II. Research Notes

Research on Radicalisation: Topics and Themes

by Alex P. Schmid

The following text is a slightly expanded version of the author's introduction to a panel titled 'Next Wave of Research Topics and Themes' held at the end of a Research Seminar on 'Radicalisation: From Theory to Practice'. It was held on 12-13 April 2016 in Vienna, Austria, and organised by the European Radicalisation Awareness Network. RAN was set up in 2010 by the European Commission as an EU-wide umbrella network of practitioners engaged to prevent and counter radicalisation to violent extremism. Its Centre of Excellence (RAN CoE) acts as a hub in connecting, developing and disseminating expertise and seeks to develop state-of-the-art knowledge.

Keywords: *Radicalisation; research; extremism; terrorism; European Union; Radicalisation Awareness Network*

Introduction

The idea that terrorism comes in waves was first introduced by David C. Rapoport, the grand old man of terrorism research who started teaching about the subject half a century ago. He distinguished between four waves:

- the Anarchist Wave (1870-1920s)

- the Nationalist Wave (1920s-1960s);

- -the New Left/Marxist Wave (from the 1960s to the 1980s), and the

- Religious Wave (from the late 1970s to today and beyond)

Rapoport´s theory is one of the better theories in terrorism research, although it has not gone unchallenged[1].

This raises the question whether there are also waves in terrorism research and, if so, what are the drivers. Clearly, one of the biggest drivers of terrorism research is government funding which became substantial only after 11 September 2001. Research on what was termed by the European Commission "Violent Radicalisation" began, with few exceptions [2], only after the attacks in Madrid (11/3/2004) and London (7/7/2005). It was a largely political construct; there had been hardly any social science research driven by this particular concept before the early 21ˢᵗ century.[3] The phenomenon of *homegrown terrorism* emerging from immigrant diaspora communities worried national and European policy makers. The US-UK intervention in Iraq, launched under false pretexts, was widely viewed as an attack on a Muslim country in immigrant circles. It angered many young Muslims in Western Europe, making some of them susceptible to recruitment efforts of Islamist terrorist organisations. Both the United States and European governments had been reluctant to explore the root causes of terrorism after 9/11 and the US-led attack on Iraq. By shifting the public discussion away from Western meddling in the Muslim world to Islamist meddling with Muslim youth in the West in the form of radicalisation and recruitment, politically safe ground was reached for exploring some drivers behind homegrown terrorism–such as the role of certain mosques and other recruitment hot spots such as prisons. A European Expert Group on "Violent Radicalisation" was set up by the European Commission. It was chaired by Fernando Reinares and produced in mid-May 2008 a concise report that was, however, shelved and never officially released.[4] The Expert Group's report interpreted radicalisation as

socialization to extremism, manifesting itself in acts of terrorism and observed that radicalisation happens at the "intersection of an enabling environment and a personal trajectory."[5]

Yet to this day the main focus of radicalisation research has been on the "vulnerable individual" who is somehow manipulated into becoming a terrorist, with radicalisation being the Black Box which contains the riddle of "what goes on before the bomb goes off', to use a snappy formulation of Peter Neumann, director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) in London. To this day, the 'enabling environment', has not received the same amount of attention as the 'vulnerable individual'.[6] Even less attention than to the meso-level has been given to macro-level drivers of radicalisation.

For research to become cumulative, one needs to agree on a definition. Despite more than ten years of research we still do not have a generally agreed upon definition of "radicalisation". The definition articulated by the European Union The definition articulated by the European Union–which presumably is the one RAN is following – is short but not very precise:

> "**Radicalisation:** *Individuals or groups becoming intolerant with regard to basic democratic values like equality and diversity, as well as a rising propensity towards using means of force to reach political goals that negate and/or undermine democracy.*"[7]

If we indeed would take–following this official European definition–democracy, equality and diversity as benchmarks for measuring degrees of radicalization, we would have a great deal more radicalisation in the world, and not just among "vulnerable youth".

My own definition of radicalisation is one that owes an intellectual debt to the work of Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko[8] but goes beyond them:

> "*an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include either*
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> > *(i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion,*
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> > *(ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or*
> >
> > *(iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes.*
>
> *The process is, on the side of rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialisation away from mainstream- or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilisation outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognised as appropriate or legitimate.*"

There are many other definitions [9] as there are many ways of looking at the problem. Radicalisation can be viewed as a *process of political socialisation* towards extremism. Alternatively, radicalisation can be viewed as a *process of conflict escalation* in terms of increased use of illegal methods of political action when confronting an opponent. It can also be seen as a *mobilisation and recruitment* process, masterminded by manipulative political or religious entrepreneurs. It can finally be viewed primarily as a *conversion process,* a life-changing transformation from a more individual-centered personal identity to a new, collective-centered identity which makes the vulnerable individual subservient to the demands of an extremist religious cult while making him or her think of belonging to a superior group of true believers.[10]

Problems with the Concept of Radicalisation

If we look at the history of radicalisation research we find that there was an initial focus on *prison radicalisation*, followed by one on *mosque and madrassa radicalization*. More recently the main focus is on *internet and social media radicalisation*. Should we call this sequence of research 'waves'?

It might perhaps be better to call the very strong focus on radicalisation itself as one wave of (counter-) terrorism research if we want to stick to this aquatic metaphor. Several leading researchers have expressed unhappiness with this heavy focus on radicalisation in terrorism research. To quote one of them, John Horgan: "We should not have allowed to have radicalisation center stage.(…) We are stuck with radicalisation".[11] My own unhappiness with the concept of radicalisation and its use has been expressed in a literature review.[12] It is threefold:

   i)   the association of radicalisation with radicalism (rather than extremism; the former is an outflow of the 18th century enlightenment while the latter is regressive and authoritarian rather than progressive and egalitarian);

   ii) the one-sided use of the term for non-state actors only (as if those holding state power never become more extreme in the course of a conflict); and

   iii) the almost exclusive focus on the micro-level of the vulnerable individual (rather than a broader focus on the meso-level of the radical milieu or the macro-level of society, state and international system).

There are more problems with the concept of radicalisation. In some cases individual radicalisation *follows* joining a terrorist group rather than the other way round. In other cases (e.g. defensive vigilantism) those using terrorist tactics were never radicalised. In most cases, those holding radical (as opposed to extremist) views never engage in terrorism. The question "Why some radicalise while most do not radicalise?" is still in need of satisfactory answers.

A Dozen Topics and Themes for Research

If we look not at *radicalisation* and its opposite concept *de-radicalisation* but at Counter-Terrorism as a whole, one can note a shift from a (i) law enforcement approach that treated terrorism as crime to a (ii) military approach in the 'Global War on Terror' which treats counter-terrorism as a special type of counter-insurgency. More recently, we have seen advocacy for a (iii) whole-of-government approach, followed by pleas for a (iv) whole-of-society approach and even a (v) whole-of-UN-approach. Perhaps one could also apply the wave metaphor to these five phases.

Leaving the wave metaphor behind, what topics and themes should be next in terrorism and counter-terrorism research in general and radicalisation research in particular? Here are a dozen suggestions:

   1. *Use of primary sources*: Clearly the gap between academic research and counter-terrorism intelligence needs to be narrowed. Intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies often have too many data but lack time and also lack some of the analytical skills available in academia to fully exploit this heap of unprocessed raw data.[13] The problem to get security clearances makes it, however, difficult for researchers to work with primary sources. Most governments keep their in-house information close to their chest. [14]

   2. *Re-contextualise research*: Research on terrorism and radicalisation needs to be re-contextualised and linked to the history of a conflict on the one hand and government politics on the other hand.[15] There is a great difference between someone radicalising in Syria or Gaza from someone radicalizing

in Brussels or Paris. There is a great difference between radicalisation in a democratic country and under an authoritarian dictatorship. There is a great difference between radicalisation in an occupied country and a free one, between a country at war and one at peace. Looking at radicalisation only from the perspective of those at the top social hierarchies both at home and abroad is bound to lead to biased results and bad policies.

3. *Address rather than avoid the role of religion:* Religion and conversion to a fundamentalist religious worldview needs to be problematised rather than avoided. There has been a tendency in the United Nations but also with many governments to say that terrorism has nothing to do with religion and, more in particular, that Islam is peaceful and terrorism is un-Islamic. Political correctness has stood in the way of unbiased research. It has become customary to use the term "violent extremism" to avoid the term "Islamist terrorism". It is repeated again and again that there is no profile of a terrorist. However, most contemporary terrorist attacks are perpetrated by self-declared Muslims, or recent converts to Islam. Here in Europe many of these radicalised young males in European urban diasporas have an immigrant background from Arab and other Muslim countries, have a history of involvement in drugs and crime, and a not insignificant part of them have been plagued by family (incl. domestic violence) and mental health problems. This does not amount to a single terrorist profile but is more than mere coincidence.

    There are two basic approaches to de-radicalisation: one focuses on bringing people back into the community, the other focuses on bringing them back to the true faith. We in the West have stressed almost exclusively the first approach while in Muslim-majority countries efforts are made to bring them back to the "true religion". While there are hundreds of religions, cults and sects, all claiming to be in possession of some special if not the only truth, we should not focus our attention on community only in order to avoid the perplexing world of beliefs. We should take the faith-based ideology of extremists seriously - without ideology radicalisation to a fanatic religious extremism, most terrorism is unlikely.

4. *The role of media-induced contagion* needs to be addressed; what we call radicalisation might, in part, be contagion – imitation of behavioural models seen in social and mass media. The news value system of our commercial media favours conflict over peace, violence over non-violence, action over reflection, perpetrators over victims, and therefore unwittingly promotes violence for effect. As long as our mass media do not distinguish between events which happen anyway and pseudo-events that happen only- or mainly - because there are journalists around and the media are most likely to report about them, we will continue to provide terrorists with free publicity in exchange for the blood of victims.

5. *The silence of the moderates:* We need to examine why the mainstream moderates in Islam are so hard to mobilise against the extremists who get most of the media and public attention. Are the moderates afraid of being killed by more extremist muslims? Are they secretly subscribing to the goals if not the means of the jihadists? Are they too divided, too disorganized or lacking resources? Or are they raising their voices but we do not hear them? These are issues that need to be addressed.

6. *The paradox of much sympathy but little support for jihadists*: We still have no satisfactory answers why so few radicalise given the fact that so many non-extremists are growing up in the same social circumstances as those who become terrorists. 99 percent of all Muslims have not radicalised but sympathy and sometimes support for jihadists is much more widespread. We also have to ask: what makes some more resilient to radicalisation than others? We need to look not only at pull- and push factors behind radicalisation to violent extremism and terrorism but also at resilience factors that

inhibit such radicalisation. Here is my own, admittedly untested, list of individual level resilience factors[16]:

A) Negative

- No family breakdown, with positive father figure;

- No previous involvement and exposure to violence;

- No violent friends or criminal gang or drug scene involvement;

- No signs of mental disorders;

- No fascination with weapons and martial arts.

B) Positive

- Ability to think and act for themselves rather than accept ideological slogans;

- Decent employment, with prospect of upward social mobility;

- Successful integration in immigrants´ host society;

- Acceptance of democracy, freedom and gender equality;

- Acceptance of information from non-Salafist sources.

7. *The role of the family in radicalisation and de-radicalisation:* Family members of young Muslims who have gone missing often express surprise that their son or daughter suddenly resurfaces in Syria. Through acts of omission or commission families play a role in such developments. Yet their role in both radicalisation and de-radicalisation is under-explored. It is, for instance, remarkable how often terrorist cells contain brothers from the same family or cousins and other kin.

8. *Indicators of Radicalisation:* A comparison of regional and national checklists on outward signs of radicalisation in real life and signs in online behaviour is urgently needed.[17] French authorities, for instance have published a list of such signs of radicalization:[18]

- They stop listening to music;

- Stop watching TV and going to the cinema;

- Dramatically change eating habits;

- Stop all sport activities;

- Change the way they dress;

- Sever relations with old friends;

- Reject members of their own family.

9. *Evaluation of de-radicalisation programs:* This should have one of the highest priorities. Such programs have mushroomed in recent years. Yet without systematic, rigorous and comparative evaluations of de-radicalisation programs, no real progress towards more promising practices can be made.

10. *Willingness of communites to reintegrate former extremists:* Like the concept of *civil society* the concept of *community* is used as a mantra. Yet to which community can de-radicalised former militants go back to? Who is willing to offer him or her employment? Which neighbourhood would accept a former terrorist criminal? Which community in particular should the ex-convict re-integrate to? Probably not the same one he came from. Community building, creating social cohesion, should be high on our national agendas. Yet in most countries it is not.

11. *Professional training of qualified mentors* to guide vulnerable people away from the pathways to radicalisation. There are many social workers and others engaged in this type of work, but proper training has often been lacking. Such mentors might be selected former extremists who have genuinely persuaded themselves and others that they were misled in the past.

12. *Greater focus on collective de-radicalisation:* Since individual de-radicalisation is labour-intensive, greater focus should be on the exploration of the possibilities for the de-radicalisation of a whole group of extremists (e.g. in a prison context).

Conclusion

These then are a dozen suggestions for new topics and themes of research on and around the issue of (de-) radicalisation. Some of them are not new but all are, in my view, under-researched.

What is most needed is that we try to better understand fanatical extremism and how to break or defuse it. To do so we have to have the courage to enter the radical and extremist milieus and talk to the angry, the disillusioned and the forlorn who search for significance and recognition in their lives and hope to find it in fundamentalist religion. How else can we hope to bring them back into the midst of our societies?

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Notes

[1] Tom Parker and Nick Sitter 2015. The Four Horsemen of Terrorism: It´s Not Waves, It's Strains. *Terrorism and Political Violence [TPV],* Vol. 28, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 197 -216.–For Rapoport's reply, see, in the same issue of TPV: David C. Rapoport. It is Waves, not Strains. Ibid., pp.217-224.

[2] Ted R. Gurr. Political Rebellion. Causes, Outcomes and Alternatives. New York: Routledge, 2015. Gurr defined radicalisation in these terms:"*Radicalisation* refers to a process in which the group has been mobilized in pursuit of a social or political objective but has failed to make enough progress toward the objective to satisfy all activists. Some become discouraged, while others intensify their efforts, lose patience with conventional means of political action, and look for tactics that will have greater impact. This ist the kind of situation in which modeling or „imitative" behavior occurs. Impatience and frustration provide an expressive motivation (anger) and rationalistic grounds (dramatic episodes of violence elsewhere) that make it likely that some activists will decide to experiement with terror tactics. The choice is made, and justified, as a means to the original ends of radical reform, group autonomy, or whatever. And the dynamics oft the process are such that the terrorists believe that they enjoy the support of some larger community in revolt". – Idem, p. 171 .Chapter 9. Terrorism in Democracies. When it occurs, why it fails (originally published in 2003).

[3] Cf. Rik Coolsaet. 'All Radicalisation is Local'. The Genesis and Drawbacks of an Elusive Concept.. Brussels :Egmont Paper 84, June 2016, p.5.

[4] The report is reprinted in Rik Coolsaet. Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge. European and American Experiences. 2nd edition. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2008. Appendix. Fernando Reinares et al. Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism: Report Prepared by the European Commission`s Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation. Brussels, 15 May 2008, pp.269 – 287. A.P. Schmid was one of the members of this group.

[5] Fernando Reinares et al., 2008,op. cit., p. 9 ;as quoted in Rik Coolsaet, op. cit., p.275.

[6] An exception ist the work of Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann (Eds.) Radikale Milieus. Das soziale Umfeld terroristischer Gruppen. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 2012.

[7] Source: Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA .

[8] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko. Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

[9] For an overview, see URL: http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013_2.pdf.–A new definition by Daniel Koehler, from his forthcoming monograph on de-radicalisation, defines the core concept in these terms:

"radicalisation can be understood as a process of individual depluralisation of political concepts and values (e.g. justice, freedom, honour, violence, democracy) according with those concepts employed by a specific ideology). With a higher degree of individual internalisation of the notion that no other alternative interpretations of their (prioritised) political concepts and values exist (or are relevant), one can show (e.g. in syntax, language and behaviour) the progression of the radicalisation process. (…) However, this means that a high level of radicalisation does not necessarily equal a high level of violent behaviour or extraordinary brutality.(…) The important link here is the fusion (and combination) with a certain type of ideology that *inherently denies individual freedom (or equal rights) to persons not part of the radical person's in-group and thusly the degree of ideological incompatibility with the mainstream political culture."*- Daniel Koehler. Understanding Deradicalisation: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism. Forthcoming, 2016, quoted from MS.- According to TerRa, a EU funded Dutch project: "Most definitions have in common that they refer to an individual process, often strongly influenced by group processes. During this process, the dominant political order is rejected, as well as dialogue, compromise and tolerance as means to bring change. Instead, violence is more and more adopted as an appropriate method to attain certain goals. Thus, at some point, radicalisation can (but does not necessarily) lead to terrorism." – IMPACT. TerRa Toolkit. Amsterdam: IMPACT, 2014, p. 3.

[10] See also: F.J. Buis and F. Demant. Extremisme en radicalisering. Chapter 7 in E.R. Muller, U. Rosenthal, R. de Wijk (Eds.). Terrorisme. Studies over terrorisme en terrorismebestrijding. 2008.

[11] Cit. Alex P. Schmid Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review. The Hague: ICCT, March 2013, p. 19.

[12] Ibid. In that review, I concluded that „…we have to admit that in the final analysis, ‚radicalisation' is not just a socio-psychological scientific concept but also a political construct, introduced into the public and academic debate mainly by national security establishments faced with political Islam in general and Salafist Jihadism in particular. The concept was ‚pushed' to highlight a relatively narrow, micro-level set of problem related tot the causes of terrorism that Western governments faced in their effort to counter predominantly 'home-grown' terrorism from second and third generation members of Muslim diasporas'. – Ibid. p.19.

[13] Marc Sageman. The Stagnation in Terrorism Research. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2014, pp. 565–580; see also rejoinders by Max Taylor, Alex P. Schmid, David H. Schanzer, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko in the same issue.

[14] There are exceptions and some of these demonstrate what can be gained from the fusion of police and intelligence data and academic analytical skills. Two recent Dutch examples are: Jasper L. de Bie. How Jihadist Networks Operate. Leiden University: Ph.D. Thesis, 14 April 2016; Bart Schuurman. Becoming a European homegrown jihadist: A multilevel analysis of involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005. Leiden University: Ph.D. Thesis forthcoming summer 2016.

[15] Cf. report of the International Crisis Group. URL: http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-state.aspx?utm_source=sm&utm_medium=fb&utm_campaign=exploiting-disorder .

[16] Alex P. Schmid. Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: a European Perspective. The Hague: ICCT Research Paper, 2015, p.40.

[17] Idem, p. 39.

[18] Cit. ibid.]