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Protecting the Homeland from International and Domestic Terrorism Threats:

*Current Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Root Causes, the
Role of Ideology, and Programs for Counter-radicalization
and Disengagement*

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1.2. Individual and Group Mechanisms of Radicalization (Clark McCauley, Sophia Moskalenko)¹

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We define political radicalization as changes in beliefs, feelings and behavior in the direction of increased support for a political conflict. Radicalization can involve the movement of individuals and groups to legal and nonviolent political action (*activism*) or to illegal and violent political action (*radicalism*). An extreme of radicalization is terrorism, in which a non-state group targets not only government forces but civilian citizens supporting the government.

Analysts often describe jihadist radicalization as either “top-down” or “bottom-up” (U.S. Department of State, 2006; National Intelligence Council, 2007). Top-down radicalization refers to cases in which a radical group seeks new members through an organized recruiting campaign (charismatic imams, mobilizing networks, education and outreach programs). By contrast, bottom-up radicalization refers to cases in which individuals or small group develop radical feelings and beliefs in relative isolation from any existing radical group and only then seek connection with an existing radical group or move to radical action on their own initiative.

Unfortunately, the top-down vs. bottom-up distinction is not easily applied to the current array of cases of jihadi radicalization. If friends engaged in a community service group move to radicalization after watching Al Jazeera, or after watching videos of Muslim victimization on a jihadi web site, or after talking in a radical chat room—is this top-down or bottom-up? It is bottom-up in the sense that the friends have not been contacted personally by members of an existing radical group. But it is top-down in the sense that jihadist groups provide footage for Al Jazeera, put inciting films on their web sites, and organize radical chat rooms. The news, films, and chat rooms of jihadist and radical groups ARE, in effect, their recruiting programs.

Rather than trying to reconcile the differences between top-down and bottom-up perspectives, a more promising approach is to identify mechanisms of political radicalization that operate across groups as varied as militant jihadis and U.S. domestic radical groups. These mechanisms occur at three levels: individual, group, and mass public (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). *Individuals* are moved to join existing radical groups by a range of personal motives and experiences. Activist and radical *groups* become more extreme through competition with government forces and with groups trying to represent the same cause. A *mass public* is radicalized in and through intra and inter-state conflicts. Here we focus on individual- and group-level mechanisms. It is important to note at the outset that none of these mechanisms enables a 100 percent prediction of radicalization; rather each is a contributor for movement toward radicalization. Usually, individuals radicalize due to a combination of mechanisms.

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Individual-level Mechanisms

Individual mechanisms are the most relevant for understanding how individuals join an already radicalized group. The next section, *group-level mechanisms*, focuses on how an existing group becomes more radical over time. In practice, the two levels of mechanisms tend to become mutually reinforcing.

1. Individual Radicalization through Personal Grievance. An individual can be radicalized as a result of the perception of unjustified harm to self or loved ones. Although often cited as an explanation for terrorism, this mechanism is difficult to quantify. We are not aware of any research that attempts to count the proportion of terrorist group members with a personal grievance against their target group.

However, several observations indicate that personal grievance is seldom sufficient for radicalization. Most individuals with a personal grievance do not know or cannot reach the individuals who victimized them; their target of radical action and terrorism is the larger group that the perpetrators are seen to represent—police, army, government officials, and citizens supporting the government. Terrorist groups may include individuals seeking revenge, but a terrorist group aims to represent a political cause that is more than a collection of vendettas. Indeed, personal motives of revenge can undermine the cohesion and united action that make an effective terrorist group. Thus, we argue that personal grievance seldom leads to radicalization unless it is interpreted (with help of group and mass-level rhetoric) as part of a larger political struggle (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008).

In areas where intergroup violence is high and long-standing, most individuals will have some direct experience of personal victimization or loss at the hands of the enemy. Thus, the Chechen Black Widows included many women who were widowed or brutalized by the Russian Army (Granville-Chapman, 2004; Parfitt, 2004). Personal grievances led some of these women to suicide terrorism (Speckhard & Ahkmedova, 2006). There are similar accounts of personal victimization among Tamil Tiger and Palestinian suicide terrorists (Arnestadt, 2004).

In areas where intergroup violence is low, fewer individuals will have experience of personal victimization, and such victimization, when it occurs, is more likely to take the form of bias and discrimination than physical brutality and death. Muslims in Europe who turn to terrorism are less likely to be trying to revenge a personal grievance than Muslims in Iraq or Afghanistan.

2. Individual Radicalization through Political Grievance. An individual can be radicalized as a result of strong identification with a political group or cause that is highlighted in the mass media or Internet. It is rare that this mechanism of radicalization goes all the way to violent action without some group or organizational support; more commonly the growing radicalization of beliefs and feelings leads the individual to associate with similar others through group dynamics described below. But cases of “lone-wolf terrorism” do occur.

Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, became so invested in his personal crusade against technological progress that he began mailing bombs to those he saw responsible for such progress. Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar, a young immigrant from Iran, drove a sport utility vehicle into a crowded area of the University of NC Chapel Hill, injuring nine people to “avenge the deaths of Muslims around the world.” Lone-wolf terrorism is often attributed to

psychopathology, but there may be many examples labeled as “hate crime” that do not involve any psychiatric disorder.

3. Individual Radicalization in Action—The Slippery Slope. Individuals may become radicalized as a result of experiences they have after joining an existing radical group. Except for suicide bombers, it is rare for a new terrorist recruit to be entrusted with carrying out a lethal attack. Instead, interviews with former group members indicate that progression toward the most radical behaviors is deliberately slow and gradual (McCauley & Segal, 1987). At first, a new recruit may be asked to carry insignificant pieces of information, or to serve as a lookout. Later, the recruit may be asked to deliver a weapon and later still asked to drive a senior member to a meeting. This progression continues until the now-tested recruit is ready to use a bomb or a gun.

The power of this progression is its gradual nature. The first step is easy with little risk to the recruit and little harm to anyone. Each new step in the progression is only minimally more radical. On this slippery slope, there is no transition marked “terrorist,” and an individual looking back on a terrorist career can find it difficult to answer questions about “When did you decide to become a terrorist?”

Recruiting for the Basque terrorist group, ETA, has been described as the development of a personal relationship between a terrorist and a potential recruit. The new man is mentored and brought along into ETA in a very gradual progression. A Red Brigade militant in Italy described his experience this way: “A choice [made] in cold blood, such as ‘now I will become a terrorist,’ [did] not exist. It was a step-by-step evolution, which passed through a kind of human relation that I had with Guido, and with the people I worked with” (della Porta, 1995, p. 168).

4. Individual Radicalization in Relationship—The Power of Love. In order to avoid penetration by government security forces, radicals and terrorists tend to recruit from within the trusted circle of friends and family of those already radicalized (della Porta, 1995, p. 167-168; Sageman, 2004). Similarly, individuals may join radical groups in order to be with or to protect a loved one who is already a member. The bond that brings people into the group is likely to become even stronger as they share common experiences of threat from the authorities or rival groups, as well as the experience of isolation, common to radical groups that tend to make group members more dependent on one another. Former members of radical groups recall that once a loved one is threatened or killed, any doubts about the group’s tactics or cause become irrelevant. In this mechanism, an individual may become highly radicalized in terms of actions without a parallel radicalization in political beliefs.

Sophia Perovskaya, one of the leaders of the nineteenth century Russian terrorist group “People’s Will,” initially objected to the idea of using violence to advance the organization’s cause. She nonetheless participated in the organization’s activities, including assassination attempts, because of her loyalty to her lover Anrdej Zhelyabov. Anrdej was one of the most radical of the group leaders and committed to violence (Radzinsky & Bouis, 2006).

A particular form of love that can move individuals to join a radical group is the “love-at-a-distance” that is sometimes referred to as charismatic leadership. A strong and confident personality combined with public speaking skills can provide an important attraction for new recruits. This is one of the keys to Osama bin Laden’s staying power.

5. Individual Radicalization in Status and Thrill Seeking. Terrorism offers a number of rewards to those who seek adventures and the admiration of others: access to a secret society with grandiose goals; the thrill of operations that involve guns and money; and status and fame unparalleled by the achievement of an ordinary life. Young men, in particular, are susceptible to the appeal of these rewards as they transition from adolescence into young adulthood, trying to position themselves relative to their peers (Wilson & Daly, 1985). A strong social structure will often provide outlets for the young and restless including firefighting and military and police service. But even when these legitimate outlets are available, a proportion of thrill and status seeking youths will be attracted to street gangs or criminal networks for a life of unpredictability and danger. For these individuals, the ideology of the group they join matters less than the anticipation of thrill and status (Goldstein, 1994; Kanasawa & Still, 2000).

Abu Musab Al Zarqawi is an example of this kind of radicalization. A petty criminal imprisoned for rape and drug possession, he ascended the ranks of a prison gang by severely beating his rivals and demanding complete servitude from other prisoners. Released from prison, he went to Afghanistan where he could indulge his inclination for violence and thrills in the war against Russians. There he met Osama bin Laden and adopted the fundamentalist militant jihadi ideology. But as leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Zarqawi released videotapes of beheadings he personally carried out, despite requests from Zawahiri, bin Laden's deputy, to avoid alienating Muslims. For Zarqawi, the rewards of violence and status could be more important than forwarding the global caliphate.

6. Individual Opening to Radicalization: Unfreezing. For many individuals, the path to radicalization is blocked by prior commitments and responsibilities. Supporting a family, building a career, and attachments to friends and neighbors would all be jeopardized by joining an illegal and dangerous organization. But what if these commitments and attachments are lost? Perhaps parents or a spouse die suddenly. Or a civil war ravages the country, destroying homes, families, jobs, and social networks. Or an individual moves from home to a foreign country or remote city and has to begin again with no social ties and few resources. Thus disconnected, an individual is an easy prospect for any group that offers comradeship and connection. If group membership comes with an ideology, it may seem like a reasonable trade.

In his analysis of the 9/11 bombers, Sageman (2004) concluded that isolation and alienation opened the door to radicalization of young Muslims living in Europe. It is important to note that unfreezing can facilitate many different new identities, but for a Muslim living in a non-Muslim country, shared religion is a likely to be a high-salience source of similarity and support.

Group-level Mechanisms

There are a few individuals who translate their own personal grievance into political violence without participation in a radical group, but these lone-wolf radicals do not usually represent a large threat. Radical power comes from groups with enough cohesion and organization to plan and carry out collective action and, in the case of terrorism, collective violence. In this section, we emphasize the mechanisms that move a whole group toward political radicalization - key to understanding deradicalization or desistance from illegal political action. We return to this issue at the end of the section on Implications and Research Issues.

7. Extremity Shift in Likeminded Groups—Group Polarization. Group discussion among like-minded people tends to move average group opinion further towards the direction

avored initially by a majority of group members (Brown, 1986, p. 200-301). Discussion among people who favor the same political candidate, for instance, is likely to move average opinion toward even stronger approval of this candidate. This tendency is the result of two forces.

First, discussing an issue will bring out new arguments, not previously considered. In a like-minded group, most of the new arguments will be in the direction already favored. Group members are then persuaded by the new arguments they hear and become more confident and more extreme in the initially favored direction. Second, individuals who are more extreme in the group-favored direction are viewed as more admirable and influential. Less extreme members of the group then tend to gravitate toward the more extreme opinions in order to see themselves as more influential and admirable (Brown, 1986, p. 200-301).

These two forces are likely to affect groups of people who come together around some issue of political reform (saving redwoods, animal rights) or of resisting reform (integrated schools, gun control). A group drawn together by concern for the same political issue is likely to become more radical over time, especially if their efforts do not seem to be making enough difference. In the U.S., the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to their first demonstrations in 1960 well dressed and clean-shaven with the Bible in one hand and the U.S. Constitution in the other. By 1966, SNCC's leader Stokely Carmichael was talking about "Black Power" and violent confrontation with whites. Similarly, despite the 1962 Port Huron statement, a manifesto focused on poverty and civil rights in which the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) called for democratic reform, the organization drifted toward increasingly radical politics and more confrontational tactics (Sale, 1973).

8. Activist Radicalization in Competition with State Power--Condensation. This mechanism of radicalization arises in conflict between a government and an activist group challenging the government. Initially, the members of the challenge group are not prepared to get involved in illegal or violent action. As activists, they may participate in non-violent protest or spread propaganda. When the state response is repressive and the costs of continuing political action are raised, the less committed members drop out. Those who remain are likely to turn to more radical rhetoric and action (Mechanism 7), typically leading to even harsher response from the state. Over time, only a tiny fraction of hardened radicals remains and may go underground as a terrorist group.

The group dynamics at the heart of this mechanism are a reliable consequence of facing outside threat or attack. Hostility toward the threatening group is the obvious result, but equally important is the impact of threat on the interactions among those feeling threatened. Perceived interdependence within the threatened group increases as group members see they will share the consequences of the outside threat. They see, as Dr. Johnson put it, that "we must hang together or assuredly we will hang separately." The result is increased group identification (increased cohesion), idealization of ingroup values, increased respect for ingroup leaders, and increased readiness to punish anyone dissenting from group norms. This mechanism is a powerful source of radicalizing beliefs, feelings, and behavior as a group facing threat moves toward the unity of thought, feeling, and action that prepares them to fight the threat (Grant & Brown, 1995; LeVine & Campbell, 1972).

In Italy in the 1970s, the terrorist Red Brigades condensed out of leftist protest movements, after years of escalating conflict between protestors and Italian police. Similarly, the Weather

Underground condensed out of the Students for a Democratic Society after escalating conflicts between protestors and U.S. police (Sale, 1973).

9. Group Radicalization in Competition for the Same Base of Support—Outbidding. Groups rallying behind the same political cause can be in competition for the same base of sympathizers and supporters. This support can be crucial in providing cover, money, and new recruits. As competing groups try different tactics to advance their cause, the competition may escalate to gradually more radical acts if sympathizers favor these acts – a competition described by Mia Bloom (2005) as “outbidding.”

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) is a Marxist-Leninist group that eschewed the rhetoric of jihad and did not organize martyrdom actions in the early years of the Second Intifada. Polls of Palestinians indicated that support for the PFLP was dwindling. The PFLP began talking about jihad and fielded its own suicide bombers and its poll numbers recovered (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008).

10. Group Radicalization from Within-group Competition—Fissioning. The intense pressure for conformity within a radical group can result in factions and internal conflict. The conflict may be about tactics, with one faction advocating more violence, or may be more to do with personalities and internal power struggles. Sometimes the conflict can escalate to violence but even if it does not, the factions may separate to form new groups. The ingroup dynamics resulting from external threat (Mechanism 6) again come into play, and at least some of the new groups are likely to be more radical than the group from which they separated.

The IRA provides an example of many competing factions—Official IRA, Provisional IRA, Real IRA, Continuity IRA, INLA—who sometimes targeted one another. In perhaps the most extreme case of within-group conflict, Japanese authorities in 1972 found a mountain hideout of the Japanese Red Army with the dismembered bodies of twelve terrorists who had lost out in an intragroup conflict that had spun out of control (McCauley & Segal, 1987).

11. Social Reality Power of Isolated Groups—The Multiplier. Some would say that science and engineering do not address the most important human questions. What is beautiful and what is ugly? What is fair and what is unjust? What is worth working for, or fighting for, or dying for? Am I a good person? What does it mean that I am going to die? In group dynamics theory, the only source of confidence in answering these questions is consensus: agreement with others (Festinger, 1954). Systems of meaning and values represented in religions and secular ideologies offer abstract answers to these questions, but the specifics for implementing these systems in relation to the current situation typically depend on group consensus.

When an individual belongs to many different groups with competing values, any one group has little power over the individual. But when a group is isolated from outside influences, its power over individual members becomes extremely strong. Isolated groups--terrorist groups, youth gangs, religious cults, soldiers in combat—have unchecked power to determine value and meaning. Consensus power in such groups can justify and even require extreme beliefs, feelings, and actions against anyone who threatens the group. The unchecked value-setting power of an isolated group is a multiplier, but it is not necessarily the propensity for illegal and violent action that is multiplied. In a monastery, isolation can serve to multiply religious fervor and prayer. In an underground terrorist cell, however, isolation is likely to multiply the intensity of violence and justify escalation of violent tactics. Group radicalization through condensation, outbidding, and fission mechanisms are all multiplied to the extent that the group members are cut off from all

but fellow-radical group members.

Just how far the social reality power of the group can go is suggested by the comments of Mark Rudd, a leader of the Weather Underground, looking back on the violence of his youth. “We were just stupid kids too in love with our ideas to realize they weren’t real. We believed they were real because we thought them. That’s the essence of the downside of idealism” (Rudd, 2008).

Implications and Research Questions

1. Pathways to Radicalization are Many and Variable. There is no one path, no “trajectory profile” to political radicalization. Rather there are many different paths. How many can be estimated by calculating how many different combinations can be made of the mechanisms already identified. Some of these paths do not include radical ideas or activism on the way to radical action, so the radicalization progression cannot be understood as an invariable set of steps or “stages” from sympathy to radicalism. Radicalization by the power of love for someone already radicalized, for instance, can occur for an individual with no previous political activity. Joining a violent group for thrill, money, or status similarly does not require any political ideas or ideology (della Porta, 1995).

2. There is No Conveyor Belt from Activism to Terrorism. Whether or when legal activists graduate to illegal political or violent action depends on culture, time, and place. Some activists have moved on to terrorism, and some with radical ideas have moved on to radical action. The question is, how common are these transitions?

After the 7/7 bombings in London, polling showed that five percent or 50,000 adult Muslims believe that these attacks were justified in defense of Islam (Pew, 2005). But the UK security services are focused on no more than 2000 individuals as jihadist threats, suggesting that only about four percent of those who justify terrorism are actually any kind of security threat (Gardham, 2009).

Similarly, it appears that few activists graduate to terrorism. Of the tens of thousands of U.S. college students involved in 1970s activist organization, Students for a Democratic Society, only a few hundred moved on to terrorism in the Weather Underground. Comparable ratios are seen for the 1970s student movements that produced the Red Brigades in Italy and the Baader-Meinhof Gang in Germany (Sale, 1973).

It appears, then, that the proportion moving from radical ideas to radical action is small, and the proportion moving from legal activism to radical action and terrorism may be even smaller. Certainly the proportions are too small to support the metaphor of a ‘conveyor belt’ (Baran, 2004) with its implication of an inevitable end for anyone who steps onto the belt.

What about the proportion of radicals or terrorists with a previous history of legal activism? This question is in need of study, but examples suggest that even here the proportion may be small. In the UK, none of the individuals involved in the 7/7 bombing was a regular member of an Islamic activist group such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or al-Mahajiroun, though several of the bombers seem to have been peripherally involved in these groups. Obviously, no one considering illegal political activity is likely to risk the attention of police and security forces by joining an activist group, even if the activism is entirely within the law.

3. *When Does Activism Compete with Terrorism?* In some places and times, legal activism may serve as a safety valve for the expression of grievances that might otherwise lead to terrorism. Groups involved in legal activism may even compete with terrorist groups for potential recruits. A group such as Hizb ut-Tahrir may contribute to jihadi terrorism to the extent that it encourages the same beliefs and feelings encouraged by Al Qaeda--seeing the war on terrorism as a war on Islam, feeling humiliated by Western power--but may inhibit jihadi terrorism to the extent that it discourages Hizb members from translating these feelings and beliefs into violent action. Assessing the balance of these two tendencies is a difficult issue for researchers, security forces, and policy makers.

4. *How Important is Ideology in Moving Individuals and Groups to Terrorism?* As already noted, there are many paths to radicalization that do not involve ideology. Some join a radical group for thrill and status, some for love, some for connection and comradeship. Personal and group grievance can move individuals toward violence, with ideology serving only to rationalize the violence. Indeed videos of Muslims killed or maimed in "crusader" attacks are often cited as motivation for jihadi attacks. Hussain Osman, arrested in connection with the 7/21 attempted bombings in London, reportedly told his Italian interrogators that, "Religion had nothing to do with this. We watched films. We were shown videos with images of the war in Iraq. We were told we must do something big. That's why we met" (Leppard & Follain, 2005).

Osama bin Laden's speeches offer another clue. He emphasizes Muslim grievances against the U.S. – support for authoritarian Muslim leaders, support for Israel, U.S. troops in Muslim countries – but spends little time selling the global caliphate that he asserts is the answer to these grievances. As was the case with SNCC and the Weather Underground, ideology for jihadist groups may be more a product of contention than a cause of contention.

The idea that ideology may be relevant to only a fraction of a radical group is reflected in the latest *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (2009, p.6). "Modern insurgencies are often more complex matrices of irregular actors with widely differing goals. At least some of the principal actors will be motivated by a form of ideology (or at least will claim to be), but that ideology will not necessarily extend across the whole insurgent network."

5. *What is the Role of Emotion in Radicalization?* The literature on radicalization tends to emphasize cost/benefit calculations, but many have noted the salience of emotions such as anger or outrage, shame, and humiliation in political conflict. Research on emotional aspects of radicalization is needed. For instance, it is not clear whether hate is an emotion or a powerful form of negative identification that can be the occasion of many emotions - both positive and negative - depending on what is happening to the target of hatred (Royzman, McCauley, & Rozin, 2005). Similarly, it is not clear whether humiliation is a distinct emotion or a synergism of more fundamental emotions such as anger and shame (Lindner, 2006).

6. *How Does Martyrdom Contribute to Political Radicalization?* Many have noted the power of martyrdom for political mobilization, and there is a significant literature that asks how individuals are encouraged or recruited to give their lives in suicide terrorism (Merari, 2004; Speckhard & Ahkmedova, 2006). Still, research is needed to determine how a particular death is framed and accepted as martyrdom, and the mechanisms by which a perceived martyr moves others toward sacrifice for the martyr's cause.

7. *Does Encouraging Individual Desistance from Terrorism Interfere with Group Desistance from Terrorism?* Crenshaw (1996) makes an important distinction between two

kinds of government accommodation with terrorists. In one case, a new alternative is offered to the group as a whole; in the other case the alternative is offered to individual members of a terrorist group. Both Venezuela and Colombia have offered amnesty to violent opposition groups and legalized their political participation on condition of their giving up violence. In contrast, the Italian government encouraged 'repentance' of Red Brigade individuals who could earn reduced prison sentences by informing on comrades. The opening for groups works best when the group has high cohesion and strong leadership so as to minimize the splitting off of factions that want to continue violence. But the opening for individuals works best when cohesion is low and leadership is weak, when at least some terrorists are disillusioned, bored, or remorseful (McCauley, in press).

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