

An Inquiry into Youth Innovativeness in Radicalization and Extremism: The Case of the Recent Manchester City Bombing and Al-Shabaab Activity in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The fulcrum of this paper is the May 22, 2017 Manchester City bombing. The paper seeks to highlight how the youth can become indoctrinated into extremism. It inquires into why some people go through the terrorism indoctrination cycle yet not progress to the critical point of carrying out terror acts. Whereas several scholars have challenged the whole radicalization discourse, their basis is on the vulnerability of people to extremism in Western countries, which this paper finds inadequate, as it does not address the root cause of the problem. The results of data analysis on the terror groups al-Shabaab and Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) has shown that the majority of youth joining the two terror groups do so at an early age ranging between 16 to 20 years of age and lack a good education. The Countering the Lone-Actor Terrorism (CLAT) project results has shown a relationship between mental health and terror acts. The point of concern in this paper is therefore, youth without a good education, who have first-hand exposure to violence indoctrination and or with mental health problems would be easier to radicalize to the point of carrying out acts of terrorism and extremism.

Key words: Terrorism, jihadist, extremism, depression, alienation, bombings.

INTRODUCTION

The Manchester Arena concert bombing in England on 22nd May 2017, resulting in the death of 22 people, bears the hallmarks of the typical modern terrorist operation. What is known about the bomber, Salman Ramadan Abedi, aged 22, is that he was the son of Libyan parents who fled Libya in 2011 to Britain where the family had resided for over a decade. Abedi's father, Ramadan Abedi, aged 51, is himself a committed jihadist who has been a member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) founded in 1995 to overthrow the Gaddafi government. The group, which is said to have links with the Al-Qaeda terror network, attempted an assassination on Gaddafi in the 1990s according to press reports. Following the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime by jihadists backed by NATO forces in 2011, the family moved back to their home country (Roland Oliphant, article in The Telegraph on 24/5/17).

Abedi is believed to have participated in the father's jihad back home in Libya against the Gadhafi government when he was 16 years old (Bennhold et al, New York Times, 27/5 /17). According to the BBC News, Abedi had earlier been arrested for what the Manchester Police said were minor offences of theft and assault in 2012. The New York Times report claimed that when he visited Manchester City earlier in 2017, he told people that he believed in dying for a cause and other similar jihadist statements about suicide bombings (BBC News, 30/5/17). Abedi's behavior has similarities with the model of offending described in Brame et al (2004) and Piquero et al, (2014) in

their article 'Criminal offending frequency and offense switching', that investigated whether there existed a relationship between frequent offending and offence switching based on literature suggesting such a relationship. This can be described as a situation in which an offender who frequently commits crimes can change to other forms of crime when circumstances are favourable. This is exemplified by the fact of the bomber, Abedi, having been arrested for other offences earlier before he committed the current atrocity.

In a nutshell, the Salman family had been raised amid jihadist activities and extremist violence by the LIFG as it fought against the former regime of Gaddafi. The Salman sons were exposed to radicalization, first by their own father, and later among other extremist networks within the large Manchester Muslim community where they gained further jihadist ideas and beliefs that they evidently internalized to the point of actualizing them (Wikipedia article "Al-Shabaab (militant group)", downloaded on 29/5/17; Katrin Bennhold et al, in their article on 27th May 2017). This scenario fits the behavior of Abedi who the press has said was reported by fellow Moslem leaders in Manchester to the authorities no less than on five occasions for extremist activities. Viewed from the perspective of how people get entrapped into crime, Abedi's behavior is no surprise. It is well known in criminology that among the factors that can influence criminal behavior in a youth include peer pressure, the influence of and violent activities of the family members and the social organization surrounding the individual (Livingston et al 2014). The fact that Abedi grew up surrounded by people who viewed extremist violence as justified and normal greatly shaped his thoughts. His father's involvement in LIFG activities greatly influenced his world view towards aggression and extreme violence. Hence the circumstances around which Abedi grew up shaped his behavior in ways that led him to view the use of extremist violence on what he considered enemies of Islam as being normal and justified.

METHODOLOGY

This article used open sources in the media as well as a review of the literature to highlight the differing viewpoints of research. A comparative look at research studies by leading scholars of the subject as well as a review of current credible newspaper articles were utilized as a way of comparing the factors that influence the youth to become radicalized.

Factors that Drive Youth into Radicalization and Extremism

The foregoing background about the environment in which the Ramadan family was brought up appears to be supported by a new research suggesting that terrorist and jihadists' actions of bombing and killing of innocent people could be the result of depression and isolation (Bhui et al, 2014). The study by Queen Mary University professor, Kamaldeep Bhui, released in September 2014, surveyed 600 Moslem men and women living in Britain aged 18-45 about their views on radicalization and extremism. The survey showed that those respondents who sympathized most with terrorist activities were more at risk of being radicalized than those who condemned terrorism who the study found to be less likely to become radicalized. Given these findings, the study postulates that social networks are crucial in helping people to connect and socialize with others thereby steering them away from possible mental breakdown that could lead to radicalization.

Neighbourhoods where one spends his/her formative years in life, literature on aggression and

violent behavior suggests, has much influence on behaviours later in life especially if he/she witnesses violence in the family or sees it being practiced in the neighbourhood among or by gang or other group members (Vaughn et al, 2015; Kim and Lo, 2015). Looked at from this explanation, Abedi's family background and history fits the model described above. Another model is where a lone terrorist who does not have any links with a particular terror group but due to propaganda and other recruitment literature and approaches, goes on to carry out a terrorist action (van Zuidewijn and Bakker, 2016).

Besides the theorization of the possible reasons why people become terrorists posited by the Queen Mary University, other scholars see such motivations differently. Some have suggested that the Western governments' shifting of the debate and focus away from the root causes of radicalization among Moslems, seen as being the result of meddling by the Western governments in Moslem countries, had resulted in an inability to properly address the problem of radicalization. This school of thought postulates that the West had put the discourse and subsequently the research spotlight on Islamist or jihadists' attempts at radicalization and recruitment of the youth in Western countries. By placing the emphasis on the 'vulnerable individual' and away from the main cause, the enabling environment, that is, meddling, Western governments had missed the point of focus (Schmid, 2016). This, they argue, is evident from the definitions of radicalization coined as a result of this practice, such as the one articulated by the European Union, thus: "Individuals or groups becoming intolerant with regard to basic democratic values like equality and diversity, as well as a rising propensity towards using means of force to reach political goals that negate and/or undermine democracy". Schmid has argued that this definition articulated by the EU is problematic since if democracy and diversity were the key issues in extremism, there would be much more terrorism in the world today than is the case in reality.

To support this argument, Schmid used two cases of Moslems who fall in the description of holding beliefs that are considered radical to show that predicting terrorist violence on the basis of holding such beliefs may not necessarily prove correct (BBC News, 'Profile: Antony Garcia', April 2007: Accessed at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6149798.stm on 4/6/17). In the second example, Schmid shows that despite Salafist Islamic teachings being blamed for terrorism in the world, the Brixton Salafi community had created and operationalized some of the most effective anti-terrorist initiatives in Britain that predated the government's own PREVENT programme. He further argues that the greater number of Moslems in Western countries consider it immoral and counterproductive to engage in terrorist activities. The scholar elaborates that it is only a miniscule fringe group of Moslems that is involved in 'takfiri' (which refers to those Moslems who consider it justifiable to kill other people as unbelievers or 'kafir' using any means available to them).

Conceptualizing Radicalization

Given the varying definitions of the term radicalization in the terrorism discourse, one is tempted to ask: what is radicalization? And is there anything wrong with an individual becoming radical, a derivative of radicalization? Some scholars have questioned the basis on which Western governments have framed the term radicalization to facilitate securitization of people or communities that these governments define as being vulnerable to radicalization. Looking at the original meaning of a radical, it referred to an individual with radical or different opinions and

ideas about some situation. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, being radical is 'advocating far-reaching political or social reform; representing or supporting an extreme section of the party' (OED Online 2014a). Based on this argument, Baker-Beall et al (2015), posit that there is nothing really wrong with one being radical given historical examples of people who held radical beliefs on particular issues but were later vindicated by laws passed to support their arguments. The civil rights movement in the United States early in the twentieth century is a good example of this and others.

The emphasis on the 'vulnerable individual' that Western governments have highlighted as the focal point for securitization in efforts to deal with the menace, is further questioned on grounds that it had avoided to pay close attention to the study of Al-Qaeda as an international terrorist organization (Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2017). To test whether the vulnerable narrative really works in all radicalization cases, the two scholars interviewed three Moslem brothers originally from Algeria who went through what fits the typical radicalization cycle, exposure to jihadist videos and Salafist teachings/indoctrinations and talks by jihadist recruiters on how Moslems were being mistreated by corrupt Moslem governments in Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and others. Their findings showed that only one of the brothers was in the end actually radicalized to the point of preparing to carry out terrorist bombings. This in itself shows that despite all the three brothers going through circumstances and environments that exposed them to jihadist indoctrination, they did not all become actual terrorists even though they might have sympathized with Islamicist causes because of their indoctrination.

Lone-Actor Terrorists

This term refers to terrorists who carry out terror attacks seemingly on their own without overt control by any particular terrorist group (van Zuijdewijn and Bakker, 2016). Some scholars have theorized that these types of terrorists could be acting the way they do as a result of radicalization through propaganda and being sympathetic to certain religious or cultural and political convictions as in the case of right-wing terrorists. Research by Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Project (CLAT) led by Zuijdewijn and Bakker, had shown that about 35% of perpetrators of terror acts suffered from some mental disorder which could be as a result of social isolation suggesting a relationship between mental disorder and social isolation as a trigger for violence. The findings of the CLAT project lend support to the Queen Mary University own findings suggesting a similar relationship. However, the issue of why certain people seemed not to be influenced to the extent of performing terror acts as found by Schmid and others despite their possessing similar traits, is an issue that needs further investigation to clarify why that was the case.

Kenyan Perspective on Terrorist Recruitment

In the past decade, Kenya has been the target of the Al-Shabaab terror group based in Somalia, which pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2012. Al-Shabaab is said to cooperate with the older radical group in training in infantry tactics, indoctrination and use of explosives. The group advocates the Wahhabi form of Islam originating from Saudi Arabia which is also the version embraced by Al-Qaeda and ISIS terror groups as opposed to Sufism for the typical Somalis (Blanchard, 2007; Armanios, 2003). As argued above, only fringe groups of those that embrace the Salafist version of Islam demand application of the strict adherence to Sharia laws that requires among other things, the stoning to death of any woman accused of adultery and the amputating of the

hands of alleged thieves. Wahhabism is a form of Sunni Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.(Counter Extremism Project, 2004; Blanchard, 2007).

The al-Shabaab terror group has been most active in Somalia where it had gained a strong foothold as the youth wing of the Union of Islamic Courts which controlled Mogadishu in 2006. It had entrenched itself in Somalia to the point where it was engaged in all manner of illicit trade and business including sea piracy and charcoal business. In 2010 and 2013, the group launched spectacular attacks in Kampala, Uganda and Westgate, Nairobi, Kenya, respectively. The Westgate attack and others in various locations in the country, strengthened the Kenya Government's resolve in its decision of deploying military forces codenamed Operation Linda Inchi, (Swahili for Defend the Country) from the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) to Somalia on 26th October 2011. The KDF forces had deployed alongside other forces from four other African Union member countries, Uganda, Rwanda, Djibouti, Sierra Leone and Burundi, aimed at routing out the problem from its source and preventing and averting further attacks.

While the deployment of troops in Somalia by Kenya Government has gone a long way in curtailing and stopping crime and illicit business and brought much of the southern parts of the country to near normalcy, the terrorism threat is still much evident in Kenya as well as in Somalia itself. Al-Shabaab has been carrying out bombings of key government installations in Somalia and has sporadically used road-side bombs, improvised-explosives-devices (IEDs) and mined roads targeting Kenyan Government official vehicles as they ferried important government personalities to official functions particularly in northern and coastal areas of Kenya.

By many accounts, the majority of al-Shabaab operatives are young boys in their early twenties who joined the group at between the ages of 10-24 (Botha, 2014: Radicalisation in Kenya: recruitment to al-Shabaab and the Mombasa Republican Council). In her quite extensive research on the two terrorist groups operating in the coastal and north-eastern parts of Kenya, Botha collected data showing that 57% of al-Shabaab respondents interviewed claimed to have joined the group at ages 10 and 24 compared to MRC recruits at 53% for the same age group. The researcher further considered other factors such as who introduced operatives to al-Shabaab and MRC recruiters and the level of education of the recruits. The analysis of data collected suggests that the majority of al-Shabaab recruits, 66%, were introduced to radicalization by friends while only 38% of MRC recruits were similarly introduced.

Other factors that are utilized in recruitment included a religious figure playing a recruitment role which in respect of al-Shabaab was 34% and MRC at 38%. For the two groups, the level of education of the majority of recruits seems to have played a significant role in their joining terrorism and extremism activities. For al-Shabaab, the great majority, at 67%, had received only primary school education while MRC was at 47%; those who had attained secondary education for al-Shabaab were 45% and MRC 24%, and lastly, those with tertiary education or better stood at 8% for al-Shabaab and 9% for MRC.

Botha has gone on to suggest, without offering supporting evidence, that the Kenya Government

had deliberately denied the north-eastern and coastal people, who are mostly Moslems, development and economic opportunities in favour of up-country Christian citizens. Her findings suggest that those with minimal education were most at risk of recruitment due mostly to economic reasons but also due to their narrow world views. This view is, however, not supported by empirical research carried out by Rink and Sharma (2016) in Eastleigh area of Nairobi. The two researchers suggest instead that al-Shabaab has utilized the historical Christian-Moslem tensions in Kenya in order to entice potential recruits to its ranks and to justify violence.

Lack of a good education, some researchers have argued, is among the factors that can lead to failure or an inability to secure better economic opportunities, which has a relationship with the susceptibility of some youth being at a greater risk of radicalization into extremism. The relationship was due to factors such as poverty, feelings of alienation from the society they currently live in especially in countries like Britain, perception that Western governments treated Moslems unfairly and often targets them for attack and punishment, perceptions that in Kenya, people from the interior parts of the country were favoured by the authorities or government in employment and other opportunities as compared to Moslem-faith people (Nafeez Ahmed, 24th May 2017; Kundnani, 2014; Botha, 2014).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For this article the recent Manchester City bombing was used as an opening of the debate to highlight how the youth can become indoctrinated into extremism. The discussion has shown that parents play critical roles in the shaping of their children's worldviews as exemplified by the Ramadan family's involvement into terrorism in Libya to topple the Gaddafi regime. Additionally, it shows that neighbourhoods where a person spent his or her formative years also play a critical role in the shaping of the behaviors of young people. We also saw that being the father figure, Ramadan, Abedi's own father introduced and encouraged his sons to participate in terror activities against the Gaddafi government, a behavior that shaped the sons own future behaviour to view violence and murder against perceived enemies of Islam as normal.

The results of interviews conducted by Githens-Mazer about two Moslem brothers who were exposed to radicalization and extremist teachings/videos, however, showed that only one of the brothers eventually progressed to the point of preparing to carry out bombings and other terrorist acts. This suggests that people can become radicalized through exposure to extremist indoctrination yet not reach a point of carrying out terror acts. What is lacking in this case of the two Algerian brothers who it turned out, only one of them went to involve himself in terror activities? In the case of Abedi, the father seems to have played the key role of enticing him into terrorism which might be speculated that a father figure is what is lacking in this other case.

Instead of focusing on alleged vulnerability of people, some scholars have proposed that for meaningful debate and subsequent research on terrorism to make headway, there was need to look at the political angle and policies of Western governments with a view of addressing what many

Moslems perceive as meddling in Moslem countries.

In the Kenyan context, the results of data analysis by Botha shows that majority of youth joining the terror group do not have secondary education and that there were many non-Somali Kenyans attracted to the terror group. The conclusion, she asserts, is that it is an indication that the group would like to utilize them in internal operations inside Kenya where they can blend unnoticeably to the security forces.

As a way of addressing the al-Shabaab menace and other similar crime gangs and vigilantes in Kenya and other East African countries, governments need to craft opportunities for employment and self-employment that can alleviate the hardships that entice youth to join terror groups. The 'Jua Kali' economic model prevalent in many African countries can form a basis for a wider reaching self-employment scheme that addresses both unemployment while at the same time is a product innovation incubator for the youth that can manufacture products of high quality for the market. We finally briefly looked at the lone actor terrorist and the kinds of influences that were behind their terror acts which were shown by the CLAT project to be partly as a result of mental breakdown.

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