WORKING GROUP: Homegrown Radicalisation in the West

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In order to avoid becoming embroiled in definitional debates, the working group focused on treating radicalisation as a process rather than an outcome; one consisting of changes in both the individuals' beliefs and their behaviour towards intergroup conflict. While recognising that it is not the only form of radicalisation and that previous types of radicalisation may hold valuable lessons, the working group focused on Islamic radicalisation. Of the many facets of the topic, the working group addressed four main questions.

1. ***What are the factors and precipitants, i.e. the "causes" of homegrown radicalisation in the West? Do these differ according to regional, cultural or socio-economic context?***

It was immediately established that homegrown radicalisation results from a confluence of factors, making generalisation very difficult and contingency predominant. Nonetheless, the panel identified several key elements common in most instances:

a) While the demographic profile of individuals who are radicalised is very diverse, a foundational factor in cases of radicalisation in the West is the radical Islamist "narrative", which focuses on the claim that Islam is under attack from outsiders. This narrative challenges believers to stand up to defend themselves and their co-religionists, while also giving their cause more legitimacy within the broader Muslim community. The narrative is emotional, fluid, populist and often inconsistent, and on occasions can be used to cajole or shame individuals into participating in radical activities. While some have characterised the Islamist narrative as being retrograde, it is in fact progressive in many contexts – by propounding the notion of a super-cultural, global fraternity, it can actually be perceived as empowering to Muslims who feel constrained by local ethnic traditions. Moreover, the narrative can change over time, as seen in the case of American Somali youth joining Al-Shabaab, where the recruiting narrative morphed from emphasising nationalism to focusing on the religious aspect of global jihad.

b) Another common element in homegrown radicalisation is a feeling of alienation, which can be caused by a multitude of factors including but not limited to material deprivation. While trauma can be associated with radicalisation, many of those who become radicalised have never directly experienced physical violence – the trauma is often vicarious and can be instilled by the narrative.

c) The global jihadist movement almost always plays a role in the recruitment of homegrown extremists. Thus, the term "homegrown" might be something of a misnomer in the face of global connections.

d) In terms of identity, the radicalisation process also often involves a change of name, signifying a change in self-identity. Participation in radical Islam can also imbue adherents with status among their peers, what has been described as a perceived aura of "jihadi cool".

e) Homegrown radicals generally lack a deep understanding of Islam – their theological knowledge is often superficial and thus easily distorted. In some countries, a large percentage of Islamists are converts. Surprisingly, they can often be said to convert not to Islam, but to jihadism; in other words, they became radicals as soon as they have converted without much of a transition period of moderate Islamic belief.

f) Research has shown that there might be a geographic component to radicalisation linked to community density, with less radicalisation in areas with a greater mix of ethnicities and religions.

2. *How can we detect homegrown radicalisation before the resort to violence? Are there early warning indicators, at either the individual or community levels? If these do exist, can they be effectively monitored while still preserving civil liberties in an open, democratic society?*

Despite the lack of consensus on the point, some members of the panel asserted that there are indeed some early warning indicators (especially of the behavioural type), but that these indicators often cannot be monitored or investigated by government agencies in a democratic society because they do not constitute criminal activity. In addition, almost none of the indicators are definitive, in the sense of being either necessary or sufficient. This presents a dilemma. On the one hand, not all radicals become violent, so manpower, money and credibility can be wasted on individuals who will not commit violent acts, while on the other hand, without the ability to monitor people who are beginning the radicalisation process, many genuine cases will be missed.

It is hard to discern any community level indicators of radicalisation, at least those which would constitute necessary or sufficient conditions. Many extremists are not very secretive about their goals and this presents an opportunity for the wider Muslim community to get involved. In this regard, law enforcement must be receptive to information that is passed from the community and must earn the trust of the community. Indeed, some members of the panel believe that it is better to understand the community and build relationships than to mechanistically apply lists of indicators. At the same time, indicators might prove to be of the greatest utility when used by the community itself to detect radical activity and intervene at an early stage in the process.

3. Which policies aimed at preventing or detecting homegrown radicalisation are likely to be the most successful?

In the first place, we should avoid making things worse and thus must consider the potential unintended consequences of any policies we might enact; but we still need to take risks and experiment with policies to determine those that are the most effective. Second, any achievable policy must be consistent, coordinated and coherent.

A successful "counter-radicalisation" policy has three primary parts: engagement, education, and information sharing. Law enforcement must engage the community directly and meaningfully and not use others to voice their views. Part of the solution is to ensure that the Muslim community is not on the defensive. The use of language is important (if for no other reason than that correct usage of terminology is regarded as important by the communities whose cooperation we need). The government also needs to stop seeing Muslims as only Muslims (i.e. a mono-dimensional identity in the form of a potential security threat) and begin recognising Muslims in terms of their myriad identities to find platforms for engagement. The government must also support vulnerable and at-risk individuals through the correct intervention at the correct moment. Moreover, as many radicalised individuals are connected with an organisation overseas either physically or virtually, the response must be international in addition to purely domestically focused.

At the same time, it is the responsibility of the Muslim community to work more with law enforcement agencies to help fight radicalisation. One measure proposed is to encourage the formation of new Muslim groups as an alternative to the gateway organisations who act as facilitators of radicalisation. Another was a shift in the framing from a "monitoring" frame to a "crisis prevention and resolution" frame.

A decidedly tricky issue is the case of so-called "cheerleaders", persons offering rhetorical support for terrorism or espousing extremist but ostensibly non-violent rhetoric. The panel concluded that it might be too difficult to deal with such people in an environment that protects civil rights such as freedom of speech.

4. What are the potential futures for the phenomenon of homegrown radicalisation in the West?

Bearing in mind the caveat evinced by Niels Bohr that "prediction is very difficult, especially about the future", there are two main streams of thought. The first, more optimistic view holds that the growing shallowness of the Islamist ideology evidenced by radicals and the strategic weakening of al Qaeda will lead to a diminution of the phenomenon: in other words, that we have reached the cusp of the radicalisation curve with declining support for al Qaeda worldwide. The second, more pessimistic, view concedes that al Qaeda might not be a central organising force for very long, but that "al Qaeda central" might be replaced by an Islamist movement that is more atomised and fragmented, both organisationally and ideologically, and thus more difficult to identify and counter. Furthermore, rising anti-Muslim feeling might galvanise and reenergise radical Islamism. In short, governments and communities should lose no time in constructively addressing the threat of homegrown radicalisation in the West.