

Building Bridges

TO STRENGTHEN AMERICA

FORGING AN EFFECTIVE COUNTERTERRORISM ENTERPRISE
BETWEEN MUSLIM AMERICANS & LAW ENFORCEMENT

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PART 3
UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM



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Understanding the Problem: Radicalization & Terrorist Recruitment

In order to craft an effective joint counterterrorism enterprise between Muslim communities and law enforcement, it is first necessary to understand how some people adopt extremist viewpoints. Failing to understand this “process” will limit the effectiveness of the enterprise. According to a University of London literature review, there are five key theories for why Western Muslims become radicalized and possibly join terrorist organizations.¹

Current Theories of Radicalization and Terrorist Recruitment

- 1. “Socio-Economic Deprivation” theory.** According to this thesis, socio-economic frustration and a lack of self-fulfillment – the likely result of various forms of economic/ethnic/racial/religious discrimination – can drive someone toward terrorism.
- 2. “Identity Politics” theory.** Many second- and third- generation Muslim youth do not connect with their parents’ ethnic/cultural practices and identities because they are considered to be remote, outdated, and/or partly sacrilegious. At the same time, they may feel they are the object of hostility and humiliation by the host majority Western cultures due to local discrimination and discontent over foreign policies toward Muslim countries. Trapped between a rock and a hard place, European Muslim youth are experiencing an identity crisis that makes them more susceptible to join radical causes.
- 3. “Social Affiliations” theory.** Supporters of this view assert that recruitment for radical and violent organizations takes place through social network ties like friendship, kinship and discipleship. For instance, a study by terrorism expert Marc Sageman found at least 80% of his 500-person dataset was recruited into terrorism by friendship or family ties.² In addition, a body of literature on how people join religious cults also demonstrates how social bonds are the key ingredient for successful conversions.³
- 4. “Political Marginalization/Grievances” theory.** Some researchers argue Muslim youth feel driven to violence because they are alienated from mainstream national politics. They may also feel marginalized within their own communities by elders and elites whom believe to have little in common with. Those youth that does not become politically apathetic, may alternatively seek to have their grievances represented and addressed by more radical organizations. Adding to this marginalization is anger at Western foreign policies toward Muslims in other countries.
- 5. “Presence of Radical Ideology” theory.** Some argue the spread of violent extremist rhetoric among a select minority of preachers is mainly responsible for the radicalization of a minority of Western Muslims. It is also alleged that extremists penetrated and took over

many mosques, where they seduce attendees into radical ideology and possibly violent behavior. Finally, non-violent organizations such as the conservative Tablighi Jamaat and radical Hizb-ut-Tahrir are considered to be “conveyor belts” for violent organizations.⁴ They initially brainwash a Muslim into radical ideology and then make it easier for later recruitment/assignment into violent groups. Some believe the “conveyor belt” extends as far out as to the conservative, but more politically engaged group, the Muslim Brotherhood.

While each theory makes important contributions to the study of radicalization, each theory on its own is insufficient to describe why radicalization occurs.

The “socio-economic deprivation,” “identity politics,” and “political marginalization/grievances” theories fail to explain why radicalism and terrorism are not more widespread. For example, European Muslims face significant discrimination, high unemployment, and have little political representation at the national and European Union levels.⁵ Yet only a minority of European Muslims hold what appear to be radical political views⁶ and far fewer turn to terrorism.⁷ Furthermore, large numbers of terrorists are not impoverished. Out of 72 European Muslim terrorists studied by Dutch security expert Edwin Bakker, 33 (46%) came from middle class backgrounds or higher.⁸ Sageman’s 500-person study found “the vast majority of the terrorists in the sample came from the middle class.”⁹

“Social affiliations” may be important, but they also deny the power and rule of a person’s moral agency. Just because someone may have kinship or friendship ties to individuals with an extremist worldview does not mean they will become radicalized and take a further step by joining a terrorist organization. Also, social affiliations between radical and mainstream individuals can work in the opposite direction by disengaging at-risk individuals from extremist ideology and criminal behavior. As a recent *RAND* report shows, a person with stronger connections to mainstream social networks is much less likely to adopt extremist views and activities, because such networks greatly influence an individual’s behaviors and attitudes.¹⁰

As for the “presence of radical ideology” theory, there are three problems. First, the takeover of mosques by extremists has been negligible. Extremist ideologues like Abu Hamza¹¹ and the “shoe bomber” Richard Reid¹² were removed or voluntarily left mosques in the U.K. because their violent fringe views were explicitly rejected by the orthodox mainstream congregants.

Second, the “conveyor belt” aspect completely overlooks how most of these radical and conservative groups have mutual disdain for one another and have significant ideological conflicts.¹³ Conservative groups like the Muslim Brotherhood pose long-term strategic threats to violent extremists by siphoning Muslims away from violent radicalism into peaceful political activism.¹⁴ One would expect that if there was a “conveyor belt” relationship, there would be more cooperation rather than confrontation between all of these organizations. (Even violent extremists are barely cohesive among themselves; internal disputes are common.)¹⁵ Finally, the thesis suffers from the same pitfalls as the “socio-economic deprivation,” “identity politics” and “political/marginalization grievance” theories – if the rhetoric is visible (especially on the Internet),¹⁶ then why is there not more radicalism and terrorism?

A Proposed Hybrid Framework

None of these explanations fully account for the development of “radicalization.” They have several areas of overlap and when pieced together, they can collectively provide a sufficient basis for understanding radicalization and terrorist recruitment. Quintan Wiktorowicz, an expert on extremist Muslim groups, maps out a path to radicalism while addressing weaknesses in other theories. In this section we lay out a hybrid theory of radicalization that builds off of Wiktorowicz’s work and the other five theories critiqued earlier.

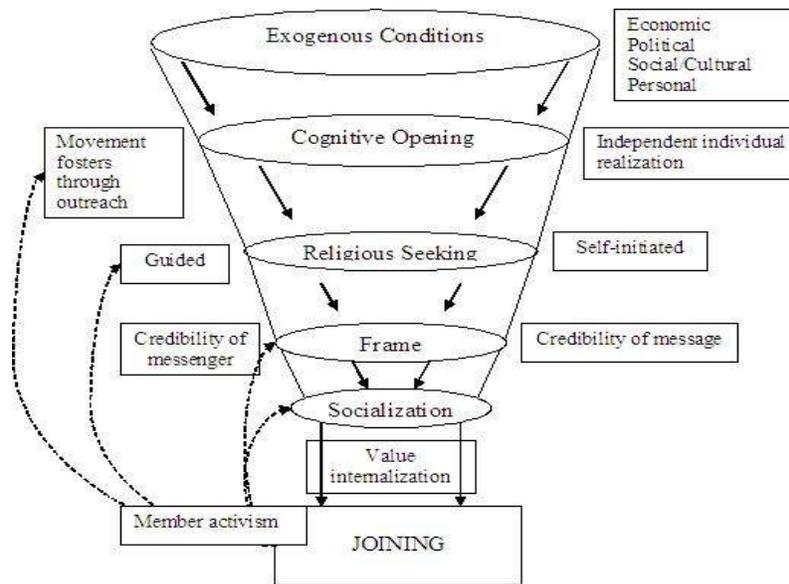


Fig. 2 – Wiktorowicz’s Model for Joining Extremist and Terrorist Groups¹⁷

According to Wiktorowicz’s model, the first step to radicalization is a “cognitive opening,” which is the first crack that opens up a person to extremist ideas. This can be the result of external factors, or “exogenous conditions” in Wiktorowicz’s words, such as social, economic, and/or political discontent from various kinds of alienation, discrimination, and/or victimization. Wiktorowicz goes so far as to include personal issues (such as death in the family or harm from a crime). The common thread of these experiences is they precipitate a personal crisis that “shakes certainty in previously accepted beliefs and renders an individual more receptive to the possibility of alternative views and perspectives.”¹⁸

Yet, violent extremist movements do not always wait passively for a potential recruit to undergo a crisis before exploiting it; they also seek to trigger one through messaging. The objective of their outreach is to “generate a sense of moral shock... that could lead to a cognitive opening and a willingness to learn more about the crises and possible proscriptions.”¹⁹ The methods range from private and individual interactions, through pre-existing social ties or developing new personal contacts, to more public and collective events such as “demonstrations, pamphlets and pictures,”²⁰ or mass-media through televised statements and Internet-based material.²¹

Though Wiktorowicz includes personal issues as a cause for cognitive openings, field research in Europe indicates the most powerful and most common types of cognitive openings are those based on a sense of socio-political-economic discontent.²² Furthermore, an empirical study of Osama Bin Ladin's publicly available statements found he overwhelmingly cited policy grievances (rather than the Islamic faith) to justify terrorism when addressing Muslim audiences.²³ If personal issues are an effective means of recruitment, one would expect Bin Ladin to engage his audience on such topics. However, such messages are absent from his statements.

Yet, just because the environmental conditions triggering a cognitive opening exist, this does not mean one will immediately happen. If that were automatically true, radicalism and terrorism would be more widespread. Even if one does occur, it does not directly lead to extremism – a point which will be elaborated on shortly.

Once the person is in an identity crisis, s/he needs to seek clarity. For many Muslims, it is done through their faith, or “religious seeking.” At this point, the individual may go through a “testing phase,” acquiring knowledge from different sources and by different means. Some cases are individual-based: books, the Internet and other media. Other seekers opt for a network-based approach: discussions with friends, family and/or religious organizations. Both methods involve “a process of persuasion [that] is characterized by discussion and debate, an exchange of ideas through which the [extremist] movement members attempt to convince seekers that the movement ideology provides logical solutions to pressing concerns.”²⁴

However, just because someone is seeking different mediums and types of religious knowledge does not mean s/he will immediately and automatically join a radical cause. Very few become radicalized and even far fewer turn to violent extremism. Instead, most Muslims use their religion as a catalyst for self-empowerment, greater social integration and increased engagement with civil society. According to one official British study of Muslim identity politics and radicalization, it found:²⁵

Muslim identity politics can support and encourage integration. Action around demands for the accommodation of religious needs have played an important role in the initial mobilisation of Muslim communities for civic and political engagement. These campaigns indicate affection rather than disaffection; they show a commitment to Britain and a wish, by Muslims, to make themselves more at home in Britain.

Some have argued that because this mobilization is ethnically and religiously based it has perpetuated segregated identities. Recent research suggests that activism for ethnic and Islamic causes, even when it has been conflictual, have accelerated Muslim integration. Such participation provides a pathway into other forms of civic and political participation... the 2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey suggests that political activity by Muslim positively contributes to the sense of identification with Britain.

Nevertheless, some knowledge seekers may be vulnerable to extremist indoctrination because such individuals typically lack mainstream religious knowledge. The presence of radical ideologues and social networks becomes important at this point because religion can be abused to “reframe” a person's worldview²⁶ (i.e. convert him/her to the radical ideology) and legitimate violent extremism. Thus, it is unsurprising to find empirical studies showing

most terrorists tend to lack religious knowledge²⁷ and were secular individuals right before joining an extremist group.²⁸

This is ironic given that, in the name of faith, arguments used by recruiters to legitimate violence typically lack religious justification. In reality, such arguments are grievance-based, emphasizing a pan-nationalist Muslim *identity*, not personal piety or a political utopia.²⁹ The premise behind this strategy is simple: Muslim recruits are typically more willing to die defending their oppressed fellow Muslims rather than for abstract political concepts like an “Islamic State” or a “Caliphate.”³⁰

In this context, it is no surprise to see violent extremists, like Bin Ladin, play on such sentiments for recruitment purposes. According to one empirical study of Bin Ladin’s public statements, it found when he was addressing Muslim audiences, he used policy-grievance justification words 51 times more than religious justification words.³¹ In addition, both Abdullah Azzam³² and Abu Musa’b al-Suri,³³ Bin Ladin’s mentor and senior strategist, used and advocated for similar ideological framing strategies.

Finally, after a person is in agreement with the radical ideology, s/he may embark on a process of “socialization.” The recruit moves from being a student of the extremist movement, to a committed member, by internalizing the group ideology and in the process having his/her identity reconstructed. This process is reinforced by radical social networks isolating the individual from the rest of mainstream society.³⁴

However as mentioned earlier, just because someone may follow down one or more of these steps does not mean a person will automatically adopt extremist ideas. In fact, even after one has joined in an extremist movement, it does not mean a person will remain ideologically committed. As Wiktorowicz points out:³⁵

...exogenous conditions can suddenly inject a degree of uncertainty into the [radicalization] process, producing a halting or uneven trajectory. Cognitive openings in particular are not singular events. In fact, exogenous conditions frequently emerge that lead individuals to question their beliefs or contemplate values, even if this is merely a ritual affirmation in which problems emerge and are answered and addressed by internalized norms and beliefs. Severe openings, however, will likely lead individuals to question their values. In the context of a radical religious movement, these openings lead individuals to question the group’s ideology.

The pathways to adopting extremist ideas are not uniform; different people take different directions based on a wide variety of factors. Empirically speaking, few become radicalized, and far fewer turn to violent extremism. Nevertheless violent extremism remains a serious challenge to national security.

Private citizens and governments have their important roles in combating radicalization and violent extremism, respectively. Later in our report, we will deal with what roles each side can play in keeping our nation secure. In the next section we give a critical analysis of select counterterrorism policies before delving into MPAC’s proposed counterterrorism strategy.

A Brief Look at Radicalization, Terrorism & the Internet

Analysts have observed terrorists are exploiting the Internet for their own purposes. *Building Bridges* focuses on its uses for radicalization and terrorist recruitment. According to a report from the UK-based *International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence* (ICSR), there are three “problematic” aspects to the Internet, with respect to radicalization and terrorist recruitment:³⁶

- **Illustrate and reinforce ideological messages.** As a less-filtered means of communication than other types of media, the Internet allows potential recruits to gain easy access to vivid imagery and texts that support an extremist worldview.
- **Joining and integration into formal organizations.** The anonymity of the Internet allows potential recruits a relatively low-risk means of joining formal extremist organizations. It also facilitates networking with other extremists, who might otherwise be isolated.
- **Establishes a supportive environment for extremist views.** Surrounded by other extremists, the Internet becomes an “echo-chamber” for radical viewpoints and behaviors. They establish a virtual arena where such distasteful views and dangerous behaviors are normalized.

Though the Internet certainly has its problematic aspects, its effects are also limited. According to the ICSR report, “Self-radicalisation and self-recruitment via the Internet with little or no relation to the outside world rarely happens and there is no reason to suppose that this will change in the near future.”³⁷

The reason for this conclusion is due to the importance of real-world relationships. Extremists see that the Internet does not “provide face-to-face human interaction nullify[ing] many of its advantages.”³⁸ Going back to our earlier analysis of terrorist recruitment, social networks are the primary means of getting people to deciding to join up with an extremist/terrorist group. The Internet serves to get people initially interested in the messages, and serves to “preach to the choir” (reinforcing extremists’ narrative after someone is already convinced).³⁹

Some find the number of consistent users tends to be small. For instance, when examining the number of messages posted on a popular terrorist sympathizer website, another prominent British study, published in the renown academic defense studies publication *RUSI Journal*, found “the vast majority of messages posted on the Mujahedon.net forums originated with a very small core group of active users: 99 percent were passive or casual users.”⁴⁰

This finding led the author of the RUSI study to later conclude, “In many cases (indeed, the vast majority of cases, in my opinion) Jihadist fora are completely innocuous, and actually serve a cathartic role.”⁴¹

Many policy responses have centered around shutting down websites. However such policies not only potentially run afoul of civil liberties like the freedom of expression, it is also noted to be extremely ineffective. Terrorism experts find website closures as temporarily effective at best. Terrorists respond by moving their websites to other Internet service providers or the so-called “deep web”.⁴² Furthermore, it fails to address the use of chat rooms and instant messenger systems.⁴³

Finally, shutting down extremist websites also validates the ideology of its supporters. It provides “evidence” their worldview is correct; otherwise, there would be no need for such an aggressive response.⁴⁴ It also limits disengagement and de-radicalization efforts, by cutting off communication to people who need it most.

Endnotes

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