

By Shahid Bux

In February 2008, five Muslim youths were acquitted of terrorism convictions after a ruling by judges that the collection and reading of radical Islamist material was not unlawful unless there was explicit evidence that this was to be employed to encourage violent activity. The men were originally prosecuted and convicted under Section 57 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which rules it an offence to be in possession of books or material thought useful to a terrorist. The conviction was later quashed when the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Phillips said, "[Section 57] must be interpreted in a way that requires a direct connection between the object possessed and the act of terrorism." It was also announced by the Court of Appeal that the grounds on which the accused had been convicted were "unsound", and there was little basis for proving that material had been downloaded with the purpose of using it.[i]

Not only does this case draw attention to the dangerous precedent of using presumed intention as a basis for discerning action, but it also underlines the difficulties in delineating the extent to which intention (if indeed proven or relevant) may extend and facilitate expression through terrorism. What is clear at least is that cases of this nature further obscure the boundaries of who or what we define as terrorist. This growing ambiguity has found credence in the need to understand and manage a "new" threat.

The expression of this threat is seen as terrorist attacks from New York, Bali, Madrid and London, among others, causing governments and academics to focus increasingly on the antecedents of such violence. Of particular interest has been the process of radicalisation, by which, individuals or groups move into and adopt violent activity. The term radicalisation has become a ubiquitous frame or 'buzzword'[ii] both in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, along with terms used in similar contexts such as integration and multiculturalism. Given such focus, the term has become tendentiously linked with terrorism. However, in general there is no any clear understanding of what is implied.

Notwithstanding the increasing reference to radicalisation, it is a term that remains poorly defined. At a political and social level radicalisation is used to refer to a shift in social and political views, beliefs, and principles. Indeed, the essential quality on which most perspectives on radicalisation concur is this presumed shift from one state to another, be it in beliefs, views and ultimately behaviour. In this sense therefore the expression radicalisation seems to reflect a process rather than an end in itself. This also implies that it may not necessarily result in violence (a behaviour) as opposed to a change of view (in some sense cognitions).

Not all authors accept this distinction however. One recent example is a study by Marc Sageman, who defines radicalisation as the process of "transforming individuals from rather unexceptional and ordinary being into terrorists with the willingness to use violence for political ends"[iii].

Self evidently, every political spectrum has its own 'extremities' or individuals who might come to adopt 'radical' views. In this sense it is important to distinguish what we might conceive of as 'radical', from a more profound behavioural expression of this concept, such as violence expressed through terrorism. The term 'radicalism' is used here to connote "...a person holding a deep-felt desire for fundamental socio-political changes, combined with a strong conviction of holding the truth, and having the right to speak on behalf of a larger group".[iv] This can be distinguished from violent radicalisation, the focus here, which is seen as an extension of this particular process, and one that involves radical ideas being accompanied by behavioural expression of violence. This particular process is highlighted in the individual context, as distinct from the radicalisation of societies.

Explanations for and presumed "causes" of violent radicalisation have been of more direct concern, dominating academic and popular discourse for some time. Partly owing to a paucity of empirical knowledge among other conceptual concerns, there is little consensus over general trends or explanatory factors.

Nature of violent radicalisation

Accounts of violent radicalisation at the individual level tend to stream across various dimensions. In particular, there is still a tendency to look for and identify personal qualities that helps distinguish why one person engages in violent radicalism and another does not. Such approaches tend to focus on identifying the presumed role by personality factors and other personal qualities thought to shape individual development.[v] The frequency with which such claims are made is hardly surprising given the seemingly inexplicable horror associated with terrorist activity.

The myth that violent radicalisation afflicts a particularly "vulnerable" sector of society in particular has currency in popular discourse, as was apparent in Hazel Blears's comment in October 2007 that "the process of radicalisation can be rapid. In some cases, people are isolated from families, indoctrinated and manipulated within a matter of months"[vi].

The potential for these assertions to undermine evidence based policy analysis, and inter alia the important role of individual agency is often not sufficiently underlined. Individuals are active not passive agents in the process of violent radicalisation, a point misunderstood in the quote above. Indeed, the lack of evidence with which to corroborate these approaches has recently given way to broader and potentially more fruitful avenues.

A related but slightly broader approach is that based on identifying 'push' factors. Push factors concern issues related to contextual influences thought to predispose violent expression, also known as 'root' causes or structural factors. Factors often cited in this respect include lack of legal recourse to address grievances, relative deprivation, social exclusion, family background, lack of integration among others.

Indeed, a major problem with these approaches is that they undermine the role of the individual in perceiving and construing how these circumstances impinge on them and, as Sageman points out "...to become aware of what they have in common, and to decide what to

do to influence them"[vii]. In short, it implies a passive view of the individual dissociating the importance of choice.

A further problem is that terrorism is a low incidence behaviour, although many individuals experience these presumed 'push' factors, and do not move into the behavioural expression of violence.

An alternative approach looks at 'pull' factors, generally thought to lie within the social and organisational context. This implies that group forces and group dynamics support and impinge on processes of violent radicalisation, with possible factors including social bonds, leadership influences, and group identification. These factors indicate a more active role for the individual concerned and allow understanding of how certain forms of interaction may escalate to the point of violence.

Certainly while both 'push' and 'pull' approaches may have some importance in specific cases, the importance of either of these hinges on the relationship between the individual and their social and situational contexts, neither of which can sufficiently address this key concern in isolation. The increasing fixation with 'reliable indicators', 'theories' or 'root causes' which are somehow expected to explain violent radicalisation are often deterministic and linear in nature, stripping it of its complexity in attempts to cluster together cases implying a particular 'profile' of the violent radical activist.

As Horgan points out, this is often also buttressed by the perception that there exists a "...moment of epiphany that explains some assumedly conscious decision to become a terrorist",[viii] a view which lacks any strong evidence and undermines the "gradual sense of progression"[ix] into violent radical movements. Sorting out the relative importance of different factors within and across cases makes extracting general trends particularly difficult, and accounting for the interactions between factors within and across cases is perhaps a more useful approach.

It is important to appreciate in this respect is that individuals are rarely 'recruited' in any formal sense into violent radical groups. Opportunity factors may enable or facilitate access to and involvement in violent radical movements, which is where 'pull' factors may acquire some explanatory value. Given the increasing importance of the Internet, this may offer another route into or in support of processes of violent radicalisation. But opportunities or avenues for involvement alone are insufficient in explaining such processes.

The importance of individual choice - and indeed the dialectic between opportunity and choice - are crucial conditions for involvement. This implies that individuals choose to engage in violent radical movements, which does not undermine the role of potentially coercive forces within the movement helping sustain involvement, but highlights how agency underpins the process.

Indeed, the importance of other factors such as ideology and group identification may well lie in understanding the dynamics of agency, as Sageman points out: "Consciousness, like solidarity and collective identity, does not always precede action, but may arise in the process of carrying out an action. These are processes that develop simultaneously, mutually

influencing and reinforcing each other".[x]

This highlights the dangers of assuming links between intentions and actions in a linear causal manner, as the introductory case illustrated. It also exposes the inadequacy of 'push' and 'pull' approaches in isolation, and the importance of accounting for the interaction between opportunity and choice in any attempts to understand violent radicalisation. This confluence is certainly not unique to violent radicalisation and manifests in many different life choices, but appreciating the dynamics that characterise and underpin this interaction may shed light on specific processes of violent radicalisation.

Given this, a key issue briefly mentioned earlier is the interaction between the existing conditions (which may include 'push' and 'pull' approaches) and the individuals' perception of those conditions, which can be understood by discerning how ideology impinges on and is constructed both by personal experiences and individual agency.

Understanding how individuals come to accommodate violence as a means of expressing this perception is a key. This entails a dissociation from previously held assumptions and identification with a more 'radical' viewpoint from which to see the world (either implicitly or explicitly). For many violent radical activists individual agency and exposure to a social context may precede and facilitate this process.

Importantly, these interactions are iterative rather than linear, and evaluating the relative weight of each factor requires examining the complexities of each case. Returning to the introductory case, dissent and action may be two separate processes. Dissent refers to one legitimate product of radicalisation, which becomes illegitimate when associated with violence. However, it does not neatly follow that one precedes the other and the two processes may co-occur and impinge on each other. This again highlights the difficulties in relying on linear causal models of violent radicalisation.

Summary

To summarise, the idea that a single theory or model of radicalisation exists is misleading and unverified. That the argument is framed in this particular way suggests a disregard of evidence-based analysis. Movement into violent radicalisation entails several competing and interactive processes which help shape and impinge on progression towards violent radicalism, a few of which have been highlighted here.

Many existing explanations inadequately identify certain 'vulnerable' individuals or sectors in society, or presumed structural causes implying crude mechanistic models of radicalisation. Ultimately, these explanations tend to emasculate the role of the individual in both perceiving and acting within their context, and the role of choice and opportunity in enabling access and routes into violent radical movements. They also fail to explain why so few individuals express themselves through violence, given so many are exposed to similar conditions and opportunities for expression.

It is often this access and opportunity for expression that allows individuals to move toward

progressively more militant beliefs and forms of action, highlighting the significant role of group dynamics in facilitating and shaping the development of the individual. Given this, scholars have recognised for some time the difficulty in sorting out the relative influence of different factors, and how much each may impinge on the individuals' decisional calculus. However, by recognising distinctions between factors that may enable access and involvement in violent radical movements, from those that may focus and shape the development of the individual, a more effective means of designing targeted interventions may be identified.

As demonstrated here, such processes are often iterative in nature, underlining the importance of measures being implemented at a variety of levels. In particular, targeting specific access routes such as the Internet and other forums or social networks, as is currently the case, continue to provide a crucial tool in managing the diffusion of violent radicalisation.

To this extent, preventing radicalisation may be an ambitious pursuit, and a more realistic target may be to manage its diffusion and identify risk management strategies, such as limiting factors that might inform individual choice and opportunity. Initiatives implemented in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen and Indonesia include deradicalisation programmes, which attempt to transform individuals into "model citizens" by offering psychological and theological "therapy" and economic rehabilitation. This approach may provide a useful adjunct to existing intervention measures.

While it is still too early to discern the effects of these programmes, the need to incorporate and account for cognitive dimensions which inform perceptions may be a crucial avenue for programmes with incarcerated individuals, as is the case with other types of criminals. Such strategies are already well developed in other forms of offending behaviour, such as sexual offending. Clearly, however, the lack of reliable tools with this particular offending population, as well as the need to account for the political context, means this type of intervention remains a long-term challenge.

Finally, there is no panacea to the issue of violent radicalisation, and current efforts to engage with the issue must account for the complexity within and across cases, or substantially fail.

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Footnotes

[i] Vikram Dodd. Appeal judges clear Muslims of terror charges. The Guardian, February 14, 2008.

[ii] Marc Sageman. Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, p.103.

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen. The Elusive Root Causes: Studying Violent Radicalization in Europe. DIIS Working Paper.

[v] Shahid Bux and John Horgan. A Psychology of Terrorism? Forensic Update, Number 92, Winter 2007/8, pp.57-61.

[vi] H el ene Mulholland. Blears calls for local help to combat Muslim extremism. The Guardian, October 31, 2007.

[vii] Sageman, p.22.

[viii] John Horgan. From Profiles to Pathways: The Road to Recruitment. E-Journal USA, 2007, pp.24-27.

[ix] Ibid.

[x] Sageman, p.75.