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# **RADICALIZATION REVISITED: JIHAD 4.0 AND CVE PROGRAMMING**

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# RADICALIZATION REVISITED: JIHAD 4.0 AND CVE PROGRAMMING

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Democracy and Governance and Peace and Security in the Asia and Middle East

## **DISCLAIMER**

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## ACRONYMS

AIVD	General Intelligence and Security Service [of the Netherlands]
AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CAF	Conflict Assessment Framework
CT	Counterterrorism
CVE	Counter violent extremism
DDA	Development and democracy assistance
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna ( <i>Basque Homeland and Liberty</i> )
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
ICAF	Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICSR	International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence
IDF	Israeli Defense Forces
IED(s)	Improvised explosive device(s)
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [See also ISIS]
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NYPD	New York Police Department

PET	Danish Security and Intelligence Service
PM	Prime Minister
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
UK	United Kingdom
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
US	United States
USG	United States Government
VE(s)	Violent extremism or violent extremist(s)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Understanding Radicalization

Hypotheses related to radicalization (and more recently deradicalization) have become a regular feature in countering violent extremism (CVE) discourse. This exploratory think piece focuses on radicalization in the context of the “fourth wave” of jihadi violence, starting roughly in 2012, and proposes that current ideas about radicalization processes are limiting our understanding of violent extremism (VE) phenomena and our ability to respond effectively. Radicalization is generally assumed to be a process that starts with ideas and ends with bad behavior, often in some logical sequence. In some formulations, it arises with an identity crisis, trauma, or other personal event that leads to a “cognitive opening” and a search for new ways of interpreting and relating to one’s environment. That opening may result in the acceptance of a belief system featuring “extremist” ideas (violent or not); incremental further radicalization of beliefs (especially under the impact of group dynamics); and, ultimately, involvement in VE activity.

Discussions of radicalization often conflate attitudes and behavior and fail to recognize that ideological radicalization might result from different drivers than behavioral radicalization and that the former might not pave the way for the latter. There is now a body of evidence suggesting that among the many who express violent views, only a handful appears willing to act on them. Many who support VE agendas do not engage in VE activity. Conversely, many individuals who engage in VE activity, or provide consequential support to those who do, may do so for reasons that have nothing to do with views or belief systems that legitimize violence. They may not support, or identify with, the political or ideological aims said to be driving violence. They may instead be motivated by different forces including financial incentives; coercion and intimidation; psychological needs; and various forms of base gratification. Consequently, radicalization of attitudes may call for different CVE interventions than radicalization of behavior.

The fourth wave of jihadism has witnessed a shift in radicalization dynamics, particularly in conflict zones and the West. In both regions, the salience of ideological radicalization has declined. Conflict and insecurity have propelled behavioral radicalization of communities in conflict zones, and marginalization of youth and youth rebellion have propelled behavioral radicalization of individuals in the West. There is reason to suspect that some of these forces are at work in non-conflict, non-Western settings, but the time allocated for this paper did not allow robust investigation of all categories.<sup>1</sup> The next step would be to research radicalization dynamics in those settings to see if the ideas presented in this paper apply in part or in full.

## Radicalization in Conflict-Affected Zones

The study of radicalization has tended to emphasize the individual, while significantly de-emphasizing the broader context in which radicalization occurs. This framing now seems more relevant in Western settings, in order to make sense of “homegrown terrorism” there, than in conflict-affected zones, where community-based dynamics and structural factors are more salient. The radicalization of a handful of individuals in the West is quite distinct from the radicalization that affects much larger percentages of entire communities in conflict and spillover settings (e.g., Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Mali, Iraq, etc.). In these latter environments, what drives radicalization is typically an entirely different set of factors. For one, macro-level processes (e.g., Sunni victimization in Iraq) that reflect national-level drivers and even geopolitical dynamics often play a far more salient role. Such considerations also mean that while in the West it makes sense to ask the question “How do individuals radicalize?” in conflict zones, the better question is: “What combination of domestic and external forces enabled jihadi organization to gain traction and/or embed themselves in communities?” Such different casting points to very different programming priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Further research is warranted on radicalization dynamics in non-conflict-affected, Muslim majority countries like Morocco, Niger, Bangladesh, and Jordan and non-conflict-affected, Muslim minority countries with religious/sectarian tensions like Kenya and Tanzania.

In many conflict zones, “radicalization” of attitudes or behavior and of individuals or communities often does not precede VE activity, especially of the jihadist type; instead, it frequently appears to be a byproduct of other forces. Therefore, in violence-torn countries, if one thinks of VE activity, jihadist expansion, or support for jihadist organizations as the dependent variable, “radicalization” rarely stands out as one of the main independent variables responsible for it. Instead, more compelling forces appear to drive jihadi activity. When “radicalization” (of individuals and/or communities) occurs in conflict zones, it often does so in the wake of the breakdown of order and the generalized violence that follows it, and as a consequence of both, rather than beforehand and as a cause of them. In such environments, large-scale radicalization takes place during violent crises or in their aftermath, as individuals and/or communities embrace more extremist views and/or engage in more violent behavior as a result of the forces unleashed by those crises.

These observations have policy implications. Where VE activity, jihadist expansion, and/or support for jihadist organizations are caused by drivers that are not themselves related to ideological radicalization, CVE programming cast in terms of “preventing radicalization” (at the individual and/or community level) is likely to miss the mark. More effective responses may include those aimed at preventing or reducing the severity of the crises that are the primary cause of jihadist expansion (and of the attendant amounts of “radicalization” of beliefs and behavior). To put it somewhat differently, in all the war-torn countries that have experienced a surge in VE/jihadist activity in the past decade, this phenomenon has owed less to pre-existing radicalization dynamics than to the longstanding decay and hollowing out of governmental and political institutions, and to the subsequent breakdown in the state’s and the political system’s capacity to provide for basic governance, security and the regulation of disputes. Recognizing this dynamic has several inter-related implications for practitioners concerned with how to prevent or combat “radicalization” in conflict zones.

1) Micro-level CVE programming that focuses on community-wide and individual radicalization processes and arenas may help stem the VE tide, and/or shelter individuals and communities alike against some of their negative effects. However, such programming should not detract from the more critical imperative of relying on carefully targeted macro-level interventions to try to prevent violent crises from erupting, or to contain them and undercut their potential for exacerbation and/or territorial expansion after they break out. Too much emphasis placed on trying to identify individuals or communities “at risk of being radicalized,” and on seeking to blunt or disrupt relevant individual-level or community-wide “radicalization dynamics,” may come at the expense of necessary attention being given to the “upstream” structural factors that cause such vulnerabilities in the first place.

2) Conflict risk assessments as well as conflict-prevention and mitigation interventions should be front-and-center in CVE programming. If radicalization is to be prevented before it happens, the violent conflicts that loom so large in creating it and in making it much harder to reverse must be anticipated to the extent possible, and efforts must be deployed to diffuse them.

3) In the past decade the thinking about how to assess and respond to situations of, respectively, conflict and VE has developed to some extent on parallel tracks, with conflict (both assessment and programming) being still approached predominantly through a development lens or humanitarian assistance perspective. Those tracks occasionally intersect but they generally remain more separate than recent and ongoing VE phenomena suggest they should be. Greater attention to conflict may help refocus a CVE agenda that, in its current state, seems to have become rather elastic and amorphous. Conflict analysis, prevention, mitigation, and resolution should be a priority. Similarly, instead of viewing CVE as a competitor to development and democracy assistance, we must recognize where the two intersect – or, to be more specific, where CVE or counter-radicalization objectives necessitate doubling down on issues of political inclusion and reform, good governance, anti-corruption, conflict prevention and resolution (both within and between communities), neglected peripheries, and social marginalization.

## Radicalization in the West

Radicalization dynamics have also changed in the West in recent years. In light of the available evidence, it has become an increasingly precarious proposition to suggest that the vast majority of jihadists in the West use violence because they have been “ideologically radicalized” or are seeking to advance a coherent political or religious agenda. For most jihadists in the West, “ideological radicalization” is neither a necessary condition, nor even a prime reason, for engaging in violence. Biographic data on Western jihadists emphasize this point. Their backgrounds are frequently characterized by criminal activity, violence, drinking, sexual liaisons, and a lack of interest in or knowledge of religion and politics. They do not arrive at jihadism through religious study or via a cogent critique of Western policies in Islamic countries. The actual line of causality runs not from religious conversion to jihadism but in the other direction: any interest in Islam recruited youth came to display manifested itself late in the day, after their “conversion” to jihadism. In fact, most of these youth never became “religious” in any conventional sense of the term. They are also not politically or ideologically inclined.

In the West at least, jihadism 4.0 reflects what the French expert Olivier Roy describes as “a generational revolt” by youth who turn against their parents, and everything that their parents represent in terms of religion and culture. It makes sense, in this context, that jihadists 4.0 embrace at least nominally Salafi ideas. For them, Salafism’s appeal lies in how different it is from the Islam of their parents, let alone their parents’ religion in the case of converts. It is the ideal religious form for what may be, to a large extent, a global counter-cultural movement, not a religious one. And, it has the added advantage of being not just alien, but threatening. Salafism thus is inherently attractive to young rebels who want to provoke, who seek to signal rejection of the dominant culture while claiming moral superiority over it. The adoption of a Salafi identity also provides membership in a new community of like-minded radical rebels, as well as the distinct counter-culture associated with that community. In the context of modern Western societies, Salafism stands out as an “Islam of rupture.” Its embrace, therefore, can be the equivalent of a rite of passage: it can serve to affirm, both to oneself and to others, one’s move into a different world.

The extolling of violence, the glorification of death and self-sacrifice, and the celebration of killing (adding a jihadi component to the Salafi one) is icing on an already tasty cake: they heighten the defiance of mainstream society and provide yet more ways of deriding the dominant value system. The sadistic violence used by groups such as Islamic State (ISIL)—and its appeal to Western jihadists—must be understood, in part, against this backdrop: it serves many ends in different contexts, but one of them is to provoke: beheadings, crucifixion, and other public displays of savagery are intended, in part, to mock civilized norms and break taboos.

In the end, it is not so much “ideology” or “religion” that drives the “radicalization” of Western youth drawn to jihadism 4.0, but rather a “thrilling cause,” as anthropologist Scott Atran has put it. There is a world of difference between an ideology and a thrilling cause. The former suggests an intellectual framework built around a set of ideas or claims, logical connections among them, and an agenda to promote the resulting worldview. A “thrilling cause” is different: while it, too, may involve ideas, fundamentally it rests not on ideas, but on emotions and the kind of behavior most closely associated with them: excitement and the “high” created by intense lives spent on the edge; the quest for personal significance and self-empowerment; the pursuit of fame, peer recognition and/or adventure; and the desire for meaningful relationships and intense communitarianism, to name but a few of those emotions most relevant to jihadism 4.0.

Casting radicalization as a primarily ideological process suggests that analysts should focus on how jihadists think; how and why they have come to think that way; and what can be done to disrupt relevant processes and counter the appeal of their destructive ideas or worldviews. Approaching radicalization, instead, through the lens of emotions necessitates that we try to imagine how jihadists feel; why they feel the way they do; what they find in jihadism that is truly satisfying to them from an emotional (not intellectual) perspective; and what that all means for CVE programming. These are two fundamentally different ways of understanding



what radicalization really means to those who experience it, and this report suggests that the transition from the former lens to the latter is overdue. The analysis also points to the problem with relying on counter-narratives or “promoting moderate Islam.” If violence-prone, young rebels looking for a cause turn to jihadism, it is precisely because violence is such an integral part of it.

Instead of emphasizing the ideological and religious aspects of radicalization, the CVE community needs to become more sensitive to its broader cultural and emotive dimensions, and to design programming that builds on such an understanding. Those who drift into jihadism 4.0 because of its appeal as a global counter-cultural movement are not going to be pulled away from its orbit by theological or political arguments (for instance, those that emphasize that IS’s ideas or actions “contradict Islam”). Many contemporary jihadists have little interest in, or no patience for, such arguments. After all, contemporary jihadi culture is, first and foremost, an experiential one. It draws individuals in because of the emotions it satisfies, including the sense of brotherhood and intense communal life it provides. Strictly religious endeavors play a relatively minor role in jihadi culture, which instead revolves around group activities that promote camaraderie and brotherhood.

CVE programming has yet to draw the full implications of these shifts. It needs to place more emphasis on the powerful cultural and emotional forces behind the new incarnations of jihadism. Responses should include context-specific programming for youth, led by youth who understand their peers. It may involve mentoring, physical activity, music, entertainment, but, above all, it must make a compelling case that it is addressing the emotions and impulses that this section has identified as the real drivers of “radicalization.” That means, among others, that it must address problems of identity (and identity redefinition), and recognize the centrality of the search for community and brotherhood as well as the quest for personal significance and recognition by peers and society alike.

In addition, “counter-narrative” interventions should perhaps be less preoccupied with articulating theological or ideological refutations of the jihadi narrative; they should instead devote more efforts to creating viable alternatives to what jihadism has to offer in the realm of emotions and experiences; they cannot be primarily negative (i.e., focused on rebutting the jihadi narrative or on highlighting the negative aspects of life under ISIL). Instead of relying on mass messaging aimed at youth, they must, just as ISIL recruiters do (physically as well as online) find ways of engaging “at-risk” youth in intimate and personalized dialogues over their grievances, aspirations, and problems. Concomitantly, donor efforts at “building resilience” should not focus exclusively on those sources of resilience that are tied to civil society and broader societal features. They also must recognize the importance of addressing resilience’s psychological and psycho-sociological components – i.e., the mental capacity of individuals and groups to resist and respond to the emotions into which jihadist organizations deliberately tap.

# INTRODUCTION

“Radicalization” has become so established as a concept in terrorism research as well as in counter-terrorism (CT) and counter violent extremism (CVE) circles that it is easy to forget its status as a relative newcomer to the lexicon of political violence. The word originally was raised within Western European law enforcement and intelligence agencies following 9/11, and its rapid ascent in both academic and policy-making discussions can be traced back to the aftermath of the March 2004 Madrid train attacks and the July 2005 London subway bombing.<sup>2</sup> Discussion of “radicalization processes” and “drivers of radicalization” gave rise to a community of experts and policy-makers focused on the analysis and policy implications of those phenomena, and it soon spawned a “de-radicalization industry” that is entering its second decade of existence.

However, focusing in particular on the “fourth wave” of jihadi violence (“Jihadism 4.0”),<sup>3</sup> which has been unfolding since approximately 2012, this report suggests that the salience of the term “radicalization” in discussions of VE phenomena may be inversely related to that concept’s actual utility. The word is more a source of conceptual confusion than analytical clarity, and consequently, from a policy-making perspective, reliance on it may be unhelpful, misleading, or point to ineffective or even counter-productive interventions. This document highlights the empirical and analytical pitfalls associated with analyzing ongoing VE phenomena through a “radicalization” lens, and it underscores the programmatic implications of that state of affairs. Its main, inter-related claims include the following:

- 1) There is a significant and worrisome gap between, on the one hand, how radicalization typically is discussed and, on the other hand, what it is meant to capture, and how it actually unfolds, in both conflict and non-conflict zones. The processes and images that the word “radicalization” brings to mind often seem disconnected from the realities of VE dynamics.
- 2) Because “radicalization” often is left undefined, is ill-defined, or is defined in inconsistent if not contradictory ways from one author or government agency to another, the term is open to misuse and confusion; therefore, it cannot provide a basis for sound, coherent policy-making. Since there is no single, commonly accepted definition of radicalization, but instead a proliferation of stated or implicit meanings and phenomena associated with the term, those who discuss “radicalization” may be talking past each other, even when they seem to be reaching common ground.<sup>4</sup>
- 3) Discussions of “radicalization” often conflate attitudes and behavior. That is problematic not only from an empirical perspective, but from a programmatic one as well. From a policy-making angle, it matters a great deal how one conceptualizes the relationship between VE attitudes and VE behavior, and the degree to which one feels that changes in attitudes toward violence (ideological or cognitive radicalization) contribute or pave the way to changes in behavior. For one, since cognitive and behavioral radicalization may be associated with different drivers, they call for different types of intervention.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation,” Coolsaet, “All Radicalisation is Local.”

<sup>3</sup> Analysts now commonly refer to four waves of global jihadist violence, though they do not always agree on the exact delineation of each phase. This report proposes the following periodization. The first phase coincided with the Afghan jihad, which developed in the wake of the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and lasted through the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989. The second wave was spearheaded by Al-Qaeda during the 1990s. It saw many veterans of the Afghan jihad return to their countries of origin, and in two notable cases (Egypt and Algeria) playing a leading role in Islamist insurgencies there (1992-1997). Other “Arab Afghans” joined insurrections elsewhere (Bosnia, Chechnya), and tried (ultimately unsuccessfully) to hijack these local conflicts to further a global jihadist agenda. This second wave culminated in the 9/11 attacks. The third wave was sparked by the U.S. invasion of Iraq (March 2003), and lasted through approximately 2010, when the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) seemed to be on the verge of total defeat and extinction. The fourth and current wave, which has had by far the greatest territorial impact and has been characterized by unprecedented levels of brutality, began with the surge in jihadist activity in the Sunni areas of Iraq in 2011 (largely as a result of the policies of the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki). It accelerated dramatically in 2013-14, especially with the capture of Mosul, the transformation of ISIL into the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), and the announcement of a Caliphate, all in June 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Pissou, “Coming to Believe ‘Truths’ About Islamist Radicalization in Europe,” p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> That is why, for instance, the notion of “drivers of radicalization” is unhelpful since the drivers in question are likely to be radically different depending on whether the issue is cognitive or behavioral radicalization. Research into “radicalization processes” therefore should treat “radicalization

4) Discussions of radicalization processes tend to overstate the role of ideology and political agendas, as well as the extent to which they operate as conveyor belts to VE activity. Especially in conflict zones and western countries, ideology does not play as central a role in “radicalization” as is often assumed to be the case, and there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that its importance has declined even further with this fourth wave of jihadi activity. In most cases, radicalization is not an “ideology-heavy” process; to the extent ideology comes into play, it often does so after individuals or communities already have been “radicalized” (in the sense of involved in VE activity, or supportive of VE organizations). As will be shown, this has important implications regarding the potential limitations of CVE programming focused on the “war of ideas,” “counter-narratives” and “support for moderate Islam.”

5) Along similar lines, the role of religion in contemporary processes of “jihadi radicalization” is frequently exaggerated or misunderstood. For the vast majority of those who drift into jihadi activity in this fourth wave, or who provide various forms of support for jihadi organizations, religiosity does not play a critical role. Religion matters, but typically not through its theological dimensions.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it comes into play through identity-related dynamics, or through the various, context-specific functions that jihadi organizations perform for individuals and/or communities.

6) What “radicalization” entails, and how it plays itself out, is so different in, respectively, conflict and non-conflict zones that the use of the same word to refer to such radically distinct dynamics is unhelpful, misleading, and problematic from a policy-response perspective.<sup>7</sup> For instance, as will be shown, the relative importance in “radicalization processes” of micro-level motivations and individual pathways as opposed to macro-level, structural factors and community-wide dynamics is drastically different in, respectively, the West and violence-torn countries. In the West, the overwhelming concern is the radicalization of a few individuals who are hardly representative of their communities. Muslim communities in Western Europe hardly can be described as “radicalized.” What matters there, instead, is how a handful of second-generation Muslim immigrants and converts – both with at best very tenuous ties to these Muslim communities – drift into jihadism. That kind of radicalization has nothing to do with the “radicalization” that affects much larger percentages of entire communities in conflict zones (say, Sunni Arabs in Iraq). In the latter environments, what drives radicalization is typically an entirely different set of factors. For one, macro-level processes (e.g., Sunni victimization) that reflect national-level drivers and even geopolitical dynamics often play a far more salient role. Such considerations also mean that while in the West it might make sense to ask the question “How do individuals radicalize?” in conflict zones today one might be better served asking: “How did jihadi movements become prominent” or “What combination of domestic and external forces enabled them to gain traction and/or embed themselves in communities”? And, as will be shown, such different casting points to different programming foci and priorities.

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of attitudes” and “radicalization of behavior” as two separate lines of inquiry, while programming must reflect an appreciation for the importance of that distinction (see Khalil, “Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are not Synonymous”).

For similar reasons, “drivers of radicalization” vary widely depending on whether the unit of analysis is the individual, the group or community, or society as a whole. And whether it should be one or the other of those three main categories typically also varies greatly depending on whether one is studying a conflict or non-conflict zone. Each of these issues is explored further in this document.

<sup>6</sup> Back in 2005, in his influential study of recruits to *al-Muhajirun* in Great Britain, Quintan Wiktorowicz already had found that it was not the most knowledgeable in Islamic theology who were vulnerable to radicalization, but, instead, those who had only a superficial religious background.

<sup>7</sup> In this report, “conflict zones” refers to countries or regions that experience large-scale, protracted violent conflicts that result in significant numbers of deaths and personal injuries, massive damage to property and infrastructure, as well as, typically, significant displacement of populations. The combination of severe political crisis and humanitarian emergency usually found in those conflict zones is frequently the product of both internal forces and external intervention.

# CONCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY AND ITS POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While this is not the place to engage in semantics or etymological discussions, four brief comments on the word “radicalization” are in order, since a) they bear on potential misunderstandings or confusion surrounding the use of the term; b) they shed light on the respective merits and disadvantages associated with approaching VE phenomena through the lens of “radicalization;” and c) they have general policy implications.

1) In the literature on VE and terrorism, and in the way in which “radicalization” is used in CT and CVE circles, the term implies an organic connection to violence, whether it is by embracing violent belief systems, actively supporting violence, or engaging in it. To provide some perspective on this way of casting phenomena, however, it is helpful to remember that, historically, “radical ideas” were merely opinions that stood outside mainstream ones, and “radicals” in politics were those advocating far-reaching political, social, and economic changes to the existing order, but not necessarily through extra-legal, anti-democratic, and violent means. In fact, many self-professed radicals were explicitly and philosophically opposed to the use of violence for political ends. Furthermore, historically as well, radical political action in the sense of a vigorous (radical) rejection of the status quo and of establishment politics played a key role in some of the most substantive advances of democracy (on civil rights issues or women’s suffrage, for instance), and it took place without any major, sustained escalation to violence. The tendency to equate radicalism with extremism, and both with violence or terrorism, thus is a relatively new development.

2) The vast majority of the literature on “radicalization” actually focuses on Islamist extremism (specifically of the Sunni variety) and jihadi terrorism, or radicalization in Muslim societies or communities.<sup>8</sup> Going back to the extensive literature on the IRA, ETA, the Baader Meinhof gang, the Red Army, the Red Brigades, Shining Path, and many other earlier terrorist organizations, one is hard-pressed to find more than very passing references to “radicalization.” Related phenomena, instead, were cast in terms of socialization or recruitment into terrorist organizations or activity. It is not clear what one is to make of the fact that what is presented as “radicalization” is in fact closely associated with a Muslim context, or why the term “radicalization” did not come into wide use earlier. One might fear that the Islamic nature of the societies and communities to which the concept is applied raises the risk that some individuals in them will feel stigmatized; therefore, relying on this particular term for analytical or programmatic purposes may come at the cost of alienating some of very populations whose cooperation is needed to combat the phenomena that radicalization is aimed to capture.

3) “Radicalization” suggests a process that just happens to individuals.<sup>9</sup> It implies that individuals are caught in relevant dynamics, if not victims of them, and thus tends to downplay considerably the role of human agency. Particularly in light of the phenomena associated with jihadism 4.0, that may be a very misleading portrayal. Many of those who drift into jihadi activity do so consciously and in a very deliberate manner. Particularly when it comes to Western jihadists, they are “radicals” – at least in the sense of angry rebels without a cause – before they become jihadists, and they become jihadists not after being “radicalized” but because jihadism offers them a convenient cause, rationale or framework to express, verbally and behaviorally, their hatred and rejection of the surrounding society.<sup>10</sup> To use “radicalization” language to refer to those dynamics is to distort them beyond recognition. One should note, in this context, that the terms “at-risk” and “vulnerable,” especially as they apply to individuals, may be misleading for many of the same

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<sup>8</sup> “Radicalization” is hardly ever discussed in a Shia context – even though one clearly can detect radicalization dynamics in Shia communities, sometimes abetted by Iran and Iranian-backed governments, and even though those dynamics and the violent organizations associated with them (such as Shia militias operating in Iraq) have been an important driver behind Sunni extremism. See for instance ICG, “Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State,” p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Khalil and Zeuthen, “Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction,” p. 3 (ft. 9).

<sup>10</sup> See Roy, “Radicalisation is not the result of failed integration;” “France’s Oedipal Islamist Complex;” and “What is the driving force behind jihadist terrorism?”

reasons, even though they remain common currency in the VE literature and provide the basis for much CVE programming.

4) As the introduction noted, yet another set of problems with “radicalization” is the absence of a uniform, widely accepted definition of it; the proliferation of meanings associated with the term; and inconsistent or vague conceptualizations of how radicalization relates to violence, the exact nature of the link between ideological and behavioral radicalization, and whether or not the former typically is a precondition to, and an initial step toward, the latter. It is this set of problems and their implications for programming that provide the focus for the next several pages.

Limiting oneself to Western government agencies tasked with “combating radicalization” or “fighting extremism,” the analytical confusion regarding the very meaning of radicalization is reflected in the following definitions of the term adopted by, respectively, the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) of the Netherlands, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the European Commission (EC), the Danish Intelligence Services (PET), the Office of Intelligence and Analysis of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the United Kingdom (UK) (in its Prevent Strategy and Contest Strategy):<sup>11</sup>

“A growing readiness to pursue and support – if necessary by undemocratic means – far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a threat to, the democratic order.” (AIVD, 2005)

“The process by which individuals – usually young people – are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs toward extreme views.” (RCMP, 2009)

“The phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism.” (EU, 2006)

“A process by which a person to an increasing extent accepts the use of undemocratic or violent means, including terrorism, in an attempt to reach a specific political/ideological objective.” (PET, 2009)

“The process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change.” (DHS, 2006)

“The process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism.” (UK Prevent Strategy, 2011)

“The process by which people come to support terrorism and violent extremism and, in some cases, then to join terrorist groups.” (UK Contest Strategy, 2011).

These definitions are inconsistent with each other when it comes to whether or not violence is an integral component of radicalization (and, if so, how). AIVD excludes violence from its definition altogether. The EC’s definition emphasizes views and ideas, not behavior, and it only states that radicalization might lead to terrorism in some cases (but not in others). PET, too, emphasizes the ideological component of radicalization and suggests that while in some cases radical beliefs may lead to support for violence, in others, it only might prompt resort to “undemocratic means.” DHS agrees about the adoption of “an extremist belief system” being at the heart of radicalization, but unlike the EC, AIVD and PET it unambiguously views “the willingness to use, support or facilitate violence” as an integral part of that process. As for the UK, it highlights “support for terrorism” as a key component of the radicalization process, but leaves unspecified whether that support is merely at the level of attitudes and/or speech, or whether it must translate into

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<sup>11</sup> Sources for these definitions include Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation,” p. 12.

attendant behavior as well. Among Western governments, Sweden's appears to be the only one whose definition of radicalization explicitly recognizes the disjuncture between attitudes and behavior when it proposes that:

Radicalization can be both: "a process that leads to ideological or religious activism to introduce radical change to society" and "a process that leads to an individual or group using, promoting or advocating violence for political aims."<sup>12</sup>

## Attitudes or Behavior?

As the above review of official definitions of radicalization suggests, the most consequential source of ambiguity associated with the term lies in whether the radicalization one discusses is unfolding at the ideological (or cognitive) level, at the behavioral level, or both, and whether the adoption of a "radical" or "extremist" belief system typically precedes, or even is a precondition to, active support for, or direct involvement in, violent activity. In other words, does radicalization denote an outlook or mindset? Should changes in behavior, instead, remain the primary criteria for determining whether one is faced with radicalization? Or does radicalization encompass both attitudes and behavior?

*Ideological (or cognitive) radicalization* might be defined as the process by which individuals come to believe that it is acceptable, legitimate, or even necessary to use violence to advance a particular cause or agenda predicated on a sweeping reordering of the existing order. In contrast, *behavioral radicalization* may refer to the process by which individuals move into active support for, or engagement in, VE organizations or activity, either by perpetrating violence themselves or by becoming significant enablers of it.<sup>13</sup>

Approaching VE phenomena in terms of an undifferentiated "radicalization" thus conflates attitudes and behavior. It does not sufficiently acknowledge that the presence of one form of radicalization (ideological or behavioral) does not necessarily signal the existence of the other (or, for that matter, that the two are connected in some sequential way). It fails to recognize that drivers of attitudes and drivers of behavior often are distinct. It seems to disregard the considerable body of evidence (from conflict zones as well as elsewhere) suggesting that among the many who may express very violent views, only a handful appear willing to act on those stated opinions.<sup>14</sup> Most importantly, this conflation (of attitudes and behavior) and confusion (between the respective drivers behind them) can lead to policy responses that may be ineffective, or even counter-productive, as discussed further below.

What we do know is that most of those who support the use of violence (e.g., individuals who have undergone "ideological radicalization") neither engage in violent acts nor provide meaningful logistical support to VE organizations; instead, they generally prefer to remain on the sidelines.<sup>15</sup> That is what rational-actor theory would suggest, and it also is supported by considerable empirical evidence. From a rational-actor perspective, it makes sense that even individuals with radicalized attitudes would refrain from engaging in VE activity, since the latter entails significant personal risks and/or sacrifices, but the benefits that it might generate cannot be denied to those who opt not to participate, and instead decide to "free-ride" on the contributions of others.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation," p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> The line that separates ideological from behavioral radicalization is not always as clearly drawn as these definitions suggest. For instance, while as defined ideological radicalization stops short of active support for, let alone engaging in, violence, it may involve the condoning of such acts as long as they appear to advance the belief system to which one subscribes. In so doing, ideological radicalization may help create a culture of implicit or explicit sanctioning of violence, and a corresponding change in societal norms. That, in turn, may enable VE organizations and activity, including (but not only) by creating complicit populations and norms that incentivize and/or reward violence.

<sup>14</sup> Being able to determine which ones among them will act on their stated beliefs is one of the most critical problems for law-enforcement agencies. Since, typically, such determination is impossible, law enforcement is forced to take seriously all those who voice such opinions. On the disjuncture between stated views and actual behavior, see Sageman, "The Turn to Political Violence in the West," p. 117

<sup>15</sup> See Khalil, "Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous."

<sup>16</sup> DeNardo, *Power in Numbers*, p. 52; Khalil, "Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous," p. 205.

There is significant empirical evidence to back up this reasoning. For instance, surveys of Afghan public opinion conducted by the Asia Foundation since 2009 reveal that those who express either “a lot of sympathy” or “a little sympathy” for armed opposition groups in Afghanistan (foremost among which is the Taliban) exceed by a considerable margin even the most generous estimates of the number of insurgents. In 2009, at a time when the number of full-time Taliban fighters (“core Taliban”) was believed to be below 10,000 (with perhaps up to 32,000 operating on an ad hoc basis as “local, part time insurgents”), a whopping 56 percent of respondents were expressing “a lot of sympathy” or “a little sympathy” for armed opposition groups.<sup>17</sup> That figure still stood at 40 percent in 2010, 29 percent in 2011, 30 percent in 2012, 35 percent in 2013, and 32 percent in 2014 (with 6.6 percent among those in 2014 in the “a lot of sympathy” category).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, since the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, the percentage of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who in surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center have expressed support for suicide attacks has varied considerably over time, but it consistently has exceeded – by a considerable margin – the tiny number of those who have acted on that stated preference.<sup>19</sup>

In short, as rational-actor theory suggests, many of those who support VE agendas are not engaged in VE activity – they make no meaningful contributions to it. Conversely, many individuals who engage in VE activity – or provide active, consequential support to those who do – may do so for reasons that have nothing to do with views or belief systems that legitimize or encourage violence. They may not support, or identify with, the political agenda or ideological aims said to be driving violence. Indeed, in many instances, it is not clear that they genuinely subscribe to any clear political project. Motivating them, instead, might be one or (typically) several of the following, entirely different set of forces: financial incentives/material gain;<sup>20</sup> coercion and intimidation by VE organizations or those associated with them (e.g., criminal groups or populations sympathetic to armed insurgents);<sup>21</sup> psychological and socio-psychological needs;<sup>22</sup> and various forms of primitive gratification.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Some discount factor should perhaps be applied to these data as those living in areas of substantial Taliban influence or control may have felt obliged to express some degree of support for the Taliban.

<sup>18</sup> The Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2014,” pp. 45-46. Consistent with some of the arguments presented in this report, respondents from insecure areas reported significantly higher levels of sympathy. The estimates of Taliban manpower are from Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla*, pp. 48-49. Kilcullen relied on both field reporting and open-source data.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes & Trends, “Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups,” September 10, 2013. In 2013, to the question of whether suicide bombing and other violence aimed at civilian targets can be justified “to defend Islam from its enemies,” 37% of Palestinian Muslims chose the “often” answer option, and another 25% the “sometimes” one, for a total of 62%. The corresponding compound percentage was 70% in 2007, and 68% in both 2009 and 2011.

<sup>20</sup> VE organizations often are engaged in illicit economic activities (e.g., drug smuggling, trafficking in persons and goods, extortion, and taxation of economic activities in the areas they control) and individuals may view joining or supporting those organizations as a way of gaining access to a share of the revenues or profits generated by those activities. Individuals also may be paid for placing IEDs; for engaging in reconnaissance activities; for providing information and/or logistical support for attacks; or for shooting or firing rockets at foreign and government troops. Such motivations have been widely documented in both Afghanistan and Iraq. See Khalil, “Radical Beliefs and Violent Actions Are Not Synonymous,” p. 206.

<sup>21</sup> Through the threat or the use of physical pressure and other forms of violence against individuals or communities, VE organizations may bully the latter into providing, for instance, shelter, goods, information (e.g., on the activities of the police or security services), and other forms of logistical support.

<sup>22</sup> Individuals may drift into VE activity or organizations as a result of, for instance, a search for a new identity and/or a new life; a yearning for community, camaraderie and a sense of belonging; the pursuit of thrills and adventure (or, rather, a desperate effort to escape dreary, dead-end lives); a craving for fame, prestige, recognition and status (among peers, in the community, or in society at large); or the desire to avenge the loss of a loved one or to exact retribution for the suffering inflicted on one’s community.

<sup>23</sup> IS offers primitive gratification of many kinds, including plunder, pillage and rape. It has justified all by invoking select religious scriptures and legal rulings, and by reviving long discarded practices once part of the religious mainstream. Its institutionalization of sexual slavery first gained notoriety in August 2014, after it overran the Yazidis’ homeland on the southern flank of Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq, and proceeded to enslave thousands of Yazidi women and girls. (Reporting by Rukmini Callimachi showed that, from the outset, the offensive was planned at least as much for sexual conquest as it was for territorial expansion.) Since then, IS has made sexual slavery a central component of its recruitment efforts. In 2015, the practice became more widespread, more systematically organized (an entire bureaucracy and trade developed around it), and more deeply enshrined in the group’s theology. While rape has long been employed as a weapon of war, what distinguishes IS in this area is that the organization not only makes no effort to deny or hide its reliance on the practice, but actually publicizes so as to attract young men. See Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape” and “To Maintain Supply of Sex Slaves, ISIS Pushes Birth Control.”



## It's Not Just Semantics

The definitional challenges discussed above have significant policy implications. Different CVE interventions may be suggested according to whether the concerned is primarily with ideological or behavioral radicalization. This is particularly relevant where attitudes do not in fact have the assumed link to behavior, and so a greater focus on behavioral radicalization is warranted. Addressing attitudes (e.g., counter-narratives decrying ISIL cruelty or promoting moderate Islam may do little if the incentives for support or joining are adventure, excitement, a cause, primitive gratifications and precisely the opportunity to indulge in violence that ISIL offers). We see a de-linking of radical attitudes and behavior particularly in conflict zones and the West today, as described more fully in the rest of this paper. While there is reason to suspect that factors affecting these two types of environments also affect non-conflict affected, non-Western countries, the time allocated for this paper did not allow robust investigation of all categories. Further research on the applicability of these ideas to non-Western, non-conflict Muslim majority and minority settings (e.g., Morocco, Bangladesh, Kenya, Central Asian Republics) is warranted.

## LEVELS OF ANALYSIS AND VIOLENCE ARENAS

Generic discussions of “radicalization” beg two inter-related questions that have vast implications for what radicalization actually means, and how it – and the VE activity it allegedly promotes – can be combated most effectively. These two questions are:

- 1) Are we primarily concerned with the radicalization of individuals or with the radicalization of entire communities? (The relevant processes and drivers typically are different.)
- 2) Are we focused on radicalization in a conflict zone (a country or region featuring large-scale violence and chaos) or in the more stable and prosperous West?

The study of radicalization typically has been conducted at the micro-level (especially if one defines radicalization as the process by which “at-risk” or “vulnerable” individuals embrace extremist views, and then are recruited into VE organizations, or engage in VE activity). Such framing of radicalization emphasizes the individual and ideology, while significantly de-emphasizing the broader context in which said radicalization occurs.<sup>24</sup> That may or may not be an appropriate approach. As a rule, this framing seems to be more relevant in Western settings, and in order to make sense of “homegrown terrorism” there, than in conflict zones, where community-based dynamics are more salient.

Thus, the primary level at which radicalization is occurring (individuals or communities), and the type of location where it is unfolding (a conflict zone or not), both matter a great deal to what radicalization really is about, the forces that trigger and/or sustain it, and the kind of policy responses most likely to reduce it. In many conflict zones, furthermore, “radicalization” – of attitudes or behavior, and of individuals or communities – often does not seem to precede VE activity, especially of the jihadist type; instead, it frequently appears to be a byproduct of other forces. Therefore, in violence-torn countries, if one thinks of VE activity, jihadist expansion, or support for jihadist organizations as the dependent variable, “radicalization” rarely stands out as one of the main independent variables responsible for it. Instead, as discussed further below, more compelling forces appear to drive jihadi activity. When “radicalization” (of individuals and/or communities) occurs in conflict zones, it often does so in the wake of the breakdown of order and the generalized violence that follows it, and as a consequence of both, rather than beforehand and as a cause of them. In such environments, large-scale radicalization neither predates nor causes violent crises;

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion.”



rather, it takes place during them or in their aftermath, as individuals and/or communities embrace more extremist views and/or engage in more violent behavior as a result of the forces unleashed by those crises.<sup>25</sup>

These observations have critical policy implications, which are developed further below. Where VE activity, jihadist expansion, and/or support for jihadist organizations are caused by drivers that are not themselves related to ideological radicalization, CVE programming cast in terms of “preventing radicalization” (at the individual and/or community level) is likely to miss the mark. More effective responses may include those aimed at preventing or reducing the severity of the crises that are the primary cause of jihadist expansion (and of the attendant amounts of “radicalization” of beliefs and behavior).

## Radicalization in Conflict Zones

In conflict zones – particularly in the MENA region (specifically, in the Syrian-Iraqi theater, Libya, Yemen, and the Sinai), but also in Afghanistan, Somalia, the Sahel, and other parts of Africa -- jihadist activity and/or support for jihadist organizations (ISIL, Boko Haram, and al Qaeda-(AQ) linked groups, especially Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Shabab) appears to be enabled, first and foremost, by chronic state weakness;<sup>26</sup> the breakdown of political order and collapse of security; a generalized, systemic crisis of governance; and longstanding neglect or marginalization of certain communities, or their deliberate political exclusion, socioeconomic marginalization, and effective disenfranchisement.<sup>27</sup> These phenomena produce large-scale chaos and violence that often are gravely exacerbated by external intervention, and they create a situation that jihadist organizations have proven adept at exploiting in order to recruit, operate, expand their influence, and, in several instances, transform themselves from “mere” terrorist entities into mixed terrorist-insurgent organizations that control territory and are engaged in governance.<sup>28</sup> “Radicalization” (of individuals and/or communities) initially does not appear to have much to do with these dynamics – though radicalization often does occur, and intensifies the dynamics in question, once the latter already are in motion or in their wake. Frequently, individuals and communities that have been rendered extremely vulnerable by the prevailing violence rally behind jihadist organizations as allies of necessity, whose presence and support they (reluctantly) come to view as necessary in order to protect themselves against further depredation.

To put it somewhat differently, in all the conflict-affected countries that have experienced a surge in VE/jihadist activity in the past decade, this phenomenon has owed less to pre-existing radicalization dynamics than to the longstanding decay and hollowing out of governmental and political institutions, and to the subsequent breakdown in the state’s and the political system’s capacity to provide for basic governance,

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<sup>25</sup> ICG, “Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.”

<sup>26</sup> In those Arab countries where states are comparatively stronger in terms of legitimacy, institutional capacity, or both – as in Morocco, Algeria, Jordan and the Gulf region – jihadist movements have not made the kinds of inroads they have achieved where effective state authority always has been in short supply and has declined ever further since 2011. Tellingly as well, where historically strong states exist (Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, for instance), jihadist organizations have gained the most traction where the government’s presence historically has been most tenuous (the Sinai in Egypt, the towns and villages of the neglected interior and the suburbs of cities in Tunisia, and to some extent peri-urban areas in Morocco).

<sup>27</sup> This discussion draws on the analysis in ICG, “Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.”

<sup>28</sup> To mention but a few examples, in Syria IS has drawn much of its strength from the diminished capacities of the Syrian regime, and from the morphing of internal violence into a regional war in which many of the key participants are more concerned with combating each other’s influence than with defeating IS. In Yemen, it was only after the state nearly collapsed in the summer of 2011 that AQAP was able to seize population centers in the south. In 2014-15, after Huthis insurgents captured the capital and advanced toward Aden, renewed prospects for an all-out political meltdown, combined with the morphing of the Yemeni conflict into yet another regional war (particularly in the wake of the massive Saudi intervention), prompted a surge in both AQAP and IS territorial control and activity. In Libya, jihadists first took advantage of the anarchy that resulted from Qadhafi’s ouster to develop pockets of territorial influence and control in 2012-13. They were able to expand their influence markedly in 2014, due to the worsening of the crisis of governance across the country, the paralysis of the Tripoli government, the subsequent standoff between that government and the rival one in Tobruk, and the collapse of security across the country. It was those phenomena – not the “radicalization” of individuals or communities – which enabled IS to inject itself into the Libyan theater, first in Derna and then in Sirte. In Mali, in early 2012 jihadists who had been active in the north for nearly a decade were able to take advantage of a new Touareg rebellion (fueled by the collapse of the Qadhafi regime), a military coup in the capital, and political disarray there to establish a short-lived emirate. In Egypt, it was the sudden weakening of the state and the withdrawal of the security forces from the Sinai in early 2011 that played a critical role in the initial expansion of jihadist influence there. The political breakdown brought about by the ouster of former President Morsi in July 2013 prompted the transformation of the low-intensity jihadi activity in the Sinai into a full-fledged insurgency, which in turn enabled IS to establish a foothold in the Arab world’s most populous country.

security and the regulation of disputes. Three other factors – none of which stems from radicalization per se, but each of which has contributed to it – also have played a critical role, and are discussed below briefly.

1) *State repression and/or exaction by regime-affiliated militias.* Such predation – and the broader insecurity associated with large-scale, violent conflict -- generates a need for protection that jihadist organizations often have been able to satisfy (at least partially). Predation also fuels a desire for retribution or revenge – a demand which jihadist organizations have proven even more adept at meeting. This logic certainly played decisive role in the resurgence of what then was known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2011, and in the processes that subsequently led first to the mutation of ISI into ISIL (in 2013) and then to the formal proclamation of a “Caliphate” and the IS in June 2014. To the extent that, during the 2011-13 period, ISI/ISIL was able to generate support in Sunni areas of Iraq, it often did so, at least initially, because it provided protection against victimization by Shia militias aligned with the Maliki government. At the time, Sunni populations often faced an unattractive choice: Shia militias or ISI/ISIL, and the latter often seemed the lesser of two evils. A similar logic played itself out across Syria, where from mid-2011 onward Sunni populations often found themselves at the mercy of the Alawite-dominated regime and its dreaded Shabiha militias.<sup>29</sup>

2) *Rising sectarian hostilities.* Particularly given the prominence of its anti-Shia rhetoric, ISIL has been unusually positioned to take advantage of (and, in turn, foster) the sectarian antagonisms and hatreds unleashed by both domestic and regional dynamics. Across the Sunni world, the narrative of Sunni victimization has found an increasing number of receptive ears since 2010. This phenomenon – which reflects in part geopolitical considerations and political maneuvering by both state elites (especially in Tehran, Riyadh, Damascus, and Baghdad) and by “entrepreneurs of violence” (of the “established business” and “start-up” kinds alike) – represents more a cause of “radicalization” at the community and individual levels than an expression of it.

3) *The existence of vast ungoverned, misgoverned, or under-governed spaces.* Among the areas that have proven most vulnerable to jihadist expansion, those that have long suffered from government neglect and marginalization loom prominently. In recent years, jihadist organizations have been drawn to such areas and have done well in them, including by engaging in governance and the kind of service delivery that earlier generations of jihadist entities had avoided. One thinks, for instance, of northern Mali, the Sinai, southern Libya, southern Yemen, northeastern Syria, and northern Nigeria. In all those cases, the outbreak of violent conflict prompted the partial or complete incapacitation of government institutions and the emergence of a governance vacuum that jihadist entities exploited skillfully and deliberately. In northeastern Syria, ISIL imposed itself relatively easily in 2012-13 because the Syrian regime had all but withdrawn from this largely barren region.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, it captured Mosul in June 2014 largely because the security and military apparatus there had been hollowed out by corruption and featured incompetent leadership unwilling to fight or stand in ISIL’s way. In sharp contrast, where ISIL knows it would face stiff resistance, it does not attempt to expand its sway to those regions (e.g., it has made no real effort to capture Damascus, Baghdad, or Erbil). In Syria, it focuses its military efforts not on areas that are under tight regime control, but instead in zones where it faces much weaker (Sunni) competitors.

## Programming Implications

The above analysis suggests that in contemporary conflict zones the “standard radicalization sequence” does not proceed from: a) individual-level and community-wide radicalization; to b) the rise of VE organizations; and to c) large-scale violence and jihadist expansion. Instead, it goes mostly in the other direction. As noted

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<sup>29</sup> We should not be surprised that jihadists were the main beneficiaries of those dynamics. After all, in Afghanistan and Somalia during the early 1990s, the Taliban and al-Shabab, too, emerged following decades of chaos and partly in reaction to the exactions of warlords and the absence of more compelling political alternatives for long-suffering populations. Whether predation is carried out by non-state actors (warlords, street gangs, or criminal syndicates) or by militias tied to the state apparatus, it always generates a need for protection and/or retribution that can benefit those VE organizations that know how to satisfy it. And when such dynamics are unleashed, they become the cause of what generally is construed as “radicalization,” more than an expression of it.

<sup>30</sup> ICG, “Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.”

earlier as well, once jihadist movements take advantage of violent conflagrations to embed themselves in local communities, it becomes much harder to undo their gains. Finally, the most important structural drivers behind the expansion of jihadism 4.0 in conflict-affected countries were shown to be the preexisting corrosion and atrophy of governmental institutions; the decay of mechanisms of political regulation; the grave governance gaps that both processes typically generate; and the longstanding marginalization or neglect of certain communities and/or regions. Recognizing this logic has several inter-related implications for practitioners concerned with how to prevent or combat “radicalization” in conflict zones.

1) Micro-level CVE programming that focuses on community-wide and individual radicalization processes and arenas may help stem the tide of VE movements, and/or shelter individuals and communities alike against some of their most negative effects. However, this kind of programming should not detract from the more critical imperative of relying on carefully targeted macro-level interventions to try to prevent violent crises from erupting, or to contain them and undercut their potential for exacerbation and/or territorial expansion after they break out. Too much emphasis being placed on trying to identify individuals or communities “at risk of being radicalized,” and on seeking to blunt or disrupt relevant individual-level or community-wide “radicalization dynamics,” may come at the expense of necessary attention being given to the “upstream” structural factors that cause such vulnerabilities in the first place.

2) Conflict risk assessments as well as conflict-prevention and mitigation interventions should be front-and-center in CVE programming. If radicalization is to be prevented before it happens, the violent conflicts that loom so large in creating it and in making it much harder to reverse must be anticipated to the extent possible, and efforts must be deployed to diffuse them. As a recent International Crisis Group (ICG) report noted, “preventing crises will do more to contain violent extremists than countering violent extremism will do to prevent crises.”<sup>31</sup>

3) CVE analysis and programming stands to benefit from a greater focus on conflict prevention, and from a more systematic investigation of the ways in which conflict assessment tools as well as conflict-prevention and mitigation approaches can be deployed to advance CVE objectives.<sup>32</sup> For instance, the Conflict Assessment Framework 2.0 (CAF 2.0) and Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) should be viewed as more directly relevant to CVE than currently appears to be the case.

4) In the past decade the thinking about how to assess and respond to situations of, respectively, “conflict” and “VE” has developed on parallel tracks, with conflict (both assessment and programming) being still approached predominantly through a development lens or humanitarian assistance perspective. Those tracks occasionally intersect – for instance, the 2012 CAF 2.0 makes a passing reference to USAID’s 2011 “The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency” policy paper – but they generally remain far more separate than recent and ongoing VE phenomena suggest they should be. Greater attention to conflict may help refocus a CVE agenda that, in its current state, seems to have become far too “elastic” and amorphous for its own good. CVE thinking and programming currently may be going in too many directions at once, failing sufficiently to prioritize among those directions based on what recent trends suggest should be core areas of concern and investigation. Conflict analysis, prevention, mitigation, and resolution stands at the top of the list of such areas. Similarly, instead of viewing CVE as a competitor to development and democracy assistance (DDA), and in numerous cases giving up on the latter on the ground that the former should take precedence over it in light of its more direct relevance to core USG security interests, we must recognize the areas where the two intersect – or, to be more specific, where CVE or counter-radicalization objectives necessitate doubling down on issues of political inclusion and reform, good governance, anti-corruption, conflict prevention and resolution (both within and between communities), dialogue and bridge-building, corruption, neglected peripheries, and social marginalization.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

## HOW CENTRAL ARE IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION TO “RADICALIZATION”?

The centrality of ideology to “radicalization processes” is generally overstated, whether explicitly or implicitly (i.e., with regard to how people think of what “radicalization” actually entails and how it unfolds). If anything, as discussed further below, ideology appears to play a less prominent role in jihadism 4.0 than it did in earlier waves – a conclusion that appears to hold in both conflict and non-conflict zones. Much the same can be said about how religion relates to radicalization. Religion does matter to “radicalization” – but what religion actually entails in this context, and how exactly it comes into play, must be carefully delineated. Such an effort is attempted below.

### Ideology, Religion and Radicalization: The Conventional Wisdom

Discussions or conceptualizations of radicalization generally make two inter-related assumptions with regard to the role of ideology or religion. These assumptions sometimes are stated explicitly, but most often, they are just implied. One relates to motivations and the other to how radicalization actually occurs.

a) With regard to motivations, involvement in VE activity typically is portrayed as motivated, at least to a significant extent, by the embrace of a particular worldview, political agenda, or set of religious beliefs, and by the desire to advance them. Violence thus is depicted as largely instrumental and driven by the desire to promote a higher cause.

b) As far as how radicalization actually unfolds, the adoption of a specific worldview is cast as a precursor to, if not a precondition for, engaging in or actively supporting VE activity. Radicalization is understood as a process that begins with ideas (e.g., a hardening of attitudes and worldviews) and progresses into (violent) behavior. In some formulations, radicalization often arises with an identity crisis, trauma or other personal event that leads to a “cognitive opening” – i.e., a search for, or openness to, new ways of interpreting and relating to one’s surrounding environment and the world at large.<sup>33</sup> That opening may result in the acceptance of a belief system featuring “extremist” ideas (violent or not); incremental further radicalization of beliefs (especially under the impact of group dynamics); and, ultimately, involvement in VE activity. Thus, most explanations of radicalization have a “sequential” dimension: specific ideological or religious beliefs are presented as a conveyor belt or gateway to action, and “behavioral radicalization” is cast as a by-product of “cognitive radicalization;” in other words, an “extremist” or “radical” belief system is presented as the primary independent variable that causes involvement in, or active support for, VE activity.

This framing of the relationship between ideas and action is reflected in the previously examined definitions of radicalization by western governments. These definitions assume not just the necessity, but the primacy, of ideology. They either state or imply that the embrace of a particular belief system predates and causes VE behavior. For instance, according to the definitions offered by, respectively, the Danish government (PET) and the USG (DHS), “radicalized individuals” engage in violence “to reach a specific political/ideological objective” or “to effect social change.” From a USAID perspective, radicalization comes into play because it is viewed as a potential path to VE, which the agency defines as “advocating, engaging in, preparing or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives.”<sup>34</sup> Like related definitions of radicalization, this phrasing posits the centrality of “ideological motivations” and a desire to “further a specific political or socioeconomic agenda.” However, as elaborated further below, in the five years that have elapsed since that definition was articulated, considerable evidence

<sup>33</sup> The notion of “cognitive opening” first was introduced by Quintan Wiktorowicz in *Radical Islam Rising*.

<sup>34</sup> USAID. “The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice,” p. 2.

(from both conflict and non-conflict zones) has accumulated to suggest that ideological motivations or coherent agendas are not as central to VE activity (or radicalization) as that definition postulates.

## **(Growing) Empirical Challenges to the Conventional Wisdom**

Analysts have long recognized that the conventional wisdom asserting the preeminence of ideology or beliefs in radicalization processes cannot always be squared with the available evidence. They have noted that the salience of worldviews and political or religious agendas in radicalization is an empirical question; that it is far more pronounced in some cases than in others; and that many paths to radicalization do not involve ideology at all.<sup>35</sup> What deserves emphasis, here, is that the role of ideology appears to have declined steadily with each wave of jihadi activity, and that it is especially limited with regard to the ongoing one. In light of the available evidence, it has become an increasingly precarious proposition to suggest that the vast majority of VEs or jihadists today use violence because they have been “ideologically radicalized” or are seeking to advance a coherent political or religious agenda. In other words, for most jihadists today, “ideological radicalization” is neither a necessary condition, nor even a prime reason, for engaging in violence. Consequently as well, as discussed further below, the entire set of policy approaches and programmatic implications predicated on such notions must be questioned.

The abundant and detailed biographical data available about Western jihadists of the fourth wave is particularly revealing in this regard, as it points to clear patterns, including the following four.

1) *These youth often were violent well before they became jihadists.* They were violent in their private lives (several, including Omar Mateen and Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, had a history of domestic violence),<sup>36</sup> as well as in the public sphere (as discussed further below, a disproportionate number of them were criminals and spent time in prison, including in several instances for violent offenses, as in the case of the Bakraoui brothers)<sup>37</sup>. Many were involved in gangs much before they ever showed any interest in jihadism. It certainly was not ideology that led them to violence; indeed, the opposite often seems to have been true: a life of petty delinquency ultimately led to the largely opportunistic adoption of a convenient, ready-made “jihadi intellectual toolkit.” The latter provided ideological cover for, and a convenient way of ennobling, immoral and violent forms of primitive gratification; a means of justifying lashing out at society; and/or an excuse for a multitude of vices, past and present. At the same time, it also offered the prospect of new, far more exciting and grandiose means of engaging in criminal behavior, including in far-away lands and as central actors in a grand epic. As Rik Coolsaet has documented, for many young European Muslims who have departed for Syria since 2012, “joining IS is merely a shift to another form of deviant behavior, next to membership [in] street gangs, rioting, drug trafficking and juvenile delinquency. But it adds a thrilling, larger-than-life dimension to their way of life – transforming them from delinquents without a future into *mujabideen* with a cause.”<sup>38</sup>

2) *Even those without a record of having engaged in physical violence or assault often were known by law-enforcement agencies as criminals.* It typically is not a shared ideological orientation that initially brings western jihadists together, but, rather, a common past of involvement in criminal activities (and, often, the incarceration linked to it). To the extent that ideology comes into play, it does so much later, and not through a process that bears any real resemblance to the manner in which “radicalization” is commonly understood. Most of the key perpetrators of the November 13, 2015 Paris attacks and March 22, 2016 Brussels bombings (Abdelhamid Abaoud, Salah and Ibrahim Abdeslam, Ibrahim and Khalid El-Bakraoui, and Mohamed Abrini) had a (sometimes long)

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<sup>35</sup> See for instance McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> Omar Mateen perpetrated the mass shooting at the Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016. Mohamed Bouhlel carried out the attack in Nice on July 14, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Ibrahim and Khalid El-Bakraoui were among the suicide bombers who executed the March 22, 2016 Brussels attacks.

<sup>38</sup> Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave,” p. 3.

criminal rap sheet.<sup>39</sup> Amedy Coulibaly, who in January 2005 shot a policewoman and (a day later) four shoppers during an assault on a Jewish supermarket in Paris, previously had served time for robbery (he was further radicalized in jail).<sup>40</sup> A study recently released by the German security authorities, which provides detailed information about 677 individuals who left Germany to join ISIL in Syria or Iraq prior to June 2015, is consistent with this pattern. It reveals that nearly half of those in the sample had been suspected of, or tried for, criminal offences (assault, robbery, property crime or drug trafficking) prior to their drift into jihadism. In sharp contrast, politically motivated offences were largely absent from the background of those same individuals (at least prior to their declaring allegiance to ISIL), a finding which supports the broader analysis below.<sup>41</sup>

3) *Western jihadists typically have no known, prior history of involvement in political causes of any kind* (e.g., active support for the “Palestinian cause,” militant opposition to the “war on Islam,” agitation against U.S. policies in the Muslim world, or effort to mobilize public opinion against repressive Arab regimes, especially those hostile to political Islam). In fact, one is hard pressed to find evidence that they had a longstanding interest in such issues. The case of Omar Mateen is perhaps particularly revealing. His father, Mir Seddique Mateen, who hailed from Afghanistan and had emigrated to the U.S. in the 1980s, had made many political statements regarding his country of origin over the years (including expressions of gratitude toward the Taliban). But Omar himself had done no such thing. Even during the Orlando shooting, during his 911 call, when he pledged allegiance to the IS, he made no reference to Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> He could have sought to justify his actions through references to US policy in the Muslim world in general, or toward Afghanistan in particular; he could have claimed that he was acting to avenge the death of Taliban leader Mullah Mansour, who had been killed by an American drone just three weeks earlier (on May 21, 2016); he could have invoked the notion of a “war on Islam,” or of “Muslim blood being cheap,” as many jihadist terrorists had done over the years to try to justify their actions. But he did not. And that is part of a pattern among the new generation of fourth-wave Western jihadi terrorists: they seem far less prone than their predecessors to invoke geopolitics to legitimate their acts. When they refer to certain events or phenomena, they tend to do so in very general terms. They rarely mention specific conflicts or struggles – even, as in the case of Mateen, those that one would think are close to their hearts in light of their personal backgrounds. They seem more interested in the IS narrative of “building the caliphate,” being actors in the great battle it involves, and feeling part of a community of fellow fighters for the cause (for instance, during his 911 call, Mateen did not mention the Taliban, but made reference to two Chechens, the Tsarnaev brothers, the 2013 Boston Marathon bombers, as well as an acquaintance of him who died in a suicide bombing in Syria). Above all, it seems to be violence, the license to kill, and the fantasy of hero-status that they might achieve through ISIL that fascinates them and draws them in. It does not appear to be ideology or a particular political or religious agenda – and certainly not the quest for a sharia-based state in which they presumably would not fare well, considering their very secular lifestyles and propensity for drinking and smoking joints.

4) *There is no evidence that fourth-wave Western jihadists experienced a “religious awakening” (again, as that term is generally understood) before they turned to jihadi activity.* Most certainly did not embrace Salafi lifestyles. None undertook religious study. There is no evidence they started praying more often, or, for that matter, began to go to the

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<sup>39</sup> The mastermind of the Paris attacks, Abaaoud, had a lengthy criminal career that included multiple stints in jail, including for burglary and assault. Salah Abdeslam has numerous convictions, including for drug related offenses, and the Belgian authorities even suspected him of involvement in organized crime. Khalid el-Bakraoui had spent time in jail for offenses that included at least four car hijackings and a major bank robbery in October 2009. In 2010, his brother Ibrahim had been sentenced to nine years in jail for attempted murder (he was granted parole in 2014); he, too, had taken part in a robbery attempt at a Western Union branch in Brussels. Like others, Abrini skipped directly from years of criminality to jihadism (in which he previously had shown no interest). One of the Paris suicide bombers, Omar Ismail Mostefai, was little more than a gangster. He had grown up in the Courcouronnes suburb of Paris, long known for gang violence, and as a teenager he was absorbed in a world where life (and death) was defined by brotherhood and violence.

<sup>40</sup> Coulibaly was a friend of the Kouachi brothers (Chérif and Saïd), who carried out the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shooting. He was believed to have played a role in that shooting and to have coordinated his own murderous actions with the Kouachis.

<sup>41</sup> See the summary of that study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) in “ICSR Insight – Germany Jihadists in Syria and Iraq.”

<sup>42</sup> See the interview of Olivier Roy by Isaac Chotiner in *Slate*, 2016.



mosque (which they had conspicuously avoided before, and where they certainly were not “radicalized”).<sup>43</sup> They continued to wear jeans, not the Salafi trousers or robe (*thawb*), to eat non-halal food, drink alcohol, carouse at night, consume, and in many instances sell drugs. Well after they drifted into jihadism, Ibrahim and Salah Abdeslam still operated a bar that sold alcohol and coffee and served as a place for drug trafficking. Lahouaiej Bouhlel reportedly drank, ate pork, and was sexually permissive.<sup>44</sup> All the individuals discussed here were known for anti-social behavior that hardly can be squared with religious edicts.

So, we are faced with instances of “religious radicalization” – in the sense of the sudden embrace of the radical Salafi cause embodied by ISIL – but without any of the outward signs of heightened religiosity and attendant changes in public and private attitudes that one might expect based on earlier writings on the subject of what happens to individuals after they “rediscover religion” and experience a “cognitive opening.” Interestingly, the role of religion per se as a driver of violence seems to decrease with each wave of jihadi activity.<sup>45</sup> Jihadism 4.0 in the West is not a case of “religious radicalization leading to VE activity,” but a “VE social trend” that has little to do with radicalization as traditionally understood.<sup>46</sup> Since the word radicalization in this context becomes misleading, it profitably might be dropped altogether.

Revealingly, the “religious leaders” whom jihadists 4.0 choose for themselves are usually self-proclaimed, with little knowledge of religious texts, and, consequently, little inclination to engage in complicated theological justifications for violence. One is very far from the arcane theological debates that characterized earlier generations of jihadis, or from the fact that recruiters in the 1980s and 1990s often were extremist preachers in radical mosques, and that most well versed in religious texts. In Western Europe, the role models for the newer generation of jihadists are more along the molds of Jean-Louis Denis or Khalid Zerkani, two notorious jihadist mentors active in the poor areas of central Brussels, including Molenbeek, who were in their earlier forties at the time of the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks. Denis, a farmworker who converted to Islam in the mid-2000s, has been connected to such key ISIL operatives as Abdelhamid Abaoud (the mastermind of the Paris attacks) and Najim Lachraoui (one of the Brussels airport bombers) as well as to many young Belgian citizens who departed for Syria.<sup>47</sup> He ran a food bank (known as *Resto du Tambid*) that distributed meals to the homeless around Brussels’ *Gare du Nord*, and more importantly used the call to charitable action in order to attract young candidates for the jihad. Like Zerkani, who was born in Morocco, Denis had scant theological knowledge and made no pretense of having any. Instead, he seemed committed to a form of “gangster Islam” that thrives on channeling the criminal energies of young delinquents.<sup>48</sup> Moroccan-born Zerkani, known by many of his followers as *le Papa Noël du jihad* (the Santa Claus of jihad), was the “perfect role model” for petty delinquents feeling the pull of jihadism. He himself had shoplifted and committed other petty crimes before pledging allegiance to ISIL, and even as a prolific recruiter for the organization he mixed proselytizing and robbery, and was known to use the proceeds from his network of criminal to send jihadis to Syria.<sup>49</sup> He insisted at his 2015 trial that stealing “from the infidels” and engaging in drug dealing not only is permitted by God, but also is necessary to finance travel to “zones of jihad.”<sup>50</sup> By presenting criminal activity as necessary for the greater good of Islam, he allowed those engaged in it to re-conceptualize their sins as virtue. He certainly knew better than to try to lecture the joint-smoking, alcohol-drinking petty delinquents who were his primary pool of recruits on esoteric theological rationales for the jihad.<sup>51</sup> Instead, he routinely would invoke a few crude religious ideas to give legitimacy to the criminal path these youth already had

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<sup>43</sup> Even as recently as the 1990s, earlier models of radicalization of Muslims in Western Europe highlighted the critical role of “radical mosques” in that process. That no longer appears to be the case, and in many instances the role of mosques in jihadism 4.0 appears to be non-existent.

<sup>44</sup> Cottee, “The Salvation of Sinners and the Suicide Bomb.”

<sup>45</sup> Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave,” p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> The notion of a “VE social trend” was put forward by Europol in the wake of the November 2015 Paris attacks.

<sup>47</sup> In January 2016, following a highly publicized trial, Denis was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

<sup>48</sup> In this respect, Zerkani was very different from Bassam Ayachi, who headed the Belgian Islamic Center in Molenbeek, and promoted a dogmatic Salafi strand of the religion. Ayachi, who “knew his Islam,” had played a critical role in earlier waves of jihadist recruitment, back in the 1990s and early 2000s.

<sup>49</sup> Cottee, “The Salvation of Sinners and the Suicide Bomb.”

<sup>50</sup> Higgins, Andrew and Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura. “A Brussels Mentor Who Taught ‘Gangster Islam’ to the Young and Angry.”

<sup>51</sup> Higgins, Andrew and Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura, *op. cit.*

chosen.<sup>52</sup> His rhetoric may have been Islam-heavy, but it also was theology-lite and melded delinquency and religious zeal.

## The “Islamization of Radicalism” Thesis

The evidence summarized above has prompted noted French expert Olivier Roy, one of the world’s leading authorities on political Islam, to argue that the potency of jihadism 4.0 across Western Europe represents not a “radicalization of Islam” but an “Islamization of radicalism.” This important analytical distinction has key policy implications for how best to respond to the challenge. “Radicalization of Islam” would imply that individuals (in this case, second-generation Muslim citizens or converts) go through a process of religious awakening, and that, having “discovered” or “rediscovered” Islam, they progressively drift (including through cognitive and group dynamics) into increasingly extreme interpretations of religious doctrine, involving legitimization of violence, and, ultimately, into “Islamic terrorism.” Those who believe in versions of the “radicalization of Islam” thesis point to the spread of Salafi ideas across Western Europe, primarily in Muslim communities but also among converts to Islam, as a key factor behind this process.

Instead, Roy argues, what we are witnessing is the “Islamization of radicalism.” That expression, which he has popularized, has proved controversial among other scholars.<sup>53</sup> Its logic can be summarized as follows

- 1) The starting point in the analysis is the recognition that we are faced with “radicalized youth” in the sense of extremely angry, alienated ones. Radicalism, in this regard, is a somewhat misleading term, in that it might suggest these youth initially share a radical political agenda. In fact, they do not. They are not politically or ideologically inclined. What they are is thoroughly estranged from their surrounding environment and society at large, and bursting with rage, contempt, and/or hatred toward “the system.”
- 2) The “radicalism” of these youth is not a byproduct or outcome of religious radicalization. These youngsters did not become jihadists after rediscovering Islam or adopting Salafi ideas, as the conventional wisdom regarding the role of religion in radicalization would suggest. Instead, the actual line of causality and sequential process goes in the other direction: any interest in Islam these youth came to display manifested itself late in the day, after their “conversion” to jihadism already had occurred. In fact, most of these youth never became “religious” in any conventional sense of the term. Asserting a “jihadi identity” may have performed a multiplicity of critical “personal-identity reinvention” functions for them, but it did not betray a heightened interest in religious ideas or theology on their part – not even, apparently, an interest in theological justifications for the jihad. It even seems that, in some cases, converts to jihadism realized belatedly that they perhaps should know a little bit more about Islam – as apparently was the case of the two British youngsters, both 22, who shortly before leaving Birmingham for Syria purchased *Islam for Dummies* and *The Koran for Dummies*.<sup>54</sup>
- 3) Many Western jihadists 4.0 are above all angry young rebels looking for a cause, for a way both to express and to experience their utter rejection of society, its mores, and accepted codes of behavior; that, above anything else, is what draws them to the narrative of ISIL. ISIL provides ideological cover for their rage, frustrations, and, often, for their criminality or psychopathic behavior. Jihadism 4.0 “Islamizes their radicalism.” As Roy suggests, for angry youths looking for a simple, transnational ideology of violent rejection of both the international system and existing domestic orders, for a framework that can give a semblance of intellectual coherence to their rage, jihadism 4.0, as spearheaded by ISIL, is the only product available on the global market of ideas, and the only one that has gathered real ideological and political momentum, including

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<sup>52</sup> Higgins, Andrew and Kimiko De Freytas-Tamura, *op. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> See in particular the controversy that has pitted Roy against Gilles Kepel, another leading French authority on political Islam and Islam in France.

<sup>54</sup> Mehdi Hasan, “What the jihadists who bought Islam for Dummies on Amazon tell us about radicalization.” Rik Coolsaet establishes an interesting parallel to members of radical left groups in the 1960s and 1970s. He notes that “members of these groups often eagerly skipped *Das Kapital* and confined themselves to the *Little Red Book* of Mao Zedong, or the then very popular series of small Chilean booklets, written by Marta Harnecker, which explained Marxism in simple terms” (Coolsaet, “Facing the Fourth Foreign Fighters Wave,” p. 26).



in the form of state-building and establishing the foundations of a truly alternative society. The predecessors of jihadism 4.0 in this regard – including Marxism, Trotskyism, Maoism, and the Communist international – have long since been discredited, and the political orders once inspired by them have collapsed. Even AQ now is viewed by a majority of young Western Muslim radicals as being under the control of anachronistic figures such as al-Zawahiri. ISIL’s current standing as the only anti-world order organization with global reach and demonstrated political success explains its appeal to converts (who constitute at least 20 percent of its recruits in France).

4) In the West at least, jihadism 4.0 also reflects what Roy describes as “a generational revolt” by youth who turn against their parents, and everything that their parents represent in terms of religion and culture. They want nothing of the culture of their surrounding society, and they want nothing of the culture of their parents. Jihadi recruiters are very much aware of, and seek to exploit, the generational gap between radicalized second-generation Muslim youth (and converts to Islam) and their parents. Tellingly, one of the videos for Denis’ food bank was entitled “choose your parents or choose Allah.”<sup>55</sup> It is revealing as well that, as the stories of youngsters who drifted into jihadism consistently demonstrate, the parents are typically unaware of the jihadization of their progeny and are in a state of denial about it. Once they realize, they live in (justified) fear that an older sibling may draw a younger one into the jihad (as Abaaoud among others did).

It makes sense, in this context, that jihadists 4.0 embrace at least nominally Salafi ideas.<sup>56</sup> For them, Salafism’s appeal lies, to a significant extent, in how different it is from the Islam of their parents, let alone of their parents’ religion in the case of converts. It is the ideal religious form for what is, largely, a global counter-cultural movement, not a religious one. Salafism thus is inherently attractive to young rebels who want to provoke, who seek to signal rejection of the dominant culture while claiming moral superiority over it. The adoption of a Salafi identity also provides membership in a new community of like-minded radical rebels (and/or criminals), as well as the distinct counter-culture associated with that community.<sup>57</sup> In the context of modern Western European and MENA societies alike, Salafism stands out as an “Islam of rupture” its embrace, therefore, can be the equivalent of a rite of passage: it can serve to affirm, both to oneself and to others, one’s move into a different world.

The extolling of violence, the glorification of death and self-sacrifice, and the celebration of killing (i.e., adding a jihadi component to the Salafi one) then becomes icing on the cake: they add yet another critical layer to the defiance of mainstream society, and provide yet more ways of deriding the dominant value system. The sadistic violence used by groups such as ISIL must be understood, in part, against this backdrop: it serves many ends in different contexts, but one of them is to provoke: beheadings, crucifixion, and other public displays of savagery are intended, in part, to mock civilized norms, break taboos, and revel in the mixture of disgust and fear that such acts evoke in mainstream society. It is in that context that one must understand video clips of smiling suicide bombers about to carry out horrific acts; ISIL members tweeting “selfies” holding the severed heads of their enemies, or issuing threats using emoticons and internet acronyms such as LOL; and technically sophisticated footage of mutilated American soldiers against a background of hip-hop beats or rap music. The sadistic, primitive violence conveyed through modern means of communication that entail sounds, slang and attitudes characteristic of modern street culture are all part and parcel of the distinctive counter-culture produced by perverted forms of identity seeking and affirmation.<sup>58</sup>

To those with little actual knowledge of Islam, and even less inclination to put themselves through rigorous religious study, Salafism also opens the door to a “do-it-yourself Islam” or “a la carte Islam”: individuals can draw on a handful of Quranic quotes or hadiths taken out of context and readily available on the web, as opposed to buried in religious treatises and scholarly exegeses. These citations then can be invoked selectively

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<sup>55</sup> Brunsdon, “Belgium: Journeys to jihad.”

<sup>56</sup> Roy, “France’s Oedipal Islamist Complex

<sup>57</sup> The parallel with gangs is striking.

<sup>58</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, “Current Trends in Jihadi Networks in Europe.”

to justify behavior as is convenient, or stitched together to build a ready-made, cut-and-paste simple framework to justify behavior driven by criminal motives and self-gratification impulses.

In the end, it is not so much “ideology” or “religion” that drives the “radicalization” of Western youth (second generation and converts) drawn to jihadism 4.0, but rather a “thrilling cause,” as Atran has put it.<sup>59</sup> There is a world of difference between an ideology and a thrilling cause. The former suggests an intellectual framework built around a set of ideas or claims, logical connections among them, and an agenda to promote the resulting worldview. A “thrilling cause” is different: while it, too, may involve ideas, fundamentally it rests not on ideas, but on emotions and the kind of behavior most closely associated with them: excitement and the “high” created by intense lives spent on the edge; the quest for personal significance and self-empowerment; the pursuit of fame, peer recognition and/or adventure; and the desire for meaningful relationships and intense communitarianism, to name but a few of those emotions most relevant to jihadism 4.0.

While much of the evidence concerning the declining importance of religion and ideology in radicalization is derived from research on VE radicalization phenomena in the West, where the data on jihadist profiles and pathways to jihad is far more abundant and well researched, there is reason to wonder whether the importance of religion and ideology in radicalization has not been overstated in other environments, and to investigate this further.

## Policy Implications

Casting radicalization as a primarily ideological process suggests that analysts should focus on how jihadists think; how and why they have come to think that way; and what, if anything, can be done to disrupt relevant processes and counter the appeal of their destructive ideas or worldviews. Approaching radicalization, instead, through the lens of emotions necessitates that we try to imagine how jihadists feel; why they feel the way they do; what they find in jihadism that is truly satisfying to them from an emotional (not intellectual) perspective; and what that all means for CVE programming.<sup>60</sup> These are two fundamentally different ways of understanding what radicalization really means to those who experience it, and this report suggests that the transition from the former lens to the latter is overdue.

The analysis above also points to the futility of thinking that “promoting moderate Islam,” “empowering mainstream Muslim voices,” or, even more ambitiously, “helping to bring about a reformation within Islam” constitute effective tools in the CVE shed (even assuming that Western countries can contribute to that process, as opposed to undermining it through ill-conceptualized or poorly implemented schemes or both). Religious scholars in their sixties, seventies, or eighties who operate within the confines of institutions that youngsters view as tied to, cowed, or coopted by governments, and as being out of step with both modern society and their own needs and aspirations, are not in a position to address the powerful needs and emotions the importance of which this report has highlighted.

One should not put too much faith either in the “waging a war of ideas” or “discrediting VE narratives through the dissemination of counter-narratives” components of CVE. In conflict zones, as this document discussed, jihadi expansion generally has little to do, if anything, with any intrinsic ideological appeal of the theology that animates ISIL leaders and ideologues. “Empowering mainstream Muslim voices” or “promoting moderate Islam” will not prevent Sunnis brutalized by Shia militias, or feeling that their community is being victimized and squeezed out of the political equation, or even from reluctantly rallying behind jihadist organizations that they grudgingly may conclude are the only ones able to keep these forces at bay. Nor will “counter-narrative” undermine the ability of those same organizations to exploit power vacuums, systemic crises of governance, and the breakdown of mechanisms of political regulation. In the

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<sup>59</sup> Atran, “The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace.”

<sup>60</sup> On the role of emotions in terrorism, see Simon Cottee and Keith Hayward, “Terrorist (E)motives: The Existential Attraction of Terrorism.”

West, meanwhile, if violence-prone, young rebels looking for a cause turn to jihadism, it is precisely because violence is such an integral part of it. As Roy has noted, “it serves no purpose to offer them a ‘moderate Islam’; it is the radicalism that attracts them in the first place.”<sup>61</sup> Atran echoes this opinion when he asks:

“When I hear another tired appeal to ‘moderate Islam,’ usually from much older folk, I ask ‘Are you kidding? Don’t any of you have teenage children? When did ‘moderate’ anything have wide appeal for youth yearning for adventure, glory and significance?’”<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, ISIL ideologues understand youth’s search for adventure, glory, significance, empowerment, community, and brotherhood. They grasp how important it is for them to tap into related yearnings, energy, and idealism. And they also gleefully realize the futility (but helpfulness to their cause) of the “tired appeals” that regularly emanate from Western governments and the donor community for a “moderate Islam,” for an “Islamic Reformation” (that will never come or, as Shadi Hamid recently has argued,<sup>63</sup> has already occurred anyway), or for “empowering mainstream religious leaders”. This understanding by senior jihadist ideologues is best reflected in the following quote from *Idaraat al-Tawabush* (“The Management of Savagery”), a 1,400-page manifesto released on the internet in 2004, and often described at the time as “al-Qaeda’s playbook”<sup>64</sup>: “Capture the rebelliousness of youth, their energy and idealism, and their readiness for self-sacrifice, while fools preach ‘moderation’ (*wasatiyyah*), security and avoidance of risk.”

Instead of emphasizing the ideological and religious aspects of radicalization, the CVE community needs to become more sensitive to its broader cultural and emotive dimensions, and to design programming that builds on such an understanding. Those who drift into jihadism 4.0 because of its appeal as a global counter-cultural movement are not going to be pulled away from its orbit by theological or political arguments (for instance, those that emphasize that IS’s ideas or actions “contradict Islam,” or that life under the ISIL is one of oppression and misery). Many contemporary jihadists have little interest in, or no patience for, such arguments. After all, contemporary jihadi culture is, first, an experiential one. It draws individuals in because of the emotions it satisfies, including the sense of brotherhood and intense communal life it provides. Thomas Hegghammer is one of the few analysts who has acted on the implications of such conclusions – one of which is that if one is to understand what “radicalization” actually mean to those who have been “radicalized,” it makes sense to examine the autobiographies, blog posts, tweets, and other first-hand personal accounts produced by jihadists and former jihadists. After doing so, Hegghammer concludes that to grasp the appeal of entities such as IS, one must understand that the world they have created entails not just death, destruction, and mutilation, but a community, and a rich social and cultural universe for those in it (compared to the alternatives generally available to them). He notes that strictly religious endeavors play a relatively minor role in jihadi culture, which instead revolves around group activities that promote camaraderie and brotherhood, and that range from discussions of the afterlife and collective efforts to interpret the meaning and dreams of members of the group to poetry recitation and acapella hymns known as *anashid*, two art forms with a long and prominent history in the Arab and Islamic world, and to which ISIL has given new vigor:

“When jihadis aren’t fighting – which is most of the time – they enjoy story-telling and watching films, cooking and swimming. The social atmosphere (at least for those who play by the rules) is egalitarian, affectionate and even playful. Jihadi life is emotionally intense, filled with the thrill of combat, the sorrow of loss, the joy of camaraderie and the elation of religious experience ... Music, rituals and customs may be as important to jihadi recruitment as theological treatises and political arguments. Yes, some people join radical groups because they want to escape personal problems, avenge Western foreign policy or obey a radical doctrine. But some recruits may join because they find a cultural community and a new life that is emotionally rewarding.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Roy, “France’s Oedipal Islamist Complex.”

<sup>62</sup> Scott Atran, “The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace.”

<sup>63</sup> Shadi Hamid, *Islamic Exceptionalism*.

<sup>64</sup> *The Management of Savagery*’s author was a key AQI ideologue writing under the pen name Abu Bakr Naji.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Hegghammer. “The Soft Power of Militant Jihad.”

CVE or “counter-radicalization” programming has yet to draw the full implications of this state of affairs. It needs to place more emphasis on the powerful cultural and emotional forces behind the new incarnations of jihadism. Responses should include carefully designed, context-specific programming for youth, and led by youth who understand their peers. It may involve mentoring, physical activity, music, entertainment, but, above all, it must make a compelling case that it is addressing the emotions and impulses that this section has identified as the real drivers of “radicalization.” That means, among others, that it must address problems of identity (and identity redefinition), and recognize the centrality of the search for community and the quest for personal significance and recognition by peers and society alike.

For their part, “counter-narrative” interventions should be less preoccupied than they have been thus far with articulating theological or ideological refutations of the jihadi narrative; they should devote more efforts to creating viable alternatives to what jihadism has to offer in the realm of emotions and experiences. They cannot be primarily negative (i.e., focused on rebutting the jihadi narrative or on highlighting the negative aspects of life under the ISIL). Instead of relying on mass messaging at youth, they must, just as ISIL recruiters do (physically as well as online) find ways of engaging “at-risk” youth in sustained, intimate, and personalized dialogues over their grievances, aspirations, and the problems they face.<sup>66</sup> Concomitantly, donor efforts at “building resilience” should not focus exclusively on those sources of resilience that are tied to civil society and broader societal features. They also must recognize the importance of addressing resilience’s psychological and psycho-sociological components – i.e., the mental capacity of individuals and groups to resist and respond to the emotions into which jihadist organizations deliberately tap.

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<sup>66</sup> See Atran, “Mindless Terrorists?”

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