

Chapter 15

Countering Radicalization in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is to provide a discussion of radicalization, especially as it has been presented in existing literature. This chapter begins with a focus on how radicalization is defined and how debates surrounding the definition of the term could have pragmatic and theoretical consequences. Further, this work highlights current discourse on the radicalization process. The work also includes a review of the risk factors that may typically lead one to radicalization. To do this, the three main overarching themes, including push, pull, and personal factors, are spotlighted. Finally, the work concludes with a three-pronged course of action (COA) to prevent the radicalization process, mitigate the violence carried by those who have already been radicalized, and also rehabilitate those who have undergone the radicalization process.

INTRODUCTION

To truly consider the topic of radicalization, one must adopt a holistic approach that is underpinned by an understanding that there is little consensus on the topic. Thus, if what is sought is a strategy to prevent radicalization, then one must first embark on a literary journey to examine the multitude of perspectives regarding what is radicalization, what factors make one more or less vulnerable, and how does the radicalization process unfold. Accordingly, the adoption of an objective standpoint is necessary to comprehend the breadth of studies on radicalization.

In any field, researchers are bound to hold varying beliefs, convictions, and standpoints on issues. Although this diversity can be problematic in a pragmatic sense, it can be highly beneficial for academics. In fact, as is posited later in this work, the work of an academic who takes the contrasting views of a field and develops a theory that bridges any gaps could possibly arrive at a practical, real-world solution to a pressing issue. This logically leads to the question, “Is it possible to close the divide that currently stands between researchers who focus on radicalization?”

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With this information and this question at the forefront of the analyses, this work was produced. Through a review of the primary opinions within the field, the strategy for preventing and mitigating radicalization and rehabilitating those radicalized is presented with an emphasis on integrating the seemingly disparate viewpoints to achieve a form of harmony in the field.

BACKGROUND

Radicalization – Defined

Within the fields of intelligence and security, there is an unfortunate pattern with regard to a lack of uniform definitions of concepts and terms. One of the most well-known examples of this is the failure to adopt one universally accepted definition of terrorism. This lack of consistent definitions also spans to the notion of radicalization. Currently, the existing body of literature includes many wide-ranging definitions from researchers who interpret the concept from their unique perspectives. Therefore, prior to any analyses, it is imperative to offer an explanation of how radicalization is herein construed and defined.

According to many researchers, radicalization refers to “the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs” (Borum, 2011, p.9). Researchers who adopt this definition clearly posit that individuals who are radicalized may embrace or be sympathetic to extremist beliefs. Yet, they also assert that the act of embracing extremist ideas is not entirely suggestive that an individual will engage in extremist actions (Borum, 2011, p.9). On the other hand, researchers, such as Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree (2012) view radicalization as the “escalation process leading to violence” (p.6). This is inherently contradictory to the former views of the concept, which assert that violence is not guaranteed with radicalization. To further elucidate the contradictions within the literature, one may consider academic discussions that contend radicalism should never even be considered as synonymous with extremism, due to relative differences in the reliance on reason and rationalism by radicals (Schmid, 2013).

Along these lines, one could further argue that many of the current definitions have greater issues, since they have also failed to accurately define “violence” in the contexts of their work. It is undoubted that violence certainly extends beyond direct, physical harm. Therefore, could the adoption of a negative, radical, cultural viewpoint that intrinsically disparages a specific population be a form of cultural violence? If so, in such instances, it would seem only logical that radicalization be considered a form of violence, rather than a process leading to violence.

These academic or theoretical debates in defining radicalization can lead to pragmatic issues in counter-radicalization and even counter-terrorism operations. The variations in how radicalization is understood can lead to major differences in the ways in which intelligence or security efforts are directed. A successful Course of Action (COA) for countering radicalization requires a true understanding of what is radicalization. Therefore, until consensus is achieved amongst academics and practitioners about the definition of radicalization, researchers should always offer straightforward explanations of the definitions they rely upon in their investigations into the topic.

Accordingly, for the purposes of this work, radicalization is viewed as the “process of developing extremist beliefs, emotions, and behaviors” (Trip et al., 2019, p.2). For further clarity, extremist beliefs are herein defined as “profound convictions that oppose the fundamental values of society, the laws of democracy, and universal human rights by advocating the supremacy of a particular group (racial, religious, political, economic, social, etc.)” (Trip et al., 2019, p.2). These workplaces a priority on the

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