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Mohammed Hafez & Creighton Mullins

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Research Note

The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism

MOHAMMED HAFEZ
CREIGHTON MULLINS

Department of National Security Affairs
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA, USA

Why and how do individuals residing in relatively peaceful and affluent Western societies come to embrace extremist ideologies that emanate from distant places? We summarize the most recent empirical literature on the causes and dynamics of radicalization, and evaluate the state of the art in the study of Islamist homegrown extremism in the West. We propose a theoretical synthesis based on four factors that come together to produce violent radicalization: personal and collective grievances, networks and interpersonal ties, political and religious ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures. We propose adopting a "puzzle" metaphor that represents a multifactor and contextualized approach to understanding how ordinary individuals transform into violent extremists. We concluded with three recommendations to strengthen the empirical foundations of radicalization studies.

The threat of terrorism resulting from radicalization among Muslims living in the West continues to be a major concern for domestic security and intelligence services. Whether it is foreign fighters leaving for Iraq and Syria, terrorists massacring cartoonists in France, or lone wolves striking at targets of opportunity in the United States, Canada, and Australia, support for *jihadism* as a mobilizing political ideology continues to grow at an accelerating rate. Governments and their security services are under intense pressure to detect and stop budding terrorists early in their radicalization tracks. Consequently, they are exhorting their analysts to chart out the arc of radicalization; identify the social, economic, and political contexts that produce violent extremists; and reveal the psychological states that drive ordinary people to perpetrate terrorism.

The renewed focus on the causes and dynamics that lead ordinary Western Muslims to become extraordinary radicals warrants a thorough discussion of the state of the art in the study of radicalization. Our intention here is to summarize the recent empirical

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Address correspondence to Mohammed Hafez, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, USA. E-mail: mmhafez@nps.edu

findings on radicalization, highlight debates in the field, and offer a theoretical synthesis for explaining radicalism among Muslims residing in the West, Europe in particular.

A decade following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, there is some scholarly consensus on the key variables that produce radicalization and violent extremism, but we are no closer to an agreement on the models that chart out the transformative process by which ordinary individuals become extremists. Homegrown militants that come from second and third generation immigrants, as well as converts to Islam, are often linked to extremist networks abroad,[1] but they are not always dependent on external guidance or direction.[2] The new generation of homegrown militants is ethnically diverse and technologically savvy, representing the successful diffusion of *jihadism* as a mobilizing ideology, but this diversity make it nearly impossible to offer a single paradigm that explains the universe of cases. Moreover, women are increasingly playing a role in Muslim radicalization, raising questions about the possibility of gender-based variables that have not been previously considered when discussing a male-dominated phenomenon.[3] Additionally, recruitment has largely been driven underground, with little overt propagation now occurring at traditional radical mosques.[4] Other vectors of radicalization, including prisons and social media, are also catalysts of Islamist militant socialization.[5] These arenas of radicalization and recruitment further diminish the possibility of generalizations. Most disconcerting, perhaps, is that political instability in much of the Muslim world, including the failure of many Arab Spring movements, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the extremization of violent repertoires among radical Islamists from Nigeria to Pakistan, threaten to add fuel to the embers of radicalism in the West. This means that radicalization "here" may be shaped by radicalization "there."[6]

Earlier attempts to reveal the "terrorist personality" and draw conclusions from their demographic makeup have largely been abandoned.[7] The attempt to shift the focus away from profiling extremists to profiling the radicalization pathways they take is a step in the right direction, but it too has failed to yield a conclusive model of radicalization. Put simply, we have the pieces of the puzzle, but we lack the representative image that informs us how best to put them together. The pieces of the puzzle consist of grievances, networks, ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures. Each piece of the puzzle can come in a different representation just like similarly structured jigsaw puzzles could reveal diverse images once their pieces are interconnected.

The puzzle metaphor is useful for two reasons. First, radicalization in the West is indeed a perplexing social phenomenon that calls for an explanation. Why and how do individuals residing in relatively peaceful and affluent societies come to embrace extremist ideologies that emanate from distant places? Second, the puzzle metaphor is more apt than the predominant narrative about a radicalization "process." The latter implies an orderly sequence of steps or procedures that produce an output. Yet, the absence of a clear pattern or pathway to radicalization is precisely what is frustrating scholars and intelligence analysts alike. Reality is far too complex for a single, parsimonious explanation—and certainly not one that could yield predictive power to help identify budding radicals on the path to violent extremism.[8] Therefore, we propose—as others have done before us—that analysts of radicalization adjust their frame of reference away from uniform and linear processes and, instead, embrace the multifactor and contextual approach that is implied by the puzzle metaphor.

Conceptualizing Radicalization

Radicalization involves adopting an extremist worldview, one that is rejected by mainstream society and one that deems legitimate the use of violence as a method to effect societal or political change. There is some debate regarding how best to conceptualize radicalization, but the consensus view converges on three elements key to defining the phenomenon. Radicalization is usually a (1) gradual "process" that entails socialization into an (2) extremist belief system that sets the stage for (3) violence even if it does not make it inevitable.

We accept this consensus view of radicalization but propose abandoning the usage of a process metaphor. Many scholars use the term "process" to describe the phenomenon of radicalization even as they acknowledge that a salient description of this presumed process remains elusive. For example, radicalization expert John Horgan defines radicalization as "the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology. Radicalization may not necessarily lead to violence, but is one of several risk factors required for this."[9] Porter and Kebbell define radicalization as "the process by which individuals (or groups) change their beliefs, adopt an extremist viewpoint, and advocate (or practice) violence to achieve their goals."[10] Vidino defines radicalization 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."[11] Helfstein defines radicalization as "the process by which people come to adopt extremist political beliefs with a particular emphasis on those ideologies that encourage violent action."[12]

We do not find evidence in the vast empirical literature on radicalization to justify this orderly image of a process. Earlier studies that framed radicalization as a linear process that proceeds in stages were challenged empirically and analytically.[13] Subsequent works treated radicalization as an evolutionary, nonlinear phenomenon that emerges out of a convergence of several "predisposing risk factors" (Horgan);[14] random and decentralized network dynamics (Sageman);[15] or sociopolitical and psychological mechanisms at various levels of analysis (McCauley and Moskalenko).[16] All these authors caution against radicalization models with seemingly neat categories and checklists of predictive indicators based on overt attitudes, outward appearances, and manifest behaviors. Such checklists run the risk of producing false positives. Radicalization specialists ought to have the modest goal of identifying the conditions under which extremism grows, and resist the temptation to seek after radical archetypes based merely on putative observable attitudes and behaviors.

Two recent works on radicalization abandon the use of the term "process" altogether. McCauley and Moskalenko conceptualize radicalization as "the development of beliefs, feelings, and actions in support of any group or cause in conflict."[17] Rabasa and Benard define radicalization in its European context as "the rejection of the key dimensions of modern democratic culture that are at the center of the European value system."[18] While we do not disagree with the content of these definitions, we do think that they are too general (i.e., "conflict" as opposed to terrorism) and, thus, lack conceptual utility for the study of violent extremism. Given that those who are most interested in this phenomenon of radicalization are counterterrorism specialists, we think it is appropriate to contextualize it within the study of sub-state terrorism. The Rabasa and Benard formulation has the added problem of being both a definition (dependent variable) and a potential explanation (independent variable) of radicalization because they aver that rejecting European values can serve as a conveyor belt to violent radicalization.

The aforementioned definitions highlight an important distinction between the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of radicalization. Both are necessary conditions for political or religious violence, but they do not always produce violence.[19] Cognitive radicalization involves acquiring values, attitudes, and political beliefs that deviate sharply from those of mainstream society. Behavioral radicalization involves participating in a range of radical activities, whether legal or clandestine, which could culminate in terrorism. Experts agree that it is rare for an individual to migrate directly from inaction to violent extremism without some ideological mediation accompanied by a series of commitments to a radical cause. Cognitive radicalization, however, is usually much more widespread than reflected in the statistically infinitesimal number of behaviorally radicalized individuals with which security agencies are mainly concerned.[20] This fact further complicates the mission of domestic security services seeking to foil terrorism by spotting predictive indicators of violent radicalization.

In sum, radicalization must be analytically distinguished from violent extremism or terrorism. The former entails the cognitive dimension of adopting an extremist worldview that accepts in the legitimacy of the use of violence to advance a social or political goal, while the latter entails additional behavioral dimensions that could escalate from mere legal activism within a radical milieu to actual participation in terrorism. The combination of cognitive and behavioral radicalization usually precedes violence, but it does not make it inevitable.

The Pieces of the Radicalization Puzzle

Radicalization specialists often point out the following mixture of factors that come together to produce extremism: grievances, networks, ideologies, and enabling environments and support structures. *Grievances* include economic marginalization and cultural alienation, deeply held sense of victimization, or strong disagreements regarding the foreign policies of states. Grievances could also entail personal disaffection, loss, or crisis that leads one to seek a new path in life. *Networks* refer to preexisting kinship and friendship ties between ordinary individuals and radicals that lead to the diffusion of extreme beliefs. These milieus not only offer opportunities for socialization with radicals, they could also satisfy psychological needs such as the search for meaningful relationships and a quest for significance, and they may entrap individuals through dynamics of peer pressure, groupthink, and ideological encapsulation that increase exit costs and solidify commitments to violence. *Ideologies* refer to master narratives about the world and one's place in it. Usually they frame personal and collective grievances into broader political critiques of the status quo. They also demonize enemies and justify violence against them, and they incentivize sacrifice by promising heroic redemption. *Enabling environments and support structures* encompass physical and virtual settings such as the Internet, social media, prisons, or foreign terrorist training camps that provide ideological and material aid for radicalizing individuals, as well as deepen their commitment to radical milieus.

We will illustrate each of the pieces of the radicalization puzzle as they relate to Muslims in Western Europe, highlighting areas of consensus and debate. We will also show how these pieces are interdependent, thus illustrating the need for a theoretical synthesis.

Grievances

Muslim disenchantment with their European host societies is often posited as a root cause of violent radicalization in the West. In keeping with the puzzle metaphor, we view these

grievances as the landscape that frames the proximate causes of radicalization, but we do not find compelling any argument that suggests that they are directly causal of behavioral radicalization.

About 15–20 million Muslims reside in Western Europe, the vast majority of whom—mainly Turks, North Africans, and South Asians—came after World War II.[21] They came as guest workers seeking employment opportunities to rebuild Europe's war-ravaged cities. These workers expected to leave their host societies after they had saved up enough money to live decent lives in their home countries. However, economic uncertainty in their countries and family reunification schemes in Europe encouraged many of these immigrants to stay.

At the risk of overly generalizing, one can point to several developments that have contributed to Muslim disenchantment with their European host societies. These include poor socioeconomic status due to unemployment rates that are consistently higher than the national averages. Although the Muslim population of Europe contains many educated middle class professionals and wealthy individuals, this is not the case for the majority of the population that occupies the lower end of the socioeconomic scale. Unemployment combines with residential discrimination and segregation to produce ethnically homogenous neighborhoods that are mostly dilapidated. High levels of residential concentration and poor housing conditions contribute to higher levels of criminality. Unemployment, poverty, and crime, in turn, produce the usual stereotypes concerning the "uncivilized" foreigners.[22]

Two recent studies draw a strong link between a sense of minority discrimination and terrorism. Piazza's statistical analysis of 172 countries between 1970 and 2006, yielding over 3,000 observations, finds robust empirical support for a link between minority groups' experience with economic discrimination and higher rates of domestic terrorism. His analysis, in line with earlier studies, rejects the proposition that national level poverty is a significant predictor of domestic terrorism. However, "countries that feature economic discrimination against minority groups experience around six more incidents of domestic terrorism per year," concludes Piazza, adding that "discrimination 'matters.'"[23] Victoroff et al. similarly find a link between a sense of discrimination and support for suicide bombings among Muslims residing in the West. Statistically analyzing two sets of Pew survey data of a combined 2,677 adult Muslim residents in Europe and the United States, they find "that younger age and perceived discrimination toward Muslims living in the West are significantly associated with the attitude that suicide bombing is justified."[24]

Negative Muslim attitudes toward their European host societies transcend economic discrimination and involve core identity difference. Anti-foreigner sentiment in Europe, coupled with opportunistic politicians and the growth of far right parties, especially in the context of deep European economic crises, has fed xenophobia.[25] In some European countries, the Islamic identity substantially overlaps with the immigrant identity.[26] Immigrants are seen as an economic burden, while Muslim immigrants are seen as a cultural threat. As a result, xenophobia combines with Islamophobia to create a hostile environment for those that embrace the Islamic identity.[27] Muslims encounter a hyper-secular (*laïcité*) culture that insists on complete assimilation with norms and habits that are not always compatible with traditional Islamic values, including bans on religious symbols such as the headscarf and complete veiling (*niqab*).[28] Identity differences are exploited by opportunistic politicians of far right parties and sensationalist media personalities who engage in provocative anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim discourse, which further offends second and third generation Muslims who were born and raised in Europe and speak European languages better than they do their native tongues.

The phenomena of anti-Muslim cartoons, books, and films further intensifies outrage among segments of Europe's Muslims, interpreting these productions as symbolic attacks on their identity. The vast majority of Europeans rightly view these provocative productions as manifestations of free speech and a secular right to freedom of expression that outweighs religious prohibitions against blasphemy. The latter undermines *laïcité* by introducing religious dogma as a litmus test for regulating speech. For many Muslims, however, this is not the central issue. By humiliating Muslims, European cartoonists and social critics of Islam are adding insult to injury by linking the Islamic identity with Europe's sense of physical insecurity in addition to its economic and cultural ones. These anti-Muslim vituperations stigmatize Muslim communities by portraying Islam and Muslims as the principal sources of intolerance, extremism, and violence, while ignoring the legacy of colonialism and its affect on postcolonial state systems in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia; historic and contemporary Western support for political authoritarianism in Muslim countries (e.g., Algeria in 1990s); violent foreign interventions and occupations that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Muslims (e.g., Iraq in 2003–2011); and the impact of social exclusion and discrimination at home.

As a result of this enduring history of marginalization and xenophobia, some European-born Muslims choose to assert a "communalist identity"[29] or "reactive religiosity"[30] in defiance of the hegemonic culture. This, in turn, leads to a self-reinforcing dynamic of exclusion: Muslims accentuate their Islamic identity in opposition to the dominant culture, which further reinforces in the minds of Europeans that Muslims are inherently different and detached from them. It has been noted that Muslim dissatisfaction with their European host societies combines with the impracticality of returning to their countries of origin. Many of the second-generation immigrants have lost their roots in their native countries and no longer share a cultural affinity with the motherland. Stuck in between, suffering from a dual sense of exclusion, some develop an idealized vision of Islam, a universalized, transnational *umma* (Muslim community or nation) that is unadulterated by culture or shaped by a specific ethno-national heritage.[31] Salafi doctrines that seek to purify Islam of any innovations or cultural accretions have taken root in this fertile soil of disenchantment.[32] Just as important, an Islam dislodged from specific cultural reference points enables its adherents to identify with Muslims around the world regardless of national or ethnic boundaries. It is in this context that we may explain why some second-generation Muslims have found a home in the global *jihadist* movement, including becoming foreign fighters.

The securitization of the Islamic identity since 9/11 further intensifies feelings of alienation.[33] As Muslims and their communities become the objects of suspicion and surveillance, the sense of humiliation deepens. The loyalty of European Muslims is questioned as conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Israeli–Palestinian territories produce criticism of Western policies from inside Europe's Muslim communities. Terrorist attacks inside Europe and the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and other conflict zones by a tiny minority of radicalized Muslims intensify the sense that Muslim communities require deradicalization, adding to the stigmatization of the Islamic identity. The new security environment, and the attendant security discourse, helps feed the conspiratorial narrative that the war on terrorism is actually a war on Muslims.

Lastly, Western foreign policies and interventions in Muslim countries have also generated grievances because these policies and interventions invariably involve controversial issues such as the Arab–Israeli conflict, Kashmir, or support for U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, prolonged foreign occupations, and their attendant images of Muslim suffering in military operations, enflame Muslim anger at Western policies.[34]

The sense of "moral outrage" in response to perceived transgressions against fellow coreligionists was manifest in various episodes of homegrown terrorism.[35] In the minds of many of Europe's Muslims, Western foreign policies in the Muslim world are the root causes of violent radicalization in Europe and elsewhere. There is a widespread belief that Western discourse regarding universal values of freedom, democracy, and human rights do not equally and consistently apply in the Muslim world. Instead, they are applied selectively and expediently in the interest of hegemonic powers exercising *realpolitik*. It is widely believed that the Western criterion that distinguishes between "moderate" and "rogue" regimes is not one based on good governance, democratic institutions, and human rights, but rather on who acquiesces to Western policies and who opposes them.

These are the grievances that combine to contribute to Muslim disenchantment with their European host societies. Grievances, however, usually affect millions of people, but only a tiny minority becomes violently extreme. Out of 15–20 million European Muslims, only few thousands have participated in *jihads* around the world and even fewer have become terrorists that strike their host societies. This discrepancy between widespread grievances and a much smaller number of manifest extremists compels us to seek the proximate causes of radicalization such as the role of radical networks and ideologies.

Networks

One of the most robust findings in the literature on political participation, social activism, gangs, cult membership, right-wing and left-wing terrorism, and religious extremism is that preexisting friendship and kinship ties facilitate recruitment.[36] Individuals are likely to derive psychological and material benefits from radical associations. Activism in a radical milieu could appeal to idealists seeking to transform an unjust world, and it could appeal to lost souls and criminals seeking a new path to personal redemption. It could provide restless youth with excitement or sense of purpose, or it could provide those feeling marginalized and excluded personal empowerment and status.[37]

Individuals that join violent groups often do so because they have one or more family members or friends in the movement. Radicalization and recruitment are local and highly personal tasks involving interpersonal ties, bonds of solidarity, and trust. Radicals often find a propitious recruitment environment in preexisting networks such as educational and faith-based institutions, community centers, bookstores, religious study groups, sports teams, workplaces, professional associations, social movement organizations, local charities, and prisons.

These preexisting networks facilitate recruitment into radical groups in many ways. First, they often link individuals who share similar beliefs or a social category, creating a collective identity.[38] Central to network analysis is the empirical observation of homophily, "individuals who are similar to one another are more likely to form ties. . . ."[39] It is much easier to recruit people with a shared sense of unity or identity than to struggle to forge a new one. Regular meetings between familiar faces in non-threatening settings facilitate the exchange of ideas between the radicalizer and the recruit.

Second, a group that engages in high-risk activism, including participation in violence, depends on interpersonal ties because trust and commitment are prerequisites for inviting people into the group. The adage "don't talk to strangers" also applies in radicalization. Recruiters first dip into the pool of family, friends, and likeminded activists because trust is already established and the risk of talking to the "wrong people" is minimized. Moreover, potential recruits are more willing to entertain radical ideas when they have shared experiences and bonds of kinship and friendship with their interlocutors.

Third, social networks present radicalizing agents with a pool of potential recruits who can be activated through "bloc recruitment," which involves group commitments that are self-reinforcing.[40] For example, Hafez's research on foreign fighters in Iraq reveals that the overwhelming majority of volunteers make the journey in small groups (at least two).[41] Once a few individuals make a commitment to a cause, it is difficult for those around them to stay behind. Bloc recruitment may be facilitated by a number of psychological mechanisms, including peer pressure, concern for reputation, groupthink, desire to maintain extant friendships or spousal relations, or guilt feelings for staying behind.

Fourth, radicalization involves a continuous effort by leaders to deepen the commitment of their acolytes, discourage them from heeding countervailing influences (e.g., telling recruits not to reveal their intentions to family), and incentivize them to engage in acts of bridge burning (e.g., participating in illegal action, leaving to training camps abroad, or declaring in front of a camera one's intention to engage in a suicide attack). Extreme interdependency of group members maximizes cohesion, which then increases pressure on members to reach consensus and behave compliantly.[42] Donatella della Porta terms these dynamics as "spirals of encapsulation," whereby activists' links to the external world are all but completely cut off as intergroup ties mature.[43] Under such circumstances, the unit of the group becomes bound to shared ideals and heightened emotional camaraderie. Defection from the group becomes doubly costly: the cost of lost friendships and the cost of shattered identity forged in the crucible of underground activism.

Lastly, association with a radical milieu generates group dynamics that raise the costs of exiting the radical path. Radicalized individuals may lose faith in the ideology, politics, strategy, or tactics of the group, or they may simply desire a return to normal life. However, emotional, psychological, material, and physical costs of exit can be prohibitively high to those seeking to walk away from extremists. Loyalty to group members, especially close kin, creates intense feelings of guilt for individuals thinking of abandoning the group. Legal entanglements such an extensive criminal record or "blood on one's hands" is an additional cost to exit that individuals must consider when seeking to abandon their radical milieu. Anxiety due to uncertainty about starting a new life, or concern with being ostracized by the mainstream community may discourage some from abandoning their radical coterie. There is also the fear of reprisals from the radical group itself, which might use physical threats to dissuade defections that compromise the group's cohesiveness.[44]

How do these dynamics apply in Europe? European Muslims that turn to radicalism do so not merely out of disenchantment, but also because of their links to preexisting radical networks through friendship and kinship ties. During the 1980s and 1990s, repression of Islamists in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) forced these dissidents to seek a new home. Europe's liberal asylum laws and its geographic proximity to MENA made it a hospitable place for Islamist exiles. However, these embittered Islamists were not content with simply having a new home; they used their safe haven to criticize their own regimes, publicize their radical worldviews in publications and online, solicit financing for their brethren in conflict zones, and plan operations against their own governments. Radicals established organizations and informal networks around mosques and other public arenas. These organizations include Hizb al-Tahrir, al-Muhajirun, Ansar al-Islam, and other groups around Saudi, Algerian, Egyptian, Moroccan, and Syrian dissidents. These organizations and networks became a conveyer belt through which ordinary Muslims were sent to Afghanistan and Pakistan for training and indoctrination.[45]

Generally speaking, these dissidents avoided direct terrorism in Europe for fear of losing their new safe haven. France, however, was a notable exception. Algerian militants connected to GIA waged a campaign of subway bombings and one airline hijacking to pressure the French government from extending aid to the military regime in Algeria. It was only after 9/11 that other radical networks began to see Europe as a legitimate arena for terrorist operations. The disappearance of a hospitable environment for radical Islamic networks after 9/11, and the participation of select European states in U.S.-led foreign interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, precipitated this change in strategy.[46]

Radical Islamist networks in Europe recruit from three categories of Muslims: recent immigrants, second- and third-generation "born-again" Muslims, and converts to Islam.[47] The latter two include individuals that have experienced a life of crime and were converted in prisons. Some of the converts stem from a rebellious subculture that combines antisocial behavior such as drug-taking or petty criminality with support for anti-mainstream rebels such as gangster rappers, Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, and, more recently, ISIS. The convergence of marginality, criminality, and connectedness to radical networks is part of the explanation of how European Muslims have become radicalized.[48] Several terrorist plots in Western countries, including the 2004 Madrid bombings and 2006 airline plot in Britain, brought together these disparate categories in deadly cells.[49] Two key elements to this amalgam are the preexisting networks of radical Islamist dissidents, and the kinship and friendship ties across the categories. Radical networks benefit from having a pool of restless youth, knowledge-hungry converts, and "lost" individuals leading a criminal life on the margins of society. They are susceptible to a radical vision of Islamism that promises honor, heroism, and redemption in the afterlife.[50] The potential recruits, on the other hand, are eager to connect with seemingly knowledgeable individuals who can provide knowledge of their newfound faith with clarity and zeal. In this context, radical ideology finds fertile soil.

Ideology

Ideological narratives and themes are almost always present in the production of violent extremists. However, like grievances, their place in the radicalization puzzle is not always at the center.[51] Ideology has multiple meanings across scholarly disciplines and philosophical traditions.[52] For our purposes, ideology refers to a set of political beliefs about the world, usually anchored in worldly or transcendental philosophies that are presumably universal, comprehensive, and idealistic (even utopian). Communism, for example, is rooted in the Marxist view of history as perpetual class struggle between the exploited and the exploiters. Fascism is an amalgam of nationalism, militarism, and populism in the service of a superior race, nation, or sect. Islamic fundamentalism harkens back to a mythical Golden Age when Muslims were pious, unified, and empowered. Radical movements rooted in political ideologies usually identify a problematic social condition, attribute a root cause to this state of affairs, and propose a course of action in the form of programmatic steps or stages necessary for transformation. Ideologies also entail explicit or implicit material and symbolic incentives, whether individual or collective, for forging an arduous path to a better society.

It is not clear how one can disaggregate ideology from radical networks. As Wiktorowicz explains in relation to religious radicalization in Britain, individuals with cognitive openings ready to explore and absorb new religious beliefs "do not typically seek religious meaning in a vacuum. They turn to friends and family for direction and possible sources of religious learning. If social contacts are in a movement, the seeker is likely to

be drawn to that movement's activities since social ties are trusted pathways of information."[53] In other words, preexisting activist networks mediate the causal link between cognitive opening and ideological absorption. Helfstein similarly views radicalization as a process that integrates ideology with socialization in a radical milieu. He postulates that domestic U.S. terrorism data, specifically regarding lone wolf terrorists, indicates that very few individuals self-radicalize toward violent action; the ideology is a necessary component, but it requires a social process for it to be fully absorbed.[54] Similarly, Kleinmann's study of 83 cases of violent Islamist radicals in the United States between 2001 and 2010 found that social ties were key to ideological socialization in 77 (93 percent) of the cases. This applies to both converts and non-converts, even though the former seems to have different inspiration for radicalism than the latter.[55]

Ideology has several important functions in radicalization. Groups promote an ideology to encourage individuals to question the precepts of the prevailing order. Radical action depends partly on new ways of seeing the world.[56] Isolated individuals usually frame social ills in fatalistic terms: "things have always worked this way," "things will never change," "there is nothing we can do about this." Radicals use ideology to diminish fatalism by convincing individuals that the status quo is problematic and that fault lies with external forces—"the system," "imperialism," "the powers that be," or "Zionist-Crusaders." Radicals invoke moral outrage by labeling the status quo as "unjust," "exploitative," "oppressive," or "heretical."[57]

Ideology can help forge a new rebellious identity by appealing to symbols, narratives, mythologies, and rituals that give meaning to acts of personal risk and sacrifice.[58] These symbols and narratives give a sense of reenactment of the past where good triumphed over evil, framing victory as "inevitable." It links isolated individuals with broader goals and identities, and may even link worldly time with sacred history.[59] Ideology can thus turn mundane existence into a cosmic struggle between justice and inequity, and empowers individuals by suggesting that an alternative world is possible. Ideology can facilitate the reprioritization of values so that material benefits, career, family, or personal risk take a back seat to collective identity, transcendental values, and group solidarity.[60] It is also necessary for demonizing or dehumanizing enemies and enabling moral beings to engage in otherwise immoral violence.[61] In the case of religious extremists, ideology can frame personal sacrifice in this world as a steppingstone to eternal salvation and redemption. The rewards of afterlife far exceed any possible pleasures that can be derived in this world.[62]

Islamist ideology has been at the core of homegrown radicalization threat in Europe since the early 2000s. The connection between a strong religious identity, or religious conversion, on one hand, and violent radicalization, on the other, is easy to see but difficult to explain. Many devout Muslims, including religious converts, do not become violent extremists. Yet many of the violent extremists that seek to strike in Western societies adopt, at least in appearance, a deeply devout Salafist worldview. Many of the terrorist plots in the West exhibit common ideological themes, including a belief that Western societies are morally bankrupt; the West is engaged in a war against Muslims; Muslims must show loyalty to their coreligionists by fighting non-Muslims, even those living in their host societies; and that *jihad* and martyrdom are indeed legitimate means by which Muslims defend their faith and their coreligionists. More generally, radical Islamist ideology is not only a terrorist threat, but also a nonviolent threat to the democratic legal order because it promotes intolerance, antidemocratic attitudes, and anti-integration and isolationism.[63]

The challenge for terrified publics and their government representatives is how to understand the relationship between the Islamic faith and radicalization. How "Islamic" are the radicals and their violence? Essentialist views of Islam as a faith inherently prone to violence are rejected as entirely ahistorical and empirically dubious.[64] The scholarly community is on firm ground when it says that not all Muslims are Islamic activists, and the vast majority of Islamic activists are not violent extremists. Moreover, radicalization occurs in all societies and cultures, and arises in many types of movements, including ethno-nationalist, ideological, and non-Muslim religious ones.[65]

How then should we think about Islam and the Islamist ideology in radicalizing Europe's Muslims? The concept of strategic framing, derived from social movement theory, is a useful way to conceptualize the link between ancient tradition and violent mobilization in the modern world. Framing refers to "conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action."[66] The term strategic framing connotes the instrumental use of discourse and symbolism. The act of framing is strategic because it selectively draws from shared identities, histories, revered symbols, rituals, and narratives to mobilize people for action. Framing is not an objective process, but one replete with subjectivity and strategic choices from the vast historical tradition. Radicals choose some symbols, texts, and narratives while they downplay or entirely ignore others that may contravene their strategic aims.

Islamic history, a vast tradition extending over 1,400 years, provides radicals a "tool kit"[67] of resources that can be retrieved and employed for the purpose of strategic action. This tool kit consists of holy texts, prophetic traditions, and historical practices associated with Islamic Golden Ages or revered companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Radicals select from this inherited tradition those elements that enable collective action. Moreover, they may innovate on these traditions while maintaining the appearance of authenticity. A prime example of this selective appropriation of, and innovation on, tradition is the use of suicide bombers. Islam forbids suicide, yet violent extremists have reframed self-immolation as martyrdom in defense of the faith, which has a basis in Islamic theology and traditions.[68]

Thus, it would be a mistake to view Islamist ideological framing as purely "Islamic." The act of strategic framing combines tradition and innovation—inherited ideas could be presented in new ways that appear to be applicable in contemporary times, and new ideas could be cloaked with a veneer of authenticity to mask their departure from tradition. As Sidney Tarrow eloquently puts it, "symbols of revolt are not drawn like musty costumes from a cultural closet and arrayed before the public. Nor are new meanings unrolled out of whole cloth. The costumes of revolt are woven from a blend of inherited and invented fibers into collective action frames in confrontation with opponents and elites."[69] In this view, accurate from our perspective, Islam and Islamic themes, texts, and traditions should be treated as instruments in the hands of radicalizing agents, not a reflection of essentialist (hard-wired) tendencies within a religious tradition.

Enabling Environments and Support Structures

Enabling environments and support structures such as the Internet, social media, or access to foreign terrorist training camps advance radicalization by providing ideological and material support for susceptible individuals. The birth of Al Qaeda as a transnational terrorist organization with affiliates from North Africa to South Asia have created terrorist training camps where radicalized individuals could deepen their ideological socialization

free from the watchful eyes of security services, and develop military skills with the help of seasoned veterans of earlier *jihads*.[70] Recently, ISIS seems to have outdone Al Qaeda as the primary provider of such socialization and training services in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Training camps were key to turning radicalized individuals into effective terrorists that can execute mass-casualty plots in the West.[71]

The birth of a highly diverse media ecosystem, consisting of synchronous and asynchronous technologies, also facilitates radicalization. As governments in the Muslim world and Europe look askance on promoters of radicalization and take steps to limit their freedom of maneuver in mosques and other recruitment sites, *jihadists* turn to the Internet, online forums, chat rooms, and a whole range of social media technologies to circumvent the physical and legal limits on reaching new recruits. The Internet has become the source of nonrelational, vertical diffusion of movement ideology, while social media became the relational, horizontal dimension of radicalization. Combined, radicals use these technologies to provide basic information on *jihadi* arenas and insurgent movements, and transmit political and religious narratives to motivate mobilization abroad or at home. External networks distribute video clips, montages, hymns and poems, and even video games to publicize their deeds and promote the image of heroic warriors of God. They also provide helpful advise on how to make a journey to foreign conflicts. More ominously, perhaps, *jihadists* present training videos and manuals on how to manufacture explosives, how to equip them with various types of detonators, and how to use them in suicide vests.[72]

The relational nature of social media adds new dimensions to radicalization that are not present in vertical and asynchronous Web technologies such as YouTube or online magazines like *Inspire* or *Dabiq*. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and myriad other new social media innovations provide horizontal communication that is user-generated, interactive, instantaneous, highly personalized, and easily mobile. As such, they could assist in forging a sense of communal belonging that is likely to appeal to some alienated individuals.[73] The multiplicity of communication vehicles is mainly intended to present vivid imagery of Muslim suffering around the globe, fostering righteous indignation among potential recruits and shaming them into avenging their coreligionists. They also promulgate the message that ordinary Muslims have an opportunity to become heroic *jihadis* who are defending the Muslim nation when their own governments are either indifferent to Muslim suffering or taking part in waging war on Islam.

The new media landscape is notable for three other recent developments. Media has shifted from being dominated by Arabic language productions, to ones that are multilingual, covering English and many other European languages. Additionally, the ubiquity of mobile devices with high-quality cameras, as well as editing software, has substantially enhanced the visual sophistication of propaganda videos; grainy clips have given way to Hollywood-like media productions. Last, the speed with which radical propaganda is disseminated across the globe, and the near impossibility of limiting its viewership, are a product of the new social media environment. By cross-posting content to several social media distribution hubs, where videos and magazines are shared and re-tweeted immediately by thousands of supporters, radicals disseminate their propaganda widely, nearly instantaneously, while precluding authorities from removing their online productions permanently.[74]

The radicalization literature disagrees over the centrality of external media and networks on homegrown terrorism, particularly the phenomenon of leaderless terrorism. The so-called Sageman–Hoffman debate exemplifies this disagreement.[75] Sageman makes the case that Islamist terrorism in the West has gravitated toward loosely networked, self-radicalized individuals with the help of the new media environment. He is not alone in

making this assertion. Vidino used a database of known terrorist conspiracies inside the European Union from 2006 to 2010 to analyze the connection between these plots and Al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM). He found that 70 percent of plots were planned independently of AQAM. He concluded that individuals are self-radicalizing in small groups and subsequently reaching out to AQAM to facilitate their operations. The deadliest plots, however, contained "extensive operational connections to groups operating outside of Europe."[76] Crone and Harrow show that there has been a rise in internal and autonomous homegrown terrorism in the West since 2003, whereby radicalized individuals proceed to conduct operations inside their host societies with a degree of autonomy from external networks, and without organizational affiliation to radicals abroad.[77]

Hoffman and Reinares challenge these conclusions. They looked at twenty-five detailed case studies of major terrorist operations and campaigns around the world and concluded that despite the uneven nature of command and control across the globe, senior Al Qaeda leaders "appeared to have had a direct hand in the most important and potentially high-payoff operations."[78] Therefore, one cannot reduce the phenomenon of Islamist terrorism today to mere ideological inspiration absent planning and organization by seasoned *jihadi* veterans. Nesser supports this view and rejects the assertion that online training is sufficient to produce capable terrorists. However, he maintains that the decision to seek training abroad is driven by individual choices at home after some cognitive radicalization as opposed to a decision from external leaders after a candidate has been recruited for an operation.[79] A recent RAND Corporation study of 15 cases of extremism and terrorism in the United Kingdom similarly maintains that there is little evidence to suggest that the Internet suffices to produce self-radicalized individuals. Digital media expands opportunities to become radicalized by facilitating the distribution of propaganda, and validating extreme beliefs by likeminded radicals. However, it is not clear that virtual arenas accelerate socialization into a radical milieu, and they certainly do not substitute for in-person meetings where radicalization is deepened through iterative interactions with other radicals connected to extremists abroad.[80] Benson goes further in arguing that the Internet and social media, rather than being force multipliers, might actually weaken terrorist groups because these tools enhance the capacity of counterterrorism agencies to detect and foil conspiracies.[81]

Conclusion

Understanding Muslim radicalization in the West is more important than ever. In this review, we highlighted areas of scholarly convergence and disagreement about the causes and dynamics of radicalization. We argued that the empirical research seems to hone in on four dimensions of radicalization, even if debates persist as to the relative weight of each of those elements in the production of radicalism. The four dimensions are grievances, networks, ideologies, and enabling support structures. Scholarly consensus converges on a nonlinear, evolutionary approach to radicalization, one that rejects talk of a sequential process of steps, stages, or phases. Grievances, networks, ideologies, and support structures appear in many of the radicalization studies, but the context and circumstances of their convergence varies. Just as similarly structured jigsaw puzzles can reveal different images once their pieces are interconnected, cases of radicalization can exhibit tremendous diversity even when the variables of radicalization are reoccurring. The puzzle metaphor is also useful to highlight the interdependent nature of radicalization variables, where one piece of the puzzle contains elements of the adjacent pieces. Several studies

we highlighted here, for example, find it difficult to disentangle ideology from networks; the two are mutually constituted.

The study of radicalization has made appreciable advances theoretically and empirically, but it continues to suffer from reliable evidentiary foundations. Addressing the lack of reliable data for the rigorous study of radicalization is more important than ever given the demand signals for "solutions" coming from terrified publics and their government representatives. Three recommendations could potentially advance the scientific study of radicalization. Our first and most important recommendation involves closer collaboration between academics and the intelligence community. The latter has access to a treasure trove of detailed documents about radicalization cases that call for thorough comparative and large-n analyses. Failure to produce authoritative conclusions about the causes and dynamics of radicalization is in large measure a function of limited reliable data given the prohibitive costs and difficulties associated with studying radicalized individuals across countries and continents. Declassifying documents without compromising sensitive means of intelligence collection would invite serious research by the scholarly community. Security services around the world collaborate with each other in a similar manner without revealing means of collection. A similar arrangement with academia will enable the scholarly community to better test extant theories of radicalization and advance the field on solid evidentiary basis.

Our second recommendation is a call for greater collaboration among researchers in the area of data organization. There is an urgent need for constructing an open-access database that provides rich, thickly descriptive narratives about radicalized individuals—be they homegrown terrorists, foreign fighters, or reformed extremists. Many of the studies cited in this review rely on such data, but there is no incentive or mechanism for standardizing, sharing, and enhancing this information with the global network of academics working on this important puzzle. Such a database would be invaluable for fostering collaboration on definitional and conceptual clarity, and could generate interesting comparative and large-n studies.

Our final recommendation is also directed at the academic community. Much of the research on radicalization we reviewed here selects on the dependent variable, choosing to test theories only where radicalization is present. This research design fails to provide control conditions that would test the validity of one's proposed hypotheses. A better research design involves selecting cases where the presumed causal variables are present, even if radicalization is not. In other words, researchers should seek evidence that disconfirms the putative causes of radicalization in order to nuance their analysis of what's necessary, sufficient, or inconsequential in the radicalization phenomenon.

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