Youth Specific Factors in Radicalization

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Abstract: Due to both biological aspects and psychosocial factors within the process of maturation, young people (juveniles and adolescents) are especially vulnerable to radicalization efforts of so-called jihadist ideologues. Counter radicalization endeavors therefore should address the specific developmental situation of youth, using a multipronged approach that combines education, social integration, and individual appreciation with counterideology programs.

Keywords: Islamism, radicalization, juveniles, youth specific factors

Introduction

The number of individuals from Western, especially Western European countries, who decide to join extremist factions claiming an affiliation with Islam in the civil war in Syria and Northern Iraq – most notoriously the terrorist organization that calls itself the ‘Islamic State’ (ISIL/DAESH) – has been steadily increasing over the last two years. Similarly, terrorism by extremists claiming an affiliation with Islam in Western countries has gained momentum in the same period of time, with the mass murders in Paris (January and November 2015), Copenhagen (February 2015) and Brussels (March 2016) being only the most prominent examples in the last eighteen months. The
imminent threat for Western societies resulting from the radicalization of individuals towards a so-called jihadist ideology has become painfully obvious.

It is nevertheless still difficult to identify a ‘target group’ for such a radicalization. Various studies examining and analyzing violent extremists in Western countries (with a focus on shared analysis of investigations of executed or prevented terrorist attacks) have been published in the past years.\(^5\) In a more recent approach, German security authorities collected and analyzed data on 677 of the current estimated total of more than 800\(^6\) cases of individuals that traveled from Germany to Syria out of an assumed extremist motivation, and produced a study summarizing their analysis.\(^7\) However, while the demographic data in this study is useful and interesting, the diversity across the categories confirms the findings already established in the previous studies analyzing homegrown terrorists claiming an affiliation with Islam in the Western world: though highly desirable to prevent future threats, the existing intelligence does not support a reliable socio-demographic profile of so-called jihadists.\(^8\) Race, country of origin, gender, age, relationship status, educational background or prior criminal involvement are of such a diversity that no universally accepted common denominator could be deduced. It is noteworthy that a disproportionately high number of extremists claiming an affiliation with Islam (ECAI) in Western countries are converts to Islam, but obviously this neither insinuates a general tendency towards radicalization among converts nor does it deny the fact that the majority of extremists were born into the Muslim faith (though not necessarily practicing their faith regularly).\(^9\)

That said, it has to be highlighted that juveniles and young adults represent a disproportionately high share by far within both groups. The data collected on the persons who have left Germany for Syria out of extremist motivation supports this perception (reference date: 30 June 2015; total: 677; gender quota: 79 % male, 21 % female\(^10\)): The age range is 15 to 62 years, with an arithmetic mean of 25.9 years. The largest group (188 individuals) belongs to the age bracket 22-25 years, while 139 were aged 18-21 years and 124 were aged 26-29 years. There are significant differences between the groups that departed before and after the proclamation of the Caliphate in June 2014 (coined ‘early departees’ and ‘late departees’, respectively): the mean age of the late departees is three years younger than the early departees (23.7 vs. 26.6 years); and the percentage of minors (i.e. individuals

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\(^6\) As of April 2016.

\(^7\) “Analyse der Radikalisierungshintergründe und -verläufe der Personen, die aus islamistischer Motivation aus Deutschland in Richtung Syrien oder Irak ausgereist sind, Fortschreibung 2015” (Analysis on background and radicalization processes of those persons who have left Germany to Syria or Iraq out of Islamic motivation, Update 2015), (Innenministerkonferenz [Permanent Conference of the German Ministers of the Interior], 2015), p.9, available at [http://www.bka.de/nn_205924/DE/Publikationen/Publikationen_node.html?__nn=true](http://www.bka.de/nn_205924/DE/Publikationen/Publikationen_node.html?__nn=true) (accessed 18 April 2016).


under the age of 18 years) is considerably higher (12% vs. 5%). This means that considerably more than half of the departed persons were teenagers or not older than their mid-twenties.11

This data correlates with the long-term statistical findings of juveniles and young adults being disproportionately represented in other areas of deviant behavior (especially with regard to criminal offenses) as well as in every category of reckless behavior.12 It seems reasonable to act on the assumption of a common causation within both contexts.

Caught in the middle – between childhood and adulthood

Biological Aspects

In criminology, it is universally accepted that juveniles and adults are fundamentally different, both with regard to the lack of maturity of young persons and to a greater sensitivity to punishment, and thus should be treated accordingly.13 The ability to be steered by norms to a certain behavior is not innate, but grows with age and is adopted during the education and socialization process, which can happen faster or slower, depending on the conditions encountered by the individual.

The lack of maturity comprises a number of aspects, some very obvious, others less so. One essential factor in the limited maturation of a juvenile is purely biological and only fairly recently established scientifically.14 It comprises the insight that brain maturation in adolescence is still incomplete.15 Fairly recent neuroscientific findings support the assumption that adolescence is characterized by a unique set of features, thus warranting its consideration as a distinct period of development.16 It appears that the brain changes characteristic of adolescence are among the most dramatic and important to occur during the human lifespan.17 New research was able to show continued brain maturation through the end of the adolescent period.18

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13 This view is recognized on a European level (Christopher Salvatore et al., “A Systematic Observational Study of a Juvenile Drug Court Judge," Juvenile and Family Court Journal 62 (2011), p. 20) and reflected in several European Recommendations (e.g. Rec(2003)20 of the Committee of Ministers to member states concerning new ways of dealing with juvenile delinquency and the role of juvenile justice, p.1; Rec(87)20 of the committee of Ministers to member states on social reactions to juvenile delinquency, p.1).
14 Laurence Steinberg, “A Behavioral Scientist Looks at the Science of Adolescent Brain Development,” Brain and Cognition 72 (2010), pp. 160-164) describes the field of developmental neuroscience as “having matured from a field in its infancy to one that is now approaching its own adolescence” (p. 160). This notion also points out that most findings in this field have to be considered as preliminary.
15 The literature about adolescent risk taking is voluminous. For a good overview, see Valerie F. Reyna and Frank Farley, “Risk and Rationality in Adolescent Decision Making,” Psychological Science in the Public Interest 7 (1) (2006).
The heightened disposition to risk taking in adolescence appears to be the product of the interaction between two brain networks: one is the socio-emotional network that is especially sensitive to social and emotional stimuli and that is remade in early adolescence by hormonal changes of puberty. The other is the cognitive-control network that backs up executive functions such as planning, thinking ahead, and self-regulation; these functions mature gradually over the course of adolescence and young adulthood largely independently of puberty.\textsuperscript{19}

A common misperception is the idea that adolescents regularly underestimate risks as the main cause for their verifiable heightened disposition to risk taking. This leads to many interventions with the intent to enhance the accuracy of risk perceptions. In contrast, adolescents apparently even partly overestimate important risks; the popular belief of adolescents feeling generally invulnerable is not backed by empirical findings.\textsuperscript{20}

Logical reasoning abilities, combined with improvement in abstract and hypothetical thinking, develop between the age of 11 and 16. The (pure) logical-reasoning abilities of a 16-year-old are comparable to an adult.\textsuperscript{21} Anticipatory thinking and the consideration of future consequences of choices, however, are not fully developed at this stage, but continue to improve over the following years.\textsuperscript{22}

That means that unlike logical reasoning abilities, which appear to be more or less fully developed by the age of 16, psychosocial capacities that improve decision making and moderate risk taking – such as impulse control, emotion regulation, delay of gratification, and resistance to peer influence – continue to mature well into young adulthood.\textsuperscript{23} The latter maturation is not complete until approximately the age of 25.\textsuperscript{24} Accordingly, psychosocial immaturity in these respects during adolescence may very well undermine what otherwise already might be competent decision making.\textsuperscript{25}

In other words, juveniles, adolescents and young adults first mature on an intellectual level and then later on a social and emotional level. Therefore juveniles and adolescents are regularly able to analyze a given situation logically, but may be unable to act accordingly, because of the ongoing

\textsuperscript{19} See Laurence Steinberg, “Risk-Taking in Adolescence – New Perspectives from Brain and Behavioral Science”, \textit{Current Directions in Psychological Science} 16 (2007), pp. 56 and 68; Paus, “Mapping brain maturation and cognitive development during adolescence,” p. 60. Both explain this partly because of an increase of white matter in the prefrontal cortex as a result of myelination, the process through which nerve fibers become sheeted in myelin, a white, fatty substance that improve the efficiency of brain circuits. More efficient neural connections within the prefrontal cortex are important for higher-order cognitive functions like planning ahead, weighing risks and rewards, and making complicated decisions.

\textsuperscript{20} Reyna and Farley, “Risk and Rationality in Adolescent Decision Making,” p. 34.


\textsuperscript{22} Elizabeth S. Scott and Laurence Steinberg, \textit{Rethinking Juvenile Justice} (Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 34.


\textsuperscript{24} Raymond Corrado and Jeffrey Mathesius, “Developmental Psycho-Neurological Research Trends and Their Importance for Reassessing Key Decision-Making Assumptions for Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults in Juvenile/Youth and Adult Criminal Justice Systems,” p. 154 (who even draw the conclusion that one might consider to raise the maximum age for youth justice systems to an age of 24 years (p. 159)).

\textsuperscript{25} Steinberg, “Risk-Taking in Adolescence – New Perspectives from Brain and Behavioral Science,” p. 56.
development of their psycho-social capacities. Although estimates vary, many experts agree that the process of structural maturation is not completed until the mid-twenties.

**Psychosocial Factors**

Such insights provided by neuroscientific research tie in with the established field of developmental psychology. Changes during adolescence obviously do not happen solely on a biological level, but also within a social context. Gender, social background, education, peer influence, situational context and other variables are well known to be influential factors affecting youth development.

Adolescence can be described as a time of experimentation as the adolescent is weaning her- or himself away from adult authority and trying to live autonomously. Furthermore, emotional arousal and affective changes increase, which often leads to greater sensations seeking. “The temporal gap between puberty, which impels adolescents towards thrill seeking, and the slow maturation of the cognitive-control system, which regulates these impulses, makes adolescence a time of heightened vulnerability for risky behavior.”

Another crucial aspect to be considered is the sensitivity of juveniles to peer pressure. Peer pressure is a well-known problem among juveniles, who often operate in groups. Even if a person has developed appropriate for his age on an intellectual and emotional level, she/he may find her-/himself in a situation when even if she/he recognizes the morally right choice peer pressure can still result in a wrong choice. Several substantial studies in the social sciences have found that adolescents act differently in the presence of peers. When individuals were alone, there were no age differences in risk taking, but when they were in groups, risk taking increased among the adolescents and college students, but not among the adults. Research showed that both same-sex and opposite-sex peer friendships were more influential in the formation of female and male emotional stability than parent-child relations, resulting in the notion that associating with troubled youth, or “hanging out with the wrong crowd,” is often credited for all problems of young people.

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28 Andrew von Hirsch and Andrew Ashworth, Proportionate Sentencing (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 44.
30 For further reading, see Ulrika Andersson and Titti Mattsson, Ungdomar i gäng: social- och straffrättsliga reaktioner (Liber, 2011)(discussing juveniles in gangs).
34 L. Alan Sroufe et al., The Development of the Person: The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood (Guilford Publications 2005), p. 195.
Both the biological and the psychosocial aspects will have to be considered to be contributing factors within the context of a process of radicalization towards violence promoting an extremist ideology.

The Radicalization Process

On the surface, the pathways to terrorism seem as varied as the actors themselves. Developing from diverse starting points, extremists can follow many different paths that lead to their ultimate involvement in terrorist activities, either in their countries of residence or through joining terrorist organizations like the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL/DAESH). Radicalization, in other words, is a phenomenon composed of various processes driven by different mechanisms, following different patterns, and enmeshed in a social and political context. However, the existence of a common end point has led many agencies and academics with an interest in radicalization dynamics to assess these different pathways as just variations of a common radicalization process. Consequently much effort has been directed to the identification of common aspects of radicalization in order to understand and, in the end, address and counter this process. Within this research, several analyses of the radicalization of identified radical terrorists have been conducted, mainly based on data from law enforcement agencies and intelligence services (including the German Bundeskriminalamt, the Swedish Security Service, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, the New York City Police Department, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service, and the British government). Although the models and explanations developed by these agencies are not entirely congruent, they suggest an underlying base model of the radicalization process. Hunter and Heinke – elaborating on a framework originally presented by Neumann – proposed a unified simplified model of the radicalization process, based upon three definable main components: grievance, ideology/narrative, and mobilization. This model has been confirmed by various agencies’ findings over the last years.

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37 Hunter and Heinke, “Radicalization of Islamist Terrorists in the Western World”, p. 27.
39 Not publicly available.
40 New York City Police Department, “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat” (New York City Police Department, 2007).
42 Politiets Efterretningsstjeneste (PET), “Radikalisering og terror” (Politiets Efterretningsstjeneste, no date).
43 Not publicly available.
44 Hunter and Heinke, “Radicalization of Islamist Terrorists in the Western World”; see also Heinke and Hunter, “Radikalisierung islamistischer Terroristen im Westen.”
45 Hunter and Heinke, “Radicalization of Islamist Terrorists in the Western World”; see also Heinke and Hunter, “Radikalisierung islamistischer Terroristen im Westen.”
It has to be pointed out, though, that these components do not reflect an automatism and do not follow a fixed timeline of radicalization. First and foremost: obviously not all individuals who begin this process will complete it. Many stop or even abandon their development at different stages and for different reasons; some reenter later and begin again. Others do not follow the implied sequential development, but sort of ‘jump’ from one radicalization stage to the next.\textsuperscript{47} With regard to pondering the possible development, other individuals do not seem to make well-considered decisions within this process, but drift within it like on a slippery slope. On a temporal scale, the individual radicalization process appears to have taken several years in many cases, but developed very quickly in others.

\textit{Grievance}

The basic prerequisite of the radicalization process (not only within the context of ECAI) seems to be a (mostly rather diffuse) discontent.\textsuperscript{48} Relevant issues driving this attitude may include the perceived persecution of Muslims throughout the world; a sense of uprootedness, alienation, or a lack of acceptance; feelings of discrimination (especially among second- or third-generation immigrants); or a general search for identity. It is hardly surprising that young persons are particularly susceptible for such a discontent.

These feelings of uncertainty of oneself during adolescence and early adulthood are common and well-known in developmental psychology. In some cases, though, these emotions can amount to a deep identity crisis. Adolescence is a period full of important changes within the young person’s life – not only biologically, but also emotionally. It is a time of experimentation, while self-regulating factors have not yet fully matured.\textsuperscript{49} The characteristics for this developmental stage (as portrayed above), namely a general uncertainty, high vulnerability for risky behavior, the search for identity, the miscalculation of consequences as a result of a deficit in anticipatory thinking, and heightened impulsivity may decisively contribute to a drift into radicalization.

The process of self-discovery (or self-identity labeling) of juveniles usually involves a combination of the influences by both authority figures (e.g. parents) and peer-invoked labels.\textsuperscript{50} Especially with regard to young people of the Muslim faith, the situation may be exacerbated by the fact that many communities associated with mosques are exclusively oriented towards the personal situation and conservative convictions of the parental and more senior generations, thus not addressing the questions and needs of juveniles and adolescents. A discrepancy between desirable


\textsuperscript{49} Heinke and Persson, “Zur Bedeutung jugendspezifischer Faktoren bei der Radikalisierung islamistischer Gewalttäter,” p. 50.

\textsuperscript{50} Corrado and Mathesius, “Developmental Psycho-Neurological Research Trends and Their Importance for Reassessing Key Decision-Making Assumptions for Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults in Juvenile/Youth and Adult Criminal Justice Systems,” p. 152.
self-identities and negative, externally imposed labels, though, can serve as a major source of adolescent stress, frustration, and anger. These negative emotional reactions can increase the likelihood of anxiety or depression, as well as aggression.\textsuperscript{51}

Such grievances, in many cases reinforced by a perceived rejection by society, can cause one to search for a new purpose of life.

\textit{Ideology}

The process of ideological framing absorbs this diffuse feeling of discontent and directs it towards a defined direction. Their core narrative of ‘us’ - the \textit{ummah} (community) or \textit{ummat al-mu’minin} (the community of the believers) - defending against ‘them’ - the nonbelievers conducting an alleged ‘War against Islam’ - secures a strong bond among the followers while alienating them from Western citizens.\textsuperscript{52}

This narrative typically finds its ideological foundation in a form of Salafism, a very fundamentalistic interpretation of the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{53} Adherence to this persuasion is viewed as the ultimate distinguishing feature between right and wrong.\textsuperscript{54} Interpretations of Salafism range from a solely personal religious conviction with an emphasis on purifying the believer’s way of life to a so-called jihadi orientation that demands its followers to take on the fight against Western governments and ‘apostate’ Muslim (especially Middle Eastern) regimes held responsible for the suffering of all Muslims. This so-called jihadi Salafism emphasizes God’s undisputed – and sole – sovereignty (\textit{hakimiyyat Allah}) and views the Qur’an and the Sunnah of Muhammad as the only acceptable sources to define right and wrong. In consequence, this ideology bans the idea of democracy and man-made law in general as un-Islamic; Western societies are considered sinful and a danger to the right order of mankind.\textsuperscript{55}

The propagandists of this extremist ideology are very well aware of the heightened vulnerability of youth (juveniles and adolescents) to the offer of an ‘anchor’ for their lives. Therefore they very often try to establish undisturbed and focused surroundings in which they can educate juveniles (or even children) about their narrative of the ideal society. These surroundings may include social centers, Qur’an classes, or mosques, but may as well be institutions – notably including prisons – exploited by charismatic leaders for their purposes.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} For a more in-depth examination of Salafism see the introduction by Tilman Seidensticker (\textit{Salafismus}, C.H.Beck, 2014) and the edited volume by Behnam T. Said and Hazim Fouad (\textit{Salafismus – Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Islam}, Herder, 2014).
\textsuperscript{55} Hunter and Heinke, “Radicalization of Islamist Terrorists in the Western World,” p. 28.
The main significance of this ideological framing component within the radicalization process should not be primarily seen on the basis of its actual content, but in its function to provide the followers (the true believers) with an idea of their ‘true purpose’ and a sense of belonging to a transnational community in which he or she is unconditionally accepted. By accepting this highly polarized worldview and its narrow set of rules, the uncertain individual searching for meaning receives simple answers, as well as a comprehensive framework of social and moral norms and values. Terrorist movements or propagandists then can continue with this ideologization by strengthening the perception of global Muslim suppression; the picture of Islam under threat, triggering the belief that the Muslim community and the radicalized individual exist in a state of permanent self-defense with the acceptance of violence as a legitimate response.  

Mobilization

In the past, the vast majority of extremists became radicalized mainly through intensifying social interaction with other people of shared beliefs, either through a mutual push toward violence or through a spiritual leader goading individuals to take violent actions. The ‘lone wolf/lone offender’ has served as the rare exception. However, in recent years – and with a seemingly upward tendency, prominent attacks in the United States and Europe were carried out successfully by individuals with few ties to other extremists (very often – though at large misleading – described as ‘lone wolves’), highlighting the threat posed by radicalized persons who are relatively alone.

With regard to the ‘classic’ (i.e. group oriented) form of radicalization, it is not unusual that the described sense of identity and belonging provide such a psychological and emotional reward that exceeds the original ideological motivation. It is obvious that especially this sense of belonging forms both an important pull factor for the primal emergence of these groups and an equally important binding effect during the subsequent development of the group. Through ongoing mutual assertion of the righteousness of shared beliefs, previously existing moral norms and standards are replaced by new ones. Group members increasingly regard violence as an acceptable and legitimate – if not desirable – method to facilitate the common goals of the group. Visual propaganda is intensified, including hate videos with high emotional impact. The contrasting juxtaposition of perceived or factual atrocities against Muslims with ‘glorious’ attacks by so-called jihadist fighters and the acclaimed murder of Westerners (heinous examples of the last months include several beheadings of U.S. and British journalists and development aid specialists by the terrorist organization, ISIL/DAESH) are featured, and all so-called jihadist terrorist attacks against infidels (including both non-Muslims and ‘apostate’ Muslims) are increasingly endorsed. Ultimately, the final threshold to actively engage in the violent fight against the perceived enemies of Islam may be crossed due to the influence of a respected ideologue who calls for the direct participation in so-called jihad, or as a result of the individual’s self-persuasion.

57 Hunter and Heinke, “Radicalization of Islamist Terrorists in the Western World,” p. 28.
59 Guido Steinberg, Kalifat des Schreckens (Knaur 2015), p. 166.
60 Hunter and Heinke, “Radicalization of Islamist Terrorists in the Western World,” p. 29.
With regard to young people, especially juveniles and adolescents, a major factor is the observation that they are – as portrayed above – ostensibly intellectually capable of recognizing the ideology’s pattern of thought, and of realizing the substance of their actions, but that they are not equally capable of long-term anticipatory thinking, and the consideration of the consequences of their choices – not least with respect to the impact on others.

Additionally one has to bear in mind the often heightened need of juveniles to integrate into a group as a result of establishing their identity, and as a result the difficulty in resisting peer pressure, and the importance of conforming to group pressure so as not to lose the acceptance of the group and being left out.

The topic of ‘online radicalization’ presents a steadily increasing concern in this context. Due to their socialization, youth are customarily open to reception of information through digital media, and they are often used to an autonomous search for information on the Internet. To use this angle, extremists use a variety of online resources, serving as a sort of ‘virtual jihad university,’ that can play a role in all three components of radicalization (as discussed above). Key approaches are graphic propaganda videos and professionally produced online propaganda magazines, such as the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)-produced *Inspire* magazine or the more recent *Dabiq* magazine distributed by the ‘ISIL/DAESH’. *Dabiq* is disseminated not only in the Arabic and English languages, but also in various other languages (in part with a different title to adapt to each main target audience).

In addition to the active participation in terrorist/fighting activities in the war-torn areas of Syria and Iraq, an ensuing serious threat is posed by surviving extremists returning to Western societies. With them, a persistent ideological belief, combined with combat training and experience, as well as a likely desensitization to violence through observed atrocities, creates a high risk of their participation in terrorist attacks.

**Conclusion**

Adolescence is a time for the differentiation from adult authorities, for the acquisition of autonomous decision-making capabilities, the development of a specific conduct of life, and for the testing of boundaries. Therefore it is regularly a time for misjudgments – including some that may harm others. In other words, the learning process to make decisions includes the risk to make bad decisions.

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61 Ibid. Samuel Musa and Samual Bendett, *Islamic Radicalization in the United States – New Trends and a Proposed Methodology for Disruption* (National Defense University 2010)(correctly pointing out that apart from the broader range of distribution modern digital media has also extended the reach of propagandists in a one-on-one interaction that is no longer confined to personal meetings).


63 von Hirsch and Ashworth, *Proportionate Sentencing*, p. 44.
For the vast majority of juveniles and adolescents such ‘bad decisions’ do not result in substantial and irreversible consequences. However, comparable to the perpetration of serious crimes, the radicalization towards a so-called jihadist ideology poses a defining aberration – an aberration the young person very often realizes only inadequately or too late, but which may have a life-defining impact.

Counter radicalization endeavors therefore should address the specific developmental situation of youth, combining education, social integration, and individual appreciation with counter ideology programs. It should be clear that this is not exclusively a challenge for law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Actually, they play only a minor part. Countering radicalization has to be a multipronged approach involving social (especially youth) services, schools and the local communities – and has to bear in mind that juveniles are not simply smaller adults.
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