RADICALIZATION TO TERRORISM

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW®

SOPHIA MOSKALENKO and
CLARK McCAULEY

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WHAT IS RADICALIZATION?

Who are we to talk about radicalization and terrorism?

In recent years, terrorism and radicalization have (unfortunately) become something of a regular topic in the news, in movies and TV shows, and even in dinnertime conversations. It seems like everyone knows something and has a theory or two to explain the growing number of terrorist attacks around the world. Some blame it on Muslims, some on the news media and the internet, and some on the Central Intelligence Agency and the US government. It has become difficult to judge the quality of all this information. Thus, it makes sense to ask for credentials of the messengers.

We are social psychologists who have dedicated our careers to studying the psychological processes that underlie transitions to radicalism and terrorism. Clark McCauley was among the first psychologists to focus on terrorism, publishing and lecturing on the psychology of terrorism since the 1980s. Sophia Moskalenko became interested in the topic when she was a student of McCauley's at Bryn Mawr College in the 1990s.

Together we have authored a number of articles and books on the psychology of terrorism and radicalization, including the most cited article in the history of the main academic journal that focuses on terrorism, *Terrorism and Political Violence*.[1] As terrorism experts, we are regularly consulted by

the media, including radio shows, television news shows, and newspapers, as well as by the US Department of Homeland Security, the US Department of Defense, and other government agencies.

What kind of bias do we bring to the book?

Academics don't like to admit to biases. We like to think we are led only by the facts before us. However, being an academic creates a bias of its own. We approach social problems with the assumption that there is an explanation for what we are seeing—an explanation that is testable and falsifiable, one that can be confirmed by other researchers looking at the same problem.

For those who study terrorism, this bias means that we do not accept explanations of terrorism that border on mystical ("terrorists are evil") or that are too vague to be tested ("terrorists are crazy").

Another bias of academics is to try not to reinvent the wheel. It has been said that the goal of science is to explain as many phenomena as possible with as few ideas as possible. We like to draw upon the body of knowledge already accumulated by social science rather than trying to invent new explanations that relate only to the facts of radicalization and terrorism. In other words, we aim to integrate terrorism research inquiry into the more established branches of social science.

There are good and bad consequences of this scientific approach. The good is that there is an economy of terminology and concepts. If an aspect of terrorism is like something already found in the vast library of social sciences (e.g., violence and aggression), we can take the terms and results of studies that were already done and use these to understand terrorism. The bad consequence is that existing social science may miss something important about how individuals and groups move to political violence. That is, concepts and results from existing social science may miss something unique about the

psychology of terrorists. We are willing to accept the possibility of missing something unique in order to obtain the value of applying knowledge already available.

Our bottom line is that the concepts and results of social science are our best tools for understanding terrorism. Even if the data are limited and the theories are still evolving, scientific inquiry continues to refine them, independent of public opinion and political climate. The alternative is to rely on pundits' opinions, on journalists' sensationalist headlines, and on politicians' self-serving interpretations of terrorism. These are not likely to be sufficient to understand the complexities of how normal people are moved to abnormal violence.

What are some of the issues related to radicalization that this book will not *cover?*

We are not theologians and cannot speculate on whether or how certain sacred texts justify radicalization and terrorism. For psychologists, the more interesting question has to do with what is happening to people who decide to take up radical activity, whether they pledge allegiance to Islam, Buddhism, communism, anarchy, or white supremacy.

Psychology has demonstrated again and again that people tend to justify and intellectualize choices and actions they take for reasons that have little to do with their justifications. When we say we do something for a particular reason, very often we are wrong.

For example, we are more likely to like a stranger we meet while we are holding a warm cup of coffee than a stranger we meet while holding a cold cup of coffee. But, if asked why we liked the stranger, we are not going to mention the cup of coffee, offering instead explanations that have to do with the stranger or with our own character.[2] Violence (riots, violent crimes, and aggression in competitive sports) is more likely on hot days than on cool days, though people who act violently hardly ever notice how the heat affects their behavior.

Similarly, radicals and terrorists sometimes use ideology to justify choices they make for reasons that have little to do with religion or politics.

Because we are not politicians, we have the luxury to leave aside moral questions related to radicalization: Who is right and who is wrong? Who started the violence? Who has the right to escalate violence? Who should be responsible for ending violence? Questions like these are beyond the scope of this book. Both terrorists and states have moral arguments for violence. "Collateral damage" of drone attacks is justified by governments that wage wars in terrorists' homelands; "collateral damage" of suicide bombing is justified by terrorists who wage wars in Western cities. Violence is gruesome and not easy for an average person to undertake. As psychologists, we are drawn to the mystery of how and why people cross over the threshold that makes violence acceptable.

What does radicalization *mean?*

Radicalization is a process by which individuals, groups, or even large publics become increasingly accepting of violence for a cause. Terrorism is an end point; radicalization is the road that leads to that end point.

Radicalization may begin with thinking about destroying property of, or hurting or even killing someone who represents a group or a cause that the individual finds objectionable. This is the mildest form of radicalization. At one time or another, many of us may have experienced something like radicalization of opinion.

For example, some get so emotionally involved in US presidential elections that they entertain violent thoughts about representatives of the candidate or party they oppose. These thoughts are a symptom of radicalization: radicalization of opinion. These thoughts are just thoughts: Most people will never form a plan for carrying out their violent fantasies, much less act on them.

A small minority, however, will go beyond radical thoughts to engage in radical actions. These individuals might break windows of campaign headquarters, destroy campaign signs, or even physically attack those who express support for a candidate they oppose. Behaviors like these are evidence of radicalization of action.

To understand radicalization to terrorism, both radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action are important to consider. For the purposes of terrorism policing and prevention, however, radicalization of action is more important than radicalization of opinion. We have more to say about the distinction between radicalization of opinion and radicalization of action, and their relationship with terrorism, in Chapter 6.

What is the difference between activists and radicals?

Activists are people who are engaged in nonviolent and legal political action. Radicals are people who participate in actions that are illegal, including violent actions.

Participating in political protests, circulating petitions, carrying political slogans, or speaking one's political mind in public forums are all examples of activism. By contrast, staging illegal sit-ins, clashing with police or security forces, and burning or breaking property are examples of radicalism. Planting explosives and shooting or throwing Molotov cocktails are even more radical actions.

At times, the transition from activism to radicalism is a matter of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, a protest that starts out peacefully is attacked by security forces, and activists who see their friends being battered must choose: to remain nonviolent or to engage in violence to protect their friends. Some might become radical in that moment, reciprocating violence directed against those they care about.

Most activists never become radicals, remaining committed to accomplishing their political goals through socially

and legally acceptable means. When asked about activist and radical intentions, people in the United States and other countries generally show a negative relationship between the two. The more one is inclined to engage in activist action, the less likely one is to engage in radical action and vice versa. This inverse relation suggests that activist action may act as a buffer against radicalization, or perhaps that activists believe that legal protest can make a difference but radicals do not believe this.

Does radicalization always lead to terrorism?

No.

Sometimes, instead of leading to terrorism, radicalization leads to a life of crime, where smaller infractions become more and more serious, culminating in violent crime. Perhaps, in the process of radicalization, an individual might join a criminal organization—a street gang or a drug cartel. At the apex of this trajectory is a hardened criminal who uses violence to get money and status, not to achieve political goals.

Radicalization is a term mostly used in the context of terrorism, but the process is general and can be observed in other contexts in which newcomers must habituate to violence. An individual joining the military learns a code of conduct and a value system that justifies a certain kind of violence—that commanded by a military superior. Even in the context of terrorism, radicalization does not necessarily progress to terrorism. Many people become radicalized in thoughts, justifying violence in their minds yet never doing anything about it.

For example, studies show that about 10 percent of US Muslims believe that suicide bombing is "sometimes" or "often" justified in defense of Islam. From the total of about 1 million adult Muslims living in the United States, that percentage corresponds to about 100,000 people. Fewer than 1 percent of these "radicalized in opinion" among the US Muslims have been implicated in any kind of terrorist plot or action.[3]

Thus, 99 percent never move from radicalization of opinion to the more extreme radicalization of action.

Some people might progress from thoughts to small actions in support of terrorism—for example supplying terrorists with money, shelter, or giving them other material support—but draw the line at committing terrorist actions themselves. These individuals have moved past radical opinion to radical action––illegal support for terrorists—but not to terrorist action.

Only a small minority will ever directly engage in terrorist action. For example, in the United States between 2011 and 2015, a total of 11 terrorist attacks were carried out by jihadist Muslims. (For comparison, 78 terrorist attacks were carried out in the United States by non-Muslims in the same time period.)[4]

As atrocious as the idea of justifying suicide bombing is, for the overwhelming majority of those who entertain it, it is just an idea. Only a tiny proportion of those with radical thoughts will engage in radical actions.

Is radicalization always bad?

Not always.

Radicalization is a rite of passage for those who want to serve the nation in the military, police, or security forces.[5] Training for these professions includes building up one's tolerance for violence and willingness to engage in it—for the right reasons. We all benefit from these brave men and women's radicalization in service of our freedom and safety.

Every revolution in history has been a result of radicalization, including the American Revolution. Even today, the US government would classify the Founding Fathers as an extremist movement.[6] Radicalization is what created the American nation.

The revolutions of the Arab Spring that toppled dictatorial regimes, the Georgian, Ukrainian, and Armenian revolutions that toppled Russian-installed puppet governments—all resulted from radicalization of citizens who marched in the

streets, facing police weapons, throwing Molotov cocktails, and engaging in combat with pro-government forces. When peaceful democratic processes are compromised, radicalization can offer the only path to freedom.

While radicalization is not always bad, it is always dangerous. Like a weapon, it can defend or protect, but it can easily be misused. The powerful force of radicalization can be manipulated by cunning and calculating powers. Hitler's government included a ministry of propaganda, headed by Joseph Goebbels, whose goal was to radicalize the German populace. It succeeded first in radicalizing Germans against Jews and other minorities within Germany and then against other nations that Germany fought in World War II.

In Chapter 11 on mass identity manipulations (MIMs), we lay out some tools for mass radicalization, many of which were successfully utilized by Goebbels. The unprecedented interconnectedness through the social media that we experience today makes a fertile ground for radicalization through MIMs (e.g., the targeted ads designed by Cambridge Analytica to influence US politics). In Chapter 12 on modern US radicalization, we showcase evidence for radicalization among US citizens and illuminate some of the MIMs and mechanisms responsible for this mass radicalization.

Do people at the extreme of radicalization, like Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri, share the same path of radicalization?

As with many human experiences, radicalization is not the same for every person. Identical events affect different people differently, depending on their genetics, upbringing, and situational factors. Being robbed at gunpoint in a dark alley will cause one person to develop anxiety disorder, another to stock up on ammunition and never leave home without a gun, a third to become obsessed with revenge against the criminal, and a fourth to shake off the incident and move on with their life.

Not only do identical events affect people differently, radicalization may result from different events. While one individual needs to be robbed at gunpoint in order to become a vigilante, for someone else, only hearing about someone being robbed at gunpoint would be enough to set them off on a radical trajectory. So, too, no two radicalization histories are exactly alike.

Understanding radicalization that leads one to become the leader of a terrorist organization, such as Osama bin Laden's trajectory, means considering not just the events that precipitated transition to terrorism but also the individual's character and personality. Terrorists are rare, but terrorist leaders are rarer still. Not only do they themselves radicalize to violent action, they also inspire others to do the same.

Osama bin Laden was shy and religious as a youth, a son of a multimillionaire businessman. Many in his position would have chosen to live an easy life of inherited money, leaving all politics aside. Instead, bin Laden chose to use his money to fight what he saw as a holy war against the apostate governments of Muslim countries and against the United States, which he saw as their backer. His unwavering devotion to his cause, coupled with his considerable wealth, won him admiration of jihadis worldwide and made him the leader of al-Qaeda.

The pivotal moments in bin Laden's radicalization are shared by many other terrorists. Like other terrorists, bin Laden was personally moved by what he saw as victimization of Palestinians by Israel and, more generally, by victimization of Muslims around the world. Like others, his radicalization was fueled by his love for an already radicalized individual—in his case, Dr. Abdullah Azzam, who became his mentor. Like others, bin Laden's radicalization was affected by attraction to the thrill and status of combat: He personally engaged in combat against the Soviets in Afghanistan and became something of a Saudi war hero as a result. Slippery slope, or a gradual progression of increasing commitment to the cause, where each previous action justifies the next, marked his as

well as other terrorists' radicalization. The dynamics of the close-knit group of fighters that bin Laden led in Afghanistan and, later, those who made up the kernel of al-Qaeda contributed to bin Laden's radicalization.

What made bin Laden a terrorist is not unique. What made him unique among terrorists is another question. A part of the answer lies within bin Laden's own character—his piety, his willingness to live his beliefs to the fullest no matter the cost, and his steadfastness and devotion to the cause. These may be inborn personality traits. The other part of the answer is perhaps the special way bin Laden was treated by his enemies—first the Arab governments that he opposed, including his home-country government of Saudi Arabia, and then the United States. His provocations made him—one person—the target of powerful enemies. Withstanding attacks directed against him, he grew in the eyes of Muslims sympathetic to his cause. Bin Laden developed skills and persona to stand up to mighty enemies, in the process becoming the international symbol of Islamic terrorism.

Who studies radicalization?

We are psychologists who study radicalization. Along with our colleagues in the same field, we try to understand the mechanisms that move someone from peace to political violence. *Clinical psychologists* are interested in the psychopathologies that may contribute to radicalization. Clinical psychologists explore, among other things, what is psychologically atypical or abnormal about terrorists. *Social psychologists*, like us, are more interested in the circumstances that may result in individuals or groups becoming radical. Social psychologists ask questions such as What were the events or relationships that made thoughts, feelings, or behaviors more radical?

Sociologists consider radicalization in the context of the culture and society in which it arises. They try to uncover the tendencies that affect broader populations and make them more prone to radicalization. Sociologists ask questions such as How do poverty and marginalization affect radicalization rates across communities?

Political scientists view radicalization through the lens of political systems, government policies, and their impacts on populations affected by them. They seek answers to questions such as What are the conditions in which turning to terrorism is a rational choice?

Historians study radicalization as it developed over time, seeking informative patterns. They study, for example, how and why some terrorist groups deradicalized, moving away from political violence, sometimes becoming legitimized as political parties.

Criminologists study radicalization as a form of criminal behavior that may be related to gang violence, assassinations, and school shootings. They trace the dynamics of terrorist incidents and try to relate their occurrence to gun sales, age and education of offenders, rates of incarceration, and proliferation of radical rhetoric in print or internet in particular regions at particular times.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11), the US government has made a concerted effort to bring these different specialists together for collaboration and exchange of ideas. For many years, the authors of this book were part of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (NC-START) that was created especially for the purpose of bridging disciplinary divides for better understanding of radicalization. Many important studies emerged as a result of the collaborative efforts of NC-START and other interdisciplinary centers.

What are some of the methods used to study radicalization?

Interviews

The most direct method of studying radicalization is to talk with radical individuals. Psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists sometimes conduct interviews with terrorists or their supporters. As you might imagine, this is a very labor-intensive, expensive, and elusive task. First, where can we find terrorists to talk with?

The easiest place to find them is prison. The problem is that, in the United States at least, access to imprisoned terrorists is restricted to those with high security clearance and permission from the relevant government agencies. What's more, the data from these interviews would likely be classified, meaning they would not be available to share with other researchers or the public. Other countries, including Israel, allow researchers access to terrorists in their prisons, and we have learned a great deal from interviews with terrorists conducted by psychologists such as Ariel Merari, who is based in Israel.

In addition, researchers have sought access to former terrorists who have become deradicalized. Researchers such as Donatella della Porta and John Horgan have explored what ex-terrorists report about their own experience of radicalization and deradicalization.

The advantage of interview studies is obvious: You gets answers from the radical individual on how and why they became radicalized, with no guesswork, no filters, and no interpretations. The disadvantage is, well, that people lie. Imprisoned terrorists may want to appear better for a possible parole hearing or an appeal; deradicalized terrorists may want to project a manicured image of themselves for their legacy.

Also, people often can't recall their own motives accurately. Suppose someone asked you how you ended up in a particular school or occupation. Can you really remember what was in your teenage mind?

Case studies

Second best to an actual interview with a living, breathing terrorist is a detailed study of a terrorist's "footprint"—their own blogs, posts, diaries, emails, and letters, as well as friends' and relatives' witness accounts. These data are put together in a case study, which is then analyzed for evidence of trends or characteristics that may explain radicalization. We are among the researchers who have used case studies to understand mechanisms of political radicalization.

One disadvantage of a case study is that it may not answer all the questions the researcher wants to ask. There may simply be nothing in the terrorist's own or her contemporaries' writing to explain why one day she transitioned from giving money to jihadists to becoming one herself. On the other hand, a case study may open unexpected directions for research, whereas an interview is limited by the questions asked and answered.

Surveys

The most frequently used method of social sciences is often used to study radicalization. Some researchers have traveled to areas where radicalization is prevalent, such as Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, or Syria, to administer surveys face to face. Others have used commercial polling agencies that are still present on the ground in those dangerous regions. Because radicalization is not limited to war-torn areas in the Middle East, researchers have solicited survey data from populations at risk in Western countries—for example, Muslims in the United States and Europe. We have used polling data from both Muslim and Western countries to try to learn where radical opinions come from.

One disadvantage of a survey is that the questions have to be very carefully phrased so that they are not threatening for the participant and yet are revealing to the researcher. Some clarity can be lost in framing the questions.

Another disadvantage is that terrorists are few and dangerous; security services would like to know how to spot them, not look at survey responses from people with violent fantasies that will never materialize. Thus, surveys usually provide answers to questions about lower level radicalization of opinion, not about radicalization of action. Advantages of surveys are that they are cheap, fast, and more objective than the qualitative data from interviews or case studies.

Databases

All kinds of data are collected and compiled into databases that can then be used to try to find connections between a variety of individual characteristics and terrorist acts. For example, the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) compiles data on crimes committed by ideologically motivated extremists in the United States. Using ECDB, criminologists Josh Freilich and Todd Chermach were able to show that the greatest number of terrorist attacks in the United States are not by immigrants from Muslim countries and not even by US-born Muslims. Instead, it is far right extremists who have perpetrated the most terrorist attacks in the United States between 1990 and 2017, with more than twice as many victims as those of jihadist terrorists.[7]

If the far right extremists are more deadly than Islamic extremists, then why is public perception of their relative threat so mistaken? To answer this question, psychologist Erin Kearns and colleagues analyzed a different database, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), looking at all terrorism attacks on US soil from 2011 to 2015. They then searched the internet for mentions in the news media of each one of the incidents in the GTD for those 5 years. What they found that there were about 4.5 times as many news media stories about Islamic terrorism incidents as there were about any other kind of terrorism. The general public gets the idea about the relative danger of terrorist attack from the amount of media coverage. It is not surprising that the public perception of the threat of

Islamic terrorism is far greater than it should be: It is informed by a disproportionate attention in the news.

Summary

Interviews, case studies, surveys, and database analyses are the most prevalent methods of studying radicalization. Researchers continue to develop new and different ways of researching terrorism and radicalization. For example, linguistic analysis of terrorists' writings and speeches, including internet postings, can identify particular words or phrases that correlate with radicalization. Network analysis can help identify social connections between terrorists and nonradicalized individuals, and trace the degrees of separation that affect radicalization. The organizational structure of terrorist groups is studied to try to understand how hierarchy and leadership affect radicalization of new members. Content and musical structure of songs popular among terrorists are analyzed for elements that make these songs appealing and emotionally mobilizing.

There will be more methods for studying radicalization. With the rapid development of the digital domain, new methods relying on an individual's digital footprint are yet to come. The field of radicalization research is young and growing.

How can researchers believe anything people say on surveys or interviews about radicalization?

It is a fair concern. People lie. When it comes to questions about radicalization, people may lie to avoid detection by security services, to minimize their responsibility for damaging and illegal behaviors, or to project a more socially acceptable persona to the researchers—or even to themselves.

One way that social scientists address the problem of lying is assuring anonymity of responses. Responses to interview

questions or to survey questions are coded in a way that makes it impossible for the researchers themselves, not to mention any government officials, to connect participants' answers with their personal information. All participants are assured of anonymity before they agree to be part of the study.

Of course, it is possible that participants wouldn't believe assurances of anonymity. But then, they can always say no to the study—the fact that they agree to participation suggests that they feel safe in answering questions. Participation in itself is evidence of participants' willingness to contribute truthful information.

Second, social scientists who work with survey data have "tricks" they use to maximize truthful responses to sensitive subjects such as radicalization. For example, we often ask questions about radicalization in two formats: personally (i.e., "Do you believe the War on Terrorism is a war on Islam?") and also as *meta-opinion*, or opinion about opinions of others (i.e., "Thinking now not about yourself, but about other US Muslims, how many would you say agree that the War on Terrorism is a war on Islam?"). Meta-opinion questions allow participants to express their true feelings without risking being considered a radical. In places where many fear the operations of security forces (e.g., Palestine), we find a big difference between personal and meta-opinion questions about radical opinions: Meta-opinion responses tend to be more radical than personal responses. Where this is the case, we rely more on meta-opinion responses than on personal responses. On the other hand, in the United States, the difference between personal and meta-opinion responses is so small as to be negligible, suggesting that respondents are answering honestly to personally worded questions.

Third, in dealing with survey data on radicalization, researchers can anticipate the way in which participants would lie, if they were indeed lying. If anything, participants' responses would be minimizing their violent ideas and intentions, not maximizing them. So, to the degree that participants