

Radicalisation Redux: On Numbers and Potentially Radicalised Individuals

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Such a delicate problem as radicalisation has invited quite an impressive inflation in the number of literature and policy papers zeroing in on the subject, and this has left one with narrow space to manoeuvre without repeating what has already been asserted before. Scholars and policymakers have proposed solutions to contain and cease radicalisation through the lenses of education, political participation, social and psychological approaches, and even economic empowerment. Experts, in return, have capitalised on these contributions to devise holistic counter-radicalisation (CR) and de-radicalisation (DR) programmes.

Unfortunately, the inflation in radicalisation literature is quite parallel to the exponential rise of radicals in various parts of the world, especially as triggered by the trending jihadi radical group of the day — the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also referred to as Daesh).

For instance, more than 500 nationals from Indonesia and Britain have flocked to Iraq and Syria to pledge service to the radical group. The Malaysian authorities have arrested some 107 individuals who are associated with the same group,ⁱ while fear is amounting in Australia over the ever-present possibility of lone wolf attacks. In fact, the progress of radicalisation has rapidly accelerated to the point where the head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation claimed that one could turn into a radical within mere weeks.ⁱⁱ

We are, therefore, racing against time to slow down the rapid duplication of the number of radicals. Various CR and DR programmes have been introduced to reduce this stratospheric figure or, failing to accomplish that, to prevent more individuals from joining the dreaded ranks of radical groups.



This 14-year-old Malaysian teenager, suspected of heading to Syria to join the ISIS militant group, was detained at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in February. The Malay Mail reported recently that the country's top counter-terrorism official opined that an ISIS attack on Malaysia "was just a matter of time". -- PHOTO: MALAYSIA POLICE



ASIO director-general Duncan Lewis wants families to keep an eye out for radicalisation of teenagers. Photo: Andrew Meares

However, it is the contention of this paper that despite the large number of radicals worldwide — which we must stop before they cross to the violent extremists' side — we must not leave potentially radicalised individuals (PRIs) out of our concern.

PRIs are essentially groups of individuals who are vulnerable to the allure of radical ideology, thus could potentially graduate into fully-realised radicals. As a whole, they become the ample reserve of would-be radicals who may pose security threats on the morrow, replacing the current generation of radicals once their numbers dwindle. Unless we address their side of the problem, CR and DR programmes would essentially go down in history as interminable projects, never to complete.

Our primary concern with PRIs is their sheer numbers. Technically, anyone without a sufficient degree of resistance against the pull of radical groups — whether it be religious conviction, rationale, personal-emotional bond, or political satisfaction — could become radicalised.

This paper addresses three proposed profiles of PRIs.

First, PRIs could materialise in the shape of individuals who do not hold radical views yet, but find themselves sympathetic or agreeing to the cause or methods of a violent extremist group's campaign. Such individuals would object to being labelled as one of the radicals because they have yet to fully approve the activity of violent extremists like Daesh, but among the three types discussed here, they are the closest to being full-fledged radicals.

Certain quarters of the Muslim community in Malaysia appear as a good example of this first group. The 2013 Pew Global Attitudes Survey discovered that “essentially 39 per cent of the Malaysian Muslims surveyed believed that violence can be justified against enemies of Islam.”ⁱⁱⁱ If we juxtapose this figure to the current global terrorism affairs, then we could ascertain that 39 per cent of Malaysian Muslims are likely to approve the relentless bloodletting campaign that Daesh is currently engaging in.

Given the right circumstances, and without sufficient intervention from peers, this first group are at great risk of “graduating” into actual radicals. If such is the case, then they are only steps away from becoming violent extremists.

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The second group consists of individuals who lack sufficient capacity, or defence mechanisms, to repel the enticement of radical groups. These people may hold an opposing stance against radical groups or even disregard the whole issue, but they remain potential, easy victims to radical recruitment. This is because they either fail or are unable to perceive radical influences as a threat to their lives and others.

Some may follow and hold opposing views towards the brutal conduct of Daesh and its associates, but only because such views seem to be the norm of the day. Others may denounce Daesh and its like, due to pressure from their social groups or religious community, while others mask their inability or unwillingness to confront difficult questions posed on the topic. They appear as part of the “mainstream” community who renounce radical and extremist groups.

These individuals are easy victims of radical recruiters. Their weak intellectual and religious understanding — depending on which card the radicals are playing — could easily be broken and exploited by the radicals before being swayed into accepting the latter’s ideology and agenda.

The third group of the PRIs comprises those marginalised from the wider society. Identified not by their feeble rationale stance or religious understanding, the final group’s weakest link is their inability to sustain stable personal emotional bonds with their social surroundings, resulting in their low self-esteem, life dissatisfaction, and gloomy worldview.

There are multiple types of emotional agonies that could severely affect one’s social relationship. It could be the loss of someone close, the failure to establish positive relations with peers, the rebuff by society, the absence of appreciation from others, and many more. When society at large fails to integrate individuals with such personal-emotional issues, chances are that these individuals would erect an invisible barrier between themselves and the rest of society. Not only do they start retracting themselves from public life at this juncture, they will also gradually become apathetic towards society due to broken social linkages.



*An ISIS propaganda video purporting to show the execution of 21 Egyptian Christians in Libya.
Photo: Rex Features*

Radicals prey with ease on individuals in such self or socially imposed isolation. Perpetrators gain the attention of those who feel left out by exploiting their fragile emotional state and give them a chance to find a new purpose in life and leave an impact in history. Such predatory tactics have been likened to the practice of sexual grooming in the streets of the United Kingdom, whereby perpetrators target disenfranchised individuals in a one-on-one setting as opposed to preaching radical messages to a group of people all at once.^{iv}

Considering that PRIs fall outside the scope of CR and DR programmes — which exclusively deal with fully-realised radicals — what are their options to protect themselves from radical influences?

Tossing all the blame to radical preachers without critically questioning the capacity of the receiver seems incoherent in the dynamics of human communication. It is already acknowledged in so many other platforms that radical preachers, with their deception and inception-like strategy, have an over-the-top capability to seduce victims to join their side. However, to suggest that receivers do not have the ability to resist such allure sounds almost intellectually disrespectful on our part.

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I opine that PRIs must erect a first-degree protection against the influence of radicalisation. Each individual must identify their weak points and concentrate on building strong defence mechanisms to guard against being exploited by radicals. Weak points could be manifest in one's cognition and intellect, religious beliefs, or emotional state; these vary among individuals but are susceptible to the radicals' influence nonetheless. Engaging in critical discussions, expanding one's worldview, enriching oneself with non-dogmatic religious understanding, and establishing healthy emotional connections, are among the first steps in obtaining this highly-personalised defence mechanism.

Generating personal willingness to oppose radical ideology is another issue altogether. This is especially difficult if one maintains the perception that radical groups are an insignificant threat to one's life.

A way to solve this is through the employment of intellectually generated "us versus them" mentality. It is pointless to convince anyone to denounce radicals if they do not see the latter as "the harmful other group", who pose not only challenges to security but also to the integrity of one's identity.

Similar to the first-degree protection, each individual needs to dive into their deep personal state to ascertain which aspect of their identity is incompatible to radical ideas.

For nationalists, this could be their national identity. They may arrive at the conclusion that a radical proposition contradicts the prevailing collective national integrity, aspiration and tradition. A Malaysian, for example, could say that Daesh imposes severe discord to the social integrity of the Malaysian community as it alienates fellow Malaysians from the rest of the society by recruiting them into a notorious death-cult that aims to inflict harm on the very society they originate from. If we upgrade this discussion onto the nation-state level, one could conclude that radicals project security and structural challenges to the state through their violent activities and spread of radical messages that undermine the state's sacred ideologies and construct. This situation has propelled countries like Indonesia to vigorously reintroduce their national ideology — *Pancasila* — into public space as a counter-narrative against radical groups.

The religious community may posit that religiously inspired radical groups adopt a perverted version of sacred teachings, which are liberally concocted to serve some divorced-from-religion ends. A religious person needs to ascertain and prove the intellectual fallacy of the radicals' religious claims to alienate the latter's teachings from the mainstream religious grouping which denounces radicalism and violent extremism. Daesh, for instance, has been exposed by many thinkers as merely a violence-loving group who cover their political, financial, and other "secular" goals with carefully constructed religious fervour.^v From there, one must work out an effective counter-narrative that can invalidate their twisted campaign and cause. This counter-narrative must be substantially supported by religious texts and intellectual understanding of the religion to maintain its credibility in the eyes of the public.

Those who do not subscribe to the above two categories may simply invoke the spirit of humanity and moral life to attain substantial reason to condemn radical movements. The barbaric methods of radical groups should suffice as the dividing factor between them and individuals who lead life based on respect for each other, compassion, virtuous character, and staunch support for the preservation of life as well as dignity. Morality serves as a more intrinsic identity that is not developed by subscribing to external constructs, like nationality or religion, but one that is built-in within everyone's system. By that standard, humans at large, including PRIs, have an inherent element at their disposal to brand violence-loving radical groups as an out-group.

This paper has an unconventional take on radicalisation. It postulates the need to address the current state of rising number of radicalised people by including PRIs in our assessment as well as emphasises the need to direct analytical focus down to the individual level. Some might find the argument to take PRIs into wider counter-radicalisation strategy as counter-productive for it expands the scope of the target to well beyond anyone's capacity to accommodate. However, I am of the view that for each PRI who we engage with today, there will be one less radical or terrorist that our security apparatus must deal with in the future. While the discussion presented above is in no way exhaustive, it sets up a stable platform to kick-off deeper analysis in a non-mainstream direction.

Notes:

ⁱ Based on YBhg SAC Dato' Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay's speech in "Roundtable Discussion on Addressing IS Threat", held on 14 May 2015 at The Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

ⁱⁱ David Wroe, "ASIO issues 'call to arms' for families to spot radicalisation of teenagers," The Sydney Morning Herald, 15 May 2015. Retrieved on 25 May 2015: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/asio-issues-call-to-arms-for-families-to-spot-radicalisation-of-teenagers-20150514-gh1hmk.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Liow, "Malaysia's ISIS conundrum," Brookings Southeast Asia View series. Retrieved on 21 April 2015 from Brookings : <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/04/21-malaysia-isis-conundrum-liow>

^{iv} Nazir Afzal, "Young people are easily led. Our anti-radicalisation schemes need to be cleverer," The Guardian, 8 April 2015. Retrieved on 10 April 2015: http://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/apr/08/nazir-afzal-young-people-anti-radicalisation-government-isis?CMP=share_btn_tw

^v See Mehdi Hasan, "How Islamic is Islamic State?" New Statesman, 10 March 2015. Retrieved on 20 March 2015: <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/03/mehdi-hasan-how-islamic-islamic-state>