Radicalization Into Violent Extremism

A Literature Review

Following several domestic terrorism incidents in the 1990s and "homegrown" terrorist plots in Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States after the September 11th, 2001 attacks, radicalization became a prime focus for those involved in homeland security and national security. Attempts to understand the factors leading to group and individual radicalization—as well as how to prevent radicalized individuals from engaging in violent acts—led to a particular emphasis on counter-radicalization strategies, commonly called Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). This essay explores some of the key literature on radicalization and counter-radicalization, providing a starting point for decision makers determining how to respond to radicalized persons.

Background: Definitions and Models

There is not a universal definition for either radicalization or CVE. Several articles explore the lack of common definition, such as "[A public health approach to understanding and preventing violent radicalization](#)" in *BMC Medicine*. Former Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis and Chief Intelligence Officer for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Charles Allen provided one commonly-used description, [defining radicalization in Congressional testimony](#) as "the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change." To extrapolate, violent extremism could be described as putting radical beliefs into violent action, while

CVE refers to the broad scope of efforts to prevent and reverse violent radicalism.

The difficulty in defining even core terminology stems partially from the variety of radicalisms to study, although many reports focus specifically on Islamist-inspired extremism. See, for example, Jerome Bjelopera's Congressional Research Service report "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat" and Ryan Hunter and Daniel Heinke's *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* piece "Radicalization of Islamist Terrorists in the Western World."

Two 2009 anthologies offer a broader perspective, examining both Islamist and non-Islamist terrorism alongside other criminal groups, such as gangs, underground organizations, and far-left and far-right extremists. Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan's *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and collective disengagement* emphasizes the variety of potential models and processes for counter-radicalization, highlighting the need for both in-depth knowledge of the radicalized group and a clear intended end goal when designing a CVE program. Paul Davis and Kim Cragin's *Social Science or Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together* underscores the need for valid social scientific hypotheses when planning and evaluating counter-radicalization efforts.

The more narrowly-focused studies examining Islamist extremism have some common trends, often adhering loosely to the framework established by the New York City Police Department and corroborated by the Webster Commission's report on the 2009 Fort Hood shooting. These reports suggest that individuals move through four primary psychological phases—and many smaller ones—to become radicalized.

According to this framework, people start in the pre-radicalized stage, the "ordinary" life before seeking out extremism. From there they move to the self-identification phase, in which they seek out and begin to become affiliated with extreme groups or philosophies, potentially triggered by a personal questioning of their belief systems. At the third stage, indoctrination, they delve deeply into the extremist philosophy, taking it fully for their own. The fourth phase, jihadization or action, involves putting extremist beliefs into violent practice.

Of course, not every model agrees with this approach. Moreover, while the process of radicalization can be inspired by a variety of societal or individual factors, radical beliefs do not automatically result in violent action — a point made effectively by [Randy Borum in the *Journal of Strategic Security*](#).

Triggers for Radicalization

Holding radical beliefs does not make one a terrorist, and committing terrorist acts does not necessarily require radical beliefs. The triggers prompting an individual to move from extreme beliefs to violent action vary widely, leaving researchers to try to explain the gamut of potential radicalizing factors. For example, in 2004, [researchers led by Randy Borum examined how psychological factors can contribute to radicalization](#), including why some extremists pursue violence and other do not. Borum's team emphasized "[p]erceived injustice, need for identity and need for belonging" as common traits among terrorists while downplaying the role of mental illness or a common "terrorist personality."

In 2011, the [U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Department of State collaborated with a team of experts](#) to outline the theoretical drivers

of radicalization both in the United States and abroad, with a particular focus on ideology and self-identification. The report also included international prevention and de-legitimization strategies and de-radicalization case studies from the 1970s to 2011.

While highlighting the complexity of radicalizing causes, the lessons showed the significance of localized grievances in radicalization as well as the need for credibility among messengers who seek either to radicalize or to counter radicalization. The report focused on seeking small, achievable wins for long-term CVE success. James J.F. Forest echoes some of these points in his book *The Terrorism Lectures*, as does the United Kingdom's Youth Justice Board in a 2012 report outlining eight formal models of radicalization.

Many researchers have tried to identify which people are prone to radicalization. The U.S. Army, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Institute of Peace, and Los Alamos National Laboratory have all released documents aimed at explaining why some people pursue terrorism and extremism and how to respond.

Researchers at the Library of Congress examined sociological and psychological factors leading to terrorism, noting that other issues like economics, politics, and religion also play a role. Like Borum, they argued that there is no single psychological profile for terrorists, and common assumptions about mental illness, fanaticism, and suicidal tendencies tend not to be true. Rather, group dynamics often help pressure individuals to commit acts of terrorism. Researchers like John Horgan, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and J.M. Berger have further debated the role of individual beliefs versus group processes in radicalization and definitional problems about the subject.

The [history of Americans participating in violent Islamist movements](#) shows that the role of radical beliefs inspiring violent action is not a new phenomenon. For that matter, despite a common research focus on al-Qaeda and other Islamist-inspired violence, radicalization leading to violent extremism is not limited to jihadists, as both the [Congressional Research Service](#) and the [National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism](#) have made clear.

A portion of the literature attempts to clarify misperceptions. For more on the role of personal motivations to join hard-line Islamist groups, as well as misconceptions about why individuals join, see articles like Anne Marie Baylouny's "[Emotions, Poverty, or Politics? Misconceptions about Islamist Movements](#)," and the recently published study "[Is Violent Radicalisation Associated with Poverty, Migration, Poor Self-Reported Health and Common Mental Disorders?](#)"

As researchers try to determine causes for radicalization to violent extremism, much has been made in particular of easy access to extremist materials on the Internet and periods of incarceration, though these factors are more nuanced than media analysis sometimes suggests — a point the [RAND Institute recently emphasized](#) regarding Internet radicalization.

Several scholars take on these hot button issues. The [White House established a working group](#) last year to address online radicalization to violence, no doubt inspired in part by case studies like [Zachary Chesser](#)'s reliance on extremist websites and studies like the Homeland Security Policy Institute's "[NETworked Radicalization: A Counter Strategy](#)." The Bipartisan Policy Center similarly addressed the issue in a 2012 report on "[Countering Online Radicalization in America](#)."

Research like Aaron Zelin's report on [jihadist use of the Internet](#) and J.M. Berger and Bill Strathearn's piece on [white supremacists' influence on Twitter](#) expand on the subject, though they are not limited specifically to radicalization. Similar reports also address the incarceration issue, like the 2010 *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* piece "[Prisoner Radicalization](#)" and the *Brown Journal of World Affairs* article "[Radicalization: Behind Bars and Beyond Borders](#)."

Countering Violent Extremism in the United States

A main point of trying to understand the roots of radicalization is to determine ways to counter it, particularly before it develops into violent extremism. In 2011, the White House released the broad government-wide strategy on CVE, "[Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States](#)," which was followed by a [strategic implementation plan](#) for enacting the recommendations. Both documents stress community-driven approaches to CVE, including teaching law enforcement and governing bodies at the city and state levels about the concept of violent extremism, explaining how to be resilient to terrorism and how to develop an understanding of radicalized populations, and encouraging partnerships with influential thought leaders who may be able to sway potential radicals away from extremism.

The [Congressional Research Service released a report](#) this year outlining current approaches to CVE as well as the risks and challenges to the White House's recommendations. The White House's strategy emerged in part from the work of DHS's Countering Violent Extremism Working Group, which [identified case studies in the United States](#)

where public and private institutions developed effective counter-radicalization programs. A 2012 [Federal Bureau of Investigation publication](#) similarly showed how to implement the White House's CVE program through community-oriented policing—a point bolstered by a 2014 [report published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#).

Lessons for Counter-Radicalization

CVE strategies often face criticisms pointing to a lack of common definitions or empirically measureable goals. To address such potential shortcomings, the [Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation released a 2012 study](#) on ways to assess the impact of counter-radicalization efforts. The [Australian Department of Defence](#) also offers a comprehensive discussion on CVE programs.

In the same vein, the [Foreign Policy Research Institute](#) (FPRI) and the [U.S. Government Accountability Office](#) (GAO) each released reports in 2012 addressing perceived problems in the United States' CVE plans. FPRI's report focused primarily on defining CVE more narrowly to ensure effective programs with limited overlap among government agencies, and GAO's outlined ways to improve DHS and U.S. Department of Justice training on CVE.

Additionally, [John Horgan](#) has pointed to an overemphasis in counter-radicalization programs on changing extremists' beliefs rather than seeking their disengagement from participation in violent organizations, and [Risa Brooks](#) has suggested that warnings of growing homegrown Islamist terrorism may be overstated.

The study of radicalization has evolved continuously as assumptions about what effectively counters radicalization have been tested in American and international policies and programs. To better fill gaps in the understanding of the radicalization and counter-radicalization efforts, several groups have developed lengthy bibliographies of relevant literature.

These include a 2004 accompaniment to the report by Borum on the psychology of terrorism, a 2006 report by DHS's Homeland Security Institute, a 2010 review by the Institute for Homeland Security Solutions, and a comprehensive 2012 bibliography distributed by the European Union's Publishing and the Ecology of European Research project.

DHS also maintains a resource directory of relevant publications, and scholars like John Horgan and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross have published individual reading lists on terrorist psychology, terrorist disengagement, and violent non-state actors.

There is a degree of overlap between these lists, but differences of perspective result in differing emphases in each study.

International programs focused on counter-radicalization also offer unique perspectives, including efforts in the United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands. The United Nations has explored the issue from an even more global perspective, and the European Union helped establish a website, www.counterextremism.org, to collect relevant scholarly articles. The overarching lessons from these international studies are the need for an intimate familiarity with the target audience of CVE programs as well as defined, achievable goals.

Furthermore, governments and organizations cannot import an effective program from one country wholesale into another. For example, the practice in certain North African and Middle Eastern countries of supplying jobs, cars, education, or marriages for graduates of de-radicalization programs—described by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence—has limited international applicability. As a 2007 Center for Strategic and International Studies report points out, the United States enjoys a higher degree of assimilation by immigrant Muslim populations than many Western European countries do, helping lead to fewer grievances and a lower level of radicalization. CVE programs must account for such disparities to be successful.

Radicalization leading to violent extremism is a threat to the United States, and one that is constantly evolving. For example, self-radicalized, so-called "lone-wolf" extremists may pose a current danger that is more difficult to prevent than organized violent groups—a fear highlighted by the 2013 bombing in Boston. The crisis in Syria and other hot spots may provide stronger incentives to pursue violence or join terrorist groups, and the skills developed in those conflicts may contribute to further attacks in the future.

Effective strategies to combat violent extremism require inter-agency cooperation. It is clear, however, that there is no guaranteed single method to counter radicalization. International and domestic CVE programs alike provide a framework from which to develop localized initiatives targeting specific concerns. The lessons presented in the publications referenced in this essay can help in developing a nuanced approach to these local issues.