What Is (Wrong With) Radicalisation?
A Response to Manchester Bombing

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

The recent Manchester bombing is likely to lead to renewed media and policy focus on radicalisation and a search for a reason for it. However, this may lead to a search for a non-existent magic key rather than dealing with more complex problems.

Commentary

IN THE wake of the Manchester bomb attack on 23 May 2017, it is likely that increased attention will be given to the question of why and how seemingly modern, young, Westerners become radicalised. The identified attacker is a 22-year-old, Salman Abedi, born in Manchester to refugee parents of Libyan decent.

He went to a UK university but dropped out before working in a bakery, and supported Manchester United football club. A "home grown" terrorist, he was born and brought up in the country he attacked and from the scant information we have so far, he had partially integrated but ultimately found this difficult. Indeed, his community had reported him to the police for his extremist views and he was known to security forces.

No Magic Key

A recent high profile debate saw two notable French theorists, Gilles Kepel and Oliver Roy clashing over different interpretations of contemporary extremism. In broad terms, Roy emphasises the dysfunctional individual who wishes to enact violence and finds an excuse for their internal rage. As such, for him, it is not so much about society and certainly not about Islam per se.

Rather he speaks of the "Islamicization of radicalism". His argument is that what is happening today with Islam is comparable to ideologies that justified terrorism over the 20th century (in a European context) which were nationalist or political. For Roy, the ideology does not matter; it simply becomes a cover for violent individuals.

Kepel on the other hand, and in the French context, blames society and a radicalisation of Islam. He sees a society that is hostile to immigrants, especially Muslims, being a breeding ground for disaffected young people. This is coupled with a particular interpretation of Islam, associated with a fringe militant form of what is known as Wahhabism, which justifies terrorist violence against a hostile world (more specifically the West).

That these scholars disagree so fundamentally is, I suggest, a clue that there is not a single answer. Rather different individuals are probably drawn to acts of terror, and militant organisations, for a variety of reasons. Structural reasons in society are certainly important, making extremist narratives credible; individual psychology is also a factor as not every young immigrant becomes a killer; and, an ideology that legitimates violent action is needed.

Here, I believe, we see Kepel and Roy talking about two aspects of the same thing; as with all ideologies or worldviews (including religions) there are ways they can be used to justify pacifism and nonviolence, self-defence, or atrocities including terrorism.

Why Concept of Radicalisation is a Problem

This brings us to the question of why some (generally young) people are drawn into extremism and terrorism. Many theories, often empirically based on profiles and interviews with former extremists, exist. Marc Sageman, the American counter-terrorism specialist, has spoken about the "bunch of guys" theory which highlights that it is often a search for brotherhood (many of them are male) and group bonding which leads some to follow others who have bought into extremist ideologies.

However, this may not explain so called lone wolf attackers. Likewise, scholarship which has shown that a disproportionate number of extremist militants have been engineers, while empirically based, does not provide a catchall profile.

A problem arises when people look for the factor or special ingredient which leads to radicalisation. There are a range of individual and social factors. Further, experts such as Matthew Francis in the United Kingdom have pointed out that imagining some special formula exists called radicalisation is just wrong. Rather, we are looking at what sociologists call "socialisation". That is to say, the way all of us learn about the norms, values, and ideals of our society.

With what we call terrorists or radicals, the socialisation they receive is simply about different norms, values, and ideals. Radicalisation is not a special system applied to make a normal person different. If it was it would presumably be easier to spot dangerous individuals. Rather, they can be engaged in the typical activities which we

all are. However, from whatever source, they are engaging with a different sense of social values from the rest of society.

The potential terrorist needs a process whereby they will buy into a framework in which attacking their fellow citizens, including innocent children and bystanders, seems legitimate. All three factors of psychology, society, and ideology identified by Roy and Kepel play a part in this. However, arguing that one of these is always the most significant ignores the complexity of individuals.

Looking Forward

While a single theory explaining every aspect of terrorism or radicalisation will always be attractive, it is not helpful if the media, policy analysts, and policy makers look for a magic key. The theories of figures like Kepel, Roy, and Sageman are important, but each appears to be only part of the picture (it is a very big picture, so this is no critique of their scholarship). Likewise, we must move away from simple buzzwords like radicalisation which explain nothing in themselves, and can lead to false perceptions of the problem.

Moving forward, a holistic approach is needed: dealing with the psychology of individuals who may be at risk of being drawn to extremist ideologies; structural problems in society (including injustice, prejudice, and poverty, although terrorists can come from affluence and privilege); and refuting extremist ideologies, but also – and more importantly – developing a positive counter ideology.

No single factor, or idealised profile, will fit all terrorists or potential terrorists, and the search for, or emphasis on, this can be a problem in dealing with the complexity involved.

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