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The Reception of Broadcast Terrorism: recruitment and radicalisation

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Abstract

The declaration of a caliphate by Islamic State in June 2014 witnessed the recruitment of increasing numbers of foreign terrorist fighters drawn from a diverse range of nations across the globe. This paper seeks to explore the appeal of extreme groups and how recruiters persuade young people to risk either their lives or lengthy terms of imprisonment. The processes of radicalisation and recruitment are differentiated and compared with conventional means of encouraging individuals to enlist in state-sanctioned armed forces. The reasons why people join terrorist organisations are influenced by their education, formative experiences and social or familial connections, whilst these variables, in turn, have an impact on the roles that they then undertake. Whether personality traits explain an over-representation of engineers and doctors amongst leaders of particular extremist groups remains a moot question. The increasing use of the internet and social media as instruments to propagate extremist philosophies may, in part, be responsible for the recent rise in sole actors. The need to involve respected and influential Muslim leaders and organisations is crucial in providing a counter-balance to the message of righteous adventure and belonging promoted by Islamic State.

Keywords: terrorism; recruitment; propaganda; radicalisation; violent extremism; jihad

Introduction

Although a small number of terrorists achieve an international following, such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or manage the transition into mainstream politics and government, the majority do not achieve career success in conventional terms. Indeed, the outcome for many terrorists is poor: lengthy terms of imprisonment, in hiding from security forces or death as a result of their actions. Terrorists tend to be young, so the loss of life and

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freedom are all the more significant. This prompts the question why would anyone wish to take on this role? Although Muslim terrorists are promised that martyrdom leads to significant rewards in the afterlife, this ideology has not been proposed as a significant driver to recruitment but rather to explain why some individuals, once radicalised, are willing to die for their cause (Koomen & Van der Pligt, 2016, pp. 167-68). Currently, theories of terrorist recruitment are divided between explanations that focus on an ideological or religious appeal versus the appeal of group membership, notably belonging, comradeship and a corporate sense of purpose (McCauley & Moskalneko, 2008; Rogers, 2011). This paper will explore the psychology of the terrorist in terms of vulnerabilities to the recruiter's message. It will also investigate the techniques used to engage the interest of young people and how they encourage them to undertake high-risk or life-threatening tasks. A comparison will be drawn with campaigns designed to draw young men and women into conventional armed forces.

Definition

Under English law, terrorism is defined as the use or threat of an act 'designed to influence the government or an international governmental organisation or to intimidate the public or a section of the public... and... made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause' (Terrorism Act 2000, part I, section 1). The European Council's Framework Decision of 2002, which required member states to align their legislation, offered a comparable definition of terrorism including acts with the aim of 'seriously intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a Government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act, or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation' (Council of the European Union (2002/475/JHA), article 1). Loose legal definitions are designed to assist the security forces to apprehend suspects not only committing but also planning and preparing acts of terrorism (McCulloch & Pickering, 2009). As a result, they are less helpful in identifying the essential characteristics of being a terrorist.

Because terrorist organisations arise at both extremes of the political spectrum and in many cultures and ethnic groups (Silke, 2003), it is recognised that there is no single terrorist psychology (Schmid, 2013; Horgan, 2014). Broadly speaking, however, terrorists are divided into two categories: those operating within groups with an operational structure and rules (Byman, 2015), and sole actors (also known as 'lone wolves') who identify a cause and plan an attack without institutional training and control (Gill et al., 2014). A higher incidence of

mental illness has been identified in sole actors, estimated at 31.9% in a recent study of 119 subjects compared with 3.4% in a matched sample of group-based terrorists (Corner & Gill, 2014). The difference may, in part, result from a selection bias: these being individuals rejected by recruiters to organised groups because of perceived unreliability but so motivated or aggrieved take matters into their own hands.

‘Fifth Wave’ and broadcast terrorism

In the 1970s and 1980s, terrorist groups, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the UK, Red Army Faction in Germany or Red Brigades in Italy, operated as clandestine organisations using covert means to plan and execute acts of violence against civilians and the state (Horchem, 1991; Neumann, 2005). Great effort was devoted to protecting the identity of members, whilst operatives worked in self-contained cells to limit the penetration of counter-terrorist intelligence. Although al-Qaeda and Islamic State conceal details of their operations and key personnel, they thrive on publicity and the status attached to key figures (Neumann & Rogers, 2007).

Terrorist organisations have been grouped into generational ‘waves’ based on their core characteristics, respectively anarchist, anti-colonial, new left and religious (Rapoport, 2004). The last found fullest expression in al-Qaeda because of its aim to create a single Muslim state subject to Sharia law, and its willingness to conduct major attacks on military and government installations. The fifth wave, most powerfully represented by Islamic State (IS), is an evolutionary development typified by the wide-scale recruitment of ‘foreign terrorist fighters’ and an aggressive agenda with global rather than national ambitions (Kaplan, 2007). IS not only rejects existing forms of society, it also offers a radical and transformative vision of the Muslim *umma*, a global community of faith, feeling and brotherhood. Fifth wave terrorists seek to create a new ‘utopia’ in a single generation by an intense ethnic, racial or tribal focus, and are willing to resort to extreme methods such as mass killing.

Earlier organisations, such as the IRA or Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA), ascribed to the propaganda of the deed, the notion that actions rather than words conveyed purpose (Wright, 1991). Their formal announcements were terse, commonly to issue warnings or to claim responsibility for an action. By contrast, al-Qaeda and IS have embraced the broadcast media (O’Shaughnessy & Baines, 2009). To advance their political

interpretation of Salafist values, IS make significant use of on-line technology. It produces 90-minute documentaries with shorter features on fighters' lives and current events. Handbooks are uploaded to their websites together with the IS magazine, *Dabiq*, translated into half a dozen European languages, and a new publication, *Rumiyah*, launched in September 2016 (Neumann, 2016). To facilitate dialogue, they and their supporters make widespread use of social media: messages spread via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp (Von Behr et al., 2013; Edwards & Gribbon, 2013). The revolution in information technology has allowed terrorist groups to connect with a vast population of potential recruits. By contrast, al-Qaeda during the 1990s had only a few hundred active supporters (Neumann, 2016: 174). The world-wide reach of on-line networks lends credibility to the claim of IS to be defending the Islamist *umma*, the global community of faith.

Without the need for physical contact, social media facilitates dialogue, networking and provides increased opportunities for self-radicalisation. Radical virtual dawa, where Muslims are invited to discuss their faith, serve not only to change beliefs but also to encourage membership or action (Hoffman, 2006; Ryan 2007). By providing an environment in which extreme and otherwise unacceptable views are discussed under the cloak of anonymity, on-line dialogue may normalise violent behaviour (Neumann, 2008). Because it is innovative, information technology appeals to the young and is thought to accelerate the process of radicalisation (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). The internet is easily accessed, while *Inspire* (a high-quality web magazine launched by al-Qaeda in June 2010) and *Dabiq* (published by IS from July 2014) were designed not only to recruit but also prepare sole actors. However, anyone in the UK who downloads the magazines without a 'reasonable excuse' risks being likely to be prosecuted for the offence of disseminating a terrorist publication contrary to the Terrorism Act 2006 (Terrorism Act 2006, part I, section 2). To evade the security services, information is commonly transmitted by encryption and increasing use is made of the dark web. As a global phenomenon, the internet is difficult to police particularly as Google, Microsoft and Apple seek to safeguard their customers' data against criminals and surveillance, whilst repeatedly bringing out new applications and ways of communicating. Apple, for example, designed its messaging and video chat apps to use end-to-end encryption, which means that the company cannot read historical communications. It resisted US Department of Justice demands to modify its system to wiretap messages in real time (Simonite, 2015).

When mosques and prisons were key sites for recruitment, it was argued that the internet played a secondary role. Group loyalties based on personal contacts and social networks were considered necessary to engage those about to undertake high-risk activities (Sageman, 2004). With burgeoning use of on-line communication, it was thought that some lone actors may have been engaged and motivated without the need for direct contact. However, a recent literature review, supported by 15 interviews, concluded that the internet alone was not responsible for the adoption of radical beliefs. In each case subjects had offline contact with family or friends who were sympathetic to an extreme political stance (Von Behr et al., 2013). Although the internet may sometimes play a primary role in the process of radicalisation and recruitment, this study suggests that it requires secondary reinforcement from trusted individuals.

Recruitment and radicalisation

Although radicalisation may be part of recruitment, the two activities need to be differentiated. Recruitment is a dynamic process by which a willing or unwilling individual is encouraged or dissuaded from joining a group; it involves a measure of assessment on both sides. In terms of its form, radicalisation refers to a process of belief modification, which can be gradual with a tipping point or, on occasion, achieved within a short period of time. In the context of terrorism, radicalisation requires a progression from feeling sympathy towards violence for a political goal to direct involvement in such activities (Neumann & Rogers, 2007; Neumann, 2013).

Although research into these formative processes is difficult to conduct, it is often assumed that most terrorists have been radicalised before they seek to join an organisation that routinely employs violence as a tactic (Kooman & Van der Pligt, 2016). Studies have focused on how individuals in the West (often second and third generation Muslim immigrants or Middle Eastern students) are socialised ideologically and psychologically by terrorist propaganda and/or recruiters of terrorist organisations (Malthaner, 2010). This theory of terrorism places newly-acquired or reinforced beliefs about the self in relation to society at the core of membership and action. Although this model may explain why individuals support a particular cause, it does not tell us why they resort to violence rather than a legitimate, political campaign. Indeed, some authors have questioned the validity of ideological indoctrination as a core driver for violent protest (Schmid, 2013; Mueller, 2012).

An alternative approach explores the impact that membership of a terrorist organisation may have on the person's daily life and mental state (Sageman, 2008; Ranstorp, 2010). McCauley and Moskalenko argue that some may 'join a radical group for thrills and status, some for love, some for connection and comradeship. Personal and group grievances can move individuals toward violence, with ideology serving only to rationalise the violence' (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011, p. 89). Right-wing militants who become terrorists often have little ideological baggage, whilst theological knowledge among religious terrorists is often superficial or recently acquired (Schmid, 2013, p. 28). For some a wish to address a grievance is the primary driver and ideology is sought only later as rationalisation (Kushner, 1996). Under different circumstances, some of those recruited might have joined a criminal gang, a religious sect or even the armed forces of their country (Nesser, 2016, pp. 15-17). There has emerged something of a consensus around the idea that the path to terrorism involves a search for identity and belonging (Choudry, 2007). Extremist movements are said to offer potential recruits 'identities of empowerment', which allow them to reconstruct their sense of self and gain new confidence (Neumann & Rogers, 2007, p. 68).

As in conventional armed forces, the roles that individuals are required to play also influence selection criteria. From his survey of terrorist cells, Nesser (2016) identified four characteristic types. The leader and strategist (the 'entrepreneur') is motivated by a political or ideological agenda and commonly adopts violence only to serve these ends. Such individuals tend to be well-read and ambitious. Mohammed Siddique Khan, leader of the London bombers, was a university graduate and community worker who ran a bookshop and had established two gyms with government funding. Also well-educated is the technical specialist and second-in-command (the 'protégé'), who gains inspiration from the leader. The foot soldiers, who are numerically greater, Nesser divided into those with a troubled background or a criminal record (the 'misfit') and those who are recruited as a result of social or family connections (the 'drifter'); the latter could equally have joined a different form of organisation. This model, informed by detailed analysis of contemporary terrorist cells, has not yet been used to frame testable hypotheses. Indeed, a major research challenge is to gain access to subjects in sufficient numbers to conduct meaningful population studies.

Based on a sample of 497 members of extremist Islamic groups, Gambetta & Hertog (2006, p. 20), found that engineering graduates were over-represented. Although relative deprivation created by reduced employment opportunities may, in part, have explained their

motivation, it was found that engineers were more likely than other graduates to join Islamist or right-wing groups. To explain why left-wing organisations seemed to be less attractive to them, despite the need for their expertise, Gambetta & Hertog suggested that certain personality traits associated with their discipline drew them in a particular political direction. These included proneness to disgust, a need for order and certainty through cognitive closure and a rigid in-out group distinction. Doctors were also over-represented but at a markedly lower level than engineers, whilst humanities and social science graduates were more likely to join left-wing extremist groups. Whether key personality traits determine terrorist allegiance in leaders remains an interesting question insofar as the authors concede that their samples were not random and under-represented groups from North Africa and South Asia.

Recruitment is often divided into push-factors (social, economic and political factors that create a sense of injustice and discrimination) and pull-factors (sense of belonging to a cause or network, adventure and an opportunity to do something worthwhile or heroic). Within these two categories a range of psychological processes are seen to be operating. They include rational choice theory, social learning theory, stress theory, (Stroink, 2007; Victoroff, 2005), general strain theory (Rice, 2009) and uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). Strain theory, for example, has been proposed to explain why individuals are vulnerable to the recruiter's message: personal feelings of discrimination or loss of autonomy can fuel negative emotions, which in turn drive a desire for corrective action and even violence. One reason for the diversity of causal hypotheses is the difficulty of conducting in-depth cohort studies.

The message

The content of the radical narrative (the pull-factor) has been analysed in a number of ways. A comparison with traditional methods of recruiting young men to join the armed forces at time of war suggests that there are certain core elements. There is often a dual appeal: to do something worthwhile and glorious for the greater good of a particular group balanced against a message of shame should the person fail to take part. In the First World War, for example, young Britons were encouraged to volunteer by posters which drew on their membership of social groups. 'Come lad slip across and help' (1915) showed a smiling soldier extend his hand from Flanders to a civilian standing in southeast England (Aulich, 2007, p. 83). During the Battle of the Somme, an appeal to fellowship was emphasised in a poster showing a battalion of cheerful soldiers with the caption, 'Come and join this Happy

Throng off to the Front' (Imperial War Museum, Art. IWM PST 13604). Recruitment propaganda depicting the sinking of the S.S. *Lusitania*, together with attacks on civilians and their homes was designed to create a sense of righteousness and purpose (Imperial War Museum, Art. IWM PST 13654, Art. IWM PST 13654). Posters such as 'What did YOU do in the war Daddy?' (which depicted two children questioning their father about his contribution to the war effort) and 'Women of Britain say GO!' sought to shame men into military service (Aulich, 2007, pp. 82, 88-9).

The generic elements in British recruitment material of the First World War are evident in Salafist propaganda. The dual message is apparent in IS recruitment films, literature and websites. Salafist jihad is presented as a duty, a righteous campaign to save Muslim peoples from an iniquitous and persecutory West (O'Shaughnessy & Baines, 2009). In fact, key words, such as 'jihad' and 'Salafist' have been injected with radical meaning. Jihad means a struggle and can be applied in a range of contexts from social, economic, political or ecological, and represents a struggle for greater justice not only against discrimination, racism but also to support freedom of expression and in defence of civil responsibilities (Ramadan, 2004, p. 113). 'Salafism', a form of Sunni Islam derives from the expression 'ai-salaf al-salih' meaning the 'pious predecessors' and refers to the first three generations of Muslims who were closest to the Prophet Muhammed (Leiken, 2012; Olidort, 2015). Thus, Islamic State through a concerted internet campaign has succeeded in associating the term Salafi-jihadism with a narrow interpretation that seeks to achieve change through violent conflict.

There is significant difference in how Salafists apply their religious philosophy to politics (Hellmich, 2008). Maher (2016) has proposed three sub-groups: quietists, activists-challengers and violent rejectionists; only the latter advocate conflict as a tactic. The Salafist rejectionists challenge Western democracy, human rights and foreign policy. They offer order and certainty through a closed system of rules and injunctions for any eventuality. Martyrdom is lauded and comes with rewards for the individual and his family, whilst failure to take part results in shame and punishment in the afterlife. In addition, videos of IS fighters present jihad as an exciting brotherhood of determined and valiant young men who avenge violations of the Muslim *umma*. This form of Salafism stresses community to provide a sense of belonging and unity designed to recruit the troubled and aggrieved.

The message to Muslim women to encourage them to migrate to IS parallels that directed at young men (Saltman & Smith, 2015). An appeal is made to their religious duty to build a utopian Caliphate in which they serve as wives, mothers, nurses and teachers. Heavenly rewards are promised together with a sense of belonging through a sisterhood. The general tone is one of adventure and romance targeted at the impressionable and idealistic.

Conclusion

Because terrorist groups deliberately challenge the rule of law and are willing to commit acts of violence against civilians to deliver their political goals, they are sometimes framed as being beyond comprehension. Without seeking to minimise the serious threat posed by extremists, this paper suggests that they can be understood by drawing on existing paradigms and by reference to past conflicts. The word ‘jihad’ has been subverted by a Salafist subgroup as part of their propaganda to mean an armed struggle against unbelievers. In reality it is a term that can be applied in a range of political and social contexts and even to support fundamental human rights (Ramadan, 2004). A significant challenge is to find an alternative but compelling narrative to appeal to disaffected or marginalised groups. This is no small task not least because extremist groups are willing to mislead and distort, promising immediate and unrealistic rewards. There is a further issue of finding trusted individuals to deliver the message as official or state-funded sources have little, in any, credibility and many established Muslim leaders have been undermined by Salafist propaganda. Following a government review of the Muslim Brotherhood led by Sir John Jenkins (House of Commons, 2015), David Cameron issued a formal statement in which he observed that parts of the organisation have ‘a highly ambiguous relationship with violent extremism. Both as an ideology and as a network it has been a rite of passage for some individuals and groups who have gone on to engage in violence and terrorism’ (Cameron, 2015). However, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, chaired by Crispin Blunt MP, was critical of a number of the review’s findings. First, it had ‘neglected to mention the most significant event in the Brotherhood’s history: its removal from power in Egypt in 2013, the year after being democratically elected, through a military intervention’ (House of Commons, 2016, p. 4). It had failed to acknowledge that ‘some political Islamists have been very pragmatic in power’ and were committed to non-violent, democratic processes. The Committee concluded that the Brotherhood was not a terrorist organisation, whilst the pragmatism demonstrated by some

political Islamists provided an opportunity for engagement and a role as a credible ‘counter-narrative against more extremist ideologies’ (House of Commons, 2016, p. 50).

A recent population study has identified the importance of democratic engagement (actions such as voting in local elections, signing a petition or paying fees to a charity or campaigning organisation) in reducing vulnerability to radical appeals (Bhui et al., 2016). Whilst the growth and evolution of the internet presents a significant challenge for counter-terrorism policing because of its capacity to reach so many people and encourage recruitment, it has also been shown that its impact is greatly diminished without personal contacts to support its messages. This suggests that the nature of our society and its democratic institutions play a role in inhibiting radicalisation, and that those potentially vulnerable to recruitment need to be targeted as well as those engaged in terrorist activities.

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