

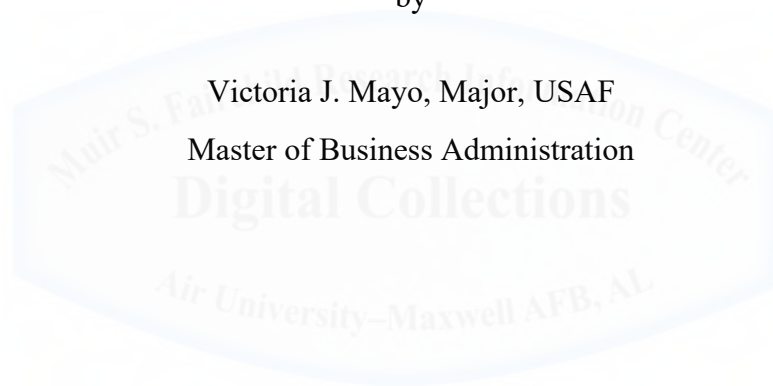
AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

THE MANY PATHS TO RADICALIATION: LEVERAGING LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR A  
COUNTER-RADICALIZATION STRATEGY

by

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## **Bio**

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## Abstract

The current campaign strategy against terrorism has focused on the immediate fight, with short-term attacks against organizations such as al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Success in the fight against violent extremism requires understanding the terrorist organizations that promulgate violence, but to win the long war requires understanding what drives a person to radicalize and join these organizations. Preventing future generations from joining these groups will enable success in the long run. Solving radicalization requires understanding the pathways that people take from political conviction to group violence, so that governments and civil organizations can take steps to inhibit this process.<sup>1</sup>

Many factors interact in causing people to radicalize, creating complexity that obstructs understanding.<sup>2</sup> A multidisciplinary approach—considering an individual’s internal motivations and external environment that influences them to commit violent acts against innocent civilians—offers great value in analyzing the diverse paths to radicalization.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that people follow many diverse paths to radicalization: many internal and external factors make individuals vulnerable to appeals from radical recruiters. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) exploit vulnerable individuals by promising them a path toward justice, belonging, fulfillment, spiritual status, and sometimes adventure. This radicalization process correlates closely with the factors pushing individuals to join criminal organizations and gangs. Therefore, investigating this topic can guide leaders to discover strategies to counter the radicalization process. For example, efforts to prevent future radicalization include local social programs linking communities and organizations, civilians, and law enforcement. These strategies can be strengthened by collaboration with allies, by mutual encouragement in developing the institutions and transparency for mutual accountability.

Success in the fight against violent extremism requires understanding the terrorist organizations that promulgate violence, but to win the long war requires understanding the factors that drive a person to radicalize and join these organizations. Preventing future generations of individuals from joining these groups may not immediately impact the organizations currently fighting against many states, but will enable success in the long run. Solving the radicalization problem requires understanding the pathways that people take to and from political and group violence, so governments and civil society organizations can take the steps to inhibit this process.<sup>4</sup> Many factors interact to cause people to radicalize, creating conceptual complexity that can obstruct understanding.<sup>5</sup> A multidisciplinary approach offers great value in analyzing the paths to radicalization, considering both the internal motivations of individuals and the external environment that influences individuals to commit acts of violence against innocent civilians either at home or abroad.<sup>6</sup> Research shows that people do not follow any single path to radicalization. Rather, many internal and external factors make individuals vulnerable to radical recruiters' appeals. Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) exploit vulnerable individuals by promising them a path toward justice, belonging, fulfillment, spiritual status, and sometimes adventure. This radicalization process correlates directly with the ways individuals join criminal organizations and gangs. Therefore, investigating this topic can guide leaders in developing strategies to counter the radicalization process for terrorist organizations. For example, efforts to prevent future radicalization include local social programs linking communities and organizations, civilians, and law enforcement. These strategies can be strengthened by collaboration with allies, by mutual encouragement in developing the institutions and transparency for mutual accountability.

This essay will first explain internal factors affecting the path to radicalization, focusing on three main internal elements leading people to radicalize: personal grievances, social needs, and a quest for significance. Then the explanation of external factors that affect this process explains common ways in which a person's local environment and culture affect their decisions. An analysis of the viewpoints of VEOs and their communications shows the relevance of these internal and external factors. This reveals correlations between the factors promoting radicalization and motivations of those who join organized criminal organizations and gangs, leading to strategy recommendations for preventing radicalization. This essay summarizes research conducted on the many paths to radicalization, links to criminal gangs, and recommendations on countering radicalization. It does not encompass every specific path, means, or way to prevent radicalization, but takes the predominant factors from research and applies them to strategies on how to counter radicalization. The complexity of the radicalization process should inhibit governments from relying on any monocausal policy model of how radicalization occurs, or how to prevent it from occurring. Policy makers should embrace the complex factors from this research to develop a comprehensive strategic approach.

### **Internal Factors that Lead to Radicalization**

Radicalization studies show several reoccurring internal factors, such as personal grievances, social needs, and a quest for significance. The growth of terrorist organizations demanding attention around the globe has stimulated many research efforts looking into the paths to radicalization over the last decade. Psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists have conducted field research, interviewing imprisoned terrorists, disengaged members, and de-radicalized members, to gain a better understanding of the paths to radicalization. For example, Jessica Stern has spent 20 years researching this topic, interviewing terrorists to try to understand

their motivations for adopting radical commitments. Stern “believes that combating violent extremism requires an understanding of the complex motivations of those who are drawn to it.”<sup>7</sup> She has interviewed a wide variety of individuals from “paramilitary white supremacist and antigovernment cults in the US; Islamist terrorists in Pakistan, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Gaza; Jewish terrorists in Israel; and violent Hindu extremists in India.”<sup>8</sup> This wide research base enabled Stern to understand a core internal factor that motivates individuals to radicalize. Across the diversity of terrorists, whether ostensibly a “lone-wolf” or openly a member of an established terrorist organization, Stern found that individuals “always have a grievance, and that grievance is almost always something you can come to understand if you listen to what terrorists say. Their grievances are often based on real pain or real injustice.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout her work, Stern found:

There is no singular profile of a terrorist and no set path to extreme violence...people are motivated to become terrorists by reasons that may have little to do with the religious and political narratives they spin. They may be driven by fear, love, hate, idealism, trauma, a search for identity, a craving for adventure and glamour, or by greed for money, land, and power. Some people join terrorist groups because they want to be with their friends. For others, religious zealotry offers the simplicity of living in a world defined by good and evil, with no confusing middle ground. In some places where jobs are scarce, terrorism puts food on the table at home...perceived humiliation – either of an entire group or of an individual – [is] a strong risk factor.<sup>10</sup>

These internal grievances initially drive individuals to act out against society and humanity, as a means by which to retaliate against the perceived causes of their grievances. In summary, Stern claims that her research leads to five lessons: “motivation cannot be understood just by reading the political and religious manifestos; personal history, including an experience of humiliation, can make people vulnerable to political or religious narratives; religious terrorists see the world in terms of good and evil, with no gray, or middle, ground; young terrorists are often confused about the religion they profess to follow; and alienation and confusion about

identity often play a role.”<sup>11</sup> Other research conducted on the same topic also shows these lessons.

Among the many sources highlighting the primary causal role of personal grievances in leading people to radicalize, Brooke Rogers found that individual or collective grievances serve as an initial cause to attract individuals towards violence, but are not the only factors.<sup>12</sup> He indicates that a myriad of factors can lead to radicalization, with personal grievances as a dominant factor.

Similarly, Nafees Hamid, a field-based researcher who seeks strategies for reducing violence, found that personal grievances commonly lead to radicalization. In summarizing the common themes in stories relating to the adoption of radical commitments, he wrote “someone felt a loss to their self-worth, a member of their social network offered them a way to regain their significance, and the initial adoption of the ideology served to rationalize a choice made for deeper, more personal reasons...those who were radicalized did report great personal grievances.”<sup>13</sup> People experience a myriad form of grievances such as a personal loss, the loss of a job, or a traumatic experience. These three studies show that personal grievances represent a primary internal factor that may lead individuals to a path of radicalization, supported by numerous other reports showing this same finding.

Researchers have identified a second internal factor that commonly contributes to radicalization, which they call a “social gap.” This means a feeling that the subject does not have anyone upon whom they depend or trust for help, which causes them to seek a social connection through a violent extremist organization. Scott Atran concluded from his research that vulnerable youth feel “increasingly marginalized – economically, socially, politically,” often due to their status “in transition stages in their lives, such as immigrants, students, and those in search of

friends, mates, and jobs.”<sup>14</sup> This feeling of emptiness and need for a social connection causes them to seek relations with other people in a similar position, to feel included in a group or organization. Terrorist organizations offer a sense of shared personal grievance, a community of people who find greater meaning in their lives through political activity.

Michiko Kakutani notes that many militants share “a desire for recognition or belonging” and argued that “the bonds of friendship and kinship are often more important than ideology” in the radicalization process, stressing the “power of social networking as a recruiting tool.”<sup>15</sup> The desire to belong, the need for recognition and the ambition to achieve something great in life, leads individuals to seek this identity and recognition through a terrorist organization. Terrorist recruiters strategically exploit this vulnerability. Kakutani also highlights a study conducted by New York Police Department intelligence analysts. They found that radicalized individuals report that “some kind of personal difficulty (the loss of a job, the death of a family member, the experience of racism) often created a cognitive opening for the turn toward radical religious belief.”<sup>16</sup> This cognitive opening occurs when an individual experiences a personal difficulty, thus opening the door for an individual to become “receptive to the possibility of new ideas and worldviews.”<sup>17</sup> Recruiters for VEOs take advantage of individuals who become receptive to new ideas, and who lack firm religious and political knowledge, which makes them more susceptible to radical Islam.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, researchers have found a mix of internal factors: 1) personal grievances; 2) the need to fill a social gap; and 3) the need to achieve something great in life, all commonly present in people who adopt radical commitments.

An international collaborative study by researchers in the United States, Sri Lanka, and Singapore, conducted on the psychology of radicalization, found that “self-identification as a member of a social group larger than oneself can have a buffering effect against life’s failures

and increase one's sense of personal power and significance."<sup>19</sup> A heightened need for belonging often correlates with a person's personal grievances, often referred to as a sense of failing in life. In contrast, extremist organizations promise a fulfilling life in a tight community with high levels of interdependence. These three studies demonstrate that people join radical groups to find fulfillment in a group that appreciates them.

This need for social fulfillment also correlates with the last internal factor associated with radicalization, the quest for significance. A University of Maryland study found the quest for significance as a "fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to have respect...this quest constitutes a major, universal, human motivation variously labeled as the need for esteem, achievement, meaning, competence, control, and so on."<sup>20</sup> The authors describe the need to feel like one is fulfilling a higher calling, or achieving significance in life, as a basic human need, an emotional driving force. Sebastian Junger also demonstrated the significance of this drive, along with a need for social connection. Junger stated that people hate feeling unnecessary, but they thrive in social communities where they feel needed and actively engaged in a cause. Ultimately, belonging to an activist society requires sacrifice, which gives back more than it costs.<sup>21</sup> This theory of human nature helps explain why people can choose to radicalize, to fulfill not only a social need, but also the strong desire to act in the name of a great cause, and thus to become historically significant.

Elena Mastors and Alyssa Deffenbaugh demonstrated that people need to pursue a noble purpose or cause, which recruiters to radical ideas promise them. They studied individuals that "simply lack any sense of structure or purpose in life and are looking for something to provide them with that structure and purpose."<sup>22</sup> In sum, radicals commonly demonstrate a strong

motivation to find purpose in life, along with other personal motivations such as social needs and personal grievances.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, Nafees Hamid describes the process of radicalization, which he found when interviewing people who were radicalized in Europe. He concluded that they were “drawn in far more by a revolutionary spirit and a belief they could change the world.”<sup>24</sup> His research demonstrates the power of the individual psychological drive to fulfill a higher purpose. Similar results in many other studies support Hamid’s findings. In sum, research into the motivations that drive individuals to radicalize shows these three prominent factors: 1) fulfilling a quest for significance; 2) seeking justice and revenge for personal grievances; and 3) overcoming social exclusion. In addition to emotional and psychological drives, external factors also attract individuals toward radical commitments.

### **External Factors that Lead to Radicalization**

Research establishes that the local and broader environments, as well as culture heavily influence radicalization. For example, living in a war zone can push people toward radicalization in a way that people living in the United States do not experience.<sup>25</sup> Stern considered the location in which recruiters targeted vulnerable individuals: she found significant differences in the paths to radicalization based upon the environment.<sup>26</sup> Recruiters find a more receptive audience where people feel prosecuted or unsafe. On the other hand, the grievances of people living in a secure environment tend toward personal rather than collective targets of anger.<sup>27</sup> Countries that fail to provide human security, or those ruled by oppressive governments create a fertile soil for radicalization. Stern also studied the process of radicalization in democratic countries that have more freedoms, such as the US. For example, despite greater human security in the United States, some still commit to radical ideologies due to their inner motivations.

Increases in terrorist attacks and the effects of globalization undermine human security even further in weak states with repressive governments. Human security concerns include poverty, crime, pollution, and lack of healthcare.<sup>28</sup> Derek Reveron and Kathleen Mahoney-Norris highlight the fact that we cannot prevent terrorism or radicalization “when hundreds of millions of young people see a future with no jobs, no hope, and no way ever to catch up to the developed world.”<sup>29</sup> These basic survival needs can motivate people to violent action, even to the point of disregarding the repercussions for dedicating their lives to terrorism: if people cannot fulfill these needs through legal means, then the path of radicalization may seem like the only option.

Abdelaziz Testas studied the root causes of terrorism in 37 different Muslim countries. He found that “(i) education has a significant and positive influence on terrorism; (ii) political repression initially decreases terrorism then it increases it; and (iii) the interaction between deteriorating economic conditions and civil war contributes positively to participation in terrorist activities.”<sup>30</sup> His documentation of the effects of education and repressive governments demonstrates the crucial role of the external environment. This evidence directly supports the claim that improving security, enabling people to receive basic human needs, while reducing poverty levels, also reduces the propensity to radicalize and participate in terrorist acts. Developing countries with repressive governments commonly fail to provide these basic needs.

Testas found that repressive governments, failed to suppress terrorism in their countries, and that repression ultimately motivated radicalization in the long term. Testas cites Jurgen Brauer, arguing that repressive governments which prevent people from using legal means to voice dissent, thereby push people into illegal activities, such as terrorism. As repressive governments increasingly limit dissent, they turn to terrorism, precisely because the government refused to hear their demands as citizens in any legal, peaceful way.<sup>31</sup> Governments repress their

people to control dissent, but their initial success ends up backfiring as desperation and anger against injustice motivates terrorism.

Ahmed Rashid provides another example of government repression increasing terrorism. He looked at the rise of militant groups in Central Asia and found a strong, direct correlation with government repression. “The regimes respond with increased repression, viewing not just Islamic militancy, but all Islamic practice as a threat to their grip on power. Such shortsightedness has only fueled the support for the more radical Islamic groups.”<sup>32</sup> Not allowing people to practice their religion freely, or speak their minds, leads them to support opposition groups, thus causing an increase in terrorist activities. Therefore, government oppression inadvertently produces militant groups.<sup>33</sup>

Another external factor, the social settings or the culture of the environment in which individuals grow up, can influence individuals toward radicalization. The educational setting that people experience in their youth exerts a significant cultural effect. Jerrold Post stated:

From childhood there is a normalization and social value attached to joining a terrorist group...in the Palestinian terrorist research project...it was clear that the major influence was the social setting. As one terrorist remarked; ‘Everyone was joining.’ Individuals from strictly religious Islamic backgrounds were more likely to join Islamist groups, while those with no religious background might join either a secular or a religious group. Peers were of great influence and often recruited the subjects. For the secular groups the social environment centered on schools and clubs, while for Islamists the mosque, religious organizations, and religious instruction dominated.<sup>34</sup>

The effects of the social environment on youth, along with internal factors, can push youth towards radicalization, making it feel a natural part of maturity. Post goes on to argue: “being part of a supporting community, and providing financial and/or moral support, can encourage the passage of frustrated alienated Islamic youth into this pathway of terrorism, especially when there is wide-spread support in the community and no voice of moderation being raised in criticism of this extremism.”<sup>35</sup> Growing up in a community that promotes radicalization and

extremist ideologies naturally predisposes the youth to agree with violent extremism as a norm. Ahmed Rashid documents this same mentality occurring when Central Asian youth go to study in Pakistan where they learn an extremist ideology. He describes youth indoctrination into extremist ideologies as, “even more than the battlefields of Afghanistan, this madrassah education and the culture of jihad it inspires, is turning out ideologically committed Islamic radicals for future fighting in Central Asia.”<sup>36</sup>

Prison provides another environment in which people come into contact with radical ideologies that draw them toward extremist organizations. For example, Anis Amri, known as “the Berlin Christmas Market Attacker,” became radicalized during his time in an Italian prison. Italian Premier Paolo Gentiloni acknowledged that radicalization frequently happens in Italian prisons. Italy’s top anti-terrorism prosecutor, Franco Roberti, also stated that Amri “found the convictions of his radicalization path” in prison, “in desperation, isolation, and marginalization.”<sup>37</sup> In this way, Roberti identified the same mix of internal and external factors caused Amri to radicalize.

Radicals frequently attribute their commitments to their social environment and relationships, another prominent external factor. In a study conducted in 2009, researchers found that only five percent of al-Qaeda members claimed that a stranger recruited them, while 75 percent gave credit to a friend and 20 percent to a family member.<sup>38</sup> Radicalization occurs most frequently in communities where violent extremism plays a large role in the culture, so that joining an extremist organization becomes accepted as normal. Atran similarly identified the impact of an individual community on their decisions to turn towards radicalization, focusing more on the relationships that influence people.

Individuals now mostly radicalize horizontally with their peers, rather than vertically through institutional leaders or organizational hierarchies. They do so mostly in small

groups of friends – from the same neighborhood or social network – or even as loners who find common cause with a virtual internet community. Entry into the jihadi brotherhood is from the bottom up: from alienated and marginalized youth seeking companionship, esteem, and meaning, but also the thrill of action, sense of empowerment, and glory in fighting the world’s most powerful nation and army.<sup>39</sup>

In this way, Atran demonstrates that multiple internal and external factors combine to ultimately motivate a person toward radical commitments.

### **VEOs’ Demands and Attractions**

Moving from examining internal and external motivations that affect radicalization, extremist organizations see these motivations as factors making a target vulnerable to their ideology. They recruit individuals by fulfilling their needs. Extremist organizations also adapt their recruitment and tactics to the local target environment, while at the same time seeking to fill their organization’s needs and to spread their ideology. VEOs target individuals based on their vulnerabilities: a personal grievance caused by their government, a social need, or a quest for significance, which they cannot satisfy in their current life. As Malet notes, to target these areas, recruiters frame victory in their cause and fight as “necessary to the interests of outsiders with whom they share connections and who might be credibly convinced by these claims.”<sup>40</sup>

Recruiters use social networks and social media to make contact with people, exploiting both internal and external factors to their advantage.

Numerous accounts of the radicalization process demonstrate how VEOs employ both internal and external factors to bring recruits into their ideology. The process often begins with some emotional loss of difficulty, such as losing a job. This despair increases, causing the individual to reach out to their social network, when someone from a VEO contacts them with the means to overcome their personal grievance, such as a source of income. Once this work begins, the grooming commences, in which the recruiter implants the ideology of the VEO.<sup>41</sup>

Recruiters market themselves as experienced in the same personal grievances that individuals experience, whether in security, government repression, or simply the ability to take part in something greater than themselves.<sup>42</sup>

A University of Maryland study describes another example of the radicalization process in three significant steps. First, the individual awakens to his need for significance, then the organization offers him this significance through radicalization, and finally the individual makes a commitment to achieving this goal by committing violence for the goals of the organization.<sup>43</sup> This process resembles the previous example in which a personal grievance initially motivated a search for change, but ends with the same results of radicalization. This demonstrates how VEOs adapt their cause to the needs of individuals they are recruiting. As Atran described, “terrorist groups turn ordinary desires for kinship and religion into cravings for the mission they are pitching, to the benefit of the manipulating organization rather than the individual manipulated.”<sup>44</sup> Recruiters seek out the vulnerabilities of their targets and then manipulate the circumstances and the thought process so the recruits feel like they belong to an organization and ideology that represents themselves and their own thoughts.

The internet and the effects of globalization, continue to increase the capability of VEOs to reach out and spread their message quicker and more efficiently than ever before. VEOs have a keen ability to utilize the information revolution to their advantage, appealing for immediate support, taking advantage of every opportunity to spread their ideology, and putting it in a positive light. In her work studying Somali refugees, Stern found that as people spent more time online, they became more prone to associate themselves with these organizations.<sup>45</sup>

The Nidal Hassan case exemplifies the importance of this immediate connectivity. Investigators found that Hassan had sent numerous emails to Anwar al-Awlaki, a prominent

figure within al-Qaeda prior to the Fort Hood shooting.<sup>46</sup> Individuals responding to some aspect of these internal and external factors by swaying towards radicalization can reach out to prominent extremist leaders at any time. Globalization and technology have undoubtedly made the prevention of radicalization even more difficult. Permeable borders enable transnational networks to operate with confidence and expand their reach throughout the globe.<sup>47</sup> Emile Simpson illustrated how insurgents engage in war, using the platforms of the information revolution to spread their political message and persuade their audience to join the fight.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, studies of VEOs recruiting show that they seek targets to fill identified local needs, including routinely targeting needed people with higher education levels. VEOs resemble military organizations in their need for a broad diversity of skill sets, from foot soldiers to leaders. Recruitment for these different levels varies depending on the environment in which the organization operates, ranging from war-torn countries like Afghanistan to Europe or the US. In Afghanistan, these organizations often capture new recruits or coerce them to partake in actions against coalition forces. In these circumstances, extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda take uneducated young men as foot soldiers.

These same organizations also target educated people to enhance their organization and global recruitment. Nafees Hamid cites the work of Gambetta and Hertog showing a six times greater proportion of Islamist radicals with a bachelor's degree than the general population and seven times higher proportion of engineering degrees.<sup>49</sup> Highly educated personnel can not only improve the technology, tactics, and structure for the organization, but they also attract a broader scope of educated recruits and raise the status of the organizations.

Additionally, in Testas' empirical analysis, he found that terrorist organizations preferred more educated people.

More educated people from privileged backgrounds are more likely to participate in politics...[have] better skills...[and] is even more appealing in international terrorism: [as] educated, middle or upper class individuals are better suited to carry out acts of international terrorism than are impoverished illiterates because the terrorists must fit into a foreign environment to be successful.<sup>50</sup>

Recruiting more educated individuals, who can fit into a variety of environments, correlates with globalization, which enables people, money, and ideas to cross borders more easily and commonly than before. As countries become more interdependent, globalization enables extremists to operate transnationally.

### **Correlations between Organized Crime and Gangs**

Under the continuing challenge of designing counter-radicalization strategies, we can look at efforts that have been used to prevent recruitment into organized crime and gangs, since these groups share similarities in the way both types of organizations operate and recruit. Numerous studies on gangs seek to deter or divert individuals from joining them and ultimately to disband these organizations. To develop effective plans to this end, researchers also examine the internal and external factors that drive individuals to join gangs. The soldiers and fighters in these organizations differ in their motivations from those in VEOs, but their structure and tactics resemble each other. Therefore, studies of organized crime and gangs offer benefit toward preventing radicalization and delegitimizing extremist organizations.<sup>51</sup> Typically, gangs look for financial gain or power, while VEOs primarily seek political power in the name of justice, revenge, and purity. Despite these differences in motivations, both types of organizations utilize criminal activities to advance their cause, target potential recruits according to the same profiles, and use similar tactics to engage these individuals.

Both gangs and terrorist organizations “operate outside the legal system and in the fringes of society,” attracting individuals feeling marginalized in their current social environment and

upset with their current position in life.<sup>52</sup> From a psychological and sociological perspective, individuals that join gangs or organized criminal networks seek to fill some of the same social and emotional needs that individuals joining terrorist organizations try to fill. Individuals join gangs as a means to develop a primary self-identification, because they feel like they do not “belong to ‘mainstream society’, but rather to socially marginal or economically disadvantaged groups,” just as people who turn to radicalization do.<sup>53</sup> Gangs allow members to gain retribution for their own personal grievances, and provide a community that will receive them, and satisfy their need for belonging and significance as a contributing member of the group. Turnley and Smrcka describe how new members experience their acceptance as a “sense of both individual power and protection...and a chance of success” which they trade for their loyalty to the organization.<sup>54</sup> When young people cannot find these opportunities in their community, they will ultimately search for such opportunities through gangs or terrorist organizations.<sup>55</sup>

The literature offers many examples of individuals joining gangs or participating in gang activities as a gateway prior to adopting radical commitments and joining a terrorist organization. For example, Doward, et al., observe that Salman Abedi, the Manchester bomber, “found some sort of identity in a violent gang subculture, that saw alliances formed between different immigrant groups and which seemed to exalt death.”<sup>56</sup> Abedi’s feeling of dispossession from both Manchester and his parents’ home in Tripoli gave him a sense of marginalization, personal grievance, and loss in his environment, which triggered him to turn violent. Doward, et al., go on to argue that Abedi was not “radicalized by ISIS...his life story is all about being radicalized from birth and then ISIS cherry-picked him.”<sup>57</sup>

A study by Neil Ferguson and Eve Binks, found that many radicalized combatants “would begin on the fringes of the conflict, perhaps running with gangs and getting involved in

riots, before being approached by or approaching armed groups and becoming involved in assassinations or bombings.”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Matthew Phillips and Matthew Valasik compare the Islamic State to a street gang, where they note that “recruits join the Islamic State for many of the same reasons young people join street gangs: social identity, protection, status, excitement and emotional fulfillment.”<sup>59</sup>

These examples illustrate that both gangs and VEOs target individuals with psychological and sociological needs which they satisfy to gain allegiance. Understanding the similarities between these different environments and how they arise, their structure, and the individual motivations to join, gangs provide a strong analog for extremist organizations.<sup>60</sup> In addition to understanding the similarities between these organizations, we can also utilize prevention efforts with organized criminal networks and gangs in countering radicalization energies.

### **Recommendations to Prevent Radicalization**

Combining this understanding of the internal and external factors that provoke individuals towards radicalization, recruitment tactics employed by VEOs, reinforced by studies of organized crime and gangs, leads to the following recommendations to prevent radicalization from occurring. Phillips and Valasik conclude, “From Brussels to Minneapolis, societal conditions like concentrated disadvantage, ethnic segregation, and social marginalization can foster either (or both) gang or terror recruitment. Successful intervention would need to foster both community engagement and healthy social bonding.”<sup>61</sup> No matter the location, in order to counter VEO recruitment, and to prevent people from turning towards VEOs for answers to their personal grievances, social needs, and pursuit for significance, local communities must implement social programs linking marginalized communities and organizations, civilians, and law enforcement. They must increase educational programs, and furthermore, countries must

work more closely together to prevent radicalization while also holding each other responsible to eradicate this issue.

Taking a multimodal approach, a RAND study found that some of the same techniques used to prevent entry into street gangs correlated with countering radicalization into a VEO. Multimodal interventions address both ideology and behavior by influencing individual's societal ties with VEOs, friends, and family members.<sup>62</sup> The RAND study found three main overlapping practices promoted success from interventions in both street gangs and radicalization: “the involvement of family members, the importance of tailoring interventions to the group, and the involvement of individuals who will have ‘credibility’ with group members.”<sup>63</sup> Family members that take an active interest and involvement in the life of the person leaning toward radical commitments can strongly influence them into more positive directions, showing them ways to overcome their personal grievances, meet their social needs, and satisfy their need for significance. They can also identify the trigger points that may cause individuals to step toward radicalization and prevent them from following through.<sup>64</sup> As family members typically have the strongest ties and influence over individuals, prevention efforts must rely on them. Additionally, those who seek to help must know what attracts the individual to a specific group. This will help in finding better avenues for that person to meet their needs. Finally, someone who has credibility with the individual can also help rescue them from falling into the ideology and behavior of the VEO. For example, someone seduced by al-Qaeda's narrative needs to receive an alternative perspective from a prominent Muslim leader or teacher in the community who can demonstrate how al-Qaeda's message violates the principles of the faith.

Any social programs or efforts to prevent radicalization must be locally focused. Therefore, any one-size-fits-all approach will fail.<sup>65</sup> Social programs must consider important local factors that draw young people towards radicalization. Governments and local communities must be aware of the human security factors, such as high inequalities in wealth, lack of employment opportunities, and access to healthcare, in local environments that create grievances which recruiters exploit, and develop programs that counter these issues. Job opportunities quell many of these issues, as they enable people to meet their basic human needs, and also provide a sense of worth to individuals. Additionally, providing local jobs can build a community that forms stronger social ties amongst the local populace. Programs designed to promote closer ties with the local populace will prevent shunning of local Muslim communities—or any population that feels cut off from their neighbors. Building these ties, along with promoting relations with local law enforcement, results in a community capable of policing itself and preventing radicalization from occurring. For example, the Spanish government initiated a counter-radicalization plan aimed at improving “coordination between local police and community leaders, municipalities, and national organizations... This program puts a large burden on the communities to do more to funnel information up toward the central government, which will then disperse it.”<sup>66</sup> With communities involved more in assisting law enforcement and government entities to identify issues that create grievances in the community and providing security also offers people a stronger sense of belonging, responsibility, and ownership in their lives.

The Dutch government has adopted a different approach by providing “counseling and employment to dislocated Muslim immigrants so as to better integrate them into Dutch society and reduce the influence of militant groups that also offer social services.”<sup>67</sup> As Hamid observes,

“local authorities cannot investigate every person, but if someone is already suspected, the local officials should know about it. Equipping them to solve local problems – and avoiding the distraction of easy, unhelpful generalizations about immigrant or local communities – is the best way to thwart the jihadists’ international aims.”<sup>68</sup> This program focuses on closing the gap between the Muslim communities and the local populace to prevent individuals from turning to VEOs for their social needs, emphasizing again the criticality of the social community.

As another example of a local social program to counter radicalization, the United States describes its “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign, as “community-based and centered around different forms of violent extremism, including religious, rightwing, and anti-Semitic terrorism...focused on establishing connections between law enforcement and Muslim communities.”<sup>69</sup> This strategy not only emphasizes the importance of close social ties, but also stresses engagement within the community to educate people, to overcome stereotypes and bias related to Muslims, Islam, and the true message and intent of VEOs.<sup>70</sup> This approach also promotes the ability of law enforcement to utilize informant networks to interdict any extremist activities from taking place. This has enabled the United States to successfully identify many domestic terror suspects.<sup>71</sup> Community participation plays a paramount role because civilians have a greater likelihood of engaging a prospective terrorist than law enforcement.<sup>72</sup> Even though the United States has found some success utilizing this campaign, it remains relatively unknown. Therefore, the government must extend a stronger effort to implement it more broadly. Adrienne Ou argues that in many cases, effective programs “empower communities to develop credible alternatives that challenge violence extremist narratives rather than having the Federal Government attempt to do so.”<sup>73</sup> An increased implementation of the program in local

communities could stimulate the second approach to counter radicalization: increasing educational programs to reduce terrorism.

Just as social programs must consider local issues and needs, so must educational programs. The same educational programs will not work in different countries. These programs must address the specific educational needs of each country or local community to prevent radicalization. For instance, Testas argues that Muslim countries need to design educational programs “that aim at correcting the negative attitudes towards non-religious subjects such as social sciences...the focus should probably be not only on increasing years of schooling, but also to consider the content of education as well.”<sup>74</sup> Since large numbers of students learn the ideologies of violence in thousands of madrassahs and schools, usually in communities that promote extremism as the social norm, this creates an enormous challenge for Muslim countries to inhibit the infection of these ideologies in their youth and cut off the future of VEOs. Providing a better education to youth can open up new opportunities, and broader, more fulfilling choices than turning to extremist organizations. As Jerrold Post observes, “it is important to provide alternate pathways for redressing grievances. All too many bright ambitious, economically disadvantaged youth are unable to succeed in societies that offer few opportunities; in response, they strike out in despair.”<sup>75</sup> This requires providing youth an education that enables them to “compete in a globalizing economy and does not expose them to radical ideology.”<sup>76</sup> Post describes a program developed in Pakistan, to implement a more moderate school curriculum. Tom Moorehead, undersecretary of labor for international affairs, provided a \$25 million grant for this program with the belief that every child educated under this program will be one less educated in a radical madrassah, thereby resulting in effective counter-terrorism.<sup>77</sup>

To reinforce the education effort in the United States, the media must also produce programs to educate the general public on overcoming VEOs' messages and intents. Since most Americans have little understanding of the Muslim community and Islam, they uncritically accept the messaging that VEOs spread, which only intensifies their influence. VEOs attempt to provoke an anti-Muslim mentality that validates their narrative. Therefore, "those who most vociferously condemn Islam as a whole...are actually fueling the alienation and disillusionment that has caused people to gravitate towards such movements."<sup>78</sup> To prevent this occurrence, the United States needs to familiarize Americans with the true ideology behind Islam by educating the population on the illogical accusations that VEOs communicate. Such an effort would require a whole of government approach, utilizing both government agencies and civilian organizations to work together and spread the truth about these illogical accusations. Muslim community leaders must educate their followers, while at the same time being an example to the non-Muslim community. With both government and civilian organizations working together, they will be able to educate the ignorant population that fall into stereotyping all Muslims while discrediting VEOs' messaging. This helps local communities to not fear their Muslim neighbors and increases their acceptance into American society.

Finally, countries need to work together and hold each other responsible for their part to prevent radicalization and terrorist organizations from freely operating. Tristan Dunning laments the "practical role that governments have played, both in the Middle East and elsewhere, in fomenting and perpetuating the conditions that facilitate the rise and persistence of groups such as IS and al-Qaeda."<sup>79</sup> He argues that without understanding and correcting the social factors promoting political violence we cannot protect our security.<sup>80</sup> Even the United States cannot

secure its own borders; it must rely on other countries of the world. Providing security requires long-term national and international cooperation.<sup>81</sup>

Globalization and the permeability of national borders allows international influences to affect all regions of the world. Scott Atran argues that to minimize the negative impacts of globalization, countries must work in “concert to address the historical and personal grievances, whether perceived or actual, of people who have been denied opportunity and power to realize their hopes and aspirations for personal security, collective peace, environmental sustainability, and cultural fulfillment.”<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the international community needs to “establish an intense dialogue with Muslim religious and community leaders to reconcile Islamic custom and religious law (shari’a) with internationally recognized standards for crime, punishment, and human rights.”<sup>83</sup> Opening dialogue will facilitate a concentrated global effort to stop VEOs from spreading their radical ideology, and protect future generations from radicalizing. Setting international standards allows countries to hold each other accountable for either directly or indirectly promoting terrorist organizations, or not efficiently acting to exterminate them. As some countries utilize terrorism as a means to control their own populations, it is pertinent to focus on the VEOs that conduct attacks on their own, rather than with the support of some other governments.

States have a self-protection right to resist the spill-over of insecurity from other states. The international community can hold countries responsible for infringing on human rights and repressing political expression responsible by withdrawing military and political support, thus encouraging them to constructively debate alternate visions for their societies.<sup>84</sup> If countries choose to continue these types of actions, other nations can work together to contain and shun them. Globalization increases the interconnectedness of countries and reliance on each other,

enabling a greater impact from sanctions or containment policies. Therefore, this requires political will, leadership, and diplomacy.

The activity of the US military in countering terrorism mandates that military members understand these principles of radicalization. The United States cannot simply withdraw its forces from Muslim communities, which would send a message of defeat in the face of a threat from terrorist organizations. Instead, it must work closely with local governments to portray the right explanation for their presence and activity.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, the US military must more effectively educate military members about Muslim culture and Islamic ideology as they deploy to Muslim countries, since they represent the United States to the local populations on a daily basis. Improving education will prevent military members from causing local misperceptions regarding the American and the local government's intentions and they can avert creating more radicalized extremists. In other words, by avoiding actions that would support the VEOs' narrative.

## **Conclusion**

In reality, US politicians do not consider the issue of radicalization as important as Muslim countries do, even while the media publicizes the issue. Even though Americans should not have high levels of anxiety about terrorism and radicalization, perception has emotional power that often appears greater than reality. Therefore the US government, along with the international community, must take steps to alleviate these concerns. Effectively preventing extremist organizations from radicalizing future generations of violent combatants requires a multidisciplinary approach, based on research and understanding of the internal and external factors influencing individuals towards radicalization. Understanding how VEOs recruiters exploit these factors to indoctrinate vulnerable youth while using information gained through

analyzing organized crime and gang similarities produces recommendations to counter radicalization. Local governments should implement social programs linking Muslim communities and organizations, civilians, and law enforcement, and support local educational programs. Countries must work closely together to prevent radicalization, using shaming, sanctions, and containment against states enabling these organizations.

Even though this strategy will help alleviate the issue of radicalization, as Adrienne Ou observes, “the reality is that so long as there are people who value their beliefs over human lives and there is a social movement that allows these people to be mobilized together in an absolute willingness to achieve their goals irrespective of the horror their tactics inspire, there will be a threat of terrorism.”<sup>86</sup> Just as law enforcement officials try to prevent criminals from committing acts such as murder and rape, but cannot prevent all crimes from occurring, the same holds true with radicalization and terrorist organizations. No strategies will be able to permanently exterminate extremist organizations, or lone-wolf violent extremists, from committing terrorist acts, or continuing to radicalize others as “new threats and forms of extremism emerge over time.”<sup>87</sup> Radicalization will continue to occur. As Bergen stated, terrorism and radicalization “represent a persistent, low-level threat that should not be allowed to crowd out other serious issues.”<sup>88</sup> At the end of the day, every country will need to focus on the most critical issues in their location at that time. More specifically, Americans need to ensure they do not allow media and misinformation by VEOs to deceive them into engaging in rash policies of demonization or militarizing civil policing issues.

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