

Radicalization of Youth as a Growing Concern for Counter-Terrorism Policy

Margarita Bizina
Diplomacy Program
Norwich University
Northfield, VT

David H. Gray
Campbell University
Buies Creek, NC 27506
grayd@campbell.edu

Abstract

The portrayal of a terrorist as a foreigner from a disadvantaged marginalized country, striking at the Western values from abroad, is slowly fading with the latest increase in Canadian, American and British citizens joining the ranks of terrorist organizations. Radicalization of youth is becoming one of the most important threats of international terrorism in the world today. Socially isolated, disenchanted young men turn to extremism in their search for identity, acceptance and purpose. This paper addresses this major implication for counter-terrorism in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe. Since many of these potential recruits are second-generation Muslims born in Western Europe or North America, or are recent converts to Islam, they have the freedom to travel internationally without being subjected to rigorous visa requirements. This paper encourages a comprehensive approach to the problem of radicalization, including community engagement and building of trust between law enforcement, social workers, and local populations.

Key Words: Radicalization, Counter-terrorism, United States, Youth, Policy Implications, Community Engagement

Introduction

The stereotype of a terrorist as a foreigner from a disadvantaged marginalized country, striking at the Western values from abroad, is slowly fading with the latest increase in Canadian, American, and British citizens joining the ranks of terrorist organizations, as was the case in Algerian gas plant attack on January 20, 2013 or engaging in terrorist acts inspired by radical messages circulating online, as was the case with Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013. Radicalization of youth especially in Western Europe and North America is becoming one of the most important threats of international terrorism in the world today. Socially isolated, disenchanted young men turn to extremism in their search for identity, acceptance and purpose which they are unable to find in the community more often concerned with wealth accumulation rather than healthy relationship-building.

In this situation, the implication for counter-terrorism policy is the difficulty of identifying and intercepting terrorists since they are already in the country by birth or via naturalization, while law enforcement agencies in Europe and North America struggle with walking a fine line between civil liberties and extremism propaganda. The situation is further exacerbated by the population's opinion in regards to the foreign policy of their government, which can be seen as the motivational point for joining the jihad by young members of the society. In this case the intelligence

community will have to quickly assess the potential threat represented by these young travelers and correctly identify them while combing through a significant amount of online data.

A comprehensive approach to the problem of radicalization could be most effective for successful counter-terrorism policy, and as such should include community engagement to prevent radicalization and highlight the understanding of the detrimental impact the individualistic society has on the development of the youth. At the same time, it is crucial for law enforcement and social workers to build trust with local population, and be culturally sensitive to the community they serve, in order to correctly gauge potential for radicalization. Finally, as Internet and mass media represent a wealth of information on various radical violent venues which could seem attractive to youth, perhaps, the intelligence would benefit from a counter-terrorism dedicated cyber-crime unit.

The Problem of Radicalization

Those who feel that society as a whole has the least to offer them are the most likely to join [the terrorist network] (Sageman, 2004) and unfortunately young men in Western Europe and North America are more often nowadays joining the pool of such candidates. The rise in home grown terrorists has two important components: the process of radicalization and the causes for it are both linked to one common denominator – the society in which these young men live. On the one hand it rejects these men from its circle, and on the other hand it pushes them to look for other social networks.

Causes for Radicalization

There are various opinions on the true causes for radicalization. Some authors say that [t]he descent into homegrown terror among North American youths is typically an internal journey driven by teenaged disaffection and anger. It has little to do with geography, religion or heritage [] Individuals drawn to radicalization have a desire to take action and do something significant, [] at the same time, they see the world in black-and-white terms and seek to align themselves with a virtuous cause (Maclean, 2013). Alternatively, some young men, as was the case with the Tsarnaev brothers in Boston bombing last April, turn to radical ideology in order to project the blame for their internal suffering on the society around them (Reitman, 2013). The demise of their parents' marriage and the subsequent abandonment of the teenagers in America left the brothers without financial or social support in rapidly deteriorating conditions (Reitman, 2013). Radical Islamist ideology offered an outlet for their anger at the country that supposedly failed them and set in motion the chain of events that led to the deadly end of Boston Marathon. Sageman (2004) argument supports this proposition, underlining that the reason for joining Salafi jihad is the alienation young men felt while living in foreign countries and not having gainful employment. Joining the jihad gave them an escape from personal sense of grievance and humiliation.

A similar cause for radicalization can be seen in Western Europe, where second generation Muslims are still considered immigrants and fail to integrate in the society. Interestingly enough, the experience in France and the United Kingdom is somewhat different and leads to variations in counter-terrorism policy success, and as such should be discussed in more detail. French model of integration of its immigrants was based on the term *laïcité*, which meant secularism in politics, therefore every citizen identified himself/herself as French first, and put all other ethnic and religious labels as second (Kepel, 2010). By contrast, British multiculturalism allowed for numerous Diasporas to be created in England where closely knit ethnic and religious communities did not mix with each other (Kepel, 2010). Such multicultural approach backfired on counter-terrorism in Britain, since ethnic communities did not integrate with fellow Britons and thus were

unable to provide information to law enforcement about potential radicalization among its youths. Many experts say that some European Muslim youth, many of whom are second or third generation Europeans, feel disenfranchised in a society that does not fully accept them; they appear to turn to Islam as a badge of cultural identity, and are then radicalized by extremist Muslim clerics (Archick et al., 2005).

Regardless of the model for integration, Muslims from France to Germany to Belgium created what are often referred to as "parallel societies" in European countries (Baker et al., 2007). In these sub-sets of European populace, immigrants live in common, often impoverished neighborhoods and continue to practice the religion and cultural norms of their homeland (Baker et al., 2007) failing to share common values with the host country and subsequently becoming easy prey for radical propaganda. These marginalized parallel societies are full of young Muslims ripe for recruitment by Islamic extremists (Baker et al., 2007). What is more frightening is that "the most vulnerable potential recruits, whether born Muslim or converted to Islam, are those who are at a stage of life where they are seeking an identity, while looking for approval and validation. They are searching for causes that can be religiously and culturally justified, that provide them a way to identify who they are, and that provide a clear call for action" (Baker et al. 2007).

Danish research echoes this sentiment showing that generally, "home grown 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 [1] A common denominator seems to be that the involved persons are at a cross road in their life and wanting a cause" (Precht, 2007).

Europeans were not keen on allowing outsiders in their social circles, and even though the governments have created extensive policies to integrate and assimilate immigrants, who incidentally helped rebuild post-war Europe for meager wages and, unfortunately, even their children who were born in Europe are not fully accepted in the social ranking of white Europeans. The "parallel societies" where young educated European-born Muslims are "confined" to their communities and do not experience being truly European citizens breed dissent, as the young men strive to find their identity, and thus fall prey to Islamist fundamentalism especially if it is preached by a charismatic person (Leiken, 2005).

In sum, the causes for radicalization can range from identity crisis, personal trauma, discrimination, segregation, and alienation to misinformation about Islam and Western foreign policy. However, there are other important factors that need to be present for the process of radicalization to take root.

Process of Radicalization

According to Precht (2007), in Western Europe, for many, the process of radicalization begins when they are teenagers looking for a cause and a stronger Muslim identity and increasingly finding the answer in the ideology of radical Islam. Often people are rather secular before they enter the radicalization process and, in general, radicalization is taking place within loose social networks of friends and peers (Precht, 2007). An important factor in radicalization is the presence of a charismatic person who can easily deliver persuasive speeches not only in Mosques but also in schools, universities, or even prisons. "Official sources indicate that many American homegrown Islamists have also been radicalized while incarcerated, including the members of the prison-formed Jamiyat al-Islam al-Sahih cell in California that was convicted in 2007 for its plans to attack not only synagogues but also the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles" (Benraad, 2009). Many of young potential radicals are not fully aware of their country's history, as well, they lack proper knowledge of Islam and have not read the Quran to see that Islam is actually one of the more

peaceful religions. The fact that preachers of Wahhabi Islam find to their advantage is that many young disenchanted individuals are not knowledgeable about the entire scope of religion they are trying to embrace.

Another important factor to consider is the role of social networks in the process of radicalization. "Social links are key to the dynamics of terror networks" (Sageman, 2004). Group phenomenon is a strong factor in creating such network, because the potential jihadists were close friends or relatives when joining terrorist network and have done so not individually but as a group. Many youth enter the circles of radicals after the society rejected them by finding virtual networks online, or in youth clubs and places of worship. The local community, by remaining disinterested in its youth, misses the cues that indicate the process of radicalization, as was the case with the Millennial Plot bombers in Montreal. Having been seen as "a bunch of guys" involved in petty crimes, living in an apartment on welfare, they were not taken seriously by the authorities, although their circle revolved around Kamel, who undergone military training and fought jihad in Bosnia (Sageman, 2004). Perhaps, this lapse in judgment was due to the same British multicultural approach that Canada has adopted to its immigration policies.

However, the process of radicalization apart from social isolation also involves the desire to affect political change. Krueger (2007) posits that terrorism is akin to voting. High opportunity cost of time, such as high paying job, should discourage people from voting, but on the contrary, it is precisely them who vote, because they care about influencing the outcome and consider themselves sufficiently informed to express their opinions (Krueger, 2007). Terrorists also care about influencing political outcomes: they care about a cause so deeply that they are willing to die for it. Terrorists are responding to geopolitical issues, and understanding the causes of terrorism can help prevent countries from pursuing counterproductive courses of action (Krueger, 2007).

Implications for Counter-Terrorism

The major implication for counter-terrorism in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe is the citizenship of radicalized youths. Since many of these potential recruits are second-generation Muslims born in Western Europe or North America, or are recent converts to Islam, they have the freedom to travel internationally without being subjected to rigorous visa requirements. An alarming number of them do not have any prior ties to Muslim identity or religion, and thus they are remaining under the radar of intelligence agencies.

At the same time, counter-terrorism policy in both North America and Europe has to take into consideration the impact of foreign policy perceptions on these young potential radicals. If the behavior of U.S. troops overseas will continue to resemble the behavior of colonizing metropolis, the domestic audience will risk increased radicalization, akin to the protests against the war in Vietnam. Thus, there will always be an internal political duel "to rally support for intervention in terrorist infested country, while at the same time to prevent backlash domestically. Countries that occupy other countries are more likely to be the target of terrorist attack (Krueger, 2007).

UK government in May 2004 was aware that a strong cause of disillusionment among Muslims was a perceived "double standard" in the foreign policy of western governments: bias towards Israel vis-à-vis Palestinians; non-action on Kashmir and Chechnya; and "active oppression" in Iraq, Afghanistan and the wider "war on terror" (O'Duffy, 2008). In this atmosphere experienced and charismatic ring-leaders could recruit alienated troubled younger accomplices, who were then trained and indoctrinated with the ideas of a bipolar struggle between Islam and the West (O'Duffy, 2008).

In this situation perhaps the most important consideration for international counter-terrorism policy would be to overcome the differences and encourage interagency communication, since various transnational terrorist networks are already benefiting from improved communication

worldwide. If government agencies agree to share their findings with less bureaucracy involved, it would be beneficial to combating terrorism. Millennial Plot stands out as the case in point where Canadian authorities took six months to process the request from French authorities to execute a search warrant on Ressaam's apartment (Frontline PBS, 2001).

Implications for Law Enforcement

The most significant lesson that can be drawn from the Millennial Plot, in terms of implications for the law enforcement, is the lack of communication between the agencies of various governments which resulted in Ressaam's ability to settle in Montreal, create a terrorist cell, manufacture the explosives and even take them across the border (Sageman, 2004). There clearly is the need to have good communication channels established between various government agencies: immigration, police, and CSIS. Currently such system exists in Canada, under the name of INSET, and these offices operate in five major Canadian cities.

Communication remains a key concept in successful counter-terrorism measures at local police level, and a good example of that was 2005 takeover of the Finsbury Park mosque in the north of London, England (Vidino, 2009). The mosque was originally founded as a mainstream, moderate one for the large Muslim community of north London, but was taken over by the notorious Egyptian cleric Abu Hamza al Masri in the mid-1990s and turned into what intelligence agencies from various countries considered the undisputed headquarters of jihadist activities in Europe (Vidino, 2009) and the authorities decided to shut it down. This decision was met with the uproar from the Muslim community and boosted support for Abu Hamza (Vidino, 2009). British officials decided to reopen the mosque and give it to the organization that would be accepted by the local community - the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). This takeover was a success, as Abu Hamza's supporters lost a place of gathering, and what was a "suicide factory" has now become a thriving community center with activities for Muslims and non-Muslims (Vidino, 2009).

At the same time, the lesson that can be learned by U.S. and Canadian law enforcement from France is that its "success in handling the grassroots Islamist phenomenon has resulted from effective interagency coordination and the establishment of specific legal provisions and structures charged with the antiterrorist struggle" (Benraad, 2009).

Implications for Intelligence

The liberties that legal provisions give to law enforcement in France would be met with the backlash from civil liberties protectors in the United States and Canada. The massive data collection by NSA in America that has been raking the news channels for the past months indicates a clear problem for intelligence agencies if they are to combat terrorism effectively.

And to add the fuel to the flame, the problem persists with a large volume of data collected by intelligence agents that they are physically unable to sort and compile into comprehensive reports which would enable law enforcement to apprehend home-grown terrorists. The problem remains with having to decipher whether Internet traffic indicates a potential terrorist, radicalized youth, or a young researcher.

While the Internet and mass media are able to disseminate extremist propaganda, perhaps, there is a need to create a cyber-crime unit dedicated to counter-terrorism.

Policy Recommendations

In the field of home-grown terrorism with youth being radicalized within North American communities, there is the need to have intelligence officers fluent in cultural intricacies of the immigrant population, and at the same time, the possibility to analyze the wealth of collected information, based on the knowledge of various cultures. Police and social workers need awareness training to be able to gauge early signs of radicalization in the community. Agents being knowledgeable and sensitive to the issue of youth isolation and radicalization will be able to establish good relationship with their neighborhoods.

At the same time, social integration of youth is extremely important along with counter ideology by education, involving Muslim community in the process of countering radicalization by teaching young people. This will address the need to create collective identity and develop shared values (Precht, 2007).

Increased public diplomacy focused on domestic politics to de-mystify Islam will also help in combatting radicalization, going hand in hand with addressing the need to fight relative deprivation and alienation. Local community engagement is vital in this battle for the minds of young people. Post-immigration support, for example, to integrate new Canadians in the society would help them develop ties to their community instead of forming closely knit Diasporas.

Also, it is important to remember that poor people care about surviving and putting bread on the table, they prioritize material gains, not politics. Knowing this will help law enforcement agencies turn their attention to those that are more susceptible to radicalization. Terrorist organizations prefer recruiting from the educated elite, whose members will be more successful in carrying out the attack (Krueger, 2007). Thus the emphasis should be on the demand side (terrorist organizations) ó degrading their financial and technical capabilities and promoting peaceful means of protest should help counter-terrorism policy. Dampening (the supply) the flow of people willing to join terrorist organizations, according to Krueger (2007) is a policy that is unlikely to succeed.

In the United Kingdom the aim of Prevent, the government's counter-radicalization program, is to stop people becoming or supporting terrorists or violent extremists (Vidino, 2009). As a consequence, over the last few years, various Islamist organizations that reject violence inside the country have been engaged as partners and have received funding from the British government (Vidino, 2009).

Apart from Islamist organizations, community may act as an early warning system for the police and intelligence services; it can also work upstream to prevent young people from radicalization, by diverting them from extremist propaganda, helping to deal with personal crisis and social exclusion; it can tackle the grievances; and the communication with police should be consensual, to maintain the trust in the relationship (Briggs, 2010). The major problem in the UK for example is that Muslim communities still feel alienated because they don't feel that their views are valued by local authorities or that their involvement will make any difference. Negative media reporting about Muslims and growing Islamophobia naturally influence the way in which Muslim communities view efforts at engagement (Briggs, 2010).

Forecast

In the wake of Arab spring, radicalization will increase as many youths see this as their opportunity to shine and to belong and to make a difference. In light of these developments in the international arena federal counter-terrorism agencies should cooperate fully with local law enforcement as well as with their counterparts in foreign countries in order to slow down the process of radicalization. Unfortunately, bureaucratic processes and geopolitical goals of various countries do not allow for swift reorganization of various agencies and their increased cooperation

with local communities, thus leaving open the dilemma of youth radicalization.

Since the radicalization of youth in North American and Western Europe will only tend to increase in the coming years, based on the multitude of factors, closer cooperation between various law enforcement and counter-terrorism agencies is vital. The Arab spring, as well as recent economic crisis has made a lot of young people in Western societies anxious and looking for ways to engage meaningfully in the "struggle for justice" and thus has put more pressure on counter-terrorism policy worldwide.

It is important in this struggle for de-radicalization of youth to engage local community to its fullest potential, as teachers, coaches and parents are missing the early cues of radicalization process. As a society of isolated individuals concerned with accumulation of wealth North America and Western Europe are missing the link with their disenchanting young population that is spending increasingly more time online and less in the community.

The need to combat online radicalization, as well as local charismatic radical Islamists is placed on the shoulders of law enforcement, but the community has to share the burden if it is to be successful in this battle. Communication between all levels of governments and community is vital for the success of deradicalization.

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