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Author(s):

Vidino, Lorenzo

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EUROPEAN STRATEGIES AGAINST JIHADIST RADICALISATION

Over the last few years, several European countries have sought to tackle the threat of home-grown jihadist-inspired terrorism not just with traditional counterterrorism tools, but also with various kinds of counter-radicalisation initiatives. Though they have achieved some good results, these efforts have often been highly controversial. European authorities have been confronted with several problems related to these programs, from defining their focus to assessing their effectiveness. Some tangible results have been achieved with targeted interventions.



Reuters / Dylan Martinez

The phenomenon of “homegrown terrorism” requires new countermeasures: Bombings in London, 7 July 2005.

Since 11 September 2001, the consistent assessment of authorities in most European countries has been that, while various forms of political violence motivated by other ideologies are still present throughout the continent, so-called jihadist terrorism represents the biggest security threat. Even though it has been more than seven years since the last large successful attack (the London bombings in 2005), dozens of plots have been thwarted in several countries over the last few years. In some cases, such as in Frankfurt in 2011 and Toulouse in 2012, small-scale attacks have been successfully carried out by individuals of jihadist persuasion acting independently.

The nature of this threat has changed significantly since the 1990s, when first-generation immigrants and asylum-seekers established Europe’s first jihadist net-

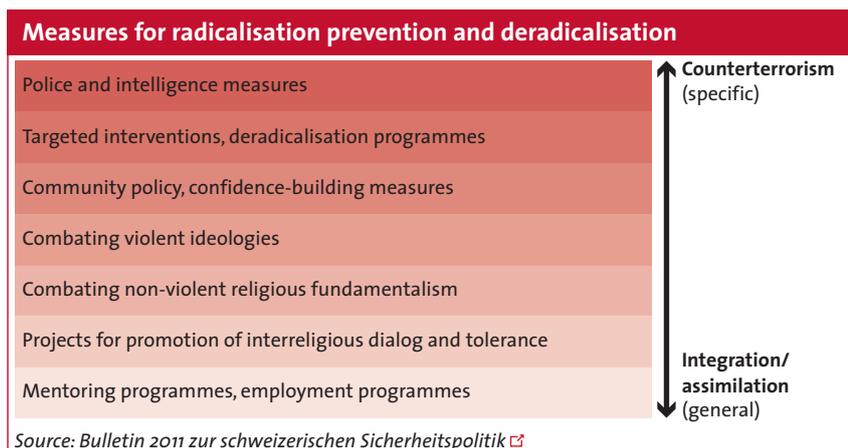
works. Today, in fact, most militants are so-called “homegrown” second- or third-generation European Muslims as well as a growing number of converts permanently residing in Europe. Irrespective of whether at any point they establish an operational connection to one of al-Qaida’s many affiliates throughout the world, in most cases, the radicalisation process of today’s European jihadists began independently in Europe.

Most European countries have confronted this threat by improving traditional counterterrorism measures and increased international cooperation. Over the last few years, however, authorities throughout Europe have added an innovative arrow to their counterterrorism quiver by introducing a wide array of counter-radicalisation initiatives seeking to prevent young Eu-

ropean Muslims from radicalising and, in some limited cases, to de-radicalise committed militants or persuade them to disengage. While they have occasionally achieved demonstrably good results, most of these initiatives are highly controversial and have triggered intense debates. Should they target just violent radicalisation or, more broadly, all forms of extremism? With whom should authorities partner in order to implement them? Finally, can their effectiveness be measured?

A wide array of initiatives

The pioneer in the field has been the UK, which launched the first incarnation of its Prevent strategy in 2003. In the following years, several other countries followed suit, in some measure thanks to the prodding of the EU, which in 2005 launched its own counter-radicalisation strategy and has since encouraged member states to adopt their own measures. As of today only the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway have issued a comprehensive national counter-radicalisation strategy detailing goals, methods, a budget, and responsibilities. Nevertheless, virtually all Western European countries have adopted at least some counter-radicalisation initiatives, often only at the local level. There are significant variations between European counter-radicalisation programs in terms of aims, structure, budget, and underlying philosophy. Moreover, none of these initiatives can be separated from the political, cultural, and legal context in which they were conceived. Nevertheless, there are some experiences and lessons learned that are common to all countries.



phase by assembling a package of measures aimed at swaying the individual away from militancy and “anchoring” him or her in mainstream society. One of the most common methods of intervention is the designation of a mentor. The mentor could be an older relative, a charismatic figure, a theologian, or a former radical. The goal is for the mentor to establish a connection with the target of the intervention, shake his beliefs in radical views and eventually make him change path.

It should be noted that there are important variations between the targeted interventions implemented throughout Europe. One significant difference concerns the role of law enforcement agencies. In the UK, Channel, the country’s targeted intervention scheme, is largely police-led. In the Netherlands and in Denmark, on the other hand, where several cities conduct targeted interventions, law enforcement agencies are only marginally involved in the process. In Amsterdam and Copenhagen, for example, the entity making the assessment and planning the intervention is a unit within the city administration. It is composed of municipal workers and experts from a variety of backgrounds and has no police component. Reinforcing the “soft” image of these initiatives, which are engineered to help individuals and not to punish them, information about the cases that the municipalities are handling is reportedly not shared with law enforcement and intelligence agencies unless it directly relates to the commission of a crime.

These kinds of interventions were introduced only a few years ago, and it is therefore difficult to assess their effectiveness. Most European authorities have nonetheless expressed satisfaction at the results achieved and are expanding this form of counter-radicalisation work. In the UK, for example, reportedly none of the 1,500 individuals who have participated in Channel have been arrested for terrorism-related offences.

Challenges and dilemmas

Programs against jihadist radicalisation represent a novelty and authorities throughout Europe have understandably experienced significant difficulties in trying to define some key aspects of their efforts. What causes radicalisation and, consequently, what approaches should be used to tackle it? Should authorities limit their efforts to violent radicalisation or broaden them to include non-violent extremism as

Counter-radicalisation programs in Europe can be broadly divided into two sub-categories: general preventive initiatives and targeted interventions. The former are initiatives aimed at making the target group (which consists de facto of Muslim youth) less vulnerable or, in counter-radicalisation parlance, more “resilient” to radical ideas. Preventive initiatives vary significantly in characteristics and underlying philosophy. Some have a strong religious component. An example of this is the Radical Middle Way, a British government-sponsored project that brings traditionalist Muslim scholars to speak to young British Muslim audiences and denounce terrorism from a theological perspective. Other projects focus on integration, seeking to provide employment and education for young Muslims.

Many initiatives seek to foster critical thinking and the ability to deal constructively with opposing views. The Amsterdam district of Slotervaart, for example, has organised courses under the telling titles “Deal with disappointment” and “Learning to deal with criticism of one’s own faith”. In Denmark, Foreign Ministry officials regularly visit high schools and youth centres to engage young Muslims on the issue of Danish foreign policy, explaining the country’s positions in order to dispel myths and misconceptions surrounding them.

Establishing trust-based relations between authorities and Muslim communities is a central part of many counter-radicalisation strategies. In order to achieve that goal, British authorities have devised an initiative called Operation Nicole, which has been implemented in dozens of cities throughout the country. The program brings together local police officers and members of the Muslim community, who spend a weekend together getting to know each other in an informal setting, shar-

ing meals and playing football. The two groups also participate in a role-playing exercise in which each side experiences the other side’s perspective during a simulated terrorism emergency. The initiative has yielded some good results, even transcending its radicalisation prevention aim. In 2008, for example, leaders of a Somali mosque in Bristol reported to the local police the presence among their congregation of a radical convert only days after participating in one of Operation Nicole’s events, admitting they had not done so earlier because they distrusted the police. The man was later convicted of planning to blow up a local shopping centre.

The second sub-category of programs implemented throughout Europe is individualised interventions. These initiatives seek to identify and “recuperate” individuals who are undergoing a process of radicalisation through a variety of tailored measures. The process starts with detection. In the cities where these initiatives have been implemented, a wide range of stakeholders, ranging from local police officers to social workers and from school teachers to community leaders, have received more or less extensive training on radicalisation, explaining its manifestations and why it is dangerous. These individuals are supposed to act as the “eyes and ears” of those in charge of interventions, detecting potential cases of radicalisation among the individuals with whom they are in contact through their professional lives and referring them to the authorities.

The stakeholders’ referral triggers the second phase of the intervention: assessment. Authorities acquire all possible information about the individual suspected of being on the path to radicalism and determine whether the case warrants an intervention. If they believe it does, they start the third

well? How are partners for counter-radicalisation initiatives to be chosen within civil society and local Muslim communities? How are the results of counter-radicalisation initiatives to be gauged?

One core aspect that has divided authorities within virtually every European country is the determination of the exact aims of their efforts. Some argue that the only target of counter-radicalisation initiatives should be radicalisation directly leading to the commission of acts of violence. Others argue that the goal should be broader and include also forms of extremism that are not directly and immediately accompanied by violent actions. Those who support the latter approach argue that the leap from non-violent to violent extremism is short and fast, and that therefore, if the aim of counter-radicalisation is indeed preventive, the state should intervene as early as possible, before that leap takes place. Moreover, supporters of broadening the scope of counter-radicalisation initiatives argue that radical ideas, irrespective of whether they are accompanied by violent means or not, are dangerous for the social cohesion of Europe's diverse societies and the integration of their Muslim communities.

Authorities throughout Europe have been struggling to find a balance between the two positions. The British authorities, which had originally focused exclusively on violent radicalisation, have lately broadened their focus, arguing that non-violent extremism is a logical antecedent to its violent manifestation and should therefore be contrasted as well. Dutch authorities, on the other hand, had originally aimed at countering all forms of radicalisation. Yet, over time, based on evidence disproving previously assumed links between lack of integration, extremism, and violence and hampered by budget cuts, authorities throughout the Netherlands have somewhat narrowed their focus to violent radicalisation.

Another issue that divides policy-makers, practitioners, and academics is the identification of the causes of radicalisation. Inevitably basing their hypotheses on limited and often subjective evidence, experts have found it difficult to identify the reasons that drive people to embrace extremist ideas. Most experts would tend to agree that radicalisation is a very complex process often caused by the concurrence of a variety of factors and that those factors change from case to case. By the same

token, as there is no grand theory of radicalisation and no common terrorist profile, there is no single explanation for why people de-radicalise or disengage from a militant group. Authorities have therefore understood that they have to use a wide array of approaches in their counter-radicalisation efforts. Initiatives should be tailored to the specific groups or individuals they seek to target, supported by extensive research and continuously assessed. It is widely understood that a high degree of flexibility is of paramount importance.

European authorities have also been struggling to find viable partners for their counter-radicalisation efforts within their Muslim communities. Most European Muslim communities are highly fragmented along ethnic, national, linguistic, sectarian, socio-economic and political lines and are therefore unable to express a unified leadership. Which of the dozens, if not hundreds, of Muslim organisations should authorities partner with to implement their counter-radicalisation programs? Assessing which organisations meet both the ideological and organisational requirements for becoming effective partners is a particularly challenging task.

A thorny sub-problem is that of non-violent extremists. Throughout Europe, several networks are operating that are organisationally or ideologically linked to Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islami, or the many incarnations of the Salafi movement – all of which publicly reject the use of violence in the West. Experts have long debated the role of these milieus on violent radicalisation, wondering whether they are part of the problem or of the solution. Some argue that these groups are “conveyor belts” spreading a narrative upon which openly jihadist groups build, and that governments should therefore not partner with and legitimise them. Others claim that, although their ideas might be controversial and at times repugnant, these groups can be useful allies. Governments, some argue, should be pragmatic and cooperate with them, as their legitimacy and “street credibility” among some of the most radical fringes of Muslim communities should be harnessed by governments seeking to prevent violence. Most European governments have long vacillated between the two positions.

Finally, authorities throughout Europe have experienced significant problems in the crucial task of assessing the effectiveness of their counter-radicalisation efforts. Empirically assessing the success of preventive measures is virtually impossible, as that would entail proving that the reason why certain people did not become radicalised was because of the government's counter-radicalisation efforts and not for other reasons. However, particularly in time of budget cuts, it is crucial to be able to gauge effectiveness.

Emphasis on targeted intervention

Counter-radicalisation programmes have attracted strong criticism from various quarters. Some claim they are ineffective and a waste of money. Many worry they infringe on civil liberties by criminalising thoughts. Others argue that they stigmatise the Muslim population, therefore potentially resulting in the opposite of what they were intended to achieve. It is also often argued that most programmes cover only jihadism, but ignore other forms of extremism, such as right-wing and left-wing radicalism.

Despite all the difficulties and controversies that such programmes face, most counter-terrorism practitioners believe that at least some forms of counter-radicalisation are important components of a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. A consensus, often balancing the two most extreme positions, seems to have

One common trend is a preference for targeted interventions over general preventive measures.

formed on many of the controversial issues that have puzzled European authorities when they first introduced counter-radicalisation initiatives.

Authorities have also often learned from their mistakes and gained valuable experience, allowing them to craft and execute their initiatives better.

One common trend is a preference for targeted interventions over general preventive measures. Authorities increasingly believe that the latter are expensive, controversially blur the lines between counter-radicalisation and integration work, and do not provide immediate tangible results. Targeted interventions, on the other hand, are deemed more cost-effective and empirically verifiable tools and are likely to be further developed in the countries that have already pioneered them and to be introduced in others.

The situation in Switzerland

Switzerland has not experienced the levels of jihadist radicalisation seen in many other European countries. No concrete plans for an attack have ever been discovered within the country, and the number of counter-terrorism operations has been comparatively limited. Nevertheless, over the last few years, authorities have been consistently saying that Switzerland, in the words of the director of the Federal Office of Police (Fedpol), “is not an island” and that dynamics that are evident in other countries do take place here as well, albeit on a smaller scale.

Tellingly, in its 2011 annual report Fedpol stated that jihadists use “Switzerland as a base for providing foreign jihad groups with logistical support and for spreading propaganda”. In 2012, the Federal Intelligence Service stated that it was “aware of several persons formerly resident in Switzerland who are currently in a jihad area”. Others have travelled to such areas in the past, and some, like former Biel resident Abu Sa’ad al-Tunisi, were killed while fighting abroad. Authorities fear that some of the individuals might come back to Switzerland and use their skills to carry out attacks. There are also indications of a small, yet lively Swiss-based Salafist scene, which is visible both online and in a handful of mosques throughout the country. Furthermore, as in most European countries, the majority of jihadist sympathisers in Switzerland are now homegrown, whether Swiss-born children of immigrants or converts.

Switzerland does not have a counter-radicalisation strategy, nor has it adopted individual measures directly targeting radicalisation. The subject is nonetheless debated within policy and security circles. It is arguable that, even though the size of the problem in the country is limited, Swiss authorities could benefit from learning from the experiences of other countries and could eventually introduce some measures, duly adapted to the Swiss context, within their territory.

I Author: Lorenzo Vidino
lorenzo.vidino@sipo.gess.ethz.ch

I Responsible editor: Daniel Trachsler
analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch

I German and French versions / other
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