INTERNATIONAL

THE STATE OF PLAY
IN COUNTER-RADICALISATION IN THE EU

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Islamist campaign for the superiority of Islam in Tooting Broadway Station, London.
The recently Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe and other countries led to an unprecedented increase of interest from the public and officials alike in the reasons why young Muslims should commit suicide-murders in the name of their religion. The process of acquire knowledge of extremist and violent ideas, commonly referred to as radicalisation, was pushed into the spotlight as various strategies to combat its appearance were put forward. Meanwhile, Islamist terrorist attacks such as last Friday in Nice continue to bear the pain, misunderstanding and anxiety in our societies. However, fifteen years later since 9/11 attacks, the literature remains divided on the underlying causes of radicalisation. Jan Stehlík, analyst of the Prague-based European Values Think Tank, explains in this article some of the main keys to this radicalisation and EU counter-narratives initiatives against jihadist ideology and propaganda.

George Orwell’s timeless Nineteen-Eighty Four opens with the following sentence: “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen”. Orwell chose his words with care: the thirteenth stroke of the clock indicates an event which calls into question everything previously believed. The book’s opening line often comes back to me when I recall the bright, cloudless September morning when a group of young men hijacked four fully-loaded civilian passenger airplanes and flew them into buildings, instantly killing thousands of innocent people and themselves.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 ushered in a revolution in the field of counter-terrorism, granting the authorities unprecedented powers and sparking controversial debates on the relationship between enhanced security and institutional limits to individual freedoms. But the attacks also led to an unprecedented increase of interest from the public and officials alike in the reasons why young Muslims should commit suicide-murders in the name of their religion. The process of acquisition of extremist and often violent ideas, commonly referred to as radicalisation, was pushed into the spotlight as various strategies to combat its appear-
ance were put forward. Fifteen years later, the literature remains divided on the underlying causes of radicalisation. Meanwhile, Islamist terrorist attacks keep on happening: most recently, in March 2016, a series of coordinated suicide bombings claimed dozens of lives in Brussels.

It would be unfair to say that our understanding of radicalisation into militant Islamism has not advanced since 2001. We now have a far more comprehensive picture of the radicalisation process than we used to, in part because we have a better grasp of the elements which go into the making of a militant Islamist group. There are also fewer explanations of radicalisation which rely on intuition of the author rather than on empirical evidence. This was not the case in the wake of 9/11 attacks. Almost immediately after the towers of the World Trade Centre came crashing down, a whole cornucopia of theories was put forward as to the underlying forces which motivate people to join Islamist terrorist groups and sacrifice themselves for their cause.¹

For some, the only explanation for the suicide terrorists’ erratic behaviour is that they are crazy. Their mental deficiency is said to explain their apparent lack of self-worth and willingness to view the world in terms which most other people find bizarre at best. This understanding of terrorists as madmen is still found here and there because some terrorists really are crazy — however, these are in the minor-

¹ Crossett and Spitaletta counted sixteen such theories, although it is likely that even more explanations were proposed since their paper was published. C. Crossett and J. Spitaletta, Radicalization: Relevant psychological and sociological concepts (Ft. Meade, MD: U.S. Army Asymmetric Warfare Group, September 2010), 10.
ity. Decades of research of convicted terrorists’ profiles by psychologists convincingly debunked the idea that only crazy join terrorist groups.²

Even more importantly, the same body of research yielded no common profile of a suicide terrorist, or any terrorist for that matter. This finding punctures the gratuitous assumption, still popular in some circles, that people join Islamist terrorist groups because they are burdened with some kind of grievance against the larger society. They are either poor, or discriminated against, or frustrated with the politics of the country they reside in. This assumption is equally problematic, as there is no single grievance, nor a combination of grievances, that were found to turn most of those who have them into extremists. The perception of terrorists as social victims with hurt feelings becomes even less convincing when one considers the apocalyptic nature of suicide terrorism. Just because someone is earning less than average wage or their hijab was pulled on the street does not explain why they should stick explosives on their chest and vaporise themselves and dozens of onlookers on a crowded bus while shouting God’s name, let alone justify it.

The contemporary correlation between the Islamic religion and terrorist attacks have led many to lay the blame on Islam. The moral teachings of the Koran and the Sunna, so the argument goes, are at best problematic and at worst ethically corrupting. Islam is said to provide the ideological foundation for violent behaviour against non-Muslims and the more strongly one believes the scriptures to be true, the worse.

It is true that the scriptures of Islam, as of any other world religion, contain passages which may be taken to justify behaviour which our society would rightly consider unacceptable. However, when it comes to the causes of radicalisation, the

“it’s the religion, stupid” explanation should not be overstretched. For one, the vast majority of Muslims is not supportive of militant Islamist groups. On the contrary, it is Muslims who are most often the victims of Islamist terror. There is also a great number of Muslims who stand shoulder-to-shoulder with non-Muslims against radicalisation towards militant Islamism. Indeed, it is these Muslims who are often at the forefront of counter-radicalisation as they wrestle with Islamists over the nature of their own faith, and it is in our interest to work with them. Finally, we should not forget that not all terrorists, nor suicide terrorists, are followers of Islam. Suicide vests, today so strongly associated with the followers of Allah, were used in the 1980s by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the act of simultaneous airplane hijacking was first used not by Islamists, but by secular Palestinians with the help of the ultra-leftist Red Army Faction. Even the first suicide attack in Israel did not have Islamic connotations but was instead perpetrated by the Japanese Red Army. Indiscriminate mass murders, including those with an element of the suicidal, were here before Islamism and there is nothing to suggest that they will not outlast it.

That is not to say that the spate of Islamist terrorist attacks of recent decades is not undergirded by ideological considerations which take their inspiration from Islamic theology. On the contrary, if there is anything that connects the thousands of Islamist terrorists and their supporters around the European Union, it is their ad-


herence to a radical set of ideas based on a specific interpretation of Islam. This ideology made its way to Europe relatively recently, in part due to the influence of Saudi Arabia and its specific interpretation of Islam inspired by the work of the 18th century Sunni Muslim fundamentalist preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who sought to “purge” Islam from what he saw as unsanctioned innovations. Although Wahhabism does not condone violent behaviour per se, Azeem Ibrahim of the University of Oxford is correct to assert that al-Wahhab’s deeply puritanical and anti-cultural worldview “lays the intellectual foundations” for the ideologies espoused by Islamist terrorist groups.

Not long after the 9/11 attacks, Europe got its own share of Islamist terrorism. In March 2004, close to two hundred people were killed by coordinated bombings orchestrated by a group of radicals affiliated with Al-Qaeda. One year later, on 7 July 2005, a group of suicide bombers detonated themselves in London’s public transport system, killing over fifty people and injuring hundreds. Other plans for major attacks in European cities, such as the 2004 plot to detonate a massive bomb made out of fertiliser⁵, were fortunately foiled by the authorities.

That Islamist terrorist attacks inspired by Al-Qaeda were now being committed on European soil was in itself distressing, but what differentiated these bombings from previous attacks was that they were not orchestrated by operatives of some distant terrorist group from the other side of the world but by European citizens. This signalled the presence of “homegrown” terrorism, wherein the ideas behind

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⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6153884.stm
militant Islamism were now readily available from radical preachers in European mosques and other Muslim meeting places, including internet forums.

Responding to this worrying trend, European states enacted countless counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation measures to turn the tide in their favour. On the hard end, extremist Islamist groups such as the Al-Muhajiroun were proscribed, police and intelligence services’ capabilities to stop planned attacks were increased, cooperation between EU member states on anti-terrorist operations was strengthened and major European cities enacted measures to become more resilient in the face of future terrorist attacks.

A plethora of international tools for European authorities has accumulated over time: for example, the EU now has its own counter-terrorism strategy and a counter-terrorism coordinator to better coordinate the efforts of member states; information about previously convicted EU nationals may be exchanged via the European Criminal Records Information System; information exchanges between national border control, customs and police authorities is streamlined in the Schengen Information System; the European Police Record Index System enables the facilitation of cross-border access to information held in national police records; finally, Europol collects data from national agencies to provide a comprehensive up-to-date picture of the threat at hand. These and other agencies give national security authorities the tools to better counter the threat of international Islamist terrorism.

The soft end, the aim of which is to prevent European citizens from radicalising towards violent extremism in the first place, also underwent a series of enhancements. The Radicalisation Awareness Network, set up by the European Union in 2011, brings together first-line practitioners from around Europe working on the prevention of radicalisation towards violent extremism. Meanwhile, seeking to halt the spread of the Islamist ideology, state authorities began deleting online extremist content. However, it quickly became apparent that relying on this strategy was in-
sufficient: not all extremist content is illegal, and not all of it is hosted on European servers. As a result, European states can only delete a portion of extremist propaganda on the internet. Simply censoring uncomfortable messages therefore does not resolve the issue. Realising this, European counter-radicalisation efforts increasingly took the form of “counter-narratives” in an attempt to erode the extremist ideology in the spirit of battle of ideas.

In their core, counter-narratives are communication campaigns designed to discredit, deconstruct and demystify extremist propaganda through the use of ideology, logic, fact or humour. Complementary to counter-narratives are so called alternative narratives, which offer an alternative worldview to that of militant Islamism. This can take various forms, from the promotion of liberal democratic values to the emphasis of the peaceful tenets in Islam.

A number of counter-narratives and alternative narratives targeting militant Islamism cropped up over time. On the individual level, small but important initiatives work with those who are at risk of being radicalised. For example, the Solas Foundation enables dialogue between young Muslims and respected imams on the peaceful nature of Islam. The work of individuals, such as the Belgian Muslim speaker Sulayman Van Ael, should also be recognised. On the local level, community engagement projects such as Rethinking Radicalisation Manchester aim to unite the local community against expressions of hatred. Inter-religious dialogue projects, designed to provide space for people to “talk it out”, are also common. For example, Together for Sweden is an inter-religious programme for young people to meet, bond and discuss issues relating to their ideational differences. On the national level, there are organisations such as the French Association of Vic-
tims of Terrorism, which educates the wider community about the dangers of extremism and the hardship survivors of terrorist acts have to face.

In recent years, online counter-narratives also started appearing. For example, the Abdullah-X cartoon challenges the online narratives of militant Islamist groups through the creation of audiovisual content targeting young Muslims. The counter-narrative projects increasingly blend the work of civil society, public sector and private companies. In response to the Islamist attacks on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, the European Commission financed the creation of the Syria Strategic Communication Advisory Team to help EU member states exchange best practices in the area of strategic communication with a view to preventing and countering radicalisation.

Finally, where counter-radicalisation efforts have failed and an individual adopted militant Islamist teachings, de-radicalisation narratives are tailored to reverse the process and erode the radicalised person’s convictions. De-radicalisation practitioners commonly work with convicted extremists or terrorist plotters in trying to deconstruct their ideology. Once a member of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, the writer and activist Maajid Nawaz personifies an example of a successful de-radicalisation strategy.

In combination, the soft and the hard responses to extremism create a formidable security architecture. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are better prepared than ever to counter radicalisation. However, the radicalisation strategies of groups espousing the militant Islamist ideology are also at their all-time best. A decade or two ago, radical messengers would coordinate their activities using email, recruit new members via personal contact and regularly travel abroad to reconnect with the leadership of their organisation. This made them vulnerable to the work of intelligence agencies. Today, they communicate via encrypted social messaging apps which refuse to allow intelligence services to access the data, spread their message using conventional methods as well as high-quality audiovisual online
propaganda and operate autonomously from the central leadership. The evolution of Islamist groups into more horizontal structures means that newly radicalised European militants are often merely inspired to act by Islamist propaganda without actually personally encountering the core of the organisation. Many of these then commit the so-called “lone wolf” attacks in Europe or travel to join likeminded militants abroad. The thousands of European foreign fighters who have left Europe in recent years to fight in Iraq and Syria on the side of the so-called Islamic State show the extent of the problem we face.

It must also be said that our own weapons against radicalisation are nowhere near perfect. While carefully applied counter-narratives can reverse the process of radicalisation, it would not be productive to think of this tactic as a silver bullet. The success of counter-narratives depends on many factors and evidence of best practices and theory-testing is scarce. As far as we know, many counter-narratives are rendered inefficient by the presence of public financing. If a counter-narrative is perceived by the target audience as an official governmental effort to dismantle extremist networks, it may be brushed off as an attempt at brainwashing rather than internalised. For this reason, many civil society organisations working with individuals at risk of being radicalised are wary of publicly accepting the help of the authorities, as this may result in a “kiss of death” that will erode their counter-radicalisation efforts. At the same time, there is no convincing evidence that online counter-narratives work, and most first-line practitioners point out the importance of offline engagement. In addition, the most effective counter-narratives seem to come from those with whom the target group identifies.

Overall, our greatest inhibition is the lack of theory-testing of the varying approaches to radicalisation. The only stakeholders with reliable information are national intelligence services, but they rarely share it for security reasons. Without knowing about instances when a particular counter-radicalisation effort actually succeeded, it is difficult to improve our fight against radicalisation. For this reason, sensible initiatives to combat radicalisation tend to focus on individual cases,
which they approach offline on a context-specific basis. This method is more manageable and measurable at the moment than grand projects which seek to encompass whole communities of people.

As the situation stands, there will almost certainly be another successful Islamist terrorist attack in the EU in the future. The reports of the Europol on the scale of the threat look grim, and no security architecture, no matter how comprehensive, can prevent all terrorist plots. However, we are well equipped to fight back against those who want to hurt us. The efforts to counter radicalisation are not without success stories, and every new terrorist attack brings out the strength of our civil society and shows its resilience to terror. Indiscriminate mass murders are ghastly and must be prevented, but they will not, indeed cannot, bring us to our knees. For the sake of preventing future attacks, it is our responsibility to enhance the body of evidence we have of successful counter-radicalisation efforts and then use it to our advantage. Only then will we manage to overcome the poisonous message of Islamist extremism.