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### Terrorists, radicals, and activists: Distinguishing between countering violent extremism and preventing extremist violence, and why it matters

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## 1

Terrorists, Radicals, and Activists  
*Distinguishing between Countering Violent  
Extremism and Preventing Extremist Violence,  
and Why It Matters<sup>1</sup>*

CHRISTIAN LEUPRECHT, DAVID B. SKILLICORN,  
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Who is likely to sympathize with, provide material support for, or actually engage in violent extremism, and why? These have become some of the more pressing security questions of our time. Pragmatically, the questions are made difficult by the small numbers who move to violence, contrasted with the much larger numbers of people in apparently comparable circumstances who exhibit a staunch resilience against even radicalization. Simplistic, reductionist, monocausal explanations abound: ideology or religion, relative deprivation, political or social alienation, discrimination, or moral outrage. However, none of these explanations can withstand rigorous empirical scrutiny. Few Muslims actually engage in political violence – and many of those who claim to do so are mere nominal believers or converts; poverty abounds, but political violence does not; feelings of alienation, discrimination, or grievance are common, but political violence is rare.

In most democracies, more people get hit by lightning than die of terrorism, and many more people die in car accidents than in terrorist incidents. Yet, security improvements in cars are incremental while the state is expected not just to mitigate but eliminate the risk of terrorism. This is a classic example of “risk society,” where the expectation of the state’s ability to manage risk exceeds its capacity to do so. As a result, security, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies in democracies find themselves on a narrow path: if they are perceived as being too aggressive, they are accused of trampling civil

liberties; if a terrorist attack happens, the same critics quickly accuse them of complacency and ask why more was not done to prevent the carnage.

Part of the problem is an inchoate understanding of security in a democracy. Just about everyone has been to school or to a physician, so people have at least a simple experiential understanding of education and health care. Beyond the occasional speeding ticket or passport application, however, the vast majority of citizens have not had much interaction with security agencies. Instead, their perception is skewed by the “Hollywood effect”: crime shows feature police, security agencies, spies, and terrorists who grace “personal opinion with dramatic illustration and thereby giving that opinion apparent authority” – and the criminals are caught.<sup>2</sup> Much of the population has a hard time realizing that these shows are fiction, not reality. We invite you to take a simple test: watch any crime show and start counting the legal and constitutional violations. If you know what to look for, you will count up dozens in a matter of minutes.

Security forces are also constrained by resources. It takes tens of people to monitor an individual continuously; so, even the largest law enforcement agencies in the world can only monitor a few dozen people at a time. But there are thousands about which security intelligence and law enforcement are concerned: reportedly some 20,500 on France’s terrorism watchlist, the *Fichiers de signalements pour la prévention et la radicalisation à caractère terroriste* (FSPRT) – twice as many now as in the aftermath of the Paris attacks of 2015 – of whom as many as half are cause for serious concern.<sup>3</sup> The difficulty for security forces is finding the needle in the haystack: the one among thousands who will act. How, then, are security officials to optimize the allocation of resources in fighting both extremist ideas and extremist violence? Real or perceived terrorist attacks at home or abroad foster a public perception that the issue of radicalization is far more pervasive and threatening than it actually is. Political leaders and the media cycle seize on the more sensational cases, which by their nature have gone too far for intervention but provide an opportunity for a sound bite or media clip. In Western democracies violent extremism remains rare and should not be confounded with larger-scale radicalization of opinion. Unlike intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear weapons, and cyberattacks, radicalization to violence is not a major, let alone existential, threat in democratic countries and, statistically

at least, ranks well below many more pressing issues for local authorities and community leaders.

In the democratic West, recent Jihadist (al-Qaeda and the more apocalyptic and caliphate-driven Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) terrorism has largely been carried out by second- and third-generation citizens or permanent legal residents of immigrant origin who appear to become radicalized and form operational groups in a largely bottom-up fashion. Such homegrown (often “lone wolf”) terrorism poses a more difficult security challenge than “conventional” Islamist terrorism. Since there is little that distinguishes homegrown terrorists from their surrounding community until an attack is imminent, the time between group coalescence and attacks has often been short, and lone wolves can act without any group interaction. Many drivers for such bottom-up radicalization have been posited:<sup>4</sup> a sense of alienation in a non-Islamic society, grievance about Western foreign policies, economic marginalization, superficial knowledge of Islam, and even a desire for status and excitement in otherwise boring lives. Some common patterns have also been noted,<sup>5</sup> such as the presence of a local, charismatic figure who acts as a mentor and travel to a region where Muslims are perceived to be threatened and victimized. Models based on these drivers have been used tactically by law enforcement and counterterrorism agencies to focus resources on the groups and individuals that present the greatest risk and by governments, in more abstract ways, in an effort to reduce the drivers that create radicalized individuals in the first place.

The objective of this chapter is to clarify common misperceptions about terrorism and how to prevent it. Since 9/11, governments have become especially concerned about “radicalization”; so, the first section will demystify the common adulteration of this concept. The second section frames common research questions and problems. Short of understanding why people feel the way they do, the third section prods the reader to ask (1) whether there is a structure to the attitudes that “radicals” hold, (2) what is the relationship that emerges from that structure, and (3) what are its broader policy implications. To promote a better grasp of how to parse policy approaches to this subject, subsequent sections take up the problem of countering the narrative of global jihad by positing a pyramid model that distinguishes between action and opinion, and the implications that follow.

## Operationalizing the Concept of “Radicalization”

With experience and research showing that radicalization of opinion seldom leads to violence and that there is no single path for radicalization to violence, framing the problem is a fundamental challenge. In the vernacular, the concept of “radicalization” has been reduced to a pejorative catchall that is equated with terrorism: all radicals are terrorists, and all terrorists are radicalized. This adulteration of the concept is empirically false: in fact, all terrorists are radical, but most radicals are *not* terrorists. Conceptual clarity matters.

Radicalization is generally understood as a change in beliefs, feelings, and actions towards increased support for one side of an intergroup conflict. By this definition, for instance, women who pushed for the extension of the franchise were radicalized, so was the government of the United States after 9/11. Radicalization per se, then, is not necessarily problematic. Instead, this chapter is concerned with a particular kind of radicalization in which individuals sympathize with, justify, or participate in politically motivated violence against a state or its citizens.

Activism – legal and nonviolent political action – differs from radicalism – illegal political action.<sup>6</sup> Only some radical activity is violent and, of that, terrorism is the extreme radical activity that targets civilians. The relation between activism and radicalism is an issue of considerable practical importance for security forces. Some observers have gone so far as to suggest a “conveyor belt” from Muslim activism to jihadi radicalism, a metaphor suggesting that extreme opinions bring individuals to activism, and frustrated activism then leads inexorably to radicalism. This chapter rejects the conveyor belt metaphor and distinguishes among three levels of radicalization of individuals based on actions:

They engage in politically motivated violence (“terrorists”);

They engage in nonviolent but illegal political actions such as financial support for terrorists (“radicals”); or

They engage in legal political actions such as protest meetings (“activists”).

The boundaries between these categories of action are objective, since a given individual has or has not protested, engaged in illegal acts, or engaged in violence. The nuance is important because the number of terrorists, by this definition, is bound to be minuscule.

On the surface, these three gradations of what are commonly lumped together as radicals cannot readily be distinguished from the *much* larger pool or community of those from whom the radicals are drawn but who have not become radicalized to any kind of action. Radicalization, then, is the process by which an individual, who is initially inert, ends up in one of these three categories of political action.

A fourth category of radicalization consists of individuals who sympathize with radicals but who do not engage in any kind of political action. Such individuals confuse the narrative because their views may seem more extreme than any of the other categories – but these views are totally without political sequelae.<sup>7</sup> They have been called “armchair jihadists.”

Having spent decades studying the relation between beliefs and feelings (attitudes) and actions (behaviour), social psychologists have consistently shown that most behaviour is not well explained by attitudes. Under some circumstances, beliefs and feelings are good predictors of action (in a voting booth, for instance). In most circumstances, however, beliefs and feelings are weak predictors of action (when strong social norms run counter to an individual’s attitude, for instance). In short, radical opinions are cheap, but radicalized action is expensive. Radicals and terrorists expose themselves to possible incarceration and even death.

There is no simple generalization to be made about the commitment to extremist violence: belief in and of itself is an unreliable predictor of an individual’s predisposition towards committing acts of terrorism.<sup>8</sup> The number of people in each of the three categories of political action may be a function of the escalating costs associated with radical activity. Costs may explain why the number of terrorists is smaller than the number of radicals, which is smaller than the number of activists, and all combined are a small subset of the larger community of sympathizers from which they are drawn.<sup>9</sup>

## The Research Agenda

These observations suggest a number of research questions about radicalization:

How do individuals end up in one of the three radical action categories?

Are there three different kinds of people who end up in these three different categories?

What are the drivers of the transitions involved? What motivates an individual to cross boundaries, either passing from nonradical to radical or from radical to terrorist?

What are the barriers to these transitions? Why do so few people become radicalized and is there anything special about these few?

Do the categories of action and the transitions between different categories depend on the particular cause being espoused or do all movements and issues exhibit commonalities in the structure of radicalization?

These questions are of theoretical and empirical interest (insofar as they can be subjected to scrutiny). As strategy turns from prosecution to interdiction and prevention,<sup>10</sup> intelligence, counterterrorism, and law enforcement organizations are also wondering:

Is it possible to tell which category of action an individual will move toward by examining an individual's attitudes?

More generally, can current attitudes predict the future political trajectory of an individual?

For these timely and relevant questions, the evidence base is surprisingly scant because individuals who meet the scope conditions are extraordinarily difficult to study. Attempts to answer these questions have suffered from a number of weaknesses. One popular approach has been to interview radicals who have been found guilty of political violence or associated activity.<sup>11</sup> This approach raises a litany of methodological problems, not the least of which is that it samples on the dependent variable by examining in detail the beliefs, attitudes, and life histories of those who have become radical without

controlling for beliefs, attitudes, and life histories of the much larger pool of similar individuals who remain inert.<sup>12</sup>

Second, this approach is marred by selection bias and a small  $n$ . The pool of radicals, especially those willing to be interviewed by researchers, is small; consequently, the evidence gleaned is inevitably anecdotal.<sup>13</sup> Hence the answers arrived at do not offer particularly compelling explanations of how radicals differ from nonradicals, especially for studies that rely heavily on the subject's *ex post facto* reconstruction of events. Human memory can be all too creative, biased, and unreliable. A relatively small  $n$  may facilitate the generation of hypotheses but not their testing.<sup>14</sup> In theory, the solution to this quandary would be large- $n$  longitudinal analysis among at-risk communities, but longitudinal community surveys large enough to yield robust results would be prohibitively expensive.

Third, humans and human communities are complex. This makes it unlikely that radicalization is a single process.<sup>15</sup> A quantitative approach is better suited to multivariate research than the qualitative research that has been the hallmark of much of the literature thus far. Independent effects, feedback loops, and causal mechanism are hard to disentangle using a qualitative approach, especially when they are posited to include a complex interaction of structural and personal factors such as political background (for example, group relative deprivation), psychological makeup and personality characteristics (for example, trauma and psychopathology), and social circumstances of joining the jihad (for example, identity conflicts).<sup>16</sup> These make it difficult to infer pathways, drivers, or barriers from qualitative work whose samples are small in size, selection-biased, and plagued by omitted variables.<sup>17</sup>

## Models of Radicalization

Theories of radicalization describe a process that takes place over time. Ergo, they necessarily imply certain expectations about attitudinal or behavioural patterns at various temporal stages.<sup>18</sup> The connection between radical beliefs and attitudes, and radicalization to violent or illegal action, has been broadly understood in three ways. First, attitudes towards a con-



flict may vary within a population but the relationship to violence is weak or indeterminate. Second, such attitudes may vary across a population, but violence is conditioned by perceptions of the cost of criminal action. Third, such attitudes may vary within a population, and the variation is correlated with likelihood of radical action.

In the first model, conflict attitudes may vary within a population, but such variation is regarded as operationally useless – what matters is detecting when an individual crosses the line from radical *views* of any kind or intensity to planning and carrying out violent or illegal *actions* – a legalist view of radicalization. This viewpoint naturally leads to an emphasis on intelligence and law enforcement as a way to construct “tripwires” to detect when individuals move from ideas to action – for example, watching travel patterns, changes in behaviour, and so on. This approach allegedly characterizes the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) Demographic Unit.<sup>19</sup> This model of radicalization makes no particular predictions about attitudes of radicals in contrast to the community from which they come, so research cannot easily validate or falsify it.

In the second model, conflict attitudes may vary across a population, but the difference between those who move to violence and those who do not is their individual perceptions of the strength of the inhibitors to violence, both external and personality-based – a psychological and economic view of radicalization.<sup>20</sup> This viewpoint naturally leads to an emphasis on (a) understanding the incentive structure in the population and community, and (b) creating disincentives whenever possible to discourage the transition to violence. This model of radicalization predicts that attitudes to economic or psychological issues should show some variation between radicals and those who are not – perhaps related to differences in risk aversion, for example. This model also predicts that the distribution of individuals should show a pyramidal structure where, as opinions become more radical, the number of individuals who hold them decreases.

In the third model, conflict attitudes vary within a population, and these attitudes affect individuals’ likelihood of engaging in radical action. This viewpoint naturally leads to a scan for, as it were, *dangerous ideas*, those attitudes that create a proclivity for violence.<sup>21</sup> Some attitudes, beliefs, and feelings may be affected by changing external realities, so this approach is

particularly fruitful in uncovering points of leverage accessible to governments and societies. Strategies for deradicalization only make sense from this point of view.<sup>22</sup>

This model of radicalization predicts that attitudes should cluster – that there should be measurable differences in attitudes between those who are radical and those who are not. Either the particular issues for which these differences occur are drivers of radicalization or they are consequences (sequelae) of radicalization, and – a key issue – it may be possible to infer which is which. According to this model, the distribution of individuals by conflict opinions is again anticipated to have a pyramidal structure but perhaps with an even more obvious “gap” between commonly held opinions and those associated with radicalization.<sup>23</sup>

A more diffuse model of radicalization that is implicit in many government programs posits intensity or dissatisfaction as inherently dangerous, to some extent regardless of the content of the dissatisfaction. Those who are political or religious activists are regarded with suspicion because of a belief that passion is a kind of slippery slope that leads from legitimate protest, to illegal activity, and finally to violence – a variant of the conveyor belt model. This model predicts that radicalization should be associated with political, social, religious, or moral intensity or dissatisfaction. A roughly pyramidal distribution of individuals by conflict attitudes is again expected in this model, as relatively few individuals can maintain a high level of passion about political issues. They might be associated with political, social, religious, or moral intensity or dissatisfaction.

Notice that all of these models begin from recognition that conflict-related attitudes vary within a population. This is indeed the pattern found in polls relating to jihadist, right-wing, and left-wing grievances. For instance, about half of US Muslims believe that the war on terrorism is a war on Islam, and half do not.<sup>24</sup> The different models represent our current uncertainties about the relation between population attitudes and the likelihood of political violence by members of that population.

## Policy Issues

A good deal of government policy makes implicit assumptions about causality: Muslims become radicals because they are unhappy. The rational policy maker's utilitarian instincts presume that happier Muslims mean fewer radicals. Thus, the solution is a programmatic policy response focused on spending money in areas of social support, education, housing, and so on. Some research on individual attitudes, actions, and aggregate patterns of terrorism suggests that weak welfare policies may foment religious extremism, while other research suggests that robust social welfare policies reduce incidents of terrorism.<sup>25</sup> A social welfare approach is also conveniently appealing to the egalitarian instincts of the electorate; it is in line with the welfare-state premise of nation-building using T.H. Marshall's social conception of citizenship, and it shows the government to be "doing something" about the problem.

Yet ties between economic status and extremism turn out to be weak at both the individual and aggregate levels.<sup>26</sup> This was also the view that informed the White House's 2002 *National Security Strategy* which goes out of its way to stress that the 9/11 attacks were perpetrated by middle-class, educated misanthropes led by a rich religious fanatic.<sup>27</sup>

Findings of a poll of Ottawa Muslims we conducted can inform this debate.<sup>28</sup> Radical attitudes appear absent among Muslims with moral and/or social/political satisfaction. Moral dissatisfaction does appear to be associated with increased social dissatisfaction, and, for some, the combination is associated with some activities and attitudes that correspond to radicalization. On the one hand, these results do not support the assumption that improving individuals' life satisfaction will decrease the prevalence of radical attitudes, let alone reduce the prevalence of radical action. The results suggest instead that government policy would have to increase moral/religious satisfaction rather than social/political satisfaction. Moral/religious satisfaction, though, appears to be largely beyond the reach of government policy. In short, as appealing as social welfare programs may be to politicians, policy makers, and electorates, the strategic payoffs against radicalization are not evident.

On the other hand, there appears to be little indication that governments should take the blame for the alleged inflammatory effects of their policies

and actions. The same poll of Ottawa Muslims found that approval of Western governments (including Canada, US, and Israel) was unrelated to approval of jihadist groups (including al-Qaeda and Hamas).<sup>29</sup> The implication of this surprising result is that policies that help Muslims like Western governments more may do nothing to help Muslims like jihadists less.

## The Metanarrative of Global Jihad

In his celebrated 1993 paper, Samuel Huntington suggested that the world's future conflicts were likely to occur around cultural fault lines in a "Clash of Civilizations."<sup>30</sup> In particular, Huntington predicted a growing conflict between Western and Islamic cultures that seemed to be confirmed by al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the US. Whatever the virtues or failings of the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, it has at least moved attention beyond the perpetrators of violence to concerns about the broader base of sympathizers and supporters of violence.

Thus the "war on terrorism" declared by President George W. Bush included a "war of ideas" aimed at reaching out to a billion Muslims, worldwide, to discourage the kind of radical Islam that brings support and recruits to militant Muslim groups. Empirically, the war of ideas has led to a growing literature of polling studies designed to assess both Western and Muslim views of jihadist militants who challenge the West. In Muslim-majority countries, the war of ideas aims to lower the appeal of armed non-state actors such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, and to raise approval of the US and other Western countries targeted by jihadists. Waging the war of ideas requires getting specific about the mobilization frame that supports and justifies jihadist violence.

The metanarrative of global jihad has four basic components: (1) Islam is under attack by Western crusaders led by the United States; (2) jihadis, whom the West refers to as "terrorists," are defending against this attack; (3) the actions they take in defence of Islam are proportional, just, and religiously sanctified; and, therefore (4) it is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions.<sup>31</sup> This metanarrative can be broken down further into four kinds of discourse. The *political narrative* is concerned with the evils of the West, including a neo-Marxist take on global inequities and distributive

effects arising from Western hegemony and exploitation whose roots can be traced to Islam's best-known cultural historian, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). The *moral narrative* focuses on the internal contradictions of liberal democracies, which profess freedom as their core value and equality and justice as their subsidiary values but where these ideals remain largely unrealized, and the associated hypocrisy drives Western moral decay. The *religious narrative* legitimises violent struggle to defend Islam against the crusader West and, in the case of ISIS, a claim to be the “true” heart of Islam and so at odds even with the rest of Islam, including al-Qaeda. The *social-psychological narrative*, finally, employs a solipsistic in-group–out-group strategy to brand as infidels those who do not subscribe to the jihadist narrative, while promoting the brotherhood of arms as a means of fulfilling a yearning for adventure and sacrifice that compels the “true believer.”

McCauley and Moskalenko propose that the global jihad narrative is best analysed in terms of a pyramid of radicalization<sup>32</sup> whose base is composed of Muslims who currently do not accept any of the global jihad narrative (figure 1.1). A layer above the base are those who sympathise with the first step of the jihadist frame: that the West is waging a war on Islam (global jihad level 1, pyramid second level). Next higher in the pyramid are Muslims who believe that jihadis are acting in defense of Islam and that their actions are morally and religiously justified (global jihad levels 2 and 3, pyramid third level). Highest in the pyramid are Muslims who believe there is an individual duty to join in violence and participate in the defence of Islam (global jihad level 4, pyramid fourth level).

There is some complexity here: Islam distinguishes between defence that must be mandated by legitimate authority, a group responsibility, and defence that is an individual obligation of every good Muslim. The battle cry of jihadis is that the current threat to Islam justifies an individual obligation not dependent on having state or religious authority behind it. We here identify belief in the individual obligation as the highest, most radicalized level of the narrative pyramid. The implication of a pyramid model of the global jihad narrative is that the lower levels represent more people, with lower levels of radicalization.

The pyramid model of radicalization implies that different pieces of the global jihad narrative are held by Muslims in different layers of the pyramid. Not all who justify suicide bombing also see a war on Islam, but most

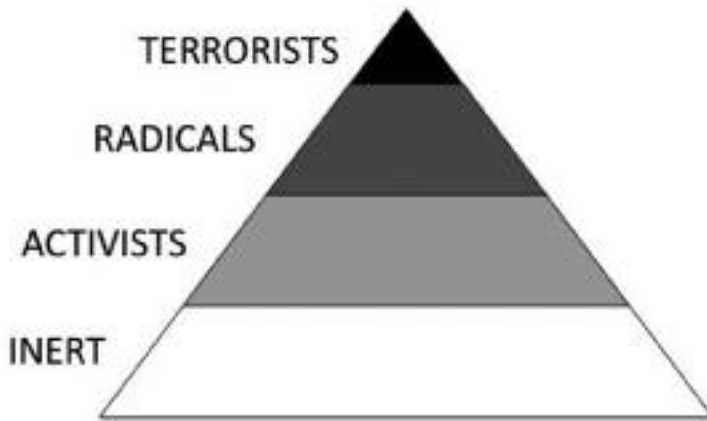


Figure 1.1 The action pyramid

do. Similarly, not all who feel a personal moral obligation for jihad also defend suicide bombing, but many do. In short, those who accept more radical elements of the global jihad narrative are more likely – but not 100 percent likely – to accept less radical elements. Given that different subsets of Muslims accept different elements of the global jihad narrative, it seems likely that the origins or sources or predictors of acceptance differ for different elements. Polling data give us an idea of who is likely to be more (or less) prone to the narrative, but not knowing why the narrative has traction with any given individual makes it difficult to devise an effective counternarrative strategy.<sup>33</sup>

### A Two-Pyramids Model of Radicalization

For decades psychologists have studied the relation between beliefs and feelings (cognition and attitude) and action (behaviour). When action consistent with beliefs and feelings is costly (such as committing oneself to a suicide bombing), the gap between belief and behaviour is likely to be large.

This seems to be the situation for the global jihad narrative: the opportunity cost of believing in a war on Islam and feeling that suicide attacks are justified in defence of Islam is relatively low; action in defence of Islam is dis-



Figure 1.2 The opinion pyramid

proportionately costly in time, energy, and, at least in Western countries, risk of incarceration or death. Almost half of US Muslims believe there is a war on Islam, while 10 percent justify suicide bombing in defense of Islam. Even that 10 percent corresponds to about 100,000 adult US Muslims, but only hundreds of US Muslims have been indicted or convicted of terrorist actions. As already noted, opinion is cheap, but action is costly.

The gap between the global jihad narrative and global jihad violence, at least in Western countries, indicates the need for another pyramid model, a pyramid of action (figure 1.2). Here the base includes all Muslims who are politically inert, whatever their beliefs or feelings. The next higher level are activists, engaged in legal and nonviolent political action, although some may join in one or another part of the global jihad narrative. Hizb ut-Tahrir members, for instance, are legal activists in both the United Kingdom (UK) and in the US (Hizb had its first national meeting in the US in Chicago in July 2009), even though Hizb, like ISIS and al-Qaeda, is striving to reestablish a supranational caliphate. Higher yet are radicals, engaged in illegal political action that may include violence. Finally, at the apex of the action pyramid are the terrorists, radicals who target civilians with lethal violence.

It is important to distinguish between nonviolent and violent political behaviour because, ultimately, the latter is of primary concern for the purposes of public security. The former is of interest only if there is evidence that it

foreshadows the latter. For example, the movement for voting rights for women and the civil-rights movement militating for racial equality were both considered radical and engaged in some illegal political action. With the benefit of hindsight, however, would we judge them as a liability or as an asset to the body politic?

The borders between the levels of the action pyramid represent the most important transition points of radicalization in action: from doing nothing to doing something, from legal political action to illegal political action, and from illegal political action to killing civilians. However, the action pyramid is neither a conveyor belt nor a stage theory in which an individual must progress through each succeeding level in a linear fashion to become a terrorist. It is not necessary to be an activist in order to become a radical nor is it necessary to be radical in order to become a terrorist.

A particular challenge for understanding radicalization in the action pyramid are cases of lone wolf or lone actor terrorists. These are individuals who act without group or organizational support; they plan and carry out an attack on their own. In effect, these are individuals who move in an apparently single step (and often quickly) from politically inert (base of the action pyramid) to terrorist action (apex of the pyramid). How is this possible? How could Major Nidal Hasan move from US Army officer to killing thirteen and wounding more than thirty in a mass shooting at Ft Hood, Texas?

The next section reviews mechanisms of radicalization seen in cases where individuals join a terrorist group, but these mechanisms do not seem adequate to explain how so few individuals move to attacking alone. McCauley and Moskalenko have suggested two possible profiles of these unusual individuals.<sup>34</sup> *Disconnected-disordered* individuals are loners, often with some history of mental disorder; they have little to lose in trying to escape their painful lives to become terrorist heroes. The only support they need is the perception that many will see them as martyrs. By contrast, *caring-compelled* individuals have normal social connections, including work and family. They have no history of mental disorder. They seem to be moved to action by unusual sensitivity to the sufferings of others – an unusual capacity for sympathy and empathy that pushes them to *do something* to fight back against perceived injustice. Momin Khawaja is such a person: he is incarcerated in Canada in connection with a bomb plot, but his initial act of radicalization was his solo attempt to join the Taliban to fight US forces in



Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> The two profiles may not be mutually exclusive. Major Hasan seems to have been caring-compelled as well as socially disconnected (but not disordered).

Lone actor terrorists are rare. Research on more cases is necessary to test the usefulness of the two possible profiles, but it is already worth noticing that both profiles point to the power of emotional experience in moving individuals to terrorism. Emotional experience may also be important in the radicalization of the much larger number of terrorists who act as part of a group or organization.

## Mechanisms of Radicalization

Any attempt at formulating a stage theory of radicalization in action is contradicted by the multiple mechanisms of radicalization identified at individual, group, and mass levels. McCauley and Moskalenko have compiled a suggestive list of mechanisms of radicalization, mostly from case materials about terrorist groups and terrorist individuals.<sup>36</sup>

### *Individual Level*

1. Personal grievance. An individual is angry and seeks revenge for government action seen as harming self or loved ones. Personal grievance usually does not lead to action unless interpreted as part of some larger group grievance. Chechen Black Widows revenging brothers and husbands killed by Russians are a commonly cited example.
2. Group grievance. Identification with a group perceived as victims can radicalize an individual who has not personally experienced any harm or hurt. This includes “lone wolf terrorism” and “sudden jihad syndrome,” with such examples as the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, as well as Mohammed Rea Taheri-azar and Momin Khawaja.
3. Self-persuasion in action – the slippery slope. This mechanism is rooted in the famous Milgram experiment and is consistent with the image of a “conveyor belt” where people are gradually radicalized in a step-by-step process.
4. Regard. Individuals can join a militant group because someone they

regard or love – friend, romantic partner, family member – asks them or because they want to aid and protect a loved one. Sometimes a member of a radical group may cultivate a personal connection with a potential recruit.

5. Fear, escape. In a failed state, individuals can join a militant group because they feel safer with friends with guns than on the street alone. Examples are found among militants of the Revolutionary Armed Forces in Colombia (FARC), sectarian groups such as Daesh in Iraq, and some ultra-nationalists on the right fringe of the political spectrum. Some join a militant group to escape loneliness, personal shame, or trouble with the police.

6. Thrill, Status, Money. This mechanism depends on individual preferences, usually those of young males. Examples include joining the US Marine Corps, setting Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) in Iraq or Afghanistan for money, or joining a street gang.

### *Small Group Level*

7. Group polarization. Discussion among members of a like-minded group moves members further in the initially agreed upon direction. Two tendencies contribute: not wanting to fall behind in representing group-favoured values and hearing a preponderance of arguments in the group-favoured direction.

8. Group competition. Radicalization can occur when nonstate actors compete with a state, compete against nonstate groups (often in the form of “outbidding” other groups), and when factions of the same group compete with one another (such as multiple fissions within the Irish Republican Army).

9. Extreme cohesion under isolation/threat. This multiplier of group dynamics (mechanisms 7 and 8) occurs for underground groups, cults, and small groups in combat.

### *Mass Level*

Mass level mechanisms are mechanisms of opinion radicalization.

10. External threat. This mechanism is at work at both the group level (mechanism 8) and the mass level. External threats lead to increased group identification, magnified ethnic entrepreneurship and the power of leaders,

sanctions for in-group deviates, and idealized in-group values. An example is the US reaction to 9/11 and the Somali diaspora's reaction to Ethiopian (Christian) troops entering Somalia in 2006.

11. Hate. An essentialized and dehumanized view of the enemy facilitates killing by ethnic or religious category, including civilians as well as militants and military.

12. Martyrdom. Martyrs can radicalize a mass audience by their example of sacrifice. A classic example is the 1981 hunger strike in which ten Irish Republican Army (IRA)/Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) prisoners perished, but the Republican cause was resuscitated.

Five of the six individual-level mechanisms – personal grievance, slippery slope, regard, fear, and thrill-seeking – do not depend on accepting new ideas from a radical ideology or narrative and can move individuals to radical action, including joining an existing militant group. In particular, these five mechanisms do not depend on the existence or acceptance of the narrative of global jihad.

In many cases, a radical narrative or ideology is learned *after* an individual joins a radical group. In these cases, the narrative is less a cause than a rationalization of commitment to radical action. In rational-choice terms, we might say that the purpose of the narrative is to reduce transaction costs of group interaction by building and reinforcing group cohesion and group consensus about action. Narratives may thus be better understood as enablers rather than as drivers of radicalization. To the extent that narratives are developed out of action and small group commitments, the potential for blocking radicalization by counternarratives is limited.

## Relating the Two Pyramids

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that relating the two pyramids, the narrative pyramid and the action pyramid, is anything but straightforward. Figure 1.3 represents, for each action level, a possible distribution of acceptance of the four aspects of the global jihad narrative.

In this representation, acceptance of narrative elements is correlated with levels of action, such that accepting a personal moral obligation for jihad – relative thickness of the black band within each action level – is most likely

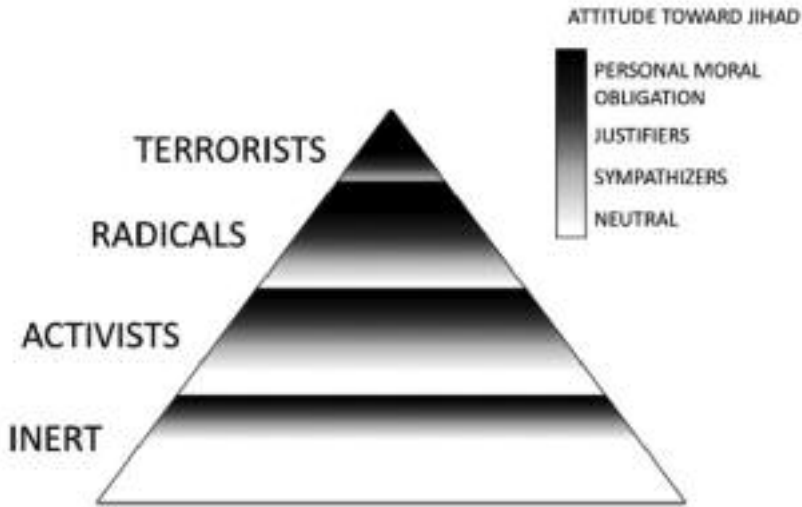


Figure 1.3 Possible distribution of acceptance

among the terrorists and least likely among the inert. Similarly, belief in none of the aspects of the global jihad narrative – relative thickness of the white band within each action level – is most likely among the inert and least likely among the terrorists.

But the correlation is only probabilistic, not deterministic. Some jihadists may accept no part of the global jihad narrative – for instance, individuals who joined a terrorist group for the thrill of guns and fighting. And there may be a few politically inert individuals who construct a personal moral obligation for jihad – for instance, individuals who want to hurt their parents by leaving for jihad.

As already described, it is neither obvious nor known what parts of the global jihad narrative appear with what frequency in different levels of the action pyramid. Mechanisms of radicalization that do not depend on ideology or narrative imply that the global jihad narrative is not necessary for radicalization in action. It seems likely that participation in a radical jihadist group soon teaches most or all of the global jihad narrative, but the narrative is not necessary to initiate radical action.

A better understanding of how individuals and groups shift between sympathy, justification, and support for illegal political activity<sup>37</sup> and the way this

shift relates to the “multiple economic, social, political, and organizational relations that span borders”<sup>38</sup> is needed. Are there tipping points that put individuals “over the edge” into action? Does a critical mass of drivers need to be accumulated for individuals to cross thresholds? Are there quantum leaps from illegal political action such as banned marches and property damage to lethal violence against human targets? What precipitates such leaps?

### Efficacy and Efficiency Issues

The weak relation between narrative and action limits the efficacy of intelligence and law enforcement in countering radicalization. The mandate of security and intelligence agencies is not to control opinion radicalization but to protect against violent threats. A common presumption is that radical ideas translate into a violent threat. And not just any type of violence but terrorism: politically motivated violence that is directed at general populations, not so much for the purpose of maximizing casualties as for the purpose of maximising psychological impact to disrupt legitimate authority and the capacity to govern. Bravado about violence proliferates among radicals, but they are unlikely to act on it – those most likely to act tend not to engage in bravado.<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, those prone to violence are fully aware of the costs associated with their activity and, as rational actors, will not draw attention to themselves. In other words, zeroing in on “narrative radicals” is likely to generate an ineffective diversion of resources from “action radicals,” as false positives proliferate. Together, the three pyramids indicate that the relationship between radical ideas and radical violence is variable and uncertain.

Instead of conceiving the process of radicalization as a pathway,<sup>40</sup> with a mechanistic understanding of individuals on a quasi-determinist trajectory, the evidence points, instead, to plural pathways with no profile trajectory. Models that treat radicalization as a single pathway that starts at political sympathy and ends in political violence, grossly oversimplify a heterogeneous process by making many of the variables that matter exogenous to the model.<sup>41</sup> Some “self-radicalize,”<sup>42</sup> others are specifically targeted by recruiters,<sup>43</sup> others recruited by family or friendship groups,<sup>44</sup> yet others who are radicalized through media, especially the Internet.<sup>45</sup>

## Human Rights Issues

Democracies have an unfortunate history of labelling any serious challenge to the status quo as radicalism. While the history of the rise of the modern security and police state throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries need not detain us here,<sup>46</sup> states cannot be careful enough when endeavouring to control or censor thought and beliefs. Indeed, the rise of democratic pluralism can be read as the struggle against state control and censorship of views from the margins. Some secularists today would like to attribute many of the world's ills to religion.<sup>47</sup> Their inference is that any type of "extremist" religion ought to be marginalized or banned. The problem with this approach is that it misses the crux of the problem: only actual violence is the responsibility of security forces.

Democracies are premised on the assumption that freedom of speech and thought should prevail, which is why speech is protected from arbitrary government interference. Only under very specific circumstances is an utterance in and of itself a crime. Rather, the criminal justice system in a democracy is generally structured to deal with acts of crime *ex post facto*. Intent and motivation are not normally punishable, although they may factor into the degree of punishment. In short, gauging threat by means of profiling characteristics such as religion, political opinion, or country of origin is not particularly effective, unnecessarily aggravates the security problem by alienating entire communities, and is usually difficult to reconcile with democratic constitutions. Since courts have been reticent to convict based on terrorist motivation and intent, and since political opinion does not necessarily translate into actual illegal action, focus on the global jihad narrative is not a fruitful avenue for intelligence and law enforcement to pursue. Rather the war of ideas that can be tracked in polls, focus groups, web sites, and video releases must be separated from the war on terrorism. The pyramid of narrative and the pyramid of action can together contribute to this kind of understanding and this kind of action.

Another way to tackle counternarratives is to invert the problem. This chapter suggests that one way to think about global jihad is as a massive free-rider problem: While the grievances are widely shared, the call to arms is not. Moreover, those who share the call to arms may have motives other

than grievances to join the fight. For a counternarrative strategy to be effective, then, it should (1) frustrate the violent extremists by exacerbating their free-rider problem and (2) target those individuals who sympathize with the metanarrative without the metanarrative having affected their actual behaviour.

The evidence in this chapter suggests that the way to aggravate the free-rider problem is to widen the gap between narrative and behaviour. That is best done by (1) raising the costs associated with acting on violent beliefs (which liberal democracies' legislators and security forces have done quite successfully in recent years) and (2) mitigating the mechanisms of radicalization that can push some individuals to bear such costs nonetheless.

## Conclusion

The war of ideas against the global jihadist narrative must be distinguished from the war against active terrorists. Violent political action must be the focus of security forces, whereas the war of ideas is in the political realm of choosing and promoting political policies.

Within the war of ideas, different parts of the global jihad narrative are held by different audiences, and each part and its audience must be separately targeted if counternarratives are to be effective.<sup>48</sup> One approach to the war of ideas would give priority to top-down counternarratives that target (1) individuals who are higher up in the pyramid and (2) individuals who are particularly prone to an upward trajectory in the pyramid. The more radicalized individuals higher up the pyramid are, in one sense, an easier target because there are fewer of them. This makes the counternarrative easier to tailor but also makes it more difficult to communicate the message to the target audience. In addition, those individuals who are already more radicalized are likely to be resistant to even the most convincing counternarrative.

The second set of individuals is even more complicated to address because, in each pyramid level – whether of the narrative pyramid or the action pyramid – few will move toward greater radicalization in any given period of time. And there are many mechanisms of radicalization and thus many

combination-trajectories to radicalization. A “profile” of individuals likely to show increased radicalization is thus unlikely to be helpful; a triangulation of factors to gauge risk perhaps more so.

In sum, the top-down approach is not promising. Radicals and terrorists are difficult to reach and difficult to move, and no profile exists for predicting those most susceptible to radicalization. A lesser but still significant problem is that focusing on the more radicalized presents a real predicament for research. The higher up in the radicalization pyramid people are – whether narrative or action pyramid – the less likely they are to collaborate with researchers for fear of alerting security forces.

The war of ideas should thus give priority to a bottom-up focus on the lower levels of the two pyramids. We cannot count on turning Muslims against Islamic militants via counternarratives that help Muslims feel more positive toward the West. Similarly, perhaps we cannot count on making Muslims more positive toward the West by turning them against jihadist militants. Although it is easy to assume that Muslims must choose between jihadis and the West, our results suggest that the war of ideas against the global jihad narrative must have two separate and independent targets: moving Muslims against militants and moving Muslims toward the West.

Finally, it is important to raise another kind of difficulty with counternarratives, no matter whether the target is top-down or bottom-up. The danger is that a message may be effective with the target audience but have unintended consequences for those not immediately targeted. In this, counternarratives are similar to more kinetic forms of counterinsurgency: both can have collateral damage that undermines political goals. For instance, a message arguing that Islam does not approve killing enemy civilians might combat acceptance of suicide bombing in defence of Islam but also, at the same time, reinforce, at least implicitly, that Western countries are enemies engaged in war against Islam.

In the end, the danger with counternarratives is a “ready-fire-aim” problem: We think we know the source of the problem when, in fact, the issue is more complex and differentiated than it appears. Although a well-intentioned solution, counternarratives may either risk diffusing scarce resources without a measurable effect or spawning unintended consequences. The good news is that, in the marketplace of ideas, democracy’s



social contract, premised on nonviolence to settle political disputes, appears to have the upper hand. The bad news is that democracies have not cornered the market.

## NOTES

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