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Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model

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### Abstract

This paper reviews some of the milestones of thinking about political radicalization, as scholars and security officials struggled after 9/11 to discern the precursors of terrorist violence. Recent criticism of the concept of radicalization is recognized, leading to a two-pyramids model that responds to the criticism by separating radicalization of opinion from radicalization of action. Security and research implications of the two-pyramids model are briefly described, ending with a call for more attention to emotional experience in understanding both radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action.

*Keywords:* individual radicalization, group radicalization, mass radicalization, radicalization, terrorism, violent extremism, political violence, two-pyramids model, lone-wolf, caring-compelled terrorists, disconnected-disordered terrorists.

After the shock of the 9/11 attacks, security officials in the U.S. struggled to understand the process by which individuals and groups move to terrorism. The hope was to ‘get to the left of the boom’—to predict and, ideally, to prevent future attacks. *Radicalization* came to be the word used to refer to the human developments that precede terrorist attack. This paper aims to provide an overview of thinking about radicalization.

The enormous and still expanding literature on radicalization cannot be fully represented here. The first section of the paper reviews Milestone in terrorism research since the 9/11 attacks. Milestone were determined on the basis of contribution to psychological theorizing of radicalization and salience to U.S. security officials. Salience was largely determined from the authors’ experience at academic and government-sponsored conferences, where certain contributions seemed to resonate more with security officials. Owing to limitations of space and knowledge, the paper focuses on radicalization to jihadi terrorism, leaving aside important work on right-wing and left-wing terrorism in the U.S. (e.g. Freilich, Chermak & Gruenewald, 2014; Taylor, Currie, & Holbrook, 2013).

Review of the Milestones leads to recognition of challenges to the concept of radicalization, which are identified in the second section of the paper and addressed in the third section with presentation of a two-pyramids model of radicalization. Implications of the model for security policy and for future research are identified in the last two sections.

### **Milestones in radicalization research**

The attacks of 11 September 2001 produced a spate of research on terrorism, and the Milestones begin from this date. Still, it is useful to identify several earlier perspectives that set the stage for radicalization research. Most notable is Crenshaw’s (1981) view of the causes of terrorism that distinguished individual motives and beliefs, group-level decision-making and strategy, and the

wider political and social context in which terrorism occurs. This three-way distinction of individual, group, and mass factors is echoed in much of later research.

Also worth noting is the decline of theorizing that explained terrorists as crazy—as suffering some form of diagnosable psychopathology. Twenty years before 9/11 it was already recognized that pathology is no more likely among terrorists than among non-terrorists of similar background (Crenshaw, 1981). Similarly it was already clear that poverty is not a useful explanation of radicalization: many terrorists—perhaps most of 1970s terrorists who grew out of student unrest—came from middle-class and professional families (Crenshaw, 1981).

### **The Staircase to Terrorism (2005)**

Moghaddam (2005) offered an early metaphor of radicalization as a six-floor ever-narrowing stairway to terrorism. The ground floor is perception of injustice and relative deprivation; the first floor is search for options; the second floor is anger at the perceived perpetrators of injustice; the third floor is a moral engagement that justifies terrorism; the fourth floor is joining a terrorist group; and the fifth and last floor is dehumanizing enemy civilians to make them legitimate targets of violence.

The staircase metaphor is a stage model set at the individual level: each floor must be traversed to get to the next higher floor and the order of floors is fixed. The difference between justifying terrorism (third floor) and joining a terrorist group (fourth floor) is the difference between radical opinion and radical action. This key difference appears as just one more step in the staircase model.

### **The Psychology of Terrorism (2005)**

Horgan's book-length treatment of the psychology of radicalization distinguished three psychological issues: the psychology of becoming a terrorist, the psychology of being

(persevering as) a terrorist, and the psychology of disengaging from terrorism. The second and third issues are beyond the scope of this review. With regard to becoming a terrorist, Horgan recognized the importance of the distinction between radical ideas and violent action: “In Northern Ireland, and even on the marches described earlier, the number of people who became involved in a direct way with the PIRA [Provisional Irish Republican Army] was minimal. The obvious question then is why?” (p.101).

Horgan emphasized three ideas in progression to terrorist action. First, the progression to terrorism is usually gradual, from involvement in legal activism to small acts in support of terrorism (courier, reconnaissance) to shooting and planting bombs. Second is “a sense of dissatisfaction or disillusionment with the individual’s current persona or activity” (p.103) that makes an individual more open to influence. Circumstances making an individual more open to influence can include loss of loved ones, work, home, or way of life; these circumstances have been called *unfreezing* in social psychology, *biographical availability* in sociology, and *cognitive opening* in social movement theory. Third is the idea that community support for violent action that affords status to militants can help motivate violence.

These three ideas say something about the trajectory to terrorism but are perhaps yet too general to understand why activists and terrorists are few. Not every individual who experiences unfreezing in a community that gives status to militants will start down the slippery slope to terrorism.

### **Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West (2005)**

In this book, Quintan Wiktorowicz reports his study of U.K. Muslim activist group al-Muhajiroun and its charismatic leader Omar Bakri Mohammed. The study was conducted in 2002, when reaction to the 9/11 attacks made activism in support of jihad risky.

The study was notable for bringing a social movement perspective to understanding how individuals joined al-Muhajiroun. Social movement theory (SMT) is not a single integrated theory but a congeries of ideas that have been found useful in understanding movements for liberal causes such as civil rights and feminism. SMT includes attention to mobilizing structures, political opportunities, framing, and repertoires of contentious action.

Starting from these concepts, Wiktorowicz arrived at a four-stage model of radicalization. First is a *cognitive opening* to new people and new ideas that follows experience of personal disconnection (unfreezing), personal grievance (discrimination), or group grievance (oppression of Muslims). Second, the seeker connects with al-Muhajiroun via *personal relations* with activists, which may be either pre-existing kin or friendship connection with activists, or new connections developed in activist-conducted study groups, debates, and demonstrations. Third, the seeker comes to accept Omar Bakri as the one *legitimate authority* for interpreting Islam. Fourth, belief in Bakri is fused with belief in Bakri's claim that salvation depends on supporting jihad; activist risk-taking then becomes a *rational choice* to attain eternal reward.

Like Moghaddam, Wiktorowicz offers a stage theory of radicalization in which individuals must go through each stage in order. Also like Moghaddam, Wiktorowicz gives little attention to the transition from radical belief to radical action. The last stage asserts radical action as a rational choice, but not everyone who sees moral behavior as necessary for salvation does in fact commit to moral behavior. More promising is the description of how Omar Bakri's ideology and his group emerged from competition with Hizb ut-Tahrir, who do not believe that the time is right for jihad. The insight that radicalization can happen in competition of groups within the same movement is explored more fully by della Porta in a later milestone.

**Radicalization in the West: The homegrown threat (2007)**

New York Police Department analysts Silber and Bhatt (2007) focus on eleven jihadist plots that took place in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, Spain, and the Netherlands. These plots are seen as inspired but not directed by al Qaeda. The aim of their NYPD report is to identify stages of radicalization prior to planning a violent act.

**Stage 1 Preradicalization** is where most Western-origin terrorists are ordinary and unremarkable individuals before radicalization begins. They have little if any criminal history.

**Stage 2 Self-Identification** “is the phase where individuals, influenced by both internal and external factors, begin to explore Salafi Islam, gradually gravitate away from their old identity and begin to associate themselves with like-minded individuals and adopt this ideology as their own. The catalyst for this ‘religious seeking’ “is a cognitive opening or crisis, which shakes one’s certitude in previously held beliefs and opens an individual to be receptive to new world views” (p.6). As already noted, this kind of opening has been described variously as *unfreezing*, *biographical availability*, and *cognitive opening*. Loss of meaning and connection can occur with death of loved ones, loss of job or romantic partner, migration away from family and friends, or experience of discrimination. But Silber and Bhatt do not specify why the seeker would look to religion rather than a secular ideology such as socialism or nationalism.

**Stage 3 Indoctrination** “is the phase in which an individual progressively intensifies his beliefs, wholly adopts Jihadi-Salafi ideology and concludes, without question, that the conditions and circumstances exist where action is required to support and further the cause” (p.6). The third stage depends on the intense dynamics of a small group of like-minded individuals who have accepted Jihadist-Salafi justifications of violence. Note the transition from Salafi Islam in Stage 2 to Jihadi-Salafi Islam in Stage 3. It is not clear why individuals would prefer Jihadist-Salafi ideology over the more common Salafi Islam that aims for purity and withdrawal from a



contaminating world. In this quiescent version of Salafism, politics is a worldly distraction and killing civilians is forbidden by the Qur'an.

**Stage 4 Jihadization** “is the phase in which members of the cluster accept their individual duty to participate in jihad and self-designate themselves as holy warriors. Ultimately, the group will begin operational planning for the jihad or a terrorist attack” (p.7).

In this model of radicalization, the leap is between Stages 3 and 4—between radical opinion and radical action. Unfortunately Silber and Bhatt do not have much to say about this crucial step; they treat the commitment to action as a natural extension of Jihadi-Salafi ideology. Snow and Byrd have criticized the idea of ideology as a cause, pointing to the variation and flexibility of ideology in different Islamic terrorist movements, and the work required to construct links between ideas, events, and action.

More generally, this is a stage model very similar to the stage model advanced by Moghaddam (2005). In the next milestone, Sageman provides examples of individuals who develop radical ideology only after joining a militant group via kin and friendship ties.

### **Leaderless Jihad (2008)**

In his 2004 book, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Sageman used open-source material to study 172 participants in anti-Western jihad. As a criminologist might study “known associates,” Sageman was able to show family and friendship links among his cases and that these links were key to understanding individual trajectories to terrorist action. Sageman’s work echoes well-established findings in Social Psychology that groups can exert social influence in individuals’ decision making (Myers & Lamm, 1976), risk-taking (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005), and immoral behavior (Zimbardo, 2007). In *Leaderless Jihad*, Sageman (2008) argued that the main jihadist threat was no longer al Qaeda but small self-radicalizing groups of Muslims in Western

countries—a ‘bunch of guys’ model of radicalization.

Sageman points to four factors that come together to move Muslims in Western countries to terrorist violence: Seeing world events and the war on terrorism as a war on Islam; personal experience of discrimination while living in the West; moral outrage in response to stories, especially videos, of Muslims suffering from Western violence; and face-to-face or internet contacts that connect an individual with the means and opportunity to attack. In discussing these factors Sageman emphasizes the emotional aspects of radicalization: competition for status and glory, anger and humiliation in reaction to perceived Western injustice to Muslims, and love for comrades that perhaps includes shame for doing less than those who die as martyrs.

Bruce Hoffman (2008) has famously disagreed with Sageman’s judgment that self-radicalizing Western Muslims are now a bigger threat than the remnants of the al Qaeda organization. One does not need to determine a victor in this debate to profit by Sageman’s account of radicalization of Western Muslims, and to recognize that terrorists with skills honed in training camps associated with al Qaeda are likely capable of more deadly attacks.

### **Radicalization as terror management (2009)**

One of the originators of Terror Management Theory (TMT) argues in this paper that both terrorist violence and government response to terrorist violence are part of how humans deal with the threat of mortality (Pyszczynski, Motyl & Abdolahi, 2009). The ‘terror’ in TMT is existential terror: fear of dying. A group identity can reduce this fear with the prospect of immortality for a good member of a group that will go forward indefinitely in time. Threats to this group, especially violent attacks that kill ingroup members, thus lead to increased thoughts of death (mortality salience) and increased commitment to the values of the ingroup (cultural anxiety buffer). The result is increased support for violence against the enemy threat.

Pyszczynski et al cite research showing that increased thoughts of mortality increased Iranian students' support for martyrdom missions against the U.S, and increased U.S. conservatives' support for using extreme military measures such as atom bombs to kill terrorists.

TMT is a theory that spans individual, group, and mass psychology: all those who identify with a group will respond to violence against that group with increased commitment to the group and increased support for violence against those who threaten the group. Importantly, Pyszczynski et al recognize the dynamic of action and reaction that links terrorist attacks and government responses:

Research is presented which suggests that many of the same psychological forces that lead terrorists to their violent actions also lead to counter-terrorist policies that create massive collateral damage. This collateral damage appears to further escalate the cycle of violence and may aid the targets of those attacks in recruiting people for the terrorist cause (Pyszczynski et al, 2009, p.12).

### **Edge of violence (2010)**

Bartlett, Birdwell and King (2010) compared 58 al Qaeda inspired terrorists with 28 non-violent Muslim radicals. In-depth profiles of convicted terrorists 'homegrown' in UK, Canada, Denmark, France and Netherlands were created from court records and news reports. From the same countries 28 radical profiles were created, of whom 20 were interviewed in depth. Individuals designated as radicals held one or more of three opinions: desire for a Caliphate, desire for Sharia law, and support for Muslims fighting Western forces in Iraq.

Terrorists and radicals were similar in experiencing some degree of societal exclusion, distrust of government, hatred for foreign policy, and some disconnection from their local community. Many in both groups had some sort of identity crisis. But terrorists were unique in

their loathing of Western society and culture, and had a simpler and shallower conception of Islam. Radicals were more likely than terrorists to have been involved in political protest, to have studied at university (and studied humanities or arts subjects) and to have been employed.

Bartlett, Birdwell and King summarize as follows:

Becoming a terrorist was not always a natural or linear progression from being a radical.

Those who turned to violence often followed a path of radicalisation which was characterised by a culture of violence, in-group peer pressure, and an internal code of honour where violence can be a route to accruing status. (p. 12).

As Freilich, Chermak & Gruenewald (2014) note, comparison of radicals and terrorists with the same cause can be particularly revealing about pathways to violence. Unfortunately this kind of study is rare. More common are studies looking backward, seeking common denominators in the histories of known terrorists. Gartenstein-Ross & Grossman (2009), for instance, examined 117 'homegrown' jihadist terrorists from the U.S. and U.K. and found that political radicalization, not religious beliefs, was the strongest commonality. The authors recognize, however, that many peaceful Muslims may share the feelings of grievance against the West that were assessed as political radicalization in their retrospective study.

### **Protecting the homeland (2010)**

Editors Fenstermacher, Kuznar, Rieger, and Speckhard (2010) provide a substantial (42 contributions, 52 authors, 375 pages) compilation of U.S. thinking about terrorism in relation to three issues relating to radicalization: root causes, dynamics of Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs), and ideology. The dominant message from the editors is the complexity of interactions that produce and sustain terrorist violence.

One key insight researchers have gained through studies of terrorism is that the

phenomenon is inherently dynamic. VNSAs undergo a dynamic life cycle, individuals undergo a dynamic process of radicalization, the relations between VNSA and their state opponents are constantly evolving, and the networks through which VNSAs operate are dynamically shifting (p. 13).

Particularly notable are two contributions using polling data to understand population support for terrorist violence. Rieger (*Conditions that foster Violent Non-State Actors*) uses Gallup polls from Muslim countries to argue that there are two types of Muslims who justify jihadist violence. One type includes low-income individuals who see Muslims as victims of Western intolerance, the other type has average income but want Shari'a law to replace current governance that is seen as unjust and ineffective. Harlow (*Audience-centered VNSA strategic communications*) asks about the intended and actual audiences for al-Qaeda videos, and distinguishes Muslim publics, existing and potential members of al-Qaeda, Western policymakers, and Western publics.

In this volume, attention to the dynamics of action and reaction in conflict between VNSAs and states, and to the reflection of these dynamics in mass audiences, links many of the contributions with the social movement perspective of Wiktorowicz and della Porta.

### **Friction: How radicalization happens to them and us (2011)**

McCauley and Moskalenko use case histories ranging from 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian anti-tsarist terrorism to 21<sup>st</sup> century al-Qaeda terrorism to identify mechanisms of radicalization operating at individual, group, and mass levels.

Individual level mechanisms of radicalization include anger and revenge for harm to self or loved ones (*Personal Grievance*), outrage for injustice to a larger group or cause the individual cares about (*Group Grievance*), participation in progressively more radical acts that

culminate in terrorism (*Slippery Slope*), helping a friend or loved one already radicalized (*Love*), risk and power seeking, especially by young males (*Status Seeking*), and escape from personal problems (*Escape*). Finally, *Unfreezing* is a loss of social connection that opens an individual to new people and new ideas; it is a multiplier of the power of the other mechanisms.

Group-level mechanisms of radicalization to action include extremity shift in likeminded groups (*Group Polarization*) and three kinds of radicalizing intergroup conflict: competition with state power as less committed members of the group fall away (*Condensation*), competition for the same base of support (*Outbidding*), and within-group competition (*Fissioning*). A multiplier of the power of these four mechanisms is *Group Isolation*: cohesion and the power of group norms are strengthened to the extent that group members have no one else to turn to and no alternative group standards.

Mass-level mechanisms of radicalization include broad public acceptance of a view of the enemy as inherently bad and threatening (*Hate*), mobilization of opinion and action by a martyr's self-sacrifice (*Martyrdom*), and mobilization of new support for terrorism by state over-reaction to terrorist attack (*Jujitsu Politics*).

The three levels of mechanisms are not a stage model; rather the mechanisms are nested such that mass level mechanisms can affect individuals and groups, and individual level mechanisms can affect groups and mass opinion. It is possible to become radicalized to terrorism by only individual level mechanisms, as in Lone Wolf terrorism.

Most of the mechanisms identified are associated with strong emotional experiences, including anger, shame, guilt, humiliation, fear, love and hate. Finally it is important to notice that the individual and group level mechanisms are mechanisms of radicalization to action, whereas mass level mechanisms produce radicalization of public opinion.

**Clandestine political violence (2013)**

In this book della Porta (2013) seeks common mechanisms of radicalization to violence in four types of underground groups: Italian and German Leftists, Italian Rightists, Basque Ethnonationalists, and al-Qaeda Jihadists. Like Wiktorowicz, della Porta begins from Social Movement Theory, but she focuses more on the dynamics of competition and conflict between groups: between police and militants, and between activist factions in the same movement.

The mechanisms identified include (pp. 284-287) *escalating policing* (“violence spread when the state was perceived to have overreacted to the emergence of protest”), *competitive escalation* (“experimentation with violent tactics emerged from attempts to outbid the other groups”), *activation of militant networks* (“Militant networks developed in small and radical groupings in which political commitment and friendship mutually strengthened each other”), and *implosion* (“Once underground, clandestine organizations underwent a process of implosion in which interactions with the outside were reduced”). Della Porta finds that small cells cut off from sympathizers become more extreme in justifying and perpetrating violence, and become more focused on preserving and revenging group members than on advancing their original cause.

The case material linking radicalization with individual emotions (micro level) and group dynamics (meso level) is very rich. Polls are cited to access the population (macro) level. Across the complex linkages of levels, the key insight is that radicalization occurs in the dynamics of action and reaction in conflicts between activists and police, and in conflicts between competing activist groups. In this perspective, radicalization to violence is an emergent property of escalating conflict, especially when non-violent activism is suppressed or failing.

Although in different language, the mechanisms identified by della Porta have

considerable overlap with the mechanisms identified by McCauley and Moskalenko. Indeed the psychological nature of her analysis at individual and group levels is signaled by her attention to emotions, including an explicit commitment (p. 20) to the idea that emotions can be causes. This idea is common in psychology but rarely accepted in political science (but see Petersen, 2011).

### **Significance quest (2014)**

“The quest for significance is the fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to have respect...[including] need for esteem, achievement, meaning, competence, control, and so on” (Kruglanski et al, 2014, p. 73). In this perspective, more familiar terrorist motivations such as personal revenge, group grievance, and attachment to a charismatic leader are all special cases of significance quest. When joined with a terrorism-justifying ideology and social connections promoting this ideology, significance quest moves an individual to radical ideas and radical actions.

The significance quest model of radicalization is intellectually ambitious in hypothesizing a common denominator of terrorist motivations. At this level of generality, it is not clear how significance quest differs from relative deprivation theory, which predicts anger and aggression from individuals and groups who believe that their status is less than it should be (Gurr, 1970; Kruglanski et al, 2009, pp. 345-346; see also in Moghaddam’s 2005 staircase model). For security officials, it may be more difficult to look for significance quest than it would be to look for personal and group grievances, unfreezing, and social connection with known militants.

### **The radicalization puzzle (2015)**

In this paper Hafez and Mullins (2015) aim to synthesize research that can illuminate how Western Muslims turn to jihadi violence. The authors begin by criticizing several terrorism experts for defining radicalization as a *process* (e.g. “the social and psychological process of



incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology”). Hafez and Mullins argue that case histories of radicalization do not support the kind of orderly and linear progression that can be described as a process.

As Taylor and Horgan (2006) note, however, “To use a term like ‘process’ to describe activities like terrorism implies what we describe as terrorism to be actions of some kind associated with other actions and reactions, often expressed in some sort of reciprocal relationship.” This view of radicalization highlights a process of action and reaction in a dynamic of terrorist attack and government response to terrorism; the trajectory of this kind of dynamic is anything but linear and predictable.

Nevertheless, Hafez and Mullins recognize that few with radical ideas ever move to violent action, and distinguish radicalization of ideas (justifying violence for a political goal) from radicalization of action (from legal activism to participation in terrorist attacks). They suggest that four factors (‘pieces of the puzzle’) have to come together to produce terrorist action: grievance, networks, ideology, and enabling environment. Western Muslims have grievances relating to discrimination and foreign policies. Mobilization to action most often occurs through friendship and family connections. Ideology, including religion, provides a toolkit for constructing a social movement frame that justifies use of violence. Enabling environment includes Internet connections and training camps.

The four pieces of the puzzle advanced by Hafez and Mullins have much in common with Sageman’s (2008) four radicalization factors. Like Sageman, Hafez and Mullins mostly focus on radicalization in a small group or radicalization to join an existing terrorist group. The power of group dynamics is recognized in citing important work by Hafez showing that the great majority of foreign fighters going to Iraq made the journey in small groups. But neither of these

four-factor models have much to say about lone-wolf terrorists, who do not act as part of a group and have no connections with a militant group or its training camps.

### **What's wrong with radicalization (and extremism)?**

Beginning around 2010, a number of thoughtful scholars have raised doubts about the usefulness of the concept of radicalization. This section briefly recognizes these concerns and related concerns about the concept of extremism, then offers a two-pyramids model as remedy.

### **Eliding radical ideas and radical actions**

It is useful to begin with an extended statement of misgivings from Horgan.

When terrorism became too difficult to predict, we turned our focus to radicalization.

After all, a lot more people are radicalized than will ever become involved in terrorism, so, the assumption goes, it is easier to detect radicalized individuals. Rooting out radicalization has become a proxy for pre-empting terrorism.

But this logic, compelling as it was, faces some serious obstacles. It appears to be generally accepted wisdom that not everyone who holds radical beliefs will engage in illegal behavior. Though the consequences of terrorist atrocities are far-reaching, they continue to be perpetrated by very few individuals. [...]

However, a more challenging issue has begun to emerge. There is evidence that not all those who engage in violent behavior necessarily need to possess radical beliefs, an argument carefully supported by such research as that of Kilcullen's thesis on how counterinsurgency and counterterrorism breed 'accidental' guerillas. A lingering question in terrorism studies is whether violent beliefs precede violent action, and it seems to be the case that while they often do, it is not always the case. (Horgan, 2012, para 5-7).

Horgan cites similar concerns expressed by Githens-Mazer (2010), Sedgewick (2010), and

(with regard to insurgency) Kilcullen (2009).

Similar concerns have also been expressed by Kundnani (2015) and Patel (2011).in relation to UK counter-extremism programs.

The December 2013 report of the Prime Minister’s Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism illustrates that there remains an assumption that al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism is caused by particular kinds of religious ideology, what it calls a “poisonous extremist ideology that can lead people to violence.” The report also makes clear that the government remains committed to the development of policies that seek to reduce terrorism by preventing extremist ideology from circulating and intervening in the lives of those who have adopted it. (Kundnani, 2015, p.11)

The challenge being raised against radicalization and extremism is that these concepts elide ideas and action. A popular image of this elision is that radical ideology is a ‘conveyor belt’ that mechanically moves an individual on to violent action (Baran, 2005). As the critics point out, seeing ideas as the threat leads to a war on ideas. Targeting ideas is likely to produce a backlash, as happened with U.S. Muslim groups rising to oppose the (now delayed) FBI website designed to help teachers and students identify individuals flirting with violent extremism (Goodstein, 2015). As several Milestone authors have recognized, government over-reaction to terrorist threat (collateral damage, escalated policing, jujitsu politics) can create new threats

### **The two-pyramids model**

What is to be done? Getting rid of the words *radicalization* and *extremism* will not help; new names would soon arise to refer to the mechanisms by which individuals, groups, and mass opinion are moved to support or participate in political violence. More useful is recognizing that radicalization to extremist opinions is psychologically a different phenomenon from

radicalization to extremist action. As Borum (2011, p.30) has argued, “*Radicalization*—the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs—needs to be distinguished from *action pathways*—the process of engaging in terrorism or violent extremist actions.”

Research in Social Psychology has long established that attitudes do not easily translate to actions. In a seminal review of literature on the relationship between attitude and behavior Wicker (1969) noted, “Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that it is considerably more likely that attitudes will be unrelated or only slightly related to overt behaviors than that attitudes will be closely related to actions” (p. 65).

The weak relation between attitude and behavior is especially evident with attitudes relating to extreme behaviors. About 45% of college students report suicidal thoughts, yet only five percent ever attempt suicide (Rudd, 1989). Similarly, most people have homicidal fantasies at some point in their lives, and as many as 91% of all surveyed college students report homicidal thoughts (Duntley, 2005). Yet, mercifully, only a small minority ever act on these fantasies. Likewise, anger about group discrimination rarely translates into protests (Klandermans, 1997). Consistent with research on attitude and behavior, the two-pyramids model of radicalizations represents radicalization of opinion separately from radicalization of action (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko & McCauley, 2010; McCauley, 2013; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014).

**Opinion pyramid.** At the base of this pyramid are individuals who do not care about a political cause (*neutral*); higher in the pyramid are those who believe in the cause but do not justify violence (*sympathizers*); higher yet those who justify violence in defense of the cause (*justifiers*); and at the apex of the pyramid those who feel a *personal moral obligation* to take up violence in defense of the cause. This is not a stairway model: individuals can skip levels in

moving up and down in the pyramid.

Polling data can put percentages on the levels of the opinion pyramid. Over half of Muslims in the U.S. and U.K. believe that the war on terrorism is a war on Islam; these are sympathizers with the jihadi terrorist cause. At least five percent of Muslims in the U.S. and U.K. see suicide bombing of civilians in defense of Islam as often or sometimes justified. This five percent justifying violence projects to about 50,000 adult Muslims in both U.S. and U.K.—underlining the potential danger of backlash in targeting those with extreme opinions.

Empirical studies using opinion polls of U.S. Muslims demonstrate the usefulness of the opinion pyramid. Plotting along the layers of the pyramid percent of respondents who agree with least radical statements to most radical statements on the survey allows researchers to track changes in radicalization of opinion in a particular group over time or in reaction to a political event (McCauley, 2013).

**Action pyramid.** At the base of this pyramid are individuals doing nothing for a political group or cause (*inert*), higher in the pyramid are those who are engaged in legal political action for the cause (*activists*), higher yet those engaged in illegal action for the cause (*radicals*), and at the apex of the pyramid those engaged in illegal action that targets civilians (*terrorists*). Again this is not a stairway model; individuals can skip levels in moving up and down in the action pyramid.

Research using a scale that measures activist intentions (legal, non-violent actions) and radical intentions (illegal, violent actions) found that these were distinct dimensions which correlated differentially with past activism and past radicalism, as well as with measures of importance of country, ethnicity and political party (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009). Thus there is some empirical support to the distinction between the second (*activists*) and third (*radicals*)

levels of the action pyramid.

A recent study offered a creative way to study the relationship between the two pyramids of radicalization. The authors categorized fifteen extremist groups, based on their history of violent action, as activists, radicals, or terrorists. The content of their Internet websites was then coded on extremity of opinion. These ratings were plotted against groups' level of violent action. Results show little difference between activist and radical groups but a significant difference between radical and terrorist groups in greater power motive and less cognitive complexity in terrorist groups (Suedfeld, Cross & Logan, 2013).

As several Milestone authors have noted, jihadist actors are few--perhaps hundreds in U.S. or U.K.--in comparison with tens of thousands with radical opinions. And many individuals move to jihadist action without jihadist ideas—for personal revenge, status, escape, or love. The warrant for the two-pyramids model is the observation that ninety-nine percent of those with radical ideas never act. Conversely, many join in radical action without radical ideas: among the mechanisms in McCauley and Moskaleiko's *Friction*, four individual level mechanisms (Love, Risk and Status, Slippery Slope, Unfreezing) and three group-level mechanisms (Polarization, Competition, Isolation and threat) can bring radical action in the absence of radical ideas.

### **Lone-wolf terrorists**

Lone-wolf terrorists are a potential challenge to the two-pyramids model. If an individual does not join a terrorist group, and acts without group support, it might appear that lone-wolf terrorists are indeed cases where radical opinion directly produces radical action.

The first thing to note is that lone-wolf terrorists are rare, and may be the rare exceptions that tests the limits of the two-pyramids rule. More substantively, there may be two types of lone-wolf terrorist: the *disconnected-disordered* and the *caring-compelled* (McCauley &

Moskalenko, 2014).

**Disconnected-disordered** lone-wolf terrorists are like school attackers and assassins, who are predominantly lone actors, in showing five common characteristics: a grievance, planful rather than impulsive attack, weak social ties ('loners'), mental health problems (especially depression), and experience with weapons outside the military. A prominent example of this type is The Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski. These common characteristics suggest that disconnected-disordered lone-wolf terrorists may be part of a larger phenomenon of lone-actor perpetrators of planful violence who have little to lose in escaping the pain of depression and loneliness. It may be only the accident of how an individual describes his grievance that determines whether the attacker is called terrorist or assassin or school attacker.

Whether or not research finds a way to distinguish the psychology of lone-wolf terrorists from that of school attackers and assassins, the disconnected-disordered type is consistent with the two-pyramids model. This type moves to violence not only from radical ideas of grievance but from elements of unfreezing, escape, and status seeking (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014).

**Caring-compelled** lone-wolf terrorists are normal, socially connected and even idealistic individuals who feel an unusual degree of sympathy for victims of injustice; their feelings push them toward a personal moral obligation to bring justice to the perpetrators. An example of this type is anti-abortion terrorist Clayton Waagner, who shut down abortion facilities across the U.S.—twice—with anthrax threats (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011, Chapter 3). In Waagner's case, the move to radical action occurred in a moment of strong emotion, as he held the tiny body of his stillborn grand-daughter and thought of all the similar bodies lost to abortion.

Individuals of this type may be rare in having an excess of what is usually accounted a

virtue: sympathy. Rare or not, caring-compelled lone-wolf terrorists do represent a challenge to the two-pyramids model, and sympathy-induced outrage may be only one of the emotions that can push radical opinions to radical action. The next section returns to the importance of emotions.

Here it is important to note that individuals may have radical opinions for a long period of time before turning to violent action. Humam al-Balawi, the suicide bomber who attacked the CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan, was breathing jihadist fire on the Internet for months but did nothing until Jordanian intelligence sent him to Pakistan (Turcan & McCauley, 2010). Analysts usually look at motivation to assess risk of terrorist activity, but means and opportunity may be more useful for understanding why only a few with radical opinions ever get to radical action.

### **Implications of the two-pyramids model**

Taken together, the two pyramids are an antidote to eliding radical opinion with radical action, and to eliding extremist opinion with extremist violence. Rather than theorizing “radicalization” it is necessary to separately theorize radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action.

In February 2015 the White House convened a three-day Summit on Countering Violent Extremism. A December 2015 Google search for ‘countering violent extremism (CVE)’ produced 371,000 hits, and it is clear that CVE has become the predominant framing of U.S. response to terrorist threats. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security defines violent extremists as “individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political ends” (DHS, 2015). This definition assumes that terrorist violence is ideologically motivated—emotional reactions are off the table. A motive as simple as revenge for perceived Western humiliation of Muslims (Khouri, 2015) is not conceivable under this definition. The DHS definition also conflates support for political violence with committing radical violence—



multiplying the enemy, as noted above, by a hundred.

In short, the words and concepts used by the U.S. government to describe extremists and to frame reactions to their threat—language now dominant in the U.S. government--works against separating radicalization of opinion from radicalization of action. The language that focuses on Islamic Extremism and Violent Extremism as the enemy is a major impediment to the theoretical separation between radicalization in opinion and action.

A modest suggestion to forward this separation is so simple that it may be practical: to rename Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) as Countering Extremist Violence (CEV).

In the pages of *American Psychologist* it will perhaps seem odd that the distinction between attitude and behavior featured in every psychology textbook has not been obvious in efforts to understand terrorist violence. The textbook lesson is that the relation of attitude and behavior is generally weak--weakened by the power of 'other variables' such as norms, habits, and perceptions of control. Consistent with this lesson, radical opinions are neither necessary nor sufficient for terrorist violence.

### **Security implications of the two-pyramids model**

This section draws out a few implications of the two-pyramids model for security officials responsible for counter-terrorist strategy and tactics.

**There is no “conveyor belt” from extreme beliefs to extreme action.** It is plausible that radical beliefs inspire radical action, but research indicates that the connection is weak. Bad ideas are not like a dose of salts that must produce bad actions.

### **Fighting extreme ideas requires different skills than fighting terrorists.**

Radicalization of opinion is a phenomenon of mass psychology, whereas radicalization of action is a phenomenon of individual and small-group psychology. Fighting these two kinds of

radicalization requires different tools and different skills. One might argue, for instance, that the U.S. State Department could be more effective in the War of Ideas; whereas the police, the FBI, and the Defense Department might be more useful in finding and fighting terrorists.

**Less can be more.** Escalated policing can produce escalated terrorist violence and escalated sympathy and support for terrorist violence. Responding to the November 2015 attacks inspired by Islamic State, the French Parliament decreed a state of emergency: “All over France, from Toulouse in the south to Paris and beyond, the police have been breaking down doors, conducting searches without warrants, aggressively questioning residents, hauling suspects to police stations and putting others under house arrest” (Nossiter, 2015). The targets of this escalated policing are predominantly Muslims, giving Islamic State the jujitsu politics it hopes will convince Muslims all over Europe—20 million Muslims--that their future is with IS.

**Fewer enemies is better.** Targeting radical or extremist ideas is another kind of success for jujitsu politics. Perhaps the most dangerous force for hostility and discrimination against Muslims is the definition of the enemy as “fundamentalist Muslims.” Marine LePen, leader of an anti-immigrant party in France, offered this target in an interview with NPR’s Robert Siegel: “...we must eradicate Islamic fundamentalism from our soil.” As noted earlier, targeting ideas rather than actions multiplies the enemy by a hundred.

**Lessons from counterinsurgency.** Here it is useful to note the strong parallel between counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (2006) gives close attention to the insurgent strategy that aims to mobilize new support by eliciting government overreaction to insurgent attacks. The need to counter this strategy of jujitsu politics comes through in the first five *Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency Operations* (pp. 47-51).

(1) Sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be. (2) Sometimes, the more force is used, the less effective it is. (3) The more successful the counterinsurgency is, the less force can be used and the more risk must be accepted. (4) Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction. (5) Some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot.

Insurgency and terrorism are forms of political conflict. Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism are thus forms of political conflict. Mao Zedong's slogan is perhaps the shortest summary of the road to success for both counterinsurgency and counterterrorism: "Politics takes command."

### **Research implications of the two-pyramids model**

Separating radicalization of ideas from radicalization of action can open new research directions for both pyramids.

**Ideas vs. Actions.** The two-pyramids model leads immediately to the question of why and how some groups move to violent action while other groups with the same goals do not. An outstanding example of the kind of research needed is a project that brought multiple investigators and multiple content coding systems to a comparison of the rhetoric used by two al-Qaeda groups and two non-violent groups with similar ideology and goals (Smith, 2013). Larger scale comparisons of this kind may be possible with conflict databases such as MAROB (Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior), that include both violent and nonviolent groups.

**Behavioral trajectories.** Liberated from a supposed common grounding in radical ideas, research on radicalization to terrorist violence can focus on different behavioral trajectories. There seem to be at least five trajectories of radicalization to terrorist action. 1) An individual can move to political violence alone, without group or organizational support (lone wolf). 2) An individual can move to violence by joining an already violent group (ISIS volunteers). 3) An

individual can move to violence by volunteering as a suicide bomber for an already violent group (al Balawi's attack on the CIA at Khost). 4) A small and isolated group can move to political violence (Sageman's bunch of guys). 5) A small group within a larger activist movement can move to violence as part of intergroup competition (condensation, outbidding, or fission).

Research might aim to test the possibility that the psychologies associated with these five trajectories are different; it is even possible that there are different personality and demographic profiles associated with these trajectories. More confidently one can predict that group-level mechanisms of radicalization to action will be stronger for the last two trajectories, which focus on group dynamics and intergroup conflict.

**Emotions in ideas and actions.** Case histories of terrorists show them in the grip of anger, outrage, shame, humiliation and feeling the extreme forms of positive and negative identification that are commonly called love and hate (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011; Royzman, McCauley & Rozin, 2004). Psychologists, especially those familiar with appraisal theories of emotion (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989), have a head start in seeing the possibility that emotion includes an impetus to action. New databases with increasing detail about individual offenders--American Terrorism Study (ATS), U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), and Profiles in Individual Radicalization in the U.S. (PIRUS) offer the possibility of learning more about the emotional experiences associated with different levels of both radicalization of ideas and radicalization of action. In particular it seems possible that similar emotions are at work in moving individuals to both legal political activism and terrorist violence.

**Polling research.** Trends in public opinion relating to terrorism also need research. With regard to seeing the war on terrorism as a war on Islam, or seeing suicide bombing as justified in defense of Islam, how do U.S. Muslims differ from Muslims in predominantly Muslim

countries? How do these opinions differ for Muslims coming to the U.S. from different origin countries? What distinguishes the minority of U.S. Muslims who see suicide bombing as justified from the majority who say it is never justified?

Public opinion among those targeted by terrorists also needs study. An innovative study by Back, Kufner, and Egloff (2010) examined emotion words in millions of words of texts sent in the United States on September 11, 2001. Anger-related words increased throughout the day, ending six times higher than fear- and sadness-related words. In addition, experiments have found that U.S. students responding to images of the 9/11 attacks with anger are more likely to favor aggressive reactions to terrorism, whereas reactions of fear and sadness are related to support for more defensive reactions (Wetherell et al, 2013).

Understanding radicalization of public opinion on both sides of intergroup conflict can profit by greater attention to psychological research on group-based emotions (Mackie, Devos & Smith, 2000), especially moral emotions (Rozin, Lowery, Imada & Haidt, 1999). Matsumoto, Hwang & Frank (2012) have pointed to the potential of this kind of research, implicating the importance of anger, fear, shame, and disgust. Studies by Matsumoto and his colleagues have shown, for instance, that speeches of world leaders and ideological group leaders show increased anger, contempt, and disgust before initiating acts of aggression toward perceived enemies.

### **Looking forward**

Although a rational choice framework still dominates research on terrorism, there is growing awareness of the importance of emotions and affective experience in understanding political radicalization. Psychologists and psychological research are poised to bring a revolution in understanding both radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action.

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