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LAS VEGAS CONVENTION CENTER | LAS VEGAS, NV

The Psychology of Radicalization in the Lone-Actor Terrorist: Making Sense of the Senseless

Your Presenter

Dr. George L. Vergolias
Medical director - R3 Continuum
Forensic Psychologist

- 20 years experience:
 - Risk of Violence Assessment
 - Threat Management
 - Workplace Violence
 - Dispute Resolution
 - Stalking
 - Lone-Actor Terrorism
 - Absence Management
 - Return to Work / Disability
 - Trauma Recovery
 - Emergency/Crisis Psychology
 - Law Enforcement Training
 - Legal Consultation



Objectives & Take-Aways

- Recognize the distinction between radicalized belief and radicalized behavior
- Understand the role mental illness plays in LAT radicalization
- Distinguish behavioral risk factors of LATs that require monitoring versus proactive threat management

Vision Impacts Sight

"On that September morning, we were unprepared. We did not grasp the gravity of the threat that had been building for so long a period of time."

This was a failure of foresight, a failure of capability, a failure of imagination."

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Chairman, 9/11 Commission





Definitions & First Concepts

Defining Terrorism

Terrorism

Violence or the threat of violence against noncombatants or property in order to gain a political, ideological, or religious goal through fear and intimidation (Post, J. M. (2007)).

- Hundreds of definitions, from differing fields
- At least 6 peer journals focused on terrorism
- Conceptual inconsistency = loss of practical application
- No single profile, very dynamic and contextually based with both in-group and between-group differences

Defining Terrorism

Group-Actor Terrorist (GAT)

Terrorist acts committed by either a **single actor or group of actors**, who **receive substantive support** (orders, direction, or material) from outside sources. (adapted from “Lone Wolf Terrorism” NSCTF 2015)

Lone-Actor Terrorist (LAT)

Terrorist acts committed by a **single actor** who **does not** receive orders, direction, or material support from outside sources. (adapted from “Lone Wolf Terrorism” NSCTF 2015)

Key Findings of LATs

- No single definition of LAT
- Four main trends in U.S.
 - 1) Increasingly target LEA and military
 - 2) Overwhelmingly use firearms (vs EU)
 - 3) Radicalized via Internet/Media/Work
 - 4) Loyalty to an ideology vs a group
- Similar radicalization and behavioral trajectory
- US lacks multi-agency approach
- Community reporting is useful to identify radicalization and pathway behaviors

Recommendations

- Establish a standard LAT definition
- Clear leadership for counter-LAT initiatives
- Focus on preventing and derailing radicalization process

Report: Lone Wolf Terrorism

Prepared by
Security Studies Program
National Security Critical Issue Task Force

June 27, 2015



LAT by the Numbers

Lone-Actor Terrorists (LAT)

Since 9/11/01 in US . . .

30

handgun homicides per day in US

100

US citizens killed by radical ideological extremists

50% Islamic Jihadists

50% Right-Wing Extremists

2X

as many attacks by RWE than by Jihadists!

124

successful politically motivated attacks in US by LATs 1940 (Spaaij, 2017)

Lone-Actor Terrorists (LAT)

13.5

LATs more likely to have MI than those in organized terror networks (Corner & Gill 2015)

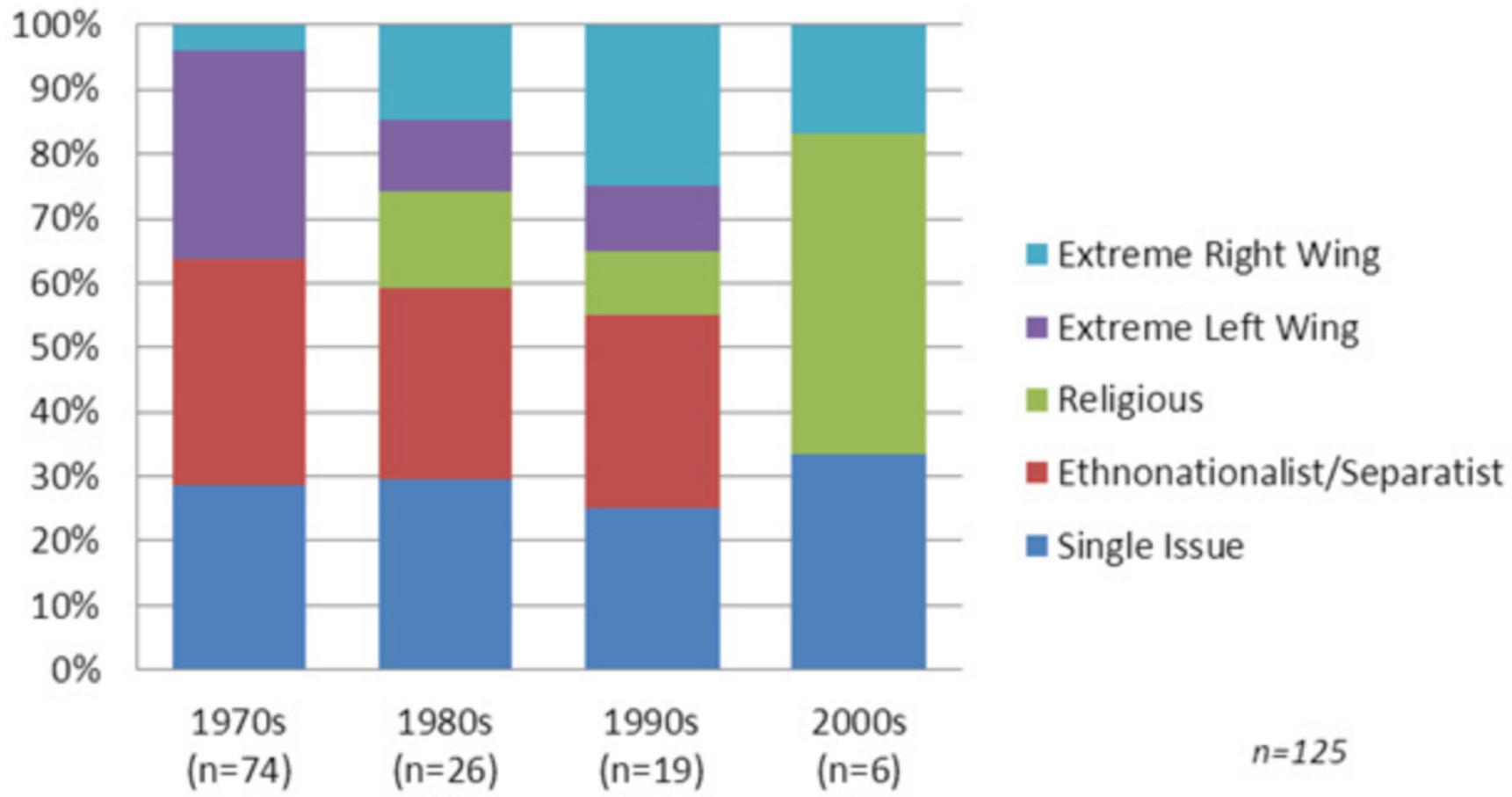
85%

Show Leakage = broadcast intent to attack

900

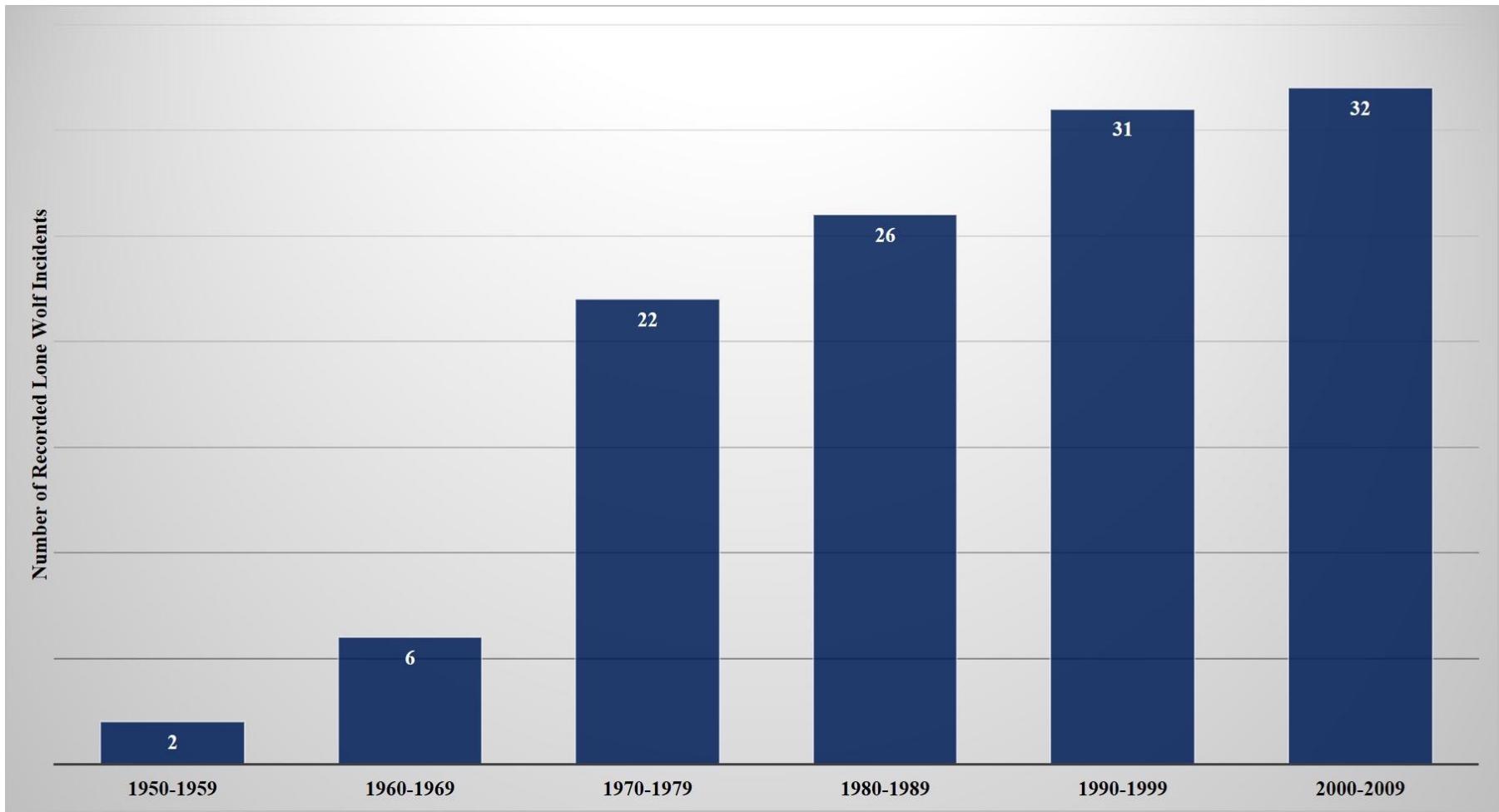
Current open FBI case of ideological extremism

Dominant Ideology of Emergent Terrorist Groups On US Soil by Decade



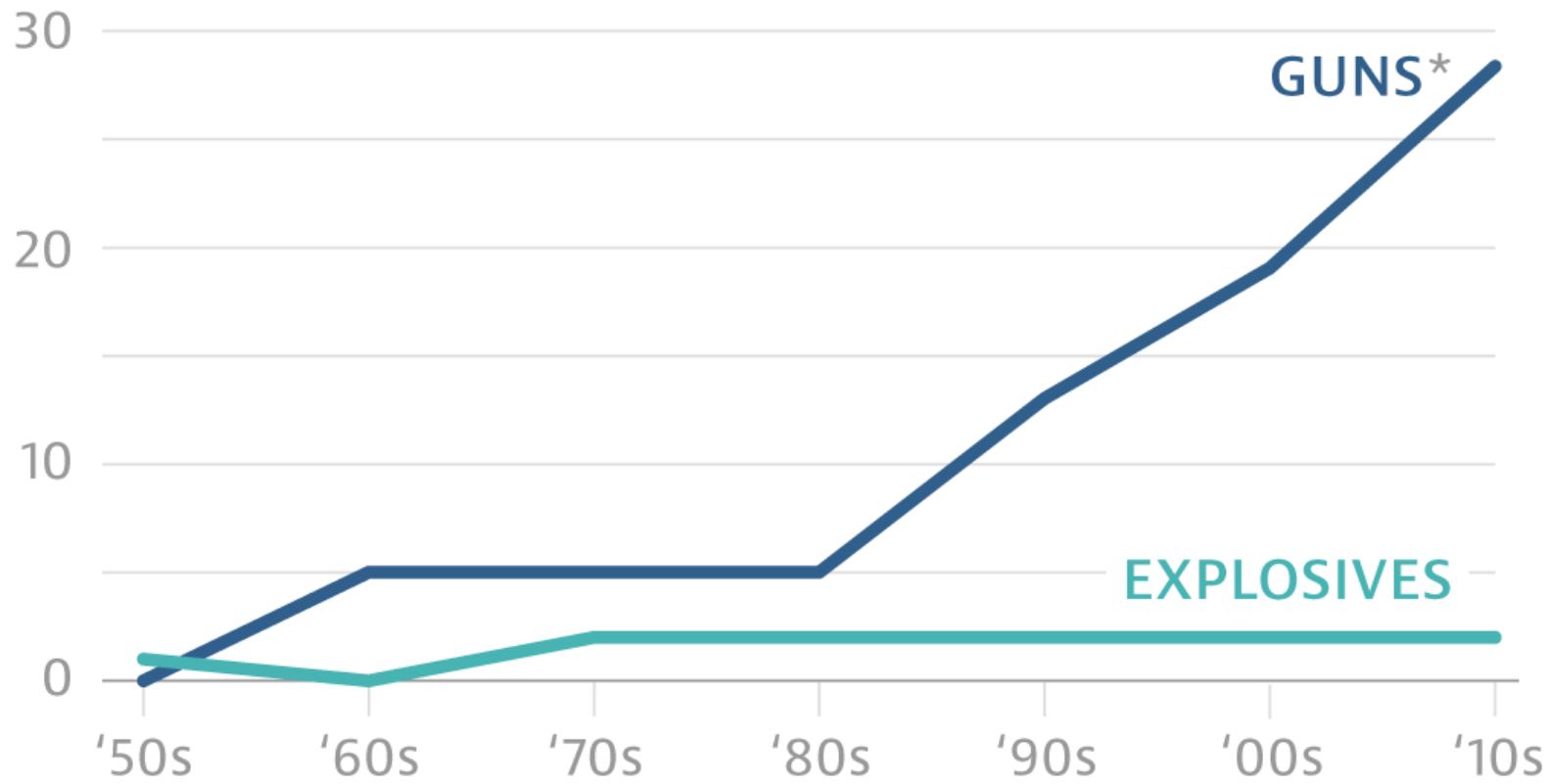
National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism – START (2012)

Number of Domestic Lone Wolf Terrorist Attacks from 1950-2009



(Hamm & Spaaij, "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America", 2015)

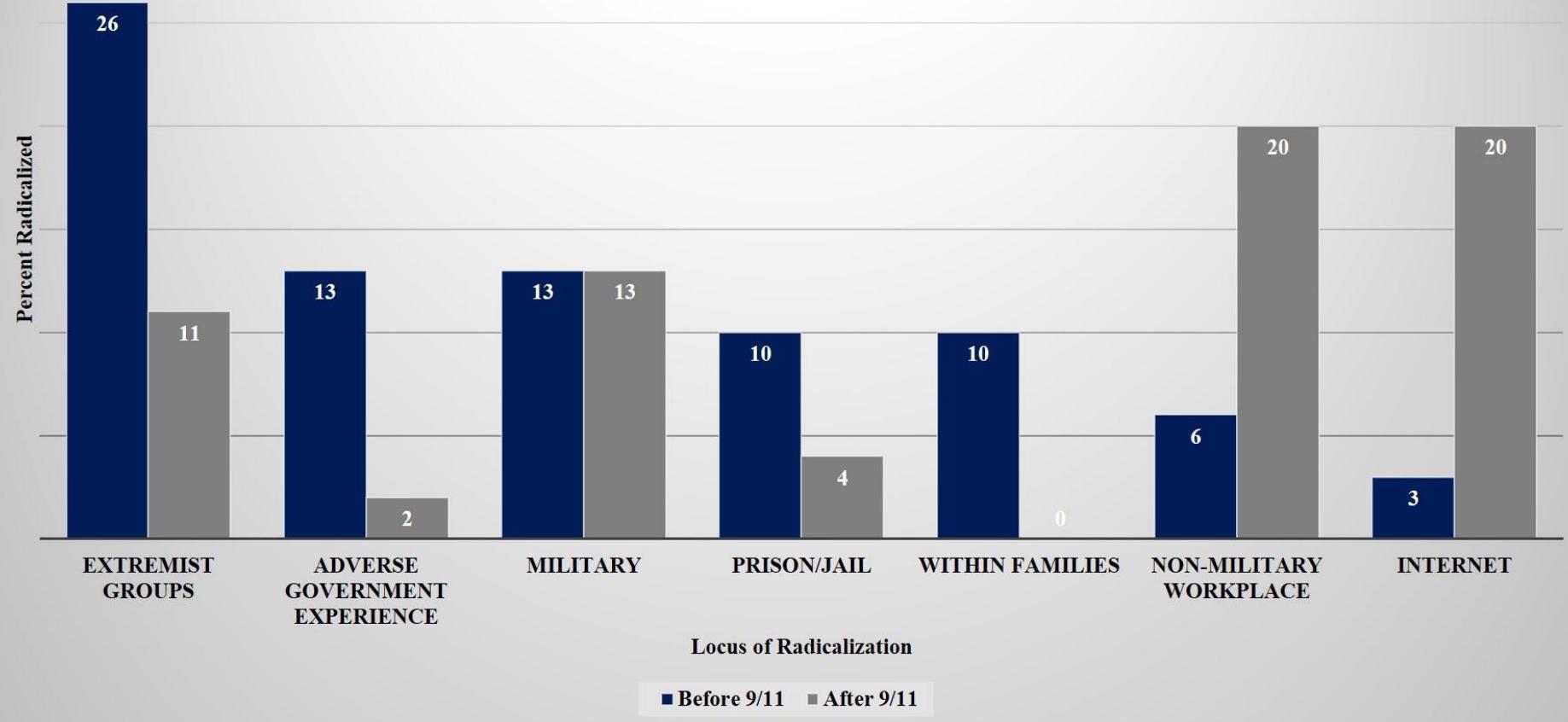
Weapons Used in Lone Wolf Attacks



*Includes Orlando and Dallas attacks

source: The American Lone Wolf Terrorism Database, by Ramon Spaaij and Mark Hamm

Loci of Domestic Lone Wolf Terrorist Radicalization Before and After 9/11



(Hamm & Spaaij, "Lone Wolf Terrorism in America", 2015)



Understanding The Psychology of Radicalization

Understanding the Hostile Mind

We start with common and basic human needs
for connectedness & Validation

People in all walks of life want to feel:

Successful

Accepted

Significant

Fairly Treated

“Something else is also at work . . . the struggle within many communities over whether and how to embrace modernity, pluralism and women’s rights.

That struggle drives, and is driven by, the dysfunction of many communities.

It has **left these societies with too many young men who have never held a job or a girl’s hand, who then seek to overcome their humiliation** at being left behind, and to find identity, by “purifying” their worlds of others who do not share their values or are perceived as holding them back.”

Opinion

OP-ED COLUMNIST

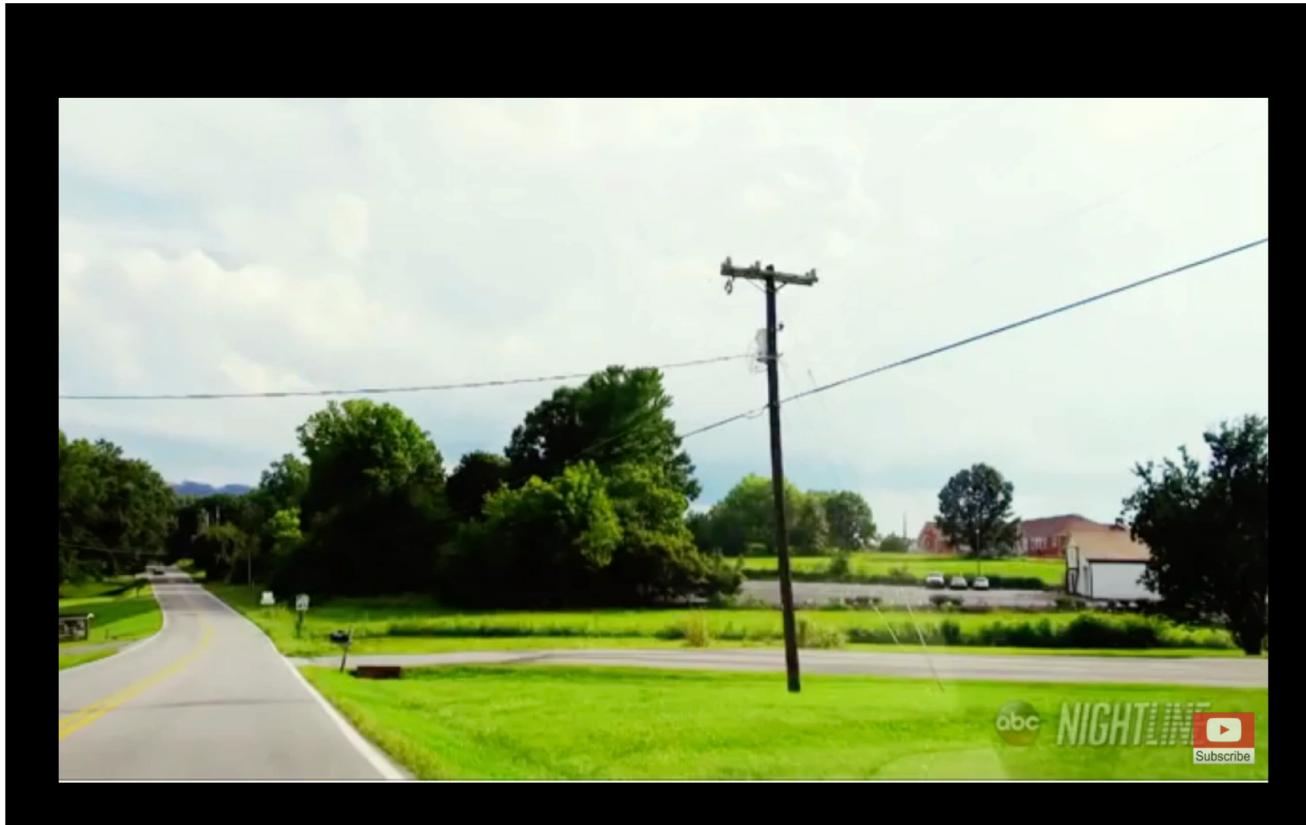
Say It Like It Is



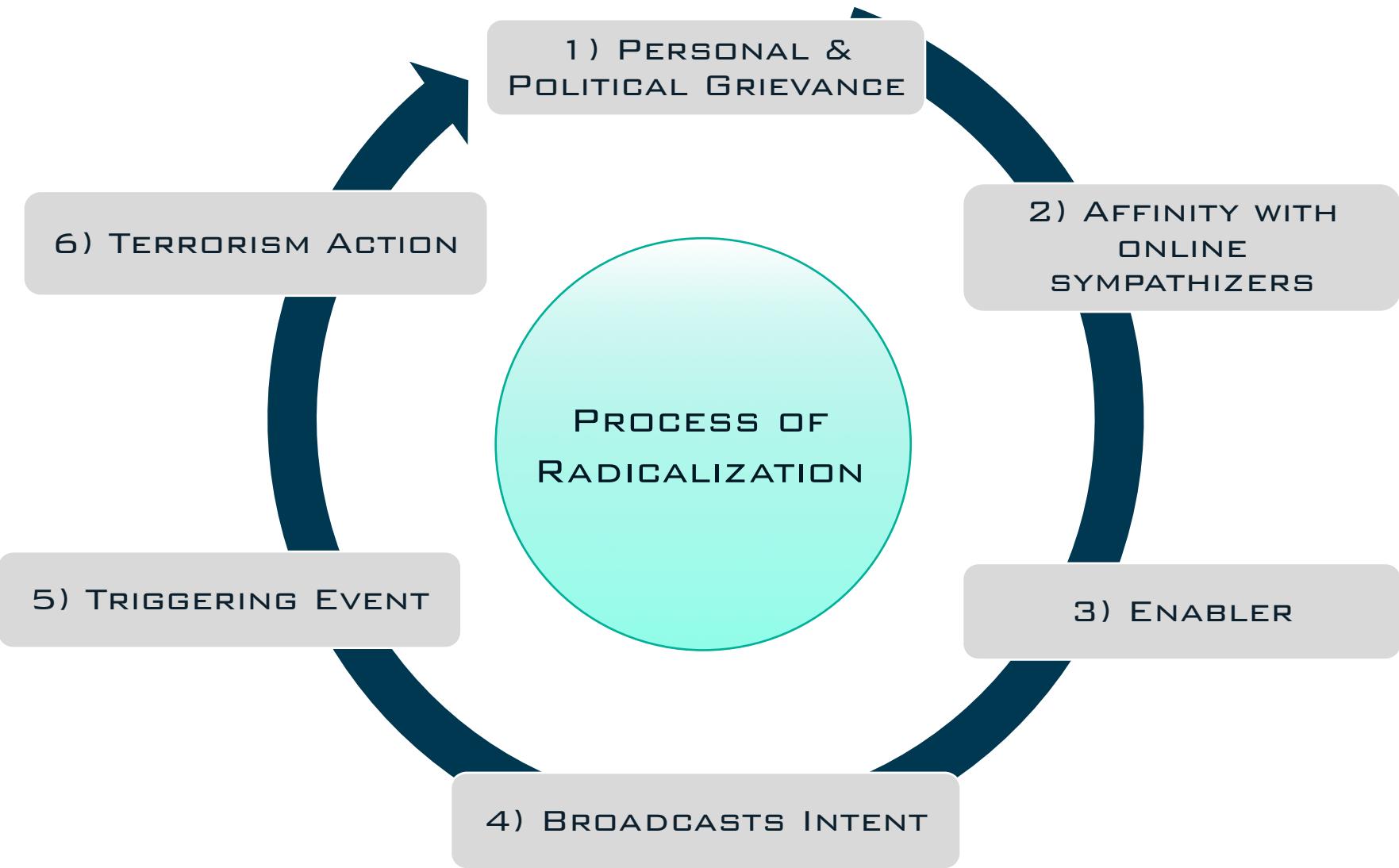
By [Thomas L. Friedman](#)

Jan. 20, 2015

Justin Sullivan



Radicalization Model (Hamm & Spaaj, 2015)





Everything You've Been Told About Radicalization Is Wrong

MAY 6, 2013

Despite the rhetoric, scary YouTube videos don't turn people into terrorists

"The idea that radicalization causes terrorism is perhaps the greatest myth alive today in terrorism research," First, the overwhelming majority of people who hold radical beliefs do not engage in violence. And second, there is increasing evidence that people who engage in terrorism don't necessarily hold radical beliefs." ~ John Horgan

Ideology and Belief Also Matter

- Radical and extremist violence transcends almost all belief systems
- “Extremism” and “Fundamentalism” are too narrow concepts
- The expression of the belief system, its values, meanings, cultural norms and taboos do have an influence in the how such is expressed in the mind and actions of the “Violent True Believer”.



Understanding Radicalization

- Most people on trajectory of radicalization are feeling a combination of disenfranchised, alienated, aggrieved.
- Radical Ideology does not equate to Radical Action!

- Challenge → to distinguish Beliefs from Action

Radicalization of Opinion → process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs

Radicalization of Action → (action pathways) process of engaging in terrorism or violent extremist actions.

- “There is no conveyor belt from extreme beliefs to extreme action”
(McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017)
- Differing skill set needed to mitigate extreme ideas vs. fighting terrorists.
(Borum, 2011)

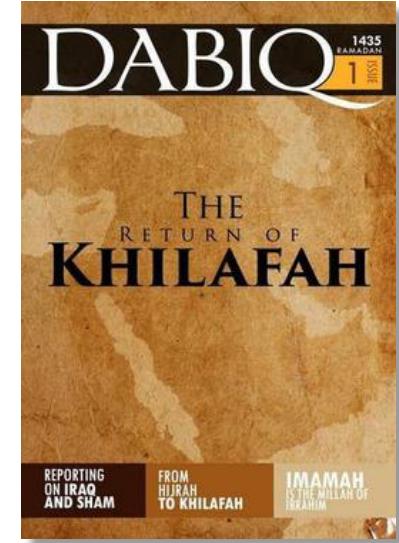
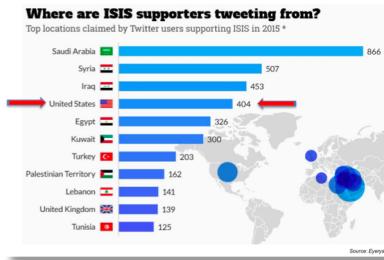
Core Methods of Radicalization

Internet & Social Media

Prison Indoctrination

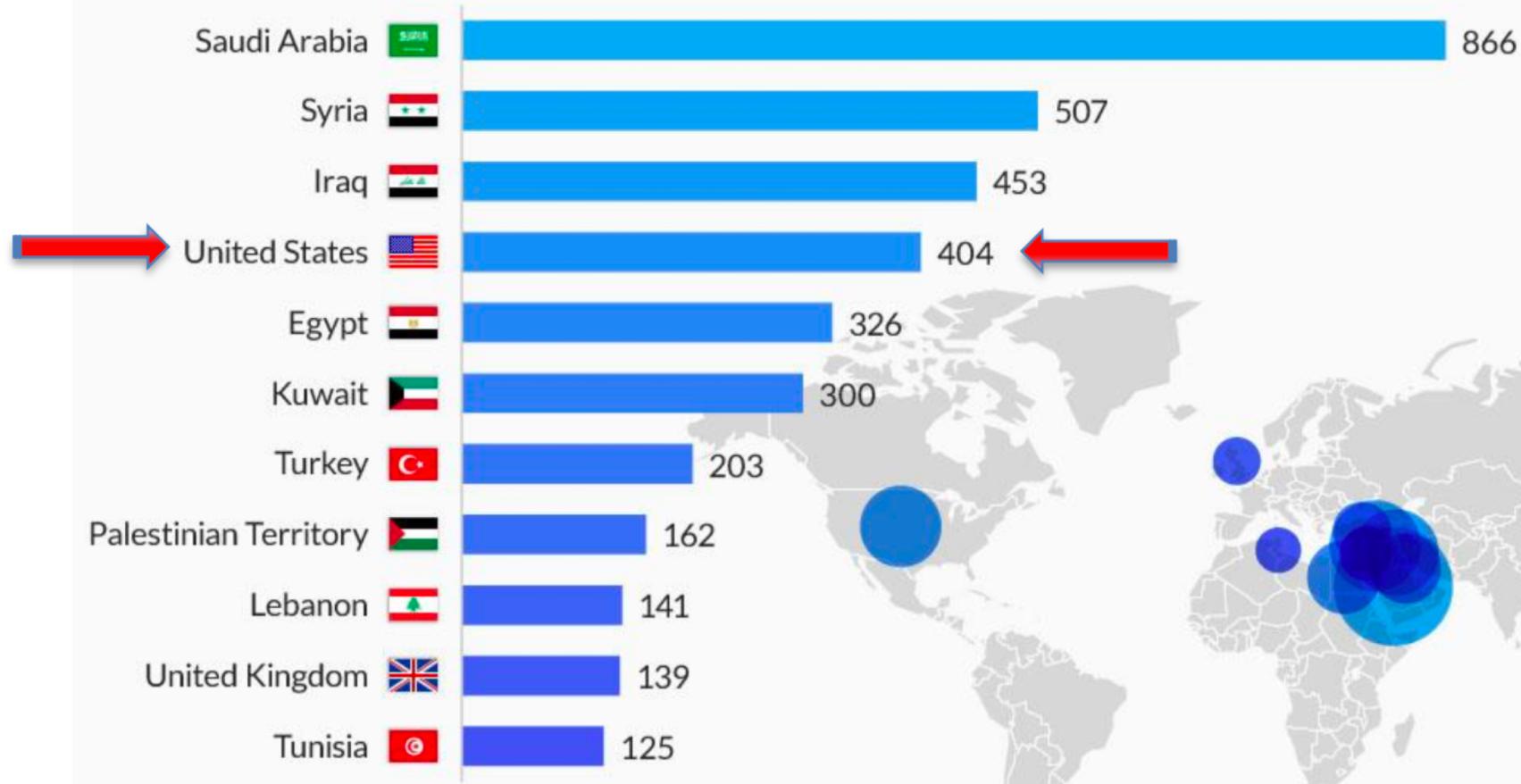
Propaganda Magazines

Peer Influence & Work



Where are ISIS supporters tweeting from?

Top locations claimed by Twitter users supporting ISIS in 2015 *



Source: Eyerys

Getting In - Radicalization Indicators

- Withdrawal from family and normal social circles
- Obsession/Fixation on radical extremist or religious websites
- More exclusive relationships with only likeminded people, to exclusion of others with longer-standing relations
- Obtain large sums of money, conduct fundraising efforts
- Acquire travel documents with minimal planning/disclosure
- Ideological Rigidity - increased time spent at group gatherings/places of worship
- Abrupt change in meeting/gathering places

Role of Mental Illness (Corner & Gill, 2015; 2017)

- Psychology of the LAT is multi-variate in nature
- GAT – tend to be psychologically “normal”
 - Organizations seek to recruit most capable to do assigned tasks
 - Most tasks require secrecy, calibration, and technological savvy
 - Thus prefer educated, psychologically healthy, and normal recruits
- Odds of LAT with MI is 13.50x higher than GAT
 - For LATs with MI, they are 18x more likely to have partner involved in a wider movement (than those with no MI)
- LATs with MI more likely have histories of:
 - Victim of prejudice
 - Chronic and acute stresses
 - Recent life disruption/change
- Presence of MI can be a background which makes one more susceptible to radicalization and LAT pathway



Behavioral Pathway Assessment

BIOLOGICAL MODES OF VIOLENCE

Affective (Reactive)

Intense autonomic arousal

Subjective experience of emotion

Reactive and immediate violence

Internal/external perceived threat

Goal is threat reduction

Possible displacement of target

Time-limited

Preceded by instinctual behaviors to reduce the threat

Primarily emotional/defensive

Heightened and diffuse awareness

Predatory (Targeted)

Minimal/absent autonomic arousal

No conscious emotion

Planned/purposeful violence

No imminent perceived threat

Variable goals

No displacement of target

No time limit

Often preceded by private ritual to fuel narcissism/reduce paranoia

Primarily cognitive/attacking

Heightened and focused awareness



Behavioral Patterns of LATs

There is no clear profile of an LAT, thus traditional profiling is not effective. Yet, pathway behaviors are useful for early detection:

- LATs share more in common with mass murderers vs. GATs
- Behaviors and violence trajectory are similar
- Sense of **personal** grievance, but framed by moral outrage at some oppressed group
- strong ideological belief - expressed openly and with passion – “*the violent true believer*”
- failure to merge with extremist group due to erratic behavior
- dependence on “virtual” support groups – internet & social media
- failure in occupational or academic goals
- failure to form lasting intimate (sexual) relationships
- recent changes in thinking and mood

(Meloy & Knoll 2014; Hogan & Gill 2016)

Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol - TRAP-18



Proximal Warning Behaviors	%*
Pathway planning	80
Fixation	77
Identification	77
Novel Aggression	17
Energy Burst	8
Leakage	85
Last Resort	28
Direct Communicated Threat	22

Distal Characteristics	%*
Grievance/Morale outrage	78
Framed by ideology	100
Failure to affiliate	29
Dependent on virtual comm.	49
Unfulfilled occupational goals	55
Changes in mood & thinking	88
Lack of sexual-intimate bond	84
Mental disorder	41
Creativity & Innovation	29
Hx of criminal violence	30

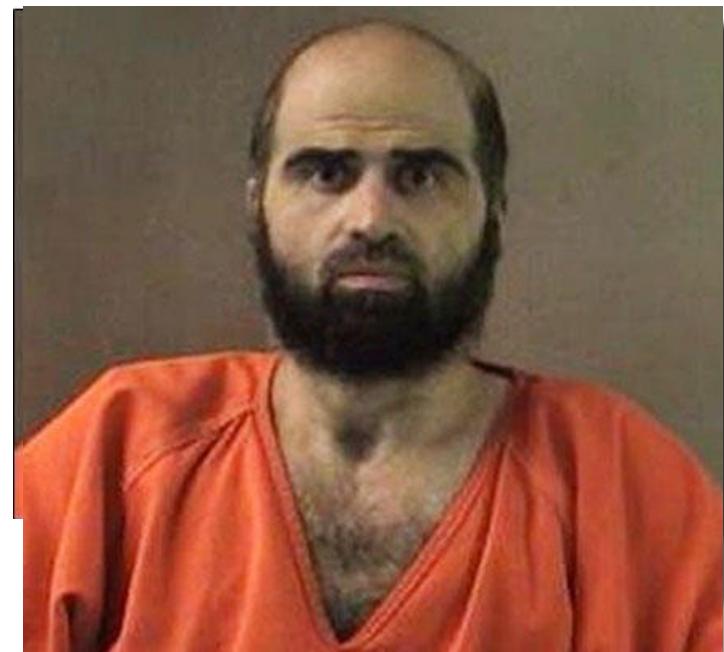
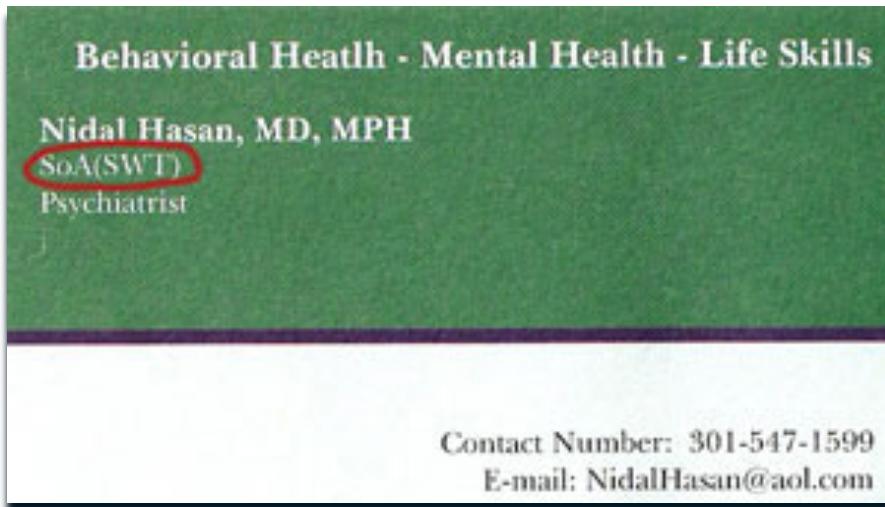
* Meloy & Gill (2016):

- N=111, lone-actor terrorists
- US & Europe, 1990-2014
- All convicted or died in act

Other Considerations

- Pathways becoming Runways (Meloy & Pollard, 2017)
 - Brief planning, partial preparation, then impulsive attack
- Evolution from Fixation to Identification can be a critical indicator to elevate threat management efforts in LAT case
- Fixation and degree of obsession leads to breakdown of social connectedness, social supports, and "social correction"

Maj. Nidal Hassan



SoA = Soldier of Allah

Timothy McVeigh



Los Angeles Times

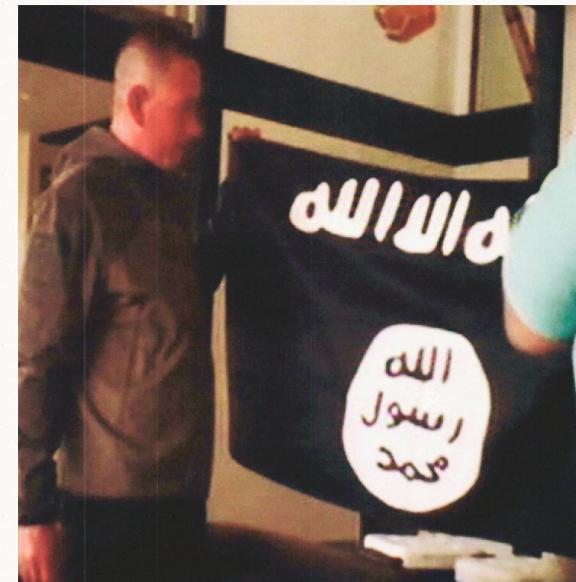
U.S. soldier pleads guilty to trying to help Islamic State

Aug 29, 2018

Sgt. 1st Class Ikaika Kang, handcuffed and wearing a Prison jumpsuit, spoke in a clear voice when he told a U.S. magistrate judge that he was guilty of all four counts against him.

Kang watched ISIS videos for **four to five hours each weekday and more on weekends**, the informant told agents in 2016. The informant "remembered feeling sick to his stomach, while Kang **laughed and insulted the victims**," the affidavit said.

Kang began **researching** Islam in 2014, couldn't wait to move to the Middle East to "**join the cause**" and was "**only in the military for a paycheck,**" the informant said.



How do we Assess Risk?

Structured Professional Judgment

- A method blending both **actuarial** risk factors and **clinical/professional judgment** towards developing a risk formulation that maximizes risk management.

*Prevention does not require Prediction →
Prediction is NOT the goal*

Goal = Identify & Manage risk behaviors in the short-term!

- An investigative guideline to set case direction
- Not a quantitative assessment instrument
- Medical corollary → heart disease



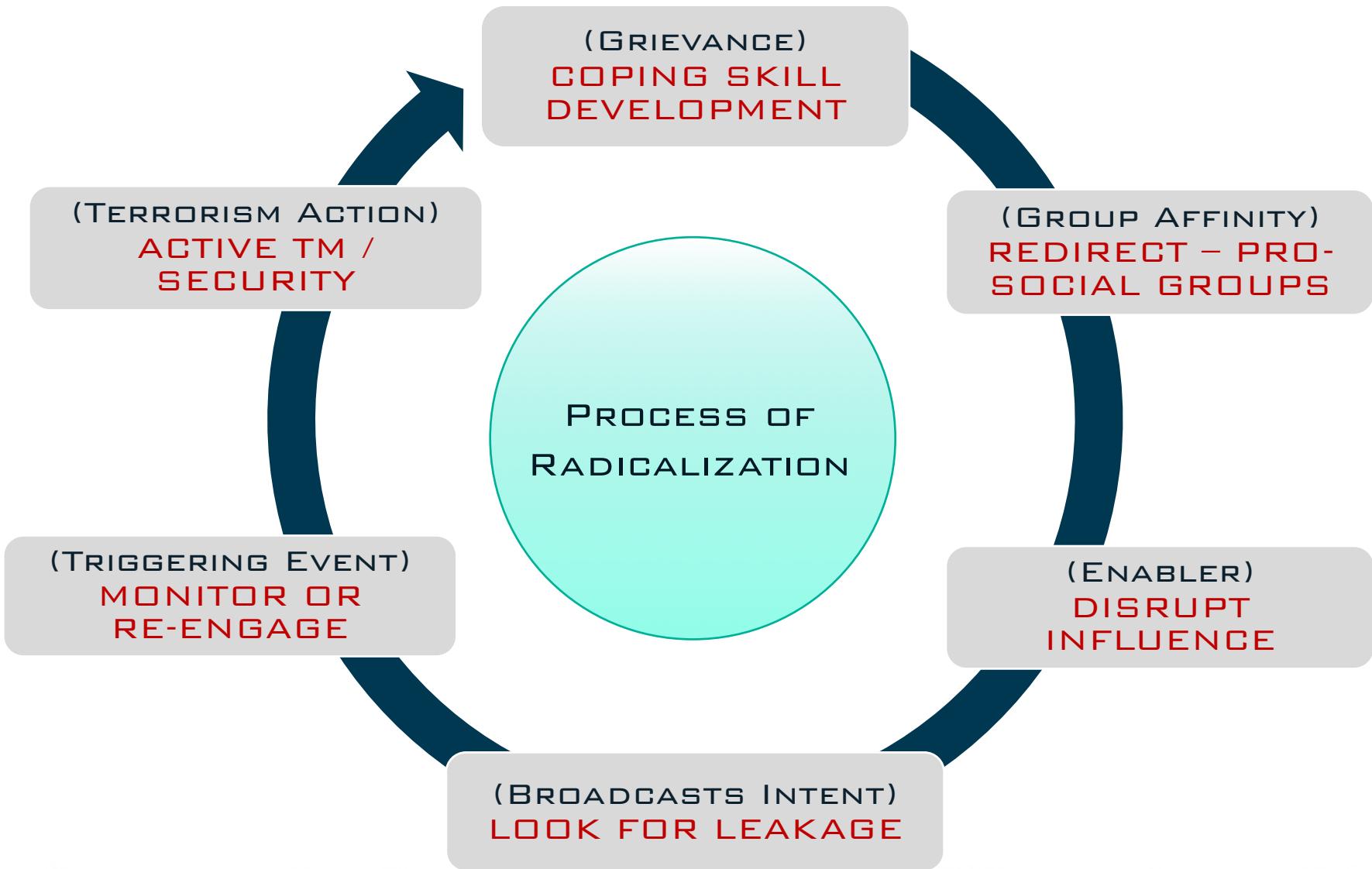
Mitigating Radicalization

- Radical Ideology does not equate to Radical Action!
- Most people on trajectory of radicalization are feeling a combination of disenfranchised, alienated, aggrieved.

Key interventions to stem radicalization:

- Earlier the better – “hit low to avoid high”
- Engage the individual
- Seek understanding before judgment
- Explore and leverage social supports
- Create and support a culture of no-tolerance for discrimination
- When radical ideology + radical action, escalate threat management considerations

Points of Engagement to Help Disrupt



The Way Forward

“In recent years terrorist psychology is no longer just about the question of why someone becomes involved, but it appears to be making way for new and exciting developments that encompass the entire “arc” of terrorism - from involvement, to engagement, to disengagement (Horgan & Taylor, 2011)

Lone-Actor Terrorists (LAT)

Key Take-aways about Lone-Actor Terrorism

Workplace Grudge vs. Terrorism → is a false dichotomy

Pathway planning + Fixation + Identification = Key variables

Leakage = is often the entry point into a case

Ideological rigidity (disgust with non-believers) is a key indicator that may warrant further inquiry

Traditional risk factors for violence do not characterize LATs

- Criminal history
- Criminal attitudes (psychopathy)
- Irresponsible behavior
- Drug use

Think your job is bad?



Thank You! Questions?

George Vergolias, PsyD

Medical Director

R3 Continuum

952.927.0184

george.vergolias@r3continuum.com

www.r3continuum.com

Resources

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