



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science - 2017

I16 On the Radicalization Process

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand general and specific recruitment tactics among terrorist networks, especially those presently used by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing an in-depth psychological and criminological description of radicalization, brainwashing, and the psychology of the “new terrorism.”

The radicalization of young men and women by terrorist organizations, especially the ISIS, has become an overwhelming problem in the world. Recently, and everywhere in the world, young people appear to have been motivated by a complex mix of politics and faith, and their communications illustrate the tactics used to try to recruit other young Europeans and Americans to their cause.¹⁻³

For example, the possibility of French citizens returning from Syria as hardened jihadists is the “biggest threat that the country faces in the coming years,” said Manuel Valls, the interior minister of France. He added that France and Europe risk being “overwhelmed” by the phenomenon. Mr. Valls estimated that 700 French nationals have either traveled to Syria, have traveled to Syria and returned to France, or are currently in route. Some 21 French nationals have been killed. Shiraz Maher, a senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King’s College London, estimated recently that up to 50 British fighters have already returned home

This study intends to provide an in-depth description of the radicalization process, which is a very important and essential step in terrorist activities. It also proposes a translational analysis of the sociological and psychological processes involved in the terrorist violence. This study is first based on experience in the psychological evaluation of terrorist behavior and, secondly, on an exhaustive review of the current literature. The search terms “terrorism,” “radicalization,” “social psychology,” and “psychopathology” were used to identify relevant studies in the following databases: Scopus, MEDLINE®, Pubcentral, and ScienceDirect.

Because of its importance, understanding the radicalization process should be one of the priorities of behavioral scientists, including forensic psychiatrists, forensic psychologists, and social workers. International and translational studies should be performed with a focus on several aspects, such as radicalization risk factors, brainwashing, cognition modifications, social psychology methods, social network behaviors, the role of the media, and, finally, deradicalization programs.

In terms of perspectives, counter-radicalization programs, such as those run by Saudi Arabia and Sweden, have demonstrated mixed results. The most successful efforts in Britain have been the efforts of the so-called Channel program, which is part of the British government’s counter-terrorism strategy to divert young people from extremism. Such efforts, which involve the police, social services, and local authorities working together, draw on methods used to help young people leave gangs.⁴⁻⁶

Not all of these people returning from radical countries will have blood on their hands. Governments need to offer a way out for those who realize that they have made a mistake, and Western countries may benefit from an even softer approach. Chastened returning fighters may be the very best people to persuade more young men to forgo the fight. No one yet knows whether today’s European jihadists who are fighting for ISIS will become tomorrow’s murderers on the streets of Western cities.⁴⁻⁶

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On a more practical note, it is clear there are currently not enough detailed case studies of terrorists to inform psychological analyses or even to conduct comprehensive reviews of the literature.

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Radicalization, Terrorism, Social Psychology