Radicalization: Anti-, Counter-, De-. What are we doing?

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Anti/Counter/De

In this lecture I deliver a set of definitions regarding counter-strategies to the problem of political radicalization.

Grounded in political resistances to the state, broadly conceived, and expressed as both religious and social ideologies, radicalization has delivered significant violent consequences both in the pre- and post-9/11 era.

Nation-states around the world have taken vastly different approaches to dealing with this issue and a comparative approach can enlighten us as to the successes and failures of these policies.

Some of the direct causes of radicalization are context-specific, and some are similar if not the same in terms of their origins.

In this discussion I examine a wide variety of state-level responses from different countries around the world.
Examining policies of various kinds tell us about:

- The kinds of political expectations of the entire polity
- How certain problems are perceived by a given society
- What people are prepared to tolerate and what they are not
- How both ideologies as well as political systems can or cannot be flexible to accommodate challenges

Radicalization is a wicked policy problem

- Ever-present, no immediate or obvious solution

It is also a contested concept politically and socially

- Different forms and interpretations of radicalization(s)

There are arguments about what the problem actually is, and still further about what to do about it

There are of course real and violent consequences of radicalized behaviour

- Not merely an abstract set of concepts – a violent contestation – even though the numbers are very small in the Global North in comparison to some MENA and some Global South countries
FACTORS INTERTWINED

Relying on social conditions
- Material conditions of poverty, marginalization

The Doctrine
- Use of doctrines religious, political

Psychology
- Radical loser thesis Enzensberger
  - [http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/the-terrorist-mindset-the-radical-loser-a-451379.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/the-terrorist-mindset-the-radical-loser-a-451379.html)

Ideology
- Related to doctrine, but more of a normative vision – encompasses what we ought to do, and the structure agency problem – a huge topic on it’s own
REMINDERS!

None of this is a new phenomenon, going back several decades

Many of the conclusions about political violence are the same then as they are now but we seem to have forgotten many of those:

- Torture
- ‘Religious’ conflicts are rarely about belief systems
- Terrorists, radicals, extremists, are rarely ‘insane’ — rational and calculating political actors
- Past experience with radical/extreme/violent politics

An interesting set of contemporary problems here is that:

- Derad programs themselves have a danger of becoming increasingly militarized, delivering power to private security agencies with no accountability
- Derad programs have a danger of becoming legally punitive ie taking away citizenships, jailing for noncompliance, delivering power to bureaucrats with little accountability
- Derad programs have a danger of becoming both too broad, including everything such as environmental groups etc, as well as too specific by targeting select groups through profiling various ethnicities or national origins
Case Study: Karen

Karen grew up in a loving family who never participated in activism of any sort. When she moved out of home to attend university Karen became involved in the alternative music scene, student politics and left-wing activism. In hindsight she thinks this was just “typical teenage rebellion” that went further than most. One afternoon Karen attended an environmental protest with some of her friends. It was exhilarating, fun and she felt like she was doing the “right thing” for society. She enjoyed spending time with this crowd. Over the next six months Karen progressively dropped out of university in order to live full-time in a forest camp, where she remained for a year. Her family were confused and disappointed and stopped supporting her financially.

The goal of the forest camp was to disrupt logging activities by barricading areas that were being logged, spiking trees, and sabotaging machinery. There was no intent to harm people but inevitably fighting broke out between protesters and loggers. Sometimes the locals and the police became involved in these incidents. Karen was arrested on numerous occasions for trespassing, property damage, assault and obstructing police. She said at the time she felt like she was a “soldier for the environment so breaking the law didn’t matter”. It became all-consuming for Karen and she became totally cut off from her family and previous set of friends.

After years of participating in direct-action campaigns, Karen finally became disillusioned by persistent in-group fighting. She also began to question the effectiveness of the protesting methods used by the group. It seemed they might make short-term gains but that there was no sustainable change unless it was translated into wider community support and government policies. She took a paid job with a mainstream environmentalist organisation and was subsequently rejected by her group who felt completely betrayed.

This was the beginning of a painful transition out of radical activism, where Karen struggled to recover, define her identity and her role in society. Over the course of a number of years she began making new friends, trying out new interests and hobbies and eventually made contact with her family and non-activist friends again. She completed her university studies and now works broadly in the environmental field. Karen also explored her beliefs and adopted a more moderate eco-philosophy. She now thinks illegal or aggressive direct-action campaigns only produce short-term solutions, and she is much more interested in working towards developing a sustainable solution using the legal system.
Typologies

- Therapeutic - individual psychological, ‘cult de-programming’
- Youth-focus - youth counsellors and police in France, Canada, Australia
- Policing - new powers for police en masse in post 9/11
- Community work - outreach programs mainly to local mosques and community centres identified as being part of some ‘radical community’ (obviously this changes over time - Irish in 70s/80s? Hungarians in 50s/60s? Sikhs in 80s/90s? Francophonie/Québecois in 60s/70s? Basque conflicts?, etc.)

- Comprehensive Saudi model
- Success of the Danish model
- Current German model
- Australia and Canada
- Denmark and Switzerland are seizing assets
Other developments

• Banning various forms of clothing worn by a tiny minority of people can be an interesting piece of security theatre, but it does nothing to de-radicalize extremists (Sikhs in Canada and hijab bans in French schools).

• In fact it does precisely the opposite and gives license to groups and individuals to attack innocent people in public. [http://www.theherald.com.au/story/2595908/ugly-incidents-shock-hunter-muslims/?cs=305]

• Fighting ‘homegrown terror’ represents one of the most complex public policy and security problems of the past 30-40 years

• Homegrown terror groups include everything from the Baader-Meinhof gang in West Germany in the 1970s, Aum Shinrikyo and the Red Army in Japan in the 1980s, various Christian Militias, the Weathermen, and the Army of God in the US

• Canada, Germany, and the UK have adopted de-radicalisation programs that have enjoyed some success [http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013_2.pdf].

• Combining a form of ‘cult deprogramming’ techniques with grass-roots level of community engagement is about the only way that we know we can change the minds of people who are engaging with possible radicalization or even returning from conflict zones
Other developments

• This is the ‘soft power’ option and we know that it works. Indonesia for example, has experienced some recent terrorist activity but has a long history of dealing with radicals (Indonesia has a fascinating history in terms of radical politics - military history, Islamist movements are usually independence movements looking for territory like Aceh, Islamists originate/strengthened by with Japanese occupation and there remains the question of Wahabism). [http://qz.com/270295/indonesia-tells-the-united-states-how-to-defeat-jihadists-with-soft-power/]

• We also know that there are limitations to what we can and cannot do - essentially attempting to convince/coerce people, then locking them up if they do not agree: [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/09/terrorism-do-deradicalisation-camps-work]

• In all cases, we are talking about a tiny minority of the population who have decided, for numerous and incompatible reasons, that the state in which they reside is no longer legitimate and must be challenged using violence.

• All terrorist groups will want to do this using some kind of sensational deed. This ‘propaganda of the deed’ must then be not only reported by the general news media, but must also be able to instill some kind of fear and general panic to be effective. Current structures of social media, and the way that mass media (all kinds of news reporting, cultural production) feeds off these deeds there is no time for reflection of any kind
Other Developments

• Check the Global Terrorism Index for numbers - Institute for Economics and Peace has a very good one here: http://economicsandpeace.org/reports/

• It is very likely at least some of returned ISIS volunteers will bring their agenda home and could succeed in perpetrating an attack

• This is not a new phenomenon, we have been dealing with homegrown extremism of this particular kind for well over a decade and over the past 20-30 years we’ve seen many instances where members of diaspora communities participating in conflicts “back home” in Serbia, Croatia, Israel and Turkey for example

• Despite the drama of fanciful homegrown plots and panic, which follows, we should not view the latest plots as new or particularly exceptional

• We should view them as comparatively small numbers of people, nowhere near the fullblown terrorist activity that occurs in Nigeria, Syria, India, Pakistan, Iraq, etc.
FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

• What the latest plots do highlight is the need for coherent and comprehensive anti-radicalization agenda rather than slogans and bombs exacerbating conflicts in war zones (which are also selective – we are not bombing AlShabab and they killed just over 1000 people last year, and Boko Haram killed more than 6600 people last year and was the most lethal single terrorist group on the planet)

• The problems are quite clear: 1) how do we thwart attacks and 2) what types of preventative measures can be put in place to ensure that vulnerable people aren’t seduced by nihilistic religio-political ideologies

• While there has a lot of discussion of anti-radicalization initiatives in policy and academic circles this has been slow to filter to mainstream media – this is a real problem especially since so many governments around the world have been part of the trend to elect ‘populist’ governments

• This recent trend in democracies stifles policy debate, increases the possibility of militarized responses to policy problems of all kinds, and makes it difficult to implement policy agendas since they are always framed as ‘ideological solutions’

• To this end we need to be very clear about what the anti-radicalization agenda is and develop a reasonable set of expectations of what it this agenda can realistically deliver.
FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

• Understanding anti-radicalization agendas:

• Essentially, anti-radicalization is shorthand descriptive given term given to various initiatives designed to achieve a sort-of behavioral modification, directed at people who are (in this case) at risk of or who have adopted Islamist ideology and are prepared to use violence in its name.

• Within the purview of anti-radicalization initiatives, we see two broad sub-agendas: a) counter-radicalization initiatives – community level interventions designed to prevent people from joining radical causes and b) de-radicalization initiatives - interventions designed to untangle people from the web of violent activism once they join, often delivered in prison or prison-like settings.

• In effect the anti-radicalization agenda is a ‘policy bow’ with many strings.

• The agenda blends traditional intelligence work with policing and community level interventions, all of which are meant to work in-sync with the end goals of preventing attacks and ‘stamping out’ homegrown Islamist extremism.

• Saudi Arabia has one of the most comprehensive programs, since it deals with a highly punitive set of measures, sometimes even executions, as well as ‘religious’ re-education that will tell offenders what the ‘true’ version of Islam actually is – but this applies to Saudi citizens, and highlights a conflict with other societies/nations that might have different interpretations of Islam.

• Some elements of this are present in other forms of de-rad programs, but those such as Denmark and Germany do not engage at the doctrinal level, and others with the community-based interventions such as Australia and Canada are leaving it to ‘local communities’ to deal with this aspect with no official state sanctioned view of what that religion ought to be.
Most states have forms of coercive measures to counter versions of perceived radicalization (as well as other sorts of behavior).

But these forms of radicalization are highly selective (as are the other sorts of behavior modification programs).

Not only is there no universally accepted definition, but in some instances there are versions tolerated that would be heavily punished elsewhere.

As such, even though the ‘treatments’ of radicalization might be similar or even the same, the political contexts differ dramatically.

The broad effect is always to discipline a populace, and to tolerate some forms of violence and not other forms of violence.
TOLERATION

- Radical groups typically not part of derad programs include police and military personnel, motorcycle gangs, in some cases far-right groups, vigilante groups, Christian militia groups, and others.

- Past radical groups that would have qualified include members of the ANC, former-Yugoslav fighters in the 90s, IRA, etc.

- So the existence of derad programs tells us about tolerance in democracies, what we decide to put up with, and tells us about how we deal with political dissent, through therapeutic means or incarceration etc.

- We are also indebted to the denazification programs that started the therapeutic contest for ideology.

- There is some significant debate about whether or not they worked, and how and if any change was possibly made.

- The start of the de-Ba’athification initiative in Iraq (from about May 2003 for a year or so) was meant to be the same concept, but we know that this took a different path...
• Over the past 10 years governments and community leaders have put a great deal of time and energy in touting the potential of counter and de-radicalization programs.

• There has been a view that these sorts of programs are the best tool available to prevent homegrown plots like those in London in 2005 and Madrid in 2004.

• The intention behind and potential of these programs are quite obvious: rather than dealing with the ‘back end’ of the problem, i.e. thwarting plots, it makes more sense to address root causes.

• This is achieved by reaching at-risk groups before their levels of activism graduate towards violent activism.

• Benefits include: opening lines of communication between the state and at-risk communities, providing space for communities to air perceived grievance and coordinated programs to address the ideological sources of extremism by using Muslim clergy to ‘correct’ deviant theological interpretations, often used to justify extremist positions.
• Radicalization is not brainwashing but a freely chosen act
• We need to determine if these acts are responses to failed attempts to deal with unemployment, marginalization, poverty, political disaffection, housing, states meeting basic needs.
• Brainwashing is a completely misguided and almost completely fictional term – it carries no analytical weight and thus ‘de-programming’ can be useless
• Terrorist organizations have historically not engaged in any form of cult-like brainwashing as it simply takes too much time, too many resources
• Historically, this is not how terrorist organizations develop and thus ‘radicalizing’ a populace is not really a process they engage in – in this way, social media processes are not a new phenomenon when it comes to radicalization
• The technology is new, and might accelerate communication, but this version of ‘brainwashing’ does not really exist
• These views develop through some version of perceived grievance, and the ability to have people naturally gravitate to that grievance
• The best way to end any form of terrorist claim is to end the grievance.
Effectively, take away the argument and there is no longer a reason to violently resist the state? This is true to a great extent.

The question is, how much of this is any society willing to do (examine FLQ, BaaderMeinhoff, PLO, Irgun, ProtolIslamist anticolonial movements in Indonesia, the Malaya emergency, ETA, IRA).

We also need to determine causes of violence, per se, that can lead to larger challenges to the state.

Terrorism and radicalization are not ‘acts of the insane’

But what about ‘statism’ as a determinant of public policy?

Are all forms of anti/de/counter-rad statist forms of responses?

And why are we claiming that there are just a few kinds of radicalizations that are worthy of heavy intervention?
But Still...

- This also leads us to talk about the need to address the concept of terrorism and ask about those changes.
- Have terrorist organizations been effective in bringing about just and positive changes?
- Are there examples of terrorists who have become revolutionaries that have changed their worlds for the better?
- Are there examples of states interacting with violent resistance to bring about positive change without engaging in the derad programs?
Some specifics about the dynamics of religious violence

And finally, I’d like to address some concerns about the specificities of religious violence, religious radicalization, and the historical problems we have encountered.

Religion is a ‘weak force’ in creating social bonds.

It is malleable, borderless, and at best a 3rd tier social bond that appears behind nation and ethnicity in the modern era (perhaps a perfect fit for the social media era?)

Political leaders around the world have sought to co-opt co-religionists to create power bases.

Occupiers have sought to mobilise populations for various reasons using religion (Imperial Japan in Indonesia, Tunku system under Dutch imperialism).

Religion as a way to create sociopolitical bonds for modern nation-states has always been weak in the industrial age - political ideologies, economic prosperity, ethnicity are far stronger historically.
Summary

- While an important tool anti-radical strategies should not a panacea to the issue of homegrown terror.

- In terms of the former, there are 4 common issues: 1) scope and definition - how do we define what constitutes radicalized behavior, 2) target audience - who are programs targeted at and at what stage do people become subject to these initiatives 3) management - who has oversight of programs and 4) choice - can people ‘opt-out’ of these programs?

- In addition to these specific problems the governance of these programs typically suffers from general problems related to ‘confusion purpose’, political meddling and goal over-reach (the usual modern bureaucracy problem).

The biggest challenge is the inherent complexity of what programs are being asked to do.
In effect we have two agendas running simultaneously: On one hand we have counter-radicalization and disengagement strategies.

These strategies deploy a variety of soft tools, ranging from workshops designed to fostering civic loyalty/identification to counseling and ‘approved’ religious education and re-education initiatives.

On the other hand, the security services will continue to use other tactics to ensure that attacks do not occur - including arbitrary detention, aggressive interrogation and extra-judicial confinement.

At some point these two agendas inevitably clash.

While often communicated to communities as something else, anti-radicalization agendas are a function of counter-terrorism policy.

While building inter-communal bridges and addressing grievance is important, the end game is preventing attacks and that is what governments and police/security organizations are concerned with.
Realistic Expectations

From a public policy perspective and for its many problems, the anti-radicalization agenda presents the best way we have of managing homegrown Islamist inspired terror.

Given the depth and complexity of this problem this must be an exercise in cautious expectation management.

These programs, even if they are run perfectly and capture the right audience at the right time, will not completely mitigate Islamist-inspired extremism nor will it ‘straighten out’ every would-be potential terrorist that is not of the Islamist variety.

Government has the opportunity to get it right and deploy a well-resourced, well thought out and coordinated initiatives to address the multi-faceted problem this is homegrown Islamist extremism (at the moment mostly ISIS-inspired), and/or white-power/Australian Defence League/various far right groups, or the importation of conflicts from other parts of the world.

This of course has nothing to do with banning Burqa’s or bombing anything, and is far cheaper, and far more effective in doing away with violent radicals.
Conclusions

- So what does this say about what we are doing?
- ‘reintegrating’ former jihadists appears to be a success, but it is post-terror
- So derad approaches can be quite good, from at least 2 perspectives: give in to demands, and/or address grievances
- This may not be possible or realistic, but without it, it is quite difficult to make any change at all
- If we look at the historical development of terror movements, the best approaches are still these incremental local ones, and a return to non-aggressive foreign policies, and ‘take away their argument’
- Approaches looking to counter can be a mix of clever policy, but it must be policy that is never perceived as prejudicial, and can never give license to extremists of other varieties (far-right reactions to perceived lax ‘anti-Muslim laws’; extremist reactions to crackdowns of any kind)
- Anti approaches that are punitive and imprison, assassinate, launch military campaigns, are difficult, expensive, and usually involve an escalation of violence rather than a de-escalation
Thanks for listening!