terrorist-related activity.

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Slootman and Tillie explored the early process of radicalization in Amsterdam, focusing on antecedent ideas and beliefs, as well as possible reasons for radicalization.[17] They used data from the Amsterdam Resident Monitor, which is a representative survey taken among nearly three thousand Amsterdam residents, including 321 Muslims. They did a follow-up qualitative inquiry with twenty-four Amsterdam youths "on the verge of radicalizing," and twelve Muslim youth who already had completed the radicalization process. Their analyses revealed two uncorrelated themes among reasons for radicalization.[18] One is a very orthodox religious stance, which they refer to as the religious dimension; and the other is a set of beliefs that are mistrustful of the established order and find it troubling that Muslims in Dutch society are treated unjustly, which they call the political dimension. The religious and political dimensions are empirically *independent* of each other—one does not necessarily lead to the other. Amsterdam Muslims, however, who have strong sentiments in both dimensions appear to have an increased probability of radicalization. In addition, their qualitative investigation of radicalized or radicalizing youth suggested three non-independent paths to radicalization, which they describe in the following way:

- Need for meaning and stability: Islam for order and calm
  These are the respondents who were not active in Islam before their conversion, and for whom the step to practicing Islam meant a radical break with their old lifestyle. This old life is seen as negative and meaningless now that they actively practice Islam.

- Need for commitment: Islam brings acceptance and security
  These are the respondents who were outsiders before, but now feel accepted as they are with their new friends in the mosque. These are the youngest respondents. They are good boys who at a young age began practicing Islam more actively than their classmates or parents.

- Need for justice: Islam as a reaction to injustice
  These young men have a strong feeling that Muslims are being discriminated against. They observe things that they consider to be unjust. This can be anything from a brother who is hassled by the police or the current events in Iraq or Palestine.[19]

In 2006, Professors Peter Neumann and Brooke Rogers of King's College, London were commissioned by the *European Commission's Directorate General for Justice, Freedom and Security* to study recruitment and mobilization for the militant Islamist movement in Europe. Their approach to the ten-month study included a literature review and field-

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work, including nearly forty semi-structured interviews with law enforcement and intelligence officials, community leaders, and radicals/former radicals residing in three EU countries (France, Spain, and the United Kingdom).

Though their results were largely qualitative, they did reach some descriptive conclusions on current European trends in Islamist recruitment and mobilization. Key findings included the following:

• European mosques, once a hub for the propagation of extremist ideas and rhetoric, are no longer prominent in their presence or influence. Increased scrutiny by security agencies has instead driven extremist activists "underground," where they are more difficult to detect and monitor.

• The influence of radical imams (who tend to appeal more to converts) also seems to be waning, especially in Southern Europe, but other Islamist activists have replaced them as mobilizers or "engines" of Islamist militant recruitment. Activists tend especially to exploit conflicts of role and identity among young Muslims to align them with extremist subgroups and against the West. Linguistic and identity issues, however, are less salient among Muslims in Southern Europe (as opposed, for example, to the U.K. and France), where Muslim immigration is more recent.

• With the declining attraction of radical mosques, there is increasing concern about what happens in "places of vulnerability," such as prisons or other social institutions in which marginalized individuals are likely to feel lost or experience tensions. Neumann and Rogers also express concern about "gateway organizations" of Islamist activism, which may facilitate exposure and connection to militant ideas and the social influence of people who endorse them.

• The Internet has come to play an increasingly important role in recruitment and mobilization, particularly appealing to "seekers" and facilitating "home-grown" self-starter groups. The report suggests that effort be directed to deter the formation and action of "recruitment magnets" (which may be activists or places) that connect self-starters to the broader movement.[20]

Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman from the *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies* attempted a recent study of radicalization in the U.S. and U.K.. They observed, "To date, no study has empirically examined the process through which these terrorists are radicalizing, which constitutes

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a substantial gap in the literature." They aimed to address that gap "through an empirical examination of behavioral manifestations of the radicalization process in 117 homegrown 'jihadist' terrorists from the United States and United Kingdom."[21]

They describe their sample of cases as comprising persons participating in or supporting jihadist terrorist plots who either spent a significant portion of their formative years in the West, or whose "radicalization bears a significant connection to the West." Though the report clearly identifies—by name—which persons were included in the sample, it does not very specifically describe the sources of information, the coding strategy (if any) that was used, or the reliability of judgments about whether or not a given factor was present in a given case. They do say that they relied "wherever possible on their (the subjects') own words," derived from blogs and Internet postings, as well as some court documents and "credible open-source information that would be accepted in the professional and academic worlds." The standard for that acceptance is not specified.

The researchers began the study by outlining six potentially observable "manifestations of the radicalization process," each of which they claim "occurred frequently enough among the sample to be considered significant." The six factors examined and reported are as follows:

- Adopting a Legalistic (Rules-Based) Interpretation of Islam

- Trusting Only Select (and Ideologically Rigid) Religious Authorities

- Perceived (Incompatible) Schism Between Islam and the West

- Low Tolerance for (and Personalized Reaction against) Perceived Theological Deviance

- Attempts to Impose Religious Beliefs on Others

- Political Radicalization (Western Conspiracy to Subjugate Islam)

Reviewing these cases led the authors to several "insights" about the radicalization process. First, consistent with findings from other studies, there was no discernible "profile" of persons radicalized into violent extremism. The authors' demographic observations, however, diverged from those found in other samples—such as Marc Sageman's collection of non-Western cases. While Sageman has reported that Salafi Jihadists may be more educated, and more secure fiscally and occupationally than has been previously believed, those in Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman's sample were less frequently married, of a less privileged socioeconomic

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upbringing, and had both a weaker educational background and weaker professional prospects. Demographically, they were not dissimilar to Hegghammer's sample of AQAP militants.

Second, Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman concluded that religion and theological understanding may factor prominently into only a subset of cases. In the process of becoming radicalized, one in five were known to have a spiritual mentor. One in four claimed to have a spiritual sanctioner for their planned attack, but less than 40 percent claimed explicitly that their illegal actions were religiously motivated.[22] The perception that a schism exists between Islam and the West appeared in many cases to be an important aspect of the radicalization process.

Third, while prisons did not factor prominently into most radicalization processes (a connection was found in only seven of the 117 cases studied), overseas training was fairly common. More than 40% were known to have traveled abroad for jihad-related training.

Jyette Klausen from Brandeis University has also developed, based on public documents, "a dataset of Jihadists based or operating in the West, including some three hundred and fifty U.K. residents or individuals engaged in terrorism targeting the U.K., who were arrested between 1999 and 2010."[23] The British jihadists came from thirty-two different countries. Nearly a third had other jihadist supporters in their kinship networks (family or friend), and 80 percent of the militants were connected to social networks that traced back to just four prominent Islamist leaders (Sheiks) in London. Their mean age for first arrest was twenty-six years old, but typically an arrest would not occur for two–three years or more after radicalization. Only sixteen of the three hundred and fifty were women, and fewer than one in ten were converts to Islam (~8% in Britain and ~16% in the United States).

In 2009, the Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation (CIR) at Aarhus University in Denmark issued a series of research reports studying the phenomenon of Islamism and the contours of radicalization processes. They focused their study efforts on middle-size European cities, with specific initiatives in Lille (France) (Beski-Chafiq, et al.), Leicester (U.K.) (Githens-Mazer, et al.), Parma and Verona (Italy) (Della Porta & Bosi), and Aarhus (Denmark) (Kuhle & Lindekilde). While most of the investigations used qualitative interviews with select samples, Goli and Rezaei took a very different approach to defining and exploring what it means to be a "Radical Muslim." They devised a 108-item survey that was

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administered by telephone to a nationally representative sample of 1,113 persons aged fifteen–thirty in Denmark. Most were immigrants, and the sample was fairly evenly divided between males and females.

Goli and Rezaei took an empirical approach to defining radicalism by categorizing respondents into four ranked groups, with Group Four being the most radical (expressing Radical Islamic views in terms of expressive, explicit, and consistent affiliation with and support for militant radical Muslim groups). Persons in this group, whom they labeled as "Radical Muslims," comprised only 5.6% of the total sample and met the following four requirements:[24]

1. Advocate for Islam as a religious ideology.

2. Join the interpretation of Islam as holistic, distinguishing between true and false Islam, acknowledging Islam as a binding prescription for activities in *Din* [Religion], *Dunya* [Way of life], and *Dawla* [Government].

3. Submit to the idea that the final goal of Islam is conquest of the entire world.

4. Agree that fulfilling that end legitimizes the use of any means, including violence.

Goli and Rezaei found the Group Four "Radical Muslims" were predominantly Sunni (70%), disproportionately male (76%), and most often were in the twenty-one to twenty-four-year-old age range (38%). Converts were overrepresented, but still accounted for only 10% of the radical group.[25] There was no relationship between income and support for the Radical Islamic worldview. They also distinguished themselves from other Muslims in the sample on a number of other dimensions. Specially, the Radical Muslims were (among other things):

• More dissatisfied with life in general;

• More preoccupied with the international conflicts in Muslim countries;

• Lonelier;

• More likely to have experienced discrimination;

• Less trustful of Danish media;

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- More likely to want to marry only another Muslim;

- More likely to believe all Muslim immigrants should follow Islam;

- Opposed to certain behaviors, such as drinking alcohol, which are prohibited by *Sharia* law;

- More likely to have become more religious within the past three years; and

- More committed to religious duties like paying *Zakat* and *Khoms*, daily prayer, etc.

Finally, another standout, detailed study within the limited empirical literature on violent radicalization among militant Islamists was conducted, not by academics, but ostensibly by behavioral researchers in a U.K. Government security service. As reported in *The Guardian*, their analysis is based on in-depth case studies of "several hundred individuals known to be involved in, or closely associated with, violent extremist activity" ranging from fundraising to planning suicide bombings in the U.K. *The Guardian* notes that they published an "operational briefing note" in June 2008 titled: "Understanding Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the UK." The document is reportedly marked as "U.K.-restricted," but its contents have been widely reported in the British media. According to press reports, among the key findings, the U.K. agency notes that no profile or single pathway to extremism existed. In most cases they note that some vulnerability existed that made the person receptive to the ideology, but as with earlier studies, the process of becoming "radicalized" appears to have occurred incrementally over time, not as a discrete event.[26]

Moving Forward in Understanding Radicalization into Violent Extremism

Both social scientists and law enforcement professionals—for the most part, at least—seem to have set aside the fallacious notions that violent extremists are all "crazy" or that they are identifiable from a single profile or personality type. That movement represents a major step in the right direction. This shift has helped shape kinds of questions some researchers are asking, with less focus on "what kind of people are they?" and more attention to *how* people come to develop violent extremist ideologies or to engage with persons or groups that espouse them. This open-ended question—how do some people step out on a pathway that takes them ultimately to violent extremism—as an empirical matter, remains largely unanswered.

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With a useful set of starting assumptions and guidance from more mature social science theories, it may be possible to make more meaningful progress in studying and understanding RVE. Moving forward, here is a (notional) list of seven things that social science researchers and operational personnel need to know about violent radicalization:

1. How do individuals become engaged in violent extremist ideologies and with people and activities that instrumentally support terrorism? In particular, what is the role of social relationships (in-person or virtual) and bonds in facilitating belief and involvement?

2. What is the relative contribution of various "push" factors (i.e., grievances and adverse sociopolitical conditions) and "pull" factors (or "lures," real and imagined rewards for aligning with a group) for particular individuals? How are "push" and "pull" factors conveyed through propaganda or narrative themes to resonate most strongly with individuals who become involved and engaged with violent extremism?

3. How and why does the nature of an individual's involvement and engagement with homegrown violent extremism change—or not—over time?

4. Why do most people with militant extremist beliefs not engage in violent action?

5. How do violent extremists (especially those in Western democracies) select their targets, and plan and prepare attacks, including patterns of communication, training, and operational tradecraft?

6. What key life factors, including past criminal activity or incarceration, and psychosocial vulnerabilities—if any—seem to be associated with an individual's entry into and engagement with violent extremism?

7. How can we measure progress in deterring radicalization into violent extremism and measure the success or effectiveness of rehabilitation programs (*including an understanding of what works for whom*)?

A potentially important implication of these unanswered questions, if it is not readily apparent, is that successful CVE efforts are likely to require more than "countering the narrative." The metaphorical notion of a "war on terrorism" has been largely re-cast as a "battle of ideas." That may turn out not to be the most useful metaphor, nor is it likely to account for the

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variability among complex psychosocial RVE processes. Make no mistake; working in the information realm to mitigate perceived grievances is a worthwhile endeavor. But it is not a singular solution.

Conclusion

Peaceful nations around the world have been thrown into a lion's den of ideological extremists. Plans to defeat or neutralize an ideology, however, require different strategies, aims, and tactics than are used in a traditional war.[27] Prevention is as important as eradication. Long-term strategic planning to counter terrorism must account for, if not emphasize, terrorist radicalization and recruitment. A clearer understanding must emerge of militant jihadism's appeal to young people and the tactics radicals use to mobilize them to take violent action.

This momentous effort must begin with conceptual clarity and a good faith attempt to gather facts and to analyze them with the goal of understanding the problem before leaping into large-scale and potentially deleterious solutions. This will require better thinking and better research.[28] If radicalization into violent extremism conforms to many of the well-established principles of other known systems and developmental theories (and experience so far suggests that it does), the next generation of radicalization research—whether or not it chooses to use any of the theories suggested here—might consider the following assumptions as a starting point:

- Radicalization is multi-determined; it is driven and sustained by multiple causes, rather than a single cause. Causal factors often include broad grievances that "push" individuals toward a radical ideology and narrower, more specific "pull" factors that attract them;

- Ideologies (and group support for them) develop within the human ecology of nested contexts and systems, including family, economic, social, and political structures;

- Different pathways can lead to radicalization (sometimes called the principle of equifinality); conversely, different persons on a shared pathway or trajectory may have different outcomes (sometimes called the principle of multifinality).

  - For some persons, religion leverages their attachment to a grievance. For others, a grievance leverages their attachment to religion.

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- For some, ideological commitment leads to group affiliation. For others, social or group affiliations lead to ideological commitments.

- For some, the strength of personal conviction and commitment to the cause precedes their willingness to take subversive action. For others, engaging in subversive actions strengthens their personal conviction and commitment to the cause.

- Not all terrorists even "radicalize."

- Violent radicalization and engagement in terrorism is best viewed as a dynamic psychosocial process involving at least three phases: (1) becoming involved, (2) being involved—synonymous with engaging in unambiguous terrorist activity, and (3) disengaging (which may or may not result in subsequent de-radicalization). Engagement, moreover, comprises a variety of potential roles and functions, which individuals very often migrate both between and within, sometimes holding multiple roles simultaneously.[29]

By beginning with these basic assumptions, we may at least avoid the mistake of viewing RVE as a monolith, and move on to formulate better questions that illuminate the commonalities and variants of the process, leading to more thoughtful and systematic initiatives for CVE. Understanding RVE has implications for all points on the CVE spectrum. Even simply thinking in terms of entry, engagement, and disengagement—and knowing that each phase can have distinct motivations and trajectories—can help focus primary prevention efforts for inoculating vulnerable communities and guide potential rehabilitation programs for detained terrorists. Effective CVE efforts will need to be built on new operational and strategic frames of reference with an explicit goal not just to eradicate existing terrorists, but also to thwart tomorrow's terrorists.

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