
Radicalisation of Young Adults in the Balkan States: Counter-Measures, Healthcare Provision, and Community Involvement

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Abstract

Decreasing the rise of extremism remains a priority for governments worldwide. Motives behind joining an extremist organisation are complex and often unique to the individual, making prevention strategies difficult to design and implement. This article explores several facets of this complex problem, particularly in relation to young adults, including links between extremism, criminality and incarceration, mental health, socioeconomic status and the rise of radicalisation ‘hotspots’ in Muslim majority states in the Western Balkans, where lack of government leadership allows extremist organisations to flourish. Potential counter radicalisation measures are also discussed in various contexts, including healthcare systems, the community, internationally and within the Balkan region.

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Introduction

The growing spread of terrorism and religious extremism is apparent in worldwide news on a daily basis, and the challenges presented by its impact are both numerous and complex. One factor in these challenges is the concern about the number of young adults being drawn into the world of extremism through radicalisation, and used to further the ambitions of terrorist groups (Bizina & Gray, 2014). This concern is mirrored across the globe and, more recently, has become a noticeable problem in the Balkan States. Once at the forefront of American and European foreign policy, this article will explore the re-emergence

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of ideological extremism in this region, focusing primarily on Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, both Muslim-majority Balkan states.

Whether commonalities exist amongst young adults vulnerable to radicalisation continues to be of debate, and is unlikely to be straightforward in terms of an answer, or a solution (Malet, 2013). Some authors suggest that the most susceptible individuals to radicalisation are those with a history of difficulties in their communities, particularly involving crime either as recipients, offenders, or witnesses (Azinović & Jusić, 2015). These assertions are often borne out in media reports discussing the history of those involved in terrorist activities, yet there remains limited information from unbiased sources as to the accuracy of these claims (Bhui, Warfa, & Jones, 2014). Conversely, reports of privileged and educated adults, with no history of involvement in illicit activities, participating in terrorist activities have also been noted (Bhui, Everitt, & Jones, 2014). Thus, it is apparent that there is no simple correlation between the socio-economic status and demography of young adults, and their likelihood of becoming ‘radicalised’.

The term ‘radicalisation’ is arguably Western in origin, used more extensively in academic discussion in the years after the Madrid and London bombings in 2004 and 2005 respectively (Schmid, 2013). It remains a multifaceted term; ‘radicalisation’ can also refer to the transition to militant nationalism, a phenomenon much analysed in discourse examining the Serbian and Croatian conflicts in the 1990s. However, this article focuses on the radicalisation process solely in the context of religious extremism, which Iannaccone and Berman (2006) define as being

“...willing to Murder because they embrace theologies that sanction violence in the service of God. They have no sympathy for their victims, because they view those Victims as enemies of God. And they sacrifice their own lives because they expect huge and immediate after life rewards in return for martyrdom”.

Iannaccone and Berman (2006) argue that the success of religious extremists in their recruitment is dependent on gaps in education, health care, poverty and political representation. Radical organisations can take advantage of shortcomings in Government and provide an attractive alternative by assuming the vacant role of ‘provider’. A well-resourced radical organisation can cater to both spiritual and materialistic needs, able to form a paternalistic relationship with young and impressionable adults. Thus, government investments in the community - including healthcare resources, educational programmes and community policing- are likely to yield benefit.

Whilst no links can be proposed with certainty, there is some evidence that radicalisation of those from backgrounds of deprivation may exceed those from more affluent backgrounds (Clark McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011). Indeed, radicalisation is not the only association evidenced in youths from deprived areas, with others including increased illegal drug use, and other criminal involvement (Case & Katz, 1991). Clearly, understanding the processes by which one may become radicalised is crucial in the oft-cited, ‘war on terrorism’ (Jackson, 2005), and would fit well with international approaches to deradicalisation. Notable examples include the ‘Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare’ strategies outlined by the European Union (EU) and national governments (Council of the European Union, 2005; HM Government, 2010).

To appreciate the current understanding around the radicalisation of young adults, in the Balkan region, and links with healthcare resources, this article reviews available literature surrounding the topic. It is hoped that this may assist in furthering understanding of this important subject, and offer some potential considerations towards addressing elements that predispose youths to radicalisation.

Theological and Ideological Basis of Radicalisation

The process by which young adults become radicalised is not a straightforward one, and is unique to the individual. Horgan (2008) argued that the notion of someone simply experiencing a sudden ‘epiphany’ to engage in terrorism is reductionist, misguided and unsupported by any empirical evidence. In reality, the radicalisation process is experienced in incremental stages and at different rates of progression. There is even evidence to suggest that radicalisation may begin after joining an extremist group for other reasons, including a need to ‘belong’. Ahmad (2016) discussed these contributing factors in a study of young Pakistani adults in the process of converting to a radical Islamic ideology. Contrasting the opinions held by the general public (Howie, 2005), the authors found that the young adults attracted to extremist organisations did not necessarily possess pre-existing radical views. Ahmad argued that a true ideological conversion occurred incrementally- a result of a number of factors. Close friendships formed within the organisation would often lead to a significant improvement in the young person’s skills and self-esteem, and were thought to contribute to intimate bonds and a growing sympathy for its ideology. Moreover, Ahmad (2016) suggests that by the organisation granting power and influence to members, both psychologically and in reality, the strength of bonds grew further.

Many scholars have attempted to theorise the underpinnings of these complex psychological processes. There appears to be two opposing schools of thought in the debate surrounding a psychological ‘profile’ of a terrorist. On the one hand, Silke (1998) states that “*most serious researchers agree at least nominally that terrorists are essentially normal individuals*” whereas others (Paulussen, Nijman, & Lismont, 2017; Speckhard, 2012) believe mental illness is a key factor in predisposing individuals to radicalisation.

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) and the T.M.C. Asser Instituut explored the link between “*Mental Health and the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon*” in a closed meeting of experts in April 2016 (Paulussen, Nijman, & Lismont,

2017). Its purpose was to enhance understanding, map existing research, and identify potential research gaps in this area. The healthcare professionals consulted were only able to provide estimates on prevalence (due to patient confidentiality), with an estimated 60% of suspected jihadists having a history of mental illness, significantly higher than the general population prevalence of 25% (Paulussen, Nijman, & Lismont, 2017). The range of mental health conditions observed in this group were diverse, ranging from antisocial or borderline personality disorders to behavioural, emotional or developmental disorders such as autism. Having previously experienced a process of radicalisation, it is unclear whether the increased risk of mental illness is linked to radicalisation, or whether the radicalisation process itself may have contributed to poorer mental health.

Another point raised by Paulussen, Nijman, and Lismont (2017) pertains to the disproportionate numbers of foreign fighters coming from homes with abusive or absentee fathers. One expert observed that immigrant fathers often find assimilating to new countries and cultures particularly difficult, thus leaving their sons to assume the role as head of the family. The young person's muddled identity was posited to fuel a need for escapism: a search for identity and belonging outside the home, commonly via the internet. Ostensibly, this would leave them particularly vulnerable to extremist groups and their online content (Paulussen, Nijman, & Lismont, 2017).

Notions of identity crises exacerbating impressionability are not new: young people going through major life transitions have often been cited as a high-risk demographic for radicalisation (Bhui, Everitt, & Jones, 2014). Adjusting to a new educational or residential environment, for example, can introduce new ways of thinking and challenge notions of collective identity. This aligns with principles of 'Social Identity Theory' (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which postulate that, in terms of emotional and psychological wellbeing, individual self-esteem is linked to the wider group we feel we belong to (ethnic, national or religious). An organisation that provides an environment to positively influence self-esteem would be attractive to young adults, promoting feelings of security and respect. Collective identities can

then form, regardless of the group's ideology, and very often in the face of previously-held non-extremist views (Moghaddam, 2005).

The immediate experiences of those vulnerable to radicalisation may also be a factor. Individuals living in conflict-zones are more likely to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), with many experiencing the loss of loved ones, leading to 'survivor's guilt'. Speckhard (2012) speculated that traumatic life-events may make individuals more likely to commit terrorist acts. The combination of grief, anxiety, guilt, a need for revenge, and a strong belief in an afterlife may help to explain the motivation to take extreme action (Christmann, 2012).

Yet McCauley and Moskaleiko (2017) make an important distinction between those who develop radical views and those who act upon them. This distinction is defined in terms of an "opinion pyramid" and an "action pyramid". The opinion pyramid consists of different levels of extremist ideas, increasing in severity, and the action pyramid includes levels ranging from passivity to political violence and terrorism. The justification for the two pyramids is "*the observation that 99 percent of those with radical ideas never act... Conversely, many join in radical action without radical ideas*" (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2017). The authors suggest that there is a danger of multiplying the threat of terrorism if extremist ideas and extremist actions are not treated as separate entities.

Silke (1998) conducted a review of the literature regarding the psychological profile of a terrorist, with particular interest in antisocial, anarchistic and paranoid personality disorders. There was a lack of high quality literature evidencing a pathology model for terrorists and, in contrast, the evidence which suggested that terrorists were essentially "normal" was more abundant and of higher quality. Although, in response to this, a trend in research has emerged that suggests terrorists may possess pathological personality traits but do not possess the diagnosable clinical disorders, which is difficult to validate as it cannot be tested.

In a German context, Rasch (1979) argued that when oppressive tactics are used by the state to eradicate terrorist organizations this works only to validate their ideology by polarizing many of them into a group that have a common enemy (e.g. the Government). Experiences of incarceration can reinforce feelings of State oppression especially those labelled as political prisoners, who often spend the majority of their sentence in isolation.

Thus, the existing literature base suggests there are innumerable factors that may predispose an individual to radical ideologies. What is important to note, however, is that no single factor, either psychological or circumstantial, determines whether the individual actually engages in a terrorist act. What is also clear, is that combinations of personality traits and environmental conditions may make certain individuals and groups considerably more vulnerable to extremist rhetoric. Kruglanski and Fishman (2009) effectively conceptualise this nature vs. nurture conundrum in their paper. In a succinct encapsulation they note

“each one of these factors alone is neither necessary nor sufficient for terrorism, but under certain circumstances, and in the right combination, they may help contribute to an individual’s support for (or involvement in) a terrorist organization”.

Extremism and Criminality

Both terrorist and criminal groups use violence to attain specific goals, yet motivations may differ. Terrorists are often motivated by ideological, religious or political advantage, whereas criminals are motivated purely by material gain (Hoffman, 2006). Terrorists often believe that their cause is justified, and wish to impact a larger audience and advertise their achievements; this is less of a priority for criminal groups. However, criminals, particularly young adults, are extremely vulnerable to radicalisation during their period of incarceration (Mulcahy, Merrington, & Bell, 2013). It has been suggested that the principal cause of radicalisation in prisons is overcrowding, increased mixing of extremists with non-extremist prison populations, reduced access to rehabilitation programmes, and reduced availability of

prison chaplains to provide religious advice and comfort. Prison can be a difficult adjustment period for young inmates, and many will seek religion (sometimes radical) for comfort.

An individual's vulnerability to radicalisation may not end following release from prison, as many are released and re-enter society without basic financial, emotional or family support. Individuals may seek support from religious groups, who exploit vulnerabilities to maintain power and connections. Additionally, former inmates may have adjusted to the regimented life of prison, and seek similar surroundings in the community, which these groups may be able to provide. Some evidence exists to support the idea that extremist groups take advantage of former inmates. For example, a database of former extremist group 'Haramain', was found to hold data on over 15,000 prisoners deemed vulnerable to the group's ideology (Gartenstein-Ross, 2006).

Socioeconomic Status

The evidence base for radicalisation is predominantly UK and US based, societies where Muslims remain a minority ethnic group. In these countries, Muslims may have more opportunities, in regards to employment and education, than those living in developing countries. Bhui, Warfa, and Jones (2014) explored vulnerability to violent radicalisation in a cross-sectional study of 608 British Muslim men and women, finding that 2.4% of participants displayed an element of sympathy towards violent protest and terrorist acts. Associated variables included being less than 20 years old, in full-time education rather than employment, born in the UK, speaking English at home, and having a high family income (more than £75,000). Surprisingly, anxiety and depression, adverse life events, and socio-political attitudes were found to have no relationship with sympathy in this study.

Concurring with these findings, a larger survey of 1,200 Muslims living in Western Europe found that families with higher socioeconomic status were more likely to practice fundamentalist Islam (Deckard and Jacobson (2015). In these households, gender roles were

more conservative, and they were likely to support universal application of Islamic law. However these values were most prevalent amongst those unemployed, who held fundamentalist views and supported violence, irrespective of family wealth. The findings also resonate with the highly publicised recruitment of three promising, high-achieving British Muslim schoolgirls in 2015 by Islamic State, contradicting many theories of extremism (Davis, 2016). Hence, the view that there is a “*strong correlation between the absence of material well-being and the prospects for violence*” (Atwood, 2003), does not always stand up to scrutiny. Instead, these individuals may be seeking a shared religious (or other) identity felt lacking in the United Kingdom.

In Muslim-majority countries, the motivations to join terrorist organisations may differ from those in the West. In Afghanistan, unemployment has been evidenced to be a particularly strong predictor of radicalisation. Ladbury (2009) cited that the key impetus for young men joining the Taliban was “*to earn an income and increase their status*”, the key predictor being lack of opportunity rather than educational attainment. Similarly Hassan (2001) studied the backgrounds of Palestinian suicide bombers and found that most were well-educated, albeit with limited opportunities. Krueger and Maleckova (2003) analysed the backgrounds of extremists from a wider range of countries, including those in Europe and Turkey. From an international dataset they observed that impoverished and less-educated individuals were actually less likely to participate in organisations such as Hezbollah’s militant wing and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Evidently, poverty and lack of education are not necessarily predictors of radicalisation.

Contrasting the findings of UK-based studies, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) have repeatedly expressed importance of socio-economic status as a predisposing factor to radicalisation. The BIRN is a network of local non-governmental organisations promoting freedom of speech and democratic values, utilising practical and vocational methodology to produce objective data directly from the Balkans. With high levels of youth unemployment (40-45%), radical groups have been found to take advantage of

economic adversity and profound failings of successive Governments, by providing public services for the citizens (including supporting hospitals and schools). Notably Hide (2015) found that the majority of Albanian citizens involved in terrorist acts lived in rural, underdeveloped and isolated areas with the highest concentration of Muslim-faith communities. There is also evidence to suggest that radical Imams have provided a form of 'life coaching', aiding in the dissemination of extreme Salafist and Takfirist ideologies (Petrović, 2016). This has contributed to the belief, by some disadvantaged populations in the Balkans, that these Islamic organisations are more credible, and worthy of support, than their own government institutions.

The Risk of Radicalisation 'Hotspots' in the Balkan States

The Balkan States were once an epicentre of religious and ethnic conflict yet, remarkably, it is an area largely neglected in research on contemporary terrorism. Some have theorised that remnants of the Yugoslav wars have directly propagated the rise of radicalisation in these 'failed states', and have provided a fertile ground for extremist groups. As Bardos (2014) notes, the militant Islamist movement in south eastern Europe has quietly but efficiently created a robust infrastructure to support their agenda, from local safe havens in rural villages to mosques governed by radical clergy. As a result, Balkan Islamists have a wide array of resources at their disposal, with electronic and print media from jihad fronts efficiently relaying propaganda and orders from radical leaders, converting impressionable young people to join their cause. Affluent Middle Eastern donors are known to provide the vital funding for these resources, who are in turn supported by local extremists who infiltrate influential political, religious, and social institutions (Bardos, 2014).

Chaminski and Taneski (2015) proposed that the growth of militant Islam in the Balkan region was related to two significant events. The first was the formation of a conspiracy group named "Young Muslims", an organisation advocating the creation of a great Muslim state in the Balkans, Middle East and North African territories. The second was

related to the conflict that had occurred in this region throughout the 1990s, specifically in regards to the violent termination of the former Yugoslavia. Mujahedeen forces had an instrumental role in this conflict, yet in the aftermath, many fighters retained citizenship and continued to hold considerable influence over the local populations. In this environment, anti-Western narratives espoused by mujahedeen leaders encouraged a process of re-islamisation, gaining momentum as increasing numbers of the younger generation adopted radical perspectives. Yet the core piece of propaganda remained the notion of building a Muslim-dominated nation that would continue to promote religious intolerance and encourage terrorist activities.

Accountability for the Mujahedeen's successful infiltration of the Balkans remains a source of debate. Analysts in Serbia and the United States argue that leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina have a share of the responsibility, namely Alija Izetbegović (Schindler, 2009) the controversial first president of a newly-independent Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Deliso (2007) stated that the principal goal of Izetbegović was the formation of an Islamic State in Europe and that this vision was then supported by the Crown Prince of Dubai with a sum of one million dirham (\$272,480). Only two months prior to this, the terrorist attacks in the United States uncovered the role of Izetbegović in allowing Al-Qaeda to grow in Europe, through Bosnian Jihadists. Conversely, the Bosnian state have unofficially asserted that Croats let the "Warriors of Islam" into their country (Lucic, 2001). Others posit that Zagreb, the largest city in Croatia, was the main channel of transfer and financial support for members of the Mujahedeen as this was led by the Islamic Cultural Institute in Milan (Gibas-Krzak, 2013).

Öktem (2011) makes the important observation that 'Balkan Muslims' are far from a homogenous population. The author conducted a series of interviews and fieldwork visits to Albania, Greece, Bosnia, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey to provide an overview of Muslim communities in Southeast Europe. Stark differences were found in terms of ethno-linguistics and community organisations, and it was determined that defining universal characteristics of

“Muslims in the Balkans” was near impossible. Being Muslim is one of many coexisting identities, including national, ethno-linguistic, class or gender, and each Islamic community in this region face different challenges related to institutional and societal frameworks. In the various Balkan states Muslim communities can be majorities (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina) or minorities, and the preferred or non-traditional religion (as is the case in with the elevation of the Orthodox Church in Macedonia). Therefore, ideas of a so-called ‘common Muslimness’ do not appear to carry much weight, and counter- radicalisation strategies can never be a case of one-size-fits-all.

The development of radicalisation ‘hot-spots’ does not always follow an obvious pathway. Following the 1997 civilian uprising in communist Albanian, and subsequent fall of communism, there was vast looting of military depots, resulting in an exponential increase in accidents from landmines and munitions. Over 15 years later the needs of the victims of these accidents, and their families, were investigated by Kola (2014) in a survey of 726 survivors. It was found that these victims lived in poor, remote areas and over half (57%) did not have access to education. Many participants were physically impaired, having lost limbs, sight, and hearing, resulting in 70% of participants losing the ability to work, study, or engage in social activities. Thirty-seven percent of those studied did not have access to rehabilitation, social or education services to help adjustment to their disability and, for many, their only social contact was through visits from immediate family. It is a concern that should this population feel let down by their state and unable to provide for themselves, they may seek support from radical organisations. By posing as religious or community groups (Petrović, 2016), extremist groups are provided with the perfect environment for recruitment.

The foreign fighter phenomenon in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is explored in a report by Azinović and Jusić (2015). As a Muslim-majority country, the incentives for BiH citizens to join in conflict in their own, and other, countries are complex. The authors highlighted several subconscious and socioeconomic factors, such as BiH’s decaying post-conflict communities and culture, where youth unemployment (63%) remains the highest in

the world. As a result, the violence and retrograde ideologies espoused by extremists can become perceived as the panacea for protection and self-affirmation. Furthermore, young people are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation in an age of accessible social media, where similar worldviews can be easily exchanged and reinforced online. Yet the authors also made the observation that different generations of volunteers become active fighters for different reasons. For example the older group (men in their mid-to-late 40s) were often original members of the El-Mujahid Unit from the Bosnian War (1992-95), and considered their work for the jihad truncated by the Dayton Peace Accord. Alternatively, men in their late-teens to early-twenties were more likely driven by intrinsic instincts: adrenaline, a search for self-acceptance, and a desire for validation.

Designing Measures to Counter Radicalisation in the Balkan States

While Muslims in south-eastern Europe remain the most moderate Muslim population in the world, an estimated five to ten percent of this group are believed to have been indoctrinated by a more radical ‘imported’ Islam from Saudi Arabia (Bardos, 2014). The high numbers of foreign fighters appear to corroborate this assertion: in Kosovo over 300 fighters have travelled to Iraq and Syria, a further 330 from BiH, 110 from Albania, 100 from Macedonia, 50 from Serbia, and 13 from Montenegro (Petrović, 2016). As noted by the author, this ranks Kosovo and BiH as the top two European countries of origin for those leaving to join terrorist groups, with Albania ranked fourth. Notably Hide (2015) found that the majority of Albanian citizens involved in terrorist acts lived in rural, underdeveloped and isolated areas with the highest concentration of Muslim-faith communities.

In these countries, radical groups have been found to take advantage of economic adversity and profound failings of successive Governments, by providing public services for the citizens (including supporting hospitals and schools). There is also evidence to suggest that radical Imams have provided a form of ‘life coaching’, aiding in the dissemination of extreme Salafist and Takfirist ideologies (Petrović, 2016). This has contributed to the belief,

by some disadvantaged populations in the Balkans, that these Islamic organisations are more credible, and worthy of support, than their own government institutions.

In response to the 2014 adoption of UN Resolution 2178, and due to EU and NATO accession aspirations, all Balkan states passed legislation making it unlawful to participate in, or organise travel to, foreign warzones. This response had some notable success in that, according to BIRN data, more than 100 suspects were prosecuted on the grounds of suspicion of terrorism, or for sending fighters to Syria and Iraq (Petrović, 2016). Yet preventative strategies do not extend beyond the threat of criminal proceedings. As noted, those vulnerable to radicalisation are less likely to be swayed by the threat of possible conviction if, fundamentally, they feel justified in their extremist views.

Unfortunately, other strategies of reduction in the Balkan states have been slow to materialise. State community policing policies are still in their infancy, years after first being introduced, and likely attributed to slow changes in cultural attitudes. There also remains a paucity of literature on the exact scale of radicalisation, contributing factors, and the potential consequences in these regions. Compounding these shortcomings is a lack of collaborative work, and unified approaches between institutions such as central and local government, security services, educational establishments, health services, local authorities and sports centres. Co-operation between these organisations would assist in the early detection of radicalisation, and provide assistance to those in the process of being radicalised. Thus, much work is required to ensure a consistent approach to both de-radicalising those who have been affected and reducing the numbers of potential radicalisation hotspots.

Research for the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) (Vurmo et al, 2015) investigated religious radicalisation occurring in Albania, a developing Balkan state with a majority-Muslim population. Vurmo, Lamallari, Papa, and Dhembo (2015) found that Albanian radicalisation is still in its early stages, and suggested that the phenomenon was being propagated by discourse, or rather, a lack of it. Expert consultants observed the state's

hesitancy to directly confront forms of extremism (such as the operation of illegal mosques, or addressing the increasing numbers of foreign fighters), which has helped further the agenda of radical extremists. The IDM recommended improved communication with the local clerics who disseminate religious teachings, and encouraging the Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) to monitor those who exert influence within the communities. Finally, Vurmo, Lamallari, Papa, and Dhembo (2015) highlighted the inactivity of governmental and religious actors. Safeguarding vulnerable individuals against extremism is a responsibility of state authorities and the community at large, and necessitates pro-active approaches on both parts. Some specific suggestions included additional efforts to alleviate poverty, more public discourse pertaining to human rights, and integration programmes for young people.

Thus, it can be argued that Balkan counter-terrorism strategies must have a broad perspective (Marmo & Chazal, 2016). The incorporation of ‘development considerations’ has been cited as a crucial element in the implementation of national security measures. In developing countries this has involved social-inclusion programmes, and the use of aid agencies or non-profit organisations to engage with questions of poverty, political instability and health (Duffield, 2007). This approach has been taken to a certain extent in Albania, a country that has taken significant steps to improve its democratic political process, health, social welfare, and criminal justice system. However, much remains to be done, and a recent report on the radicalisation of youth in Albania made it clear that a wider, multi-agency approach was needed in order to tackle this growing phenomenon (Vurmo, Lamallari, Papa, & Dhembo, 2015). Clearly, in countries like Albania, vulnerable groups live in an environment that works to the advantage of extremist groups. Whilst recognising that some steps have been taken to address this, other developing countries are equally likely to have similar vulnerable populations, without the equivalent recognition or government action.

International Efforts to Reduce Radicalism in the Balkan States

In recognition of the work required, in May 2015, a regional summit to counter violent extremism (CVE) brought together ministers from the Western Balkans, and senior officials from partner countries and organizations, including the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Regional Cooperation Centre (RCC), and the UN (Balkans Regional Summit, 2015). Key recommendations of this summit included; building strong communities to tackle the spread of violent extremism, and providing educational and economic opportunities for those living in rural and isolated areas. There was recognition that states should refrain from counter-productive actions that could increase ethnic tensions or marginalise minority groups. Human rights were deemed crucial in protecting vulnerable groups, and there was acknowledgment that discourse on extremism should not be restricted to the male population, as women could also be influenced and play pivotal roles in countering extremism. Regional and international cooperation was reinforced as a vital aspect in preventing radicalisation, including involvement from OSCE, RCC and the UN.

Potential Counter Radicalisation Measures

A number of different solutions have been offered with regards to potential counter-radicalisation measures. For example, Roy (2008) suggests promoting Islam as a Western religion and recognising Muslims as equal citizens, thereby discouraging the marginalisation of Muslims into minority status. This could isolate and contradict the message of extremists and reduce their political leverage. Links could also be made between Islamic teaching associations and universities to improve education and representation. By enlisting Muslim professionals into mainstream political parties for example, visibility could encourage much-needed discourse across religious boundaries and evidence the viability of multiculturalism. Clearly, however, this argument loses strength when considered in the context of Muslim-majority countries.

The process of radicalisation is different for each individual, which, when it comes to developing strategies to prevent radicalisation, presents a challenge. (Precht, 2007). Integration has been highlighted as an important counter-terrorism strategy; it has been argued that treating Muslims differently compared to other religious groups will reinforce feelings of disengagement from society. Teaching in schools is also important in challenging radical views. By educating all students about Islam and other religions, these children will possess the knowledge to sensitively navigate a multi-religious society. Yet in a systematic review of the evidence for radicalisation prevention programmes, Christmann (2012) observed that the evidence base was very limited. The author noted how literature is currently skewed in favour of cohorts who have committed acts of terrorism as opposed to those who have been or are becoming radicalised. However, some consistent risk factors did emerge, with extreme political objections to Western foreign policy recurring in radicals from a range of socioeconomic, educational and family backgrounds.

Healthcare Workers and Reducing Radicalisation

The UK Government have previously suggested that General Practitioners (GPs) are integral in the “fight against terror” (Bhui, Warfa, & Jones, 2014), yet many health professionals have expressed discomfort over this assertion (Wright & Hankins, 2016). There is concern over whether these new protocols would compromise the confidentiality of patients, and further stigmatise an already marginalised group. This study also highlighted the apprehensions of GPs who feel they are being asked to act as an extra layer of ‘security’, a position that makes them understandably uncomfortable. Instead, Wright and Hankins (2016) suggest that GPs, and other healthcare professionals, should work closely with social services to support vulnerable adults who are experiencing significant life changes. They also recommended liaising with mental health services for patients seeking asylum from war zones, in an effort to address post-conflict traumatic conditions. By supporting vulnerable adults, health professionals would occupy a preventative, rather than security, role. Education is also important for healthcare professionals as many feel reluctant to approach the subject of

religion or extremist views due to a lack of understanding and an unwillingness to create a divide between the patient and clinician due to differing ideologies (Paulussen, Nijman, & Lismont, 2017).

Overall, healthcare professionals may have a vital role in identifying health, religious and socioeconomic risk factors for radicalisation. Perhaps more importantly, they are uniquely positioned to be part of a wider network of professionals, engaged in strengthening community support, particularly in developing regions. Thereby, they have the potential to create positive environments that can curtail the risk of radicalisation.

Community Approaches to Reducing Radicalisation – The Case of Germany

The German security authorities, on both a state and federal level, collected and analysed information on 677 individuals who left Germany to travel to Iraq and Syria before June 2015. Heinke (2016) highlighted the factors involved in the radicalisation process and the counter-radicalisation strategies used in Germany at this time. Overall the analysis showed that 79% of the individuals were male and 21% were female. An increasing number of females left the country following the proclamation of the Caliphate by the Islamic State, increasing from 15% before the proclamation to 38% following this. This is a new phenomenon not previously observed and should not be ignored when designing counter-radicalisation strategies.

The children of those departing to join IS were not included in the analysis but are an important demographic to consider. Heinke (2016) took notice of the disproportionately high number of young people among recruits. Concurring with ideas put forward by Crenshaw (1981), young people are more likely to grow disillusioned with the prospects of changing and fitting into society if they see little chance of access to hegemonic systems. In response, Heinke (2016) advocated tailoring the counter-terrorism strategies directly towards children and young people. The combined involvement of schools, social services, healthcare services

and communities in challenging these ideologies was posited to be a particularly comprehensive, long-term approach.

In these cases radicalisation was found to be a relatively quick process with 48% of individuals departing Germany within one year and 23% departing after six months. Individual radicalisation was also an important issue, as it is generally believed that close family/friends or acquaintances would notice a change in this individual. A substantial 22% left the country before their radicalisation was acknowledged by others (Heinke, 2016), and within this group, only 56% demonstrated their new beliefs with specific clothing or aspects of their appearance. Heinke (2016) argued that social media's involvement in radicalisation has been over-emphasised in literature and that direct, physical contact with like-minded individuals remains the single most important factor. Prohibiting and closing down extremist hubs (e.g. mosques and community centres) is a largely unexplored method, as many of these meetings are protected by Western 'freedom of speech' laws, and would likely be counter-productive to reducing the Muslim community's feeling of persecution. However, in the future, policy makers, security services, and religious leaders may have to sensitively investigate this option, given the role of face-to-face interactions in the radicalisation process.

Tasked with this growing problem, German authorities proposed three approaches. Firstly, professional criminal investigations would target those preparing to travel to Iraq or Syria, recruitment efforts and attempts to support the Islamic State. The use of administrative law formed the second approach, through withdrawing passports/identification documents and prohibiting these individuals from leaving the country. This has been found to be effective in reducing the numbers of militant Islamists departing to the Middle East (Heinke, 2016). The third option focuses on prevention, particularly providing information to prevent radicalisation and using social work to target those who are currently under the influence of militant Islamic organisations. Re-education is central to this approach, placing Islam in a Western context with the hope of reducing the influence of militant jihadist groups. Overall

Heinke (2016) highlighted evidence strongly opposing the idea of a definitive ‘terrorist’ profile, purporting that deradicalisation strategies must incorporate all sectors of society.

Limitations

The current article has summarised available literature on the predisposing factors involved in radicalisation, as well as potential counter-radicalisation strategies. However, this paper has several limitations. First, the literature was identified using comprehensive search strategies, but did not undergo a formal systematic review process, which leaves open the possibility of relevant articles not being identified. Second, even with a comprehensive search, there appears to be a paucity of literature eligible for review. There remains a lack of research with a specific focus on radicalisation in the Balkan region, as well as a lack of appropriate strategies and policies to evaluate from Balkan governments. This is despite strong evidence to support the assertion that increasing numbers in the Balkans are being indoctrinated by extremist organisations. Furthermore, as noted throughout the article, the vast majority of literature that does exist is UK and US-based, and in this regard, this article’s perspicacity is limited by Western ethnocentricity.

Conclusion

There are some fundamental issues when considering the impact of the radicalisation of young adults, particularly in the Balkan states. First, there is an apparent lack of research regarding the radicalisation of Muslims in Muslim majority countries. The focus of the literature is radicalisation in Western societies where Muslims are a minority group, which may be due to a variety of factors such as the availability of research funds and recruitment issues. Second, past approaches focusing on the pursuit of terrorists alone is now recognised as ineffective, with a recognised need for prevention strategies. Third, approaches taken to

improve counter-terrorism measures, and reduce radicalisation, strongly suggest a wider multi-agency approach.

The findings of this review suggest that approaches to deradicalisation should consider the importance of building communities through improved links between state-security, health, education and social care. We suggest that a broader utilisation of healthcare, whilst rarely mentioned, is a consideration in strategies developed to counter radicalisation, particularly in developing countries where healthcare is inconsistent and under-resourced. It is likely that this additional facet, along with a government sponsored, community-wide approach, will pay dividends in reducing radicalisation and encourage the building of closer communities.

However, we also acknowledge that these recommendations take a more optimistic stance on the ostensive effectiveness of state-run strategies in the Balkan region. Where the legitimacy and ownership of the state is so recently and vehemently contested, as is the case in post-Dayton Bosnia, it can be expected that overcoming mutual distrust between state government and local populations will be no simple task.

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