

Terrorism & Radicalization; An Overview

Since terrorism has been a predominant news item it has been interchangeably linked with Islam in most cases. Terrorism itself and the processes involved that lead to terrorism is referred to as radicalization. These are complex and do not fit with a standard profile nor group. A large group of variables in a person's life makes it possible for any person to go through a radicalization process that can eventually lead to terrorism or violent extremism. Although terrorism has been around for some time, its increasingly predominant position in this century has been fueled by globalization and technology. The lack of a universal definition in international law makes terrorism and the process of radicalization a field that will divide the world for decades to come.

What is terrorism?

Although the word terror has been in the English language for quite some time, the first occurrence of the word terrorism was in French at the end of the 18th century. Terrorism, as the word we know today, was first coined in the period of the French revolution. In the period of 1793 until 1794, the ruling Jacobin faction executed anyone they perceived as a threat to their regime (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2017). In the setting of that and coming centuries terrorism would be defined as the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims (Oxford Dictionary, 2017).

The linguistic definition described above is clear and succinct, but it would prove to be a point of debate in the 20th and 21st centuries. Nation-states that score low on freedom and democracy tend to use the terms "civilians" and "unlawful" eclectically as seen fit for that regime at that moment. The lack of a universal definition in international law echoes through in the daily news outlets. The act of terrorism in a legal sense can be strictly described in law. E.g., the United States (US) Law defines terrorism as: "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents" (United States Code, 2017). In the case of e.g. the Boston Marathon Bombing, no terrorism charges were filed. Although it was considered an act of terror by some, it was not classified as a terrorist attack in nature, but more an act of violent extremism.

There is a specific difference between terrorism and violent extremism as was the case with the Fort Hood shooting in 2009. Just as much as there is a difference between the legal definition of terrorism and the charges after an event (Washington Week, 2014). The focus on international terrorism creates a tendency to deem the aforementioned events like terrorism,

and although there is an overlap in causes, the strict definition of terrorism is an important aspect of not only national laws but also international law. When it comes to international organizations, we see a more complex approach regarding the definition of terrorism. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) uses the following definition: “The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence, instilling fear and terror, against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, or to gain control over a population, to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives.” (NATO, 2017).

Depending on the country or organization, the definition of terrorism may vary in terminology including certain aspects that are contextually important to that respective country or organization. This may vary from international terrorism to domestic terrorism. However, with regard to international law, it is still a work in progress as there are several concerns in defining a common definition of terrorism. This varies from how widely the offense should be defined, the relationship between terrorism and the use of force by states, and the relationship between terrorism and human rights (Shaw, 2008). Despite the political difficulties entailed there is progress being made by e.g., the United Nations (UN) in generally condemning terrorism based on common aspects in the international community (UN, 2011).

Regardless of the differences in variations in these respective definitions of terrorism per nation-state, they all share certain common denominators. The rule-of-law in most nation-states prohibits the use of unlawful violence and intimidation in its legal code. The lawful use of force is commonly used only by law enforcement officials under strict rules and regulations. Most nation-states also have an electoral system that allows their polity to pursue their political aims in a peaceful way. The extent of this of course may vary per nation-state and the amount of democracy and stability in such a nation-state.

The difference in the level of e.g., democracy, civil rights, freedom of speech, and state stability has resulted in an absence of a universal definition of terrorism. The broadened use of terrorism in certain nation-states create opportunities for political manipulations that may lead to human rights violations (UN, 2015). At this moment in time, the closest thing that can be described as a universal definition of terrorism is the one dating back to the 18th century; the unlawful use of violence against civilians by groups in pursuit of political aims.

What is radicalization?

In order to understand terrorism, one must understand the processes that lead to terrorism. This is often referred to as radicalization. Radicalization is best defined by Brian Jenkins as: “the process of adopting for oneself or inculcating in others a commitment not only to a system of beliefs, but to their imposition on the rest of society”. (Jenkins, 2009).

The fact that a large part of the radicalization process is psychologically internalized makes it hard to detect and track. The process of radicalization involves behavioral patterns that are hard to detect and are often recognized in hindsight. The possibility of recognizing signs of radicalization is also dependable on the social cohesion in a person’s habitat. If a specific person comes from a close-knit community the chances of recognizing signs of radicalization can be detected earlier than if a person is isolated in a community or society.

The extreme views or beliefs and the term extremist is often used together if not interchangeable with radicalization. However, they are not the same. An extremist is not per definition engaged in imposing their ideology on others via violence. As stated before, there are those who hold extremist views and beliefs that may eventually resort to violence, even violence that may be extreme to a point that it is regarded as an act of terror. The lack of a structured framework in international law echoes through in the study and the process of terrorism as a whole. Society is being confronted with acts of violence, terror, and terrorism, and is trying to understand the subsequent processes. This often results in using the words terrorism, terror, radical, and extremist in the same sentence. The risk with this approach is the constant attack on civil liberties to combat a social problem.

The danger herein is that by using radicalization and extremism interchangeably with regard to terrorism, the lack of an international consensus will remain. Societies and governments are being confronted this century with a complex form of terrorism and the desire to understand terrorism has led to the umbrella term of “violent extremism”. Because radicalization is a process that crosses through all demographic and social strata the usage of an umbrella term such as violent extremism covers both ideologies, religions, and their potential fallout. (European Parliament, 2015).

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, better known as START, has published preliminary findings of their Profiles of Individual

Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS). These findings validate some elements of common wisdom, but also provides new insights. Some of these preliminary findings are that:

- Individuals who spent a longer time radicalizing before engaging in illegal extremist activities were less likely to commit an act of violence.
- The participation in religious activities, as well as the consumption of radical media, were negatively correlated with the use of violence among both Far Right and Far Left extremists.

It also reaffirms that radicalization appears to be a very social phenomenon, regardless of one's ideology or psychological issues. This suggests that individuals that demonstrate risk factors are equally predisposed regardless of their background (START, 2015).

The existing research on the relationship between psychopathology and terrorism has been predominantly unanimous in its conclusion; mental illness and abnormality are not typical critical factors in terrorist's behavior (Borum, 2010). This excludes an important stereotype concerning terrorism, but still leaves a large group of people that commit acts of terror and violence such as the Fort Hood Shooting. The FBI classified this event as an act of “violent extremism” (FBI, 2011).

Countering violent extremism (CVE) could be regarded as a focus on the prevention of radicalization in which the result is terrorism.

It is important to properly classify who is a terrorist and who is a violent extremist. The terrorist has a clear and specific goal, with a specific methodology that is applied to reach that goal. Research shows the absence of stereotypes such as psychological problems. Those who commit acts of violent extremism, of which there are many, often are troubled with psychological problems. The fact that they show commonalities with terrorists, such as being belonging to a religious group doesn't warrant that they are included and treated the same. Both the respective governments and their polity should have a different approach to those who are susceptible to radicalization with tendencies to commit acts of violent extremism such as mass shootings.

Democracy and terrorism

Terrorism isn't an exclusive Islamic market, and not all terrorists are Muslim. The number of people killed in the 1970-ies and 1980-ies in Western Europe is higher than the

number killed in Western Europe since 2000 (GTDB, 2020). A military response is not the only solution for tackling threats, nor should it be excluded. People do not become terrorists overnight and the process of radicalization is a complex one as it is intrinsically linked with our civil rights, our freedom of thought, and our freedom of speech.

Globalization has brought us many advantages, but there have also been some disadvantages. The use of terrorism by various groups has stirred society and society is trying to understand what makes a terrorist. This process of radicalization in the absence of a universal definition in international law of terrorism puts society under pressure. Over the past decades, the internet has become accessible to almost anyone anywhere, and with relative ease, people can spread ideologies and find these. This allows non-state actors (but also state-actors) to spread and manipulate information. These combined factors allow relatively small parties to dominantly spread their information on social media.

Globalization hasn't brought us terrorism or violent extremism, it has merely confronted society with itself and the diversity of groups that reside inside societies all over the world. Those that feel oppressed and have different viewpoints, regardless of them being terrorists or not, now have the means to communicate with much greater ease than 40 years ago. If we want to curb radicalization, we need more grassroots initiatives. Of all the research that is out there, the common variables do show similar push and pull factors in the process of radicalization, and these factors are not new. They existed back in the 1800s in the streets of Paris and will exist long afterward. The international debate on getting a consensus with regard to terrorism is an important one, but society should also start to become more aware of radicalization. Instead of waiting for a government to undertake action, that might violate constitutional rights, communities should also undertake action.

There are many different approaches in countering radicalization, of the groups out there engaged in dealing with Islamic radicalization the following consensus shows that addressing radicalization in combined fields such as schools, mosques, efforts at home, and online yield the best result. (CSIS, 2016). Perhaps this shows the cause as well in human behavior, namely that it is a combination of factors in society today that make the process of radicalization what it is.

Terrorism and radicalization are here to stay, they are part of the human race. The way we deal with it is important and perhaps the greatest challenge is to find a proper balance in addressing the issue in contrast to the disturbance that terrorism tries to bring to society.

The fact that a lot of information about terrorism comes from hindsight also shows the need for more awareness of radicalization and grassroots initiatives as radicalization is an intrinsic process in part.

In the end radicalization and terrorism confront the polity in democratic states with a pivotal question. Do they want the government to institute different programs that may breach their civil liberties, or will the polity see it as their democratic responsibility to initiate and support democratic grass-roots initiatives?

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