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The Radicalisation of Mohammed Siddique Khan

Introduction

“ I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters.”[1]This essay demonstrates how a former youth worker who as a child called himself ‘ Sid’ and dreamed of living in America became the ringleader of Britain’s worst terror attack. It first defines terrorism and radicalisation, before outlining Wiktorowicz’s theory of radicalisation. Applying it to Khan’s life, the essay demonstrates Khan’s failure to relate to either his parents or Western society laid the foundations for a cognitive opening. He then sought religion through the ‘ Mullah Boys’ and Abdullah el-Faisal, instigating frame alignment. As Khan adopted the views of the movement, he narrowed his social networks to other extremists at his local gym, youth centre and the Iqra Bookshop. This cemented cognitive radicalisation and facilitated the transition to behavioural radicalisation. By November 2004, Khan was ready to die for his beliefs, fulfilling his wishes in July 2005. It concludes his decision to carry out a suicide attack could be understood as rational insofar as martyrdom had become immutably linked to his perception of self-interest, with the act of terror thus a way of ensuring salvation in the afterlife.

Defining terrorism and radicalisation

This work used the European Union’s 2002 definition of terrorism as “ any action... that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such act, by its nature and context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act”.[2]Radicalisation refers <https://assignbuster.com/homegrown-radicalisation-and-counter-radicalisation-in-western-europe-and-north-america/>

to “ changes in attitude that lead towards sanctioning and, ultimately, the involvement in the use of violence for a political aim.”[3]Within radicalisation, there is a broad distinction between cognitive and behavioural radicalisation. The former refers to the adoption of extremist beliefs, and the latter refers to participating in extremist activities.[4]While the relationship between the two is disputed, the essay presumes causality between cognitive and behavioural processes as “ it is impossible to separate political beliefs from political action”.[5]The cognitive/behavioural distinction also allows the essay to break down Khan’s life into phases located in theoretical contexts. The essay now outlines Wiktorowicz’s framework of radicalisation.

Wiktorowicz’s Model of Joining Extremist Groups

Wiktorowicz highlights four steps of radicalisation; a cognitive opening, a search for religion, frame alignment and socialisation. A cognitive opening is an event that “ shakes certitude in previously accepted beliefs”.[6]Second-generation Muslims such as Khan can struggle to maintain a hybrid identity of being a Westerner and Muslim, relating to neither their parent’s teaching of Islam nor native society. Politically-conscious younger Muslims “ want to understand the relationship between religion and politics, something their parents typically avoid”.[7]This generational clash can thus spark a cognitive opening and move towards radicalism as it provides a way of rebelling against both identities, speaking to perceptions of “ rootlessness, cultural and social displacement and consequent hybridisation of their identities”.[8]

The second stage sees an individual search for religion to answer existential questions of belonging and identity. Given many younger westernised

Muslims like Khan lack the knowledge to scrutinise varying theological

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viewpoints, they search for a “ religious commodity that seems ‘ good enough’ to fit the consumption needs of the individual”.[9]Individuals do not search for “ objective religious truth and are instead heavily influenced by whether the argument makes sense and is persuasive”.[10]As such, movements often revolve around relatable issues in the individual’s immediate life as a gateway to deeper religiosity. This stage applied to Khan as the Mullah Boys tackled the immediate issue of Beeston’s drug problem, providing Khan with a new moral framework to lead his life. It was also an ideological incubator that spurred Khan to seek out Abdullah el-Faisal, a local radical cleric.

If an individual accepts the Islamist movement’s legitimacy, they reach the third stage of frame alignment; the “ convergence between the movement’s narrative and the views of their recruits”.[11]Frame alignment’s dependence upon clerical authority reflects the problem with decentralised sacred authority in Sunni Islam, resulting in subjective criteria for authority and radical clerics claiming equal legitimacy through force of personality.[12]This was relevant as Khan’s poor grasp of Islam meant the fiery rhetoric of Abdullah el-Faisal acted as a heuristic for the cleric’s authority.[13]He also visited Abu Hamza’s Finsbury Park Mosque.[14]Acceptance of the movement’s views leads to the fourth stage of socialisation, believing “ the movement does not only represent the truth, but that he or she has a personal obligation and responsibility to become active.”[15]Barriers to behavioural radicalisation are removed by changing “ understandings of self-interest...that facilitates progression to risky activism.”[16]Khan’s socialisation process took place at gyms, the Hamara Youth Access Point

(HYAP) and the Iqra Bookshop. As he bonded with Shehzad Tanweer and Hassib Hussain (two of the other bombers), self-interested became aligned with martyrdom. When like-minded radicals socialise together, the process is amplified as extreme views are disproportionately influential, causing other opinions to radicalise in a process of ideological one-upmanship, driving the average view towards the extreme.[17]The essay now applies this conceptual framework to Khan's life, beginning with his childhood struggles with hybrid identities.

Khan's Childhood and Adolescence

Khan's early years demonstrated he failed to subscribe to either Western society or his parent's Barelvi sect of Islam. His local mosque delivered sermons in Urdu, but Khan's Urdu was poor, struggling to relate to the first-generation's obsession with " ritual and tradition, devoid of political import... concerned with creating microcosms of their home country".[18]He was an archetypical example of the French sociological diagnosis of an individual caught between the ' individualisation and value relativism' of Western society, yet sufficiently Westernised to deviate from the traditionalist Islam of his parents and Hardy Street Mosque.[19]In an attempt to westernise his own identity, he referred to himself as Sid and often smoked.[20]Someone who knew him remarked " you'd never really know what religion he was". [21]He was occasionally bullied but it is unclear whether this was racially motivated.[22]

A shorter-term trigger for Khan's cognitive opening was relative deprivation; in 1997, he attended a protest arranged by a local Kashmiri group against Leeds City Council.[23]He, along with other younger Muslims also resented <https://assignbuster.com/homegrown-radicalisation-and-counter-radicalisation-in-western-europe-and-north-america/>

the unwillingness by local elders to tackle Beeston's drug problem, creating a space from which a vigilante drug cleansing squad known as the 'Mullah Boys' arose. It provided evidence of the older generation's inability provide a form of Islam as "as it applies to social and political issues".[24]Other factors likely played a role, with the Independent noting he was arrested in 1986 and 1993.[25]Thus by Khan's mid-20s, he had experienced a cognitive opening driven by longer term struggles with hybrid identities and shorter-term resentment at local social problems. It sparked a search for religion, moving to the Mullah Boys and then Wahhabism.

The Mullah Boys and radical clerics

Given Khan's cognitive opening was driven by identity issues and relative deprivation, he settled upon the Mullah Boys as the chosen religious commodity as they provided a fixed value framework, alternative social networks, an outlet to vent frustration and a cause. This spoke to his internal discontent. Community elders were initially positive, but their unhappiness at the group marrying girls of their choice further highlighted the internal Pakistani community's generational clash. The boys became pariahs, cementing Khan's increasing religiosity as "the social reality value of a group is strong when members are cut off".[26]This moved Khan's religious-seeking phase beyond a casual, group-based approach and he, along with other members officially converted to Wahhabism. Having grown up in a secularised environment, the ultra-conservative Wahhabism was attractive as sermons were delivered in English, and it offered Khan a "satisfactory system of religious meaning".[27]Group conversions to Wahhabism corresponded with Wiktorowicz's account of group religious-seeking, which "

increases the social dimensions of the activism...intertwining religious and friendship networks to produce high levels of intragroup trust.[28]

Through his conversion to Wahhabism, Khan met Abdullah el-Faisal (a local radical cleric) in 1999, whose status as a fiery preacher gave him authority, allowing him to “ facilitate message receptivity and can generate powerful emotive connections between scholars and their followers”.[29]An individual close to el-Faisal labelled him “ very, very radical...an eccentric mix of vitriolic and bizarre”.[30]Faisal had the ability to “ accurately apply the immutable religious sources to dynamic contemporary conditions.”[31]Yet this reflected the problem with Sunni Islam’s decentralised sacred authority, giving radical voices false credibility in the eyes of disillusioned individuals if they are charismatic and offer an attractive narrative.

A second contributor was Khan’s relationship and later marriage in 2001 to an Indian Muslim from the Deobandi sect. The Khans sent their spiritual priest to Khan, but he rejected the priest’s advice. They made a final attempt to persuade him by moving to Nottingham in 2001, but he refused to move, demonstrating an individual rejecting his old identity and customs.[32]The narrowing of Khan’s social networks amplified frame alignment, giving him an alternative identity and social network, amplifying his identification with a de-territorialised community of Muslims around the world (the Ummah). This put him on the ideological conveyor belt to retaliation. He then spent his final five years socialising with other extremists, consolidating ideological commitment and removing barriers towards high-risk activism.

Socialisation with extremists

Now that Khan had accepted the key tenets of the Islamist movement, he embarked upon ideological culturing to transition from cognitive to behavioural radicalisation. Jihadism offered “ a blueprint or template about how Muslims should behave to ensure salvation on Judgment Day...posting self-interest on salvation...contingent on fulfilling all the divine duties of activism.”[33]Socialisation included his work at the Hamara Youth Access Point to rekindle his childhood friendship with Shehzad Tanweer and meet Hassib Hussain, with the three regularly playing football together.[34]This is consistent with Wiktorowicz’s assertion prior relationships are central in building and cementing radical networks. Outside work, Khan attended in 2001 both a training camp in Pakistan and an expedition organised by Martin McDaid (a fellow extremist) in the Lake District.[35]He was also expelled from his childhood mosque around this time for espousing extremist views. [36]

Through to 2002, he then worked at the Iqra Bookshop, associating with extremists including Khalid Khaliq, Shipon Ullah and Mohammed Shakil. [37]Iqra was a central hub of propaganda, group indoctrination and norm internalisation. Khan and fellow bomber Tanweer reportedly watched videos of an Israeli soldier killing a Palestinian girl, increasing moral shock and frame resonance.[38]Around this time, colleagues noticed he was “ more introverted. On a couple of occasions, he showed uncharacteristic intolerance”.[39]Barriers to high-risk activism were being eroded, and by 2003 he was in regular contact with al-Qaeda handler Mohammed Quyyam Khan and members of the plot to blow up Bluewater with a fertiliser bomb,

although his role was peripheral.[40]However, he was not planning his own attack, which only commenced in February 2005.[41]The period between 2001 and 2003 amplified out-group hate and increased his identification with the extremist community, moving to the logical conclusion of behavioural radicalisation (indiscriminate violence on behalf of oppressed Muslims).[42]

Preparation for Martyrdom

Khan's dismissal from Hillside Primary School in November 2004 left his entire life dedicated to Islamist activism, amplifying behavioural radicalisation. In November 2004 he travelled to Pakistan to die, recording a goodbye video stating his actions were " for the sake of Islam...not for materialistic or worldly benefits".[43]In Pakistan he met Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi (an al-Qaeda commander), who ordered them to return and commit a terror attack.[44]They returned in February 2005, going on outdoor expeditions such as paintballing and rafting.[45]This maximised in-group love, group identity and cemented the collective commitment to carrying out a terrorist attack, which they later did on 7 July 2005, killing 52 people. Khan's martyrdom video demonstrates evidence of Wiktorowicz's radicalisation process in three ways. Firstly, he stated " our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer".[46]It affirms Wiktorowicz's view individuals participate in costly behaviour to ensure salvation in the afterlife, making it rational insofar as salvation in the afterlife becomes central to self-interest. Second, Khan argued scholars are " content with their Toyotas and semi-detached houses. They seem to think that their responsibilities lie in pleasing the kufr instead of Allah... leave the job to the real men, the true inheritors of the prophets".[47]This is evidence of

Wiktorowicz's argument second-generation Muslims struggle to relate to their parents and imams, viewing them as Western sell-outs who do not practise the 'true Islam'. Thirdly, socialisation had resulted in dehumanisation, claiming Western populations were "directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters".[48]This was the cognitive bedrock of indiscriminate violence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mohammed Siddique Khan's radicalisation is best understood in four phases; childhood and adolescence, association with the Mullah Boys and el-Faisal and socialisation with fellow extremists and preparing for martyrdom. As a child and teenager, he related to neither his parent's teaching of Islam nor Western society. The shorter-term trigger for Khan's religious-seeking phase was unhappiness at Beeston's drugs problems, providing further evidence of Wiktorowicz's notion of a generational clash. This brought him into contact with the Mullah Boys, who served as an ideological springboard for Khan's conversion to Wahhabism. Through this he became associated with Abdullah el-Faisal who instigated frame alignment. By early 2001, Khan had attended a terrorist training camp in Pakistan, indicating behavioural radicalisation was underway, but not to the point of dying for the cause. The rest of his life removed cognitive barriers to suicide terrorism, using HYAP as a recruitment centre and Iqra to cement group norms and moral outrage. He brought Tanweer, Hussain and Jermaine Lindsay together, bolstering group identity and commitment to terrorism. His declaration he was dying in the name of Islam reveals a level of rationality to

his violent extremism, perceiving the movement as inherently linked to his self-interest and martyrdom a way of pursuing this. The real risk was potential jeopardization of salvation through inaction.

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