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Rethinking Radicalization

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Over the course of the past decade, the United States and its international partners have vacillated between waging war on al-Qaida, waging war on terrorism, combating violent extremism, engaging in a battle of ideas, and attempting to win hearts and minds. In a series of hard-learned lessons, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency forces confronted the realization that, even as they were steadily removing bad guys from battlespace, the adversary forces were continuing to replenish and expand. It seemed necessary to look upstream for possible ways to stem the flow of new fighters and supporters.

One result of that upstream reconnaissance was the idea of focusing on "radicalization"—the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs—as a precursor to terrorism. It was assumed that if we were trying to counter an ideologically driven adversary, then mitigating or eliminating the power of the ideology would diminish the adversary's ranks. A less belligerent population and a less volatile operating environment might even be added benefits. It was a reasonable theory.

But distinguishing between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency became a bit confusing. Although a global "war on terrorism" had been declared, the conflicts on the ground were much more local. War-fighters and analysts alike observed that terrorism was a tactic, not a clearly defined enemy. Indeed, forces were not broadly patrolling the world looking for any hints of terrorism of every kind. The military forces were mired in concentrated, complex, protracted, armed conflicts with adversaries who used—among other things—terrorist tactics. Security and intelligence services were attempting to keep watch for any indication of a pending terrorist attack that might be directed against their own nations and national interests.

The global "war on terrorism" may have been a poor azimuth for the desired objectives of the post-9/11 era, but terrorism itself and the use of terrorist tactics were—and still are—pernicious problems. Efforts to focus

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on radicalization and radical ideologies in order to get ahead of the terrorism problem, however, faced a serious challenge: Most radicals did not (and do not) engage in terrorism, and many terrorists did not (and do not) "radicalize" in any traditional sense.

Adherence to radical beliefs is not irrelevant to countering terrorism or advancing broader global security interests, but fanatically embracing an ideology is neither a proxy for, nor a necessary precursor to, terrorism. Conflating the two concepts undermines our ability to effectively counter either of them. As John Horgan has so cogently argued, we need to be less focused on *why* people engage in terrorism and more focused on *how* they become involved.[1] That's the context for the articles in this special issue of JSS.

The issue begins with a two-part review of what is currently known about *radicalization* as it relates to terrorism. The first part surveys a range of definitions and ways that radicalization has been conceptualized by academics and law enforcement analysts. It goes on to suggest some potentially promising theories that might support further study of the processes and mechanisms of radicalization into violent extremism.

In a sense, the article attempts to recast the popular notion of radicalization. I use the term—perhaps unadvisedly—"radicalization into violent extremism" (RVE) to refer to the array of processes by which people come to adopt beliefs that not only justify violence but compel it, and how they progress—or not—from thinking to action.[2]

The second part reviews recent (post-9/11) conceptual models of the radicalization process and recent (post-9/11) empirical studies of RVE. Each model, I conclude, remains underdeveloped; none of them yet has a very firm social-scientific basis as an established "cause" of terrorism, and few of them have been subjected to any rigorous scientific or systematic inquiry.

I use the familiar term *radicalization* to refer to the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs, and the term *action pathways* (or action scripts) to describe the process of being involved in terrorism or engaging in violent extremist actions. I intend for the distinction between these concepts to acknowledge that "radicalizing" by developing or adopting extremist beliefs is but one of many possible pathways into terrorism involvement, and that the broader question is *how* people become involved, stay involved, and sometimes disengage from terrorism.

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What makes this issue "special," however, is the collection of articles that follows these reviews. It is a great privilege to include here contributions from some wonderful, internationally known scholars in areas that are analogous, or in some way related, to terrorism involvement, but who do not necessarily regard themselves as "terrorism studies" researchers. Each author has years of experience in his or her own field of inquiry, and may be less encumbered by the conventions of terrorism-related research. I asked each of them if they might reflect on what lessons they have learned in their own areas of research that might be useful for the study of RVE or involvement in terrorism. Their insights are well worth reading.

Scott Decker is one of the world's leading researchers on youth gangs. He and David Pyrooz point out that while the factors explaining gang involvement and terrorism involvement may differ, commonalities among the collective structures, dynamics, and processes might be mutually informative. Organizational structure, they have found, affects three categories of activity: recruitment and joining, group process, and desistance. They address the instrumental and symbolic (e.g., revenge, peer affiliation, etc.) benefits that draw people in, evolving patterns of leadership, and the emerging roles of the Internet and technology. Importantly, one of their key conclusions is that "groups do not have to radicalize to be dangerous or of concern."

Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder study post-conflict reconstruction and reintegration of former combatants, including child soldiers. They begin by observing that ideological radicalization is much less common and less prominent among child soldiers who are coopted in civil conflicts than it is among terrorists. They explore the array of "push" and "pull" factors—both material and affiliative—that affect recruitment into armed conflict. They note that, even after completing a reintegration program, many youth are re-recruited, which they believe is caused by a misalignment between youth motivations and the imposed outcomes of reintegration. They stress the need for youth to find nonviolent social and political identities in post-conflict environments, and argue that families and communities are often critical ingredients for success.

Remy Cross and David Snow consider radicalism within the context of social movements. They distinguish among three types of radicalism: "*practice* of high-risk or extreme movement activity, the *process* by which activists become radicals, or an *identity* ascribed to those activists who may or may not already be radicalized." They suggest that grassroots social movements often serve as "free spaces" where people can explore and solidify an identity that is dissonant with mainstream culture, and insulate themselves from outside control or influence. That environment

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facilitates bonds of trust among small collectives of activists, known as *affinity groups*. They go on to outline four common types of radicals—opportunistic, coordinated, militant and loners—all of whom endorse high-risk activism, but who often have differing characteristics and follow different pathways.

Sara Savage has produced, over the years, some exceptionally thoughtful work studying fundamentalism and the psychology of religion. Based on that experience, she offers here four key lessons for the study of terrorism involvement, and even introduces evidence for a promising intervention. Lesson 1: *Expect that sacred worldviews will be defended*. She invokes findings from The Fundamentalism Project showing systematic commonalities among very different fundamentalisms and ideologically driven religious movements. Lesson 2: *Avoid overgeneralizing*—with a special caution about characterizing "fundamentalism" in religions like Islam. Lesson 3: *Simple explanatory models will not suffice*—Much like the evolution of ideas in the psychology of terrorism, Savage notes that early study of fundamentalism in the psychology of religion was marked by a search for aberrant mental or personality traits to explain the phenomenon. Lesson 4: *Words rule*—The authority of most fundamentalisms rest on a foundation of some scripture, regarded as inerrant, that is interpreted by believers and then held out as "objective" truth. She concludes with a fascinating description of an intervention to enhance "integrative complexity" as a way to counter the "us vs. them" mentality among fundamentalist radicals.

Finally, economic sociologists Marco Goli and Shahamak Rezaei empirically examine the question of whether the failure of Muslim immigrants to integrate into a Western democratic society is linked to militant Islamists beliefs, which they call "Radical Islamism." Using a nationally representative sample of 1,113 young (ages fifteen–thirty) people in Denmark with national ties to a "Muslim country," their results do not support the idea that failed integration in a Western nation is a major cause of radicalism, or that Muslim radicals integrate more poorly there than non-radicals. They explored a wide range of factors associated with sociocultural integration and compared them across a spectrum of four ideological groups, with Group One representing non-radical Muslims, and Group Four representing the Radical Islamists. They found few, if any, significant differences.

Instead of viewing radicalization as a proxy for—or as a necessary precursor to—terrorism, my hope is that the collection of papers here may stimulate a greater focus on the broader issue of terrorism involvement. Terrorism—regardless of which of the hundred definitions we use—is a

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moving target. It is also, of course, a tactic, not a discrete enemy. But as a tactic, terrorism's character has changed and is continuing to change. This is not simply a change in the weapons or devices being used, but in who is using the tactic of terrorism, for what purpose, and to what effect.

Some of the conventions that have served us well in the past—if left unexamined—may constrain and impede our future progress in countering terrorism and violent extremism. The ideas, for example, that terrorism is best viewed as an expression of political violence; that terrorism is necessarily a group-related phenomenon; or that terrorism should be defined by the actor's intent to influence a government, or specifically to cause fear among a broader population, all may be negotiable in a twenty-first century environment. I hope that the thoughtful contributions offered in this volume will stimulate some reflection and critical thinking about the concept of radicalization and about terrorism's evolving character.

References

1 John Horgan, "From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalization into terrorism," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (2008): 80–94.

2 I appreciate the term "radicalization into violent extremism" might itself conflate the two concepts that I am trying to distinguish. In the absence of a better alternative, I chose the term to demonstrate that my focus in the discussion was not about abstract radical ideologies but the processes and pathways by which ideas become connected to violent actions. It is, in essence, both a subset of "radicalization" and a subset, more broadly, of terrorism involvement.

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