PATHWAYS TOWARDS RADICALIZATION

Project: State Responses and Terrorist Activity
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Overview

We conceptualize political radicalization as increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and actions in support of intergroup conflict, and we identify mechanisms of radicalization for *individuals*, *groups*, and *mass publics*. Contrary to conventional wisdom, radicalization cannot be understood by focusing only on radicalized actors; most of the mechanisms identified depend on a trajectory of action and reaction that develops between those radicalized and the enemy they are radicalized against. The foundations of this trajectory are ingroup identification and perceived threat to the ingroup. We conclude that understanding radicalization requires understanding the dynamics of intergroup conflict as the conflict unfolds over time.

Interim Findings

Based upon a thorough review of materials documenting the experiences of individuals, groups, and mass publics that have undergone radicalization, as well as an exploration of the relevant social science literature, twelve mechanisms of radicalization have been identified. It is unlikely that any one pathway can account for a large proportion of those radicalized—that is, it is unlikely that there is any one "conveyor belt" to terrorism that can be identified and targeted to reduce terrorism. Rather, the radicalization process results from a complex interaction of multiple mechanisms.

Mechanisms of Individual Radicalization

- **Personal victimization:** an individual seeks revenge for experiences in which the individual perceives him/herself to be attacked or victimized
- **Political grievance:** an individual seeks to revenge or protect a group in response to political trends or events viewed as hurting or threatening that group
- **Joining a radical group—*the slippery slope*:** an individual engages in increasingly radical behavior as he/she integrates into a radical group or organization
- **Joining a radical group—*the power of love*:** an individual joins a radical group as a result of the pull of romantic or comradely love and participates in the group's activities to sustain those relationships

Mechanisms of Group Radicalization

- **Extremity shift in likeminded groups:** all members of a group feel pressure towards agreement, and agreement tends to shift over time toward individuals and opinions that are more extreme in representing shared values
- **Extreme cohesion under isolation and threat:** extreme interdependency of group members produces extreme cohesion which, in turn, increases pressure for value consensus and behavioral compliance among members
- **Competition for the same base of support:** increasingly radical action by a group can signal to potential supporters that the group is more devoted to the cause than

competing groups, thus attracting new supporters and new resources
- **Competition with state power—*condensation***: as governments move to quash groups engaged in radical action, many members will abandon the cause but more radical members will remain active with their commitment to the group intensified
- **Within-group competition—*fissioning***: when tensions among group members lead to splintering of groups, the newly emerged groups will often take radical action against former allies to establish their new group norms as superior

Mechanisms of Mass Radicalization
- **Conflict with an outgroup—*Jujitsu politics***: ingroup cohesion (patriotism, nationalism) of a mass public is enhanced in response to outgroup threat, leading to idealization of ingroup norms, increased support for ingroup leaders, and increased punishment of those who deviate from group norms
- **Conflict with an outgroup—*hate***: especially in the case of protracted intergroup conflicts, there is an intensification and expansion of negative perceptions of the enemy, including dehumanization via "bad essence"
- **Martyrdom:** willingness to die for a cause, especially if the martyr is a high-status individual with a lot to lose, can galvanize public support for the martyr's cause and undermine the confidence of enemies of that cause

Project Background:

This project emerges from a view of terrorist action as part of a dynamic competition between terrorist attacks and government response to these attacks. This is fundamentally a political competition, in which terrorists try to build their own base of supporters and undermine support for the government they attack, while the government aims to retain its own base and eliminate terrorists and their supporters. In this view, understanding terrorism means understanding the dynamics of asymmetric conflict that link terrorists and governments over time. Additional discussion of these mechanisms is available in: Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2008). "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:3, 415-33.

Future Directions:

Additional mechanisms are being identified and unpacked in terms of social science theories. In addition, the relevance of the dynamic interaction over time between state power and non-state groups points to the importance of developing databases of state responses to terrorists on the same timeline as databases of terrorist attacks.

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