Policy Brief No 1

Understanding the Complex Causes and Processes of Radicalization

Background

In both public discourse and the academic literature, the crucial distinctions between violent and non-violent radicalization are not sufficiently and consciously appreciated always. Similarly, the processes and causes of radicalization have remained controversial. A widespread view is that economic factors, particularly poverty and inequality, are the driving causes of radicalization; political manipulation is often considered as a contributing factor.

Occasionally, social, religious, cultural and historical factors are also mentioned. But empirical research reveals that the causes, processes and types of radicalization are quite complex, defying any simplistic single-factor explanation.

Conceptual clarity, including precise definition of key concepts, is the critical first step toward sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon. *Radicalization* means the process leading to radicalism: an extreme shift in attitudes, beliefs and practices that depart significantly from the mainstream in society.

As a process, radicalization is necessarily dynamic because it depends on contexts and perspectives. What counts as radical in one context may become quite normal in another context.

In many cases, radicalization has to overcome *counter-radicalization* in the form of actors, forces and conditions in society that inhibit its growth and spread. In contrast, *disengagement* from radicalism is the withdrawal from radical action and renounciation of affliation to radical movements while still maintaining radical views and attitudes. *Deradicalization* entails renouncing radical action, views, attitudes, and affiliation to radical movements as well.

Even though radicalization may lead to violence, this is not always the case; hence, it is important to understand how and why radicalization may remain non-violent or end up in violence. It is also imperative to note that not all violent radicals resort to *terrorism*—the deliberate targeting of the innocent or order to cause widespread fear and apprehension.

economic historical
social psychological
ideological political
conditions

Causes of Radicalization are Complex

The many causes of radicalization include economic, social, political, psychological, historical and ideological conditions that provide both the context and the driving forces that lead individuals and groups to become radicalized. The comlexities of social causation makes it difficult to identify the precise ways and mechanisms that connect the various causes of radicalication to their outcomes. Despite the daunting challenges, accurate understanding of the causes of radicalization is indispensable for crafting appropriate policies and effective strategies of intervention. Treating the underlying causes of a problem is more effective than dealing with the symptoms.

Several approaches to understanding the causes of radicalization can be identified in the academic literature.

One approach emphasizes the *varieties* of the causes of radicalization by demonstrating that the **preconditions** that set the stage are not the same as the **permissive** factors that enable and movtivate actors, and and provide opportunities for radicalization. The various causes of radicalization operate at different *levels of causation.* For example, *structural causes* "affect people's lives in ways that they may or may not comprehend." *Facilitator causes* make radicalization "possible or attractive, without being prime movers." *Motivational causes* are the "actual grievances that people experience at a personal level, motivating them" to become radicalized. Finally, *triggering causes* take the form of "momentous or provocative events, a political calamity, an outrageous act committed by the enemy, or some other events that call for revenge or action."[1]

Depending on the different causes, several typologies distinguish different types of radicalization, including religious vs. secular, ethnic vs. political, individual vs. group, violent vs. non-violent, home-grown vs. foreign etc. Other typologies are based on the motivations of the radicalized individuals such as revenge, thrill-seeking, status affirmation, quest for meaning, identity, justice, fame, etc. Individuals play different roles as leader, ideologue, organizer, foot-soldier, recruiter, financier, etc.

Another approach to understanding radicalization focuses on the risk factors that *push* or *pull* individuals and groups towards radicalization. *Push risk-factors* include emotional vulnerability such as anger, alienation, and disenfranchisement. Individuals could be pushed into radicalization by their perception of the failure of all nonviolent alternatives, including political participation, civil society action, peaceful protest etc. Another push factor is the identification with victims of injustice, political repression, religious
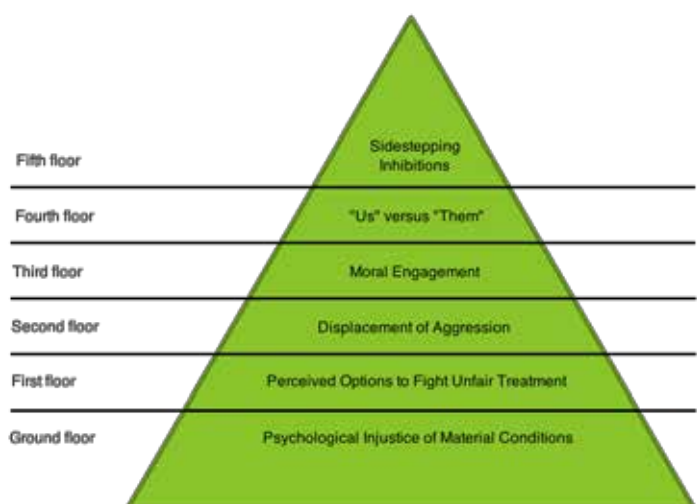
1   Bjørgo, T. (2005), Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Reality and Ways Forward, (London: Routledge), pp.3-4.

persecution, cultural discrimination, and economic deprivation. *Pull risk factors* include the rewards for joining a radical group in the form of material gains, sense of belonging to a "moral" or "religious" group, support and camaraderie from fellow radicals. Whether drawn by pull or push factors, individuals follow specific *pathways* of radicalization. A notable pathway is the "slippery slope" that gradually leads to radicalization through social ties with friends and family members who are already radicalized. Once drawn into a radical group, the new-comer is radicalized further via group dynamics, including shift to extreme views among like-minded individuals, extreme cohesion under isolation and threat, and competition for the same base of support that leads to a spiraling of radicalization in a sort of bidding war. Factionalisation, a common group dynamic, could also result in more extreme radicalization.

An insightful approach to comprehending radicalization highlights its evolutionary nature and the filtering that occurs as the push and pull factors exert greater and greater influence on individuals, and group dynamics escalate radicalization towards violence. Moghaddam employs the metaphor of "staircase to terrorism" to capture the incremental features and the filtering mechanisms of radicalization leading to violence. On the ground floor, millions of people "perceive injustice and feel relatively deprived," but most people will do nothing about it, while some individuals out the millions of "the disgruntled population will climb to the first floor in search of solutions." On the first floor, individuals search for solutions to their adverse conditions. Continuing frustration at this level can push some individuals up to the second floor where their grievances may still not be solved, thereby leading to more anger and frustration, and hence more receptive to being "influenced by leaders to displace their aggression onto an *enemy*." Fewer individuals who are more likely to displace physical aggression onto the "enemy" will climb up the stairs to the third floor, where "a gradual engagement with the morality of terrorist organizations" transforms some individuals to begin "to see terrorism as a justified strategy." On the fourth floor, the individuals are recruited into terrorist organizations and are further transformed to accept categorization of "the world more rigidly into 'us-versus-them' and to see the terrorist organization as
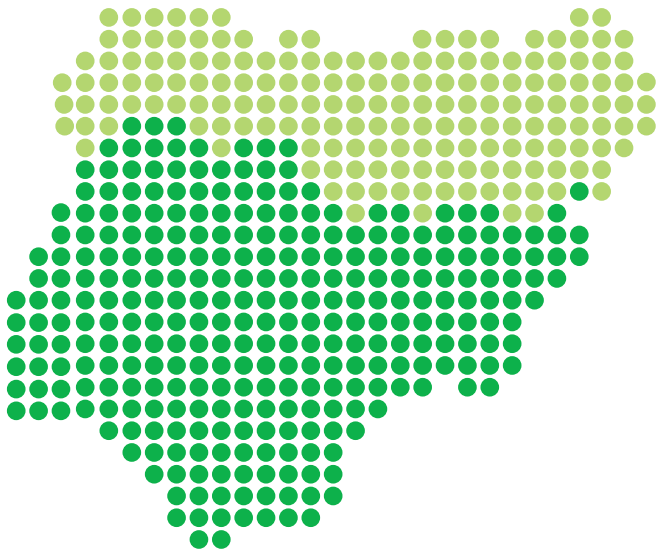
legitimate." All is now set for some individuals to step up the stairs to the fifth and final floor, where "specific individuals are selected and trained to sidestep inhibitory mechanisms that could prevent them from injuring and killing both others and themselves, and those selected are equipped and sent to carry out terrorist acts."[2]

Without worrying about the academic subtleties and nuances of the various approaches, useful insights can be drawn from each. Analysis of risk factors that push or pull individuals and groups in different pathways suggests that radicalization should be understood not as a discreet one-time event, but as series of events that evolve incrementally through different stages. The complex model of causation highlighting several causes operating at different levels indicates the imperative to avoid the simplistic attribution of radicalization to one and only cause, such as economic, political, religious or other causes. Incremental escalation requires careful attention to the various issues, factors and motives that are salient at different stages. Policy interventions will be more effective if crafted appropriately and targeted specifically at particular causes, risk factors, levels, and types of radicalization, as well as the profiles and motivations of the radicalized individual or group.

2   F. M. Moghaddam, (2005), "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," American Psychologist, February-March, pp. 161-169.

Case-studies Reveal the Complexities of Radicalization in Northern Nigeria

This brief draws from three empirical case-studies that examine the complexities of the causes and processes of radicalization in northern Nigeria. Their key findings are consistent with the major thrust of the relevant academic literature. The three case-studies investigated 1) childhood experiences and youth radicalization 2) radicalization of *almajirai*, and 3), gender dimensions of radicalization.[3]

Childhood and Youth Radicalization

The case-study on childhood experiences and youth radicalization is based primarily on extended ethnographic field research in a Hausa farmstead in the 1970s-1980s, and on fieldwork in the 1990s on youth in metropolitan Kano. The case-study searches within children's experiences of growing up for any possible indicators and processes that might lead an individual to later radicalisation.

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3   See the main reports by 1) Murray Last, (2014) An Inquiry into Possible Factors Contributing to Radicalization in Childhood and Youth in Northern Nigeria; 2) Zainab Usman, Sherine El-Taraboulsi, Khadija Gambo Hawaja, (2014) Gender Norms and Female Participation in Radical Movements in Northern Nigeria; and 3) Yahaya Hashim and Judith-Ann Walker, (2014) Radicaliciliztion, Counter-radicalization, and De-radicalization of out of School Almajirai of Northern Nigeria: Perception vs. Reality. NSRP Project on Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization, & De-radicalization in northern Nigeria, NSRP, Abuja,

Among the major findings are:

- The key elements in the experiences of northern Nigerian childhood include a deep sense of justice (*adalci*) and respect (*girma; mutunci*). Both parents and peers inculcate the notion that endurance, toughness, patience and self-restraint are worthy values that children should cultivate. Children are not usually beaten even if they behaved badly: other children's long-term disapproval and ridicule *(ba'a)* and shame *(kunya)* could be enough punishment for misbehaviour.

- In the countryside, where police are absent, young boys are expected to defend their environment, whether against armed robbers or dangerously armed people: as a group they are ready to kill the intruder. Violence is the domain of the young; elders use their brains, not their bodies, to reprimand their subordinates.

- Migration from rural to urban areas is a key experience that could lead to radicalization. In this context, a father's injustice becomes particularly unforgivable, and can lead to a son's very angry withdrawal to a big city where he needs not only shelter and food but also companionship.

- A migrant youth in urban areas might join criminal and semi-criminal gangs, but could also follow any one of the several radical Islamic preachers who have gathered disciples within the big cities.

- Parental 'neglect' is not a salient feature in youth radicalization. More significant are the new youth sub-cultures that have been developing within the great cities.

- The size and density of today's cities make it impossible for the local authorities to carry out the old-style surveillance against religious or political subversives. Until the 1970s, radical Islamic groupings located themselves far out on the edges of emirates where central governments could ignore them. But similarly

> extreme and vigorously proselytising sects have now set up, as never before, within urban areas where they clash with police and other established authorities.

- The emerging radical Islamic groups thus become a focus for those with both a quest for radical reform and a readiness to assert the truth of their ideals through violence on others.

Almajirai and Radicalization

Almajirai is the Hausa term for pupils who attend traditional Qur'anic schools *(tsangaya)* in Northern Nigeria, and depend on charity and street begging for their survival. *Almajirai* are commonly seen as the default recruitment pool for any number of deviant gangs, perpetrators of ethno-religious conflict, and most recently the JAS insurgency. In contrast to the common perception of *almajirai* as potential recruits into radicalization, the findings from the case study on the *almajirai* reveal that the fundamental ethos of Qur'anic education, especially the centrality of obedience to authorities, inhibits the radicalization of *almajirai*. But recent changes within the system are increasingly making the *almajirai* vulnerable to many temptations, including radicalization.

The case-study on *almajirai* was conducted through ethnographic research, using in-depth interviews to collect primary data in six states (Jigawa, Borno, Kano, Katsina and Zamfara). A sample 37 interviewees was drawn from a population of 370 Islamic Scholars and Opinion Leaders, including teachers and proprietors of Qur'anic schools. 80 *almajirai* were selected and interviewed. Some of the interviewees reside in urban settings while others are located in peri-urban and rural areas. The *almajirai* interviewed include young migrants from rural areas who had lost touch with their communities and had not been home for an average of 5 to 10 years.

Despite their long separation from home, in-depth ethnographic interviews with *almajirai* reveal a very human picture of young men with dreams, heroes, role models, hopes, fears and a strong desire for self-improvement through Islamic and modern education. Other key findings include:

- Asked if they would like to have modern education *(boko)*, 52% of the 68 valid answers said yes, 10% said no, and 38% said they are currently attending one, or had once attended a modern (boko) school. Most of those who once attended *boko* school reported that they would like to return to school. The positive attitudes toward *boko* among the *almajirai* indicate clear divergence from a core component in JAS ideology.

- When questioned about their views on public authority (government), about 68% of the valid responses said they see and experience government positively, 15% said they do so negatively, and 17% said they are indifferent to government. However, when asked if they will want government to help them, 98.6% said yes. On the type of help they want from government, 38% of the valid answers said they want provision of basic social amenities, while 24% said they want the construction of classes and modernization of their school structure. Another 9% wanted salary for their teachers.

- Still on the issue of leadership, when asked who their role models are, 31% cited their teachers and parents as role models, and 23% cited traditional Islamic scholars (such as Sheikhs Dahiru Bauchi and Ibrahim Nyass). Another 28% cited politicians and public figures such as Governor Sule Lamido of Jigawa State, Governor Abdulaziz Yari of Zamfara State, Governor Rabiu Kwankwaso of Kano State, and Mallam Sanusi Lamido Sunusi, former Governor of Central Bank of Nigeria and now Emir of Kano. About 12% cited the Prophet Muhammad, 3% cited non-traditional scholars while the final 3% said they had no role models.

- Interviews with Islamic scholars and opinion leaders reveal their common view that there is nothing in the *almajiri* system of Qur'anic education that is inherently radicalizing.

One interviewee stated that *almajirai* will not participate in violence because they know hell-fire is the punishment for shedding blood of the innocent. One informant sums up the common view among the teachers of *almajirai:* "Almajiri doesn't know anything other than seeking Islamic Knowledge and being respectful so that he can achieve his aim."

While the diversity in the *almajirai's* attitudes and opinions is quite interesting, the more salient point is the clear disagreement with the core components of JAS ideology. Many *almajirai* hold positive attitudes toward *boko,* accept and admire non-religious public authorities, the very things that JAS holds to be religiously forbidden.

Clearly, the *almajirai* are not simply a homogeneous group of youngsters waiting for automatic radicalization. Their attitudes and hopes are hardly those of a ready-made army of foot soldiers for the JAS insurgency. The harsh and debilitating conditions of their existence have undoubtedly made the *almajirai* more vulnerable to radicalization. But In light of the complexities of the causes and pathways to radicalization, that vulnerability alone is neither automatic nor sufficient reason for radicalization.

Women's Participation in Radicalization

Available literature has lamented women's victimization and celebrated their struggle for empowerment but has shied away from the other side of the coin: women who participate in radical movements, seeking empowerment by different means. How do women participate in Islamist radical movements in Northern Nigeria?

Primary data for this study was obtained from qualitative interviews, group discussions and participant observation across four states (Kano, Kaduna, Borno, and Plateau) as well as FCT-Abuja. Data was also obtained from transcription of videos released by JAS, and media reports on women who escaped from JAS camps. Respondents included men and women who represent a wide range of experiences.

Echoing the importance of family ties as a pathway into radicalization, this case-study discovers that the most common pathway of women's entry into JAS as is through marriage– either marrying men who become radicalised afterwards, remarrying known JAS members upon the death of their husbands, willingly marrying men who are known JAS members, or being abducted and forced into 'marriage' with members. Other key findings are:

- The women's radicalization is directly connected to the wider context of gender roles in Nigeria. A societal and cultural expectation of women to be dependent on men for their livelihood compelled women to become part of JAS once their husbands are active members of JAS.

- Thus, some women choose to be active participants in JAS, ideologically convinced and operationally involved in several roles. Apart from domestic chores and providing companionship to their husbands, women serve as *logisticians* who carry money and weapons to various JAS cells. As *recruiters,* they seek out new members typically by exploiting family ties or other personal relationships. Increasingly, women have also assumed the role of *suicide bombers, fighters and operational leaders* who carry weapons during combat. But these are still fewer than men.

- But many women do not join JAS because of ideological motivation but are forced by circumstances and/or family members. Abduction is a common pathway of coercing women into JAS. Coercing women into the group is driven by the imperative of having women in a supportive capacity to the men, who are usually husbands who rely on women for utilitarian purposes. Unlike the active participants, coerced women participants undertake these roles under duress, without necessarily becoming radicalised.

- Muslims in Northern Nigeria hold deep distrust and widespread fear of Western military domination and cultural imperialism, particularly from the United States. Since

women are regarded as custodians of morality and values, extremist groups such as JAS claim to 'shield' Muslim women from these external and 'corrupting' cultural influences.

- Women are held captive within a bigger identity crisis in Northern Nigeria where individuality, especially that of women, clashes with interpretations of Islamic injunctions that seek to impose collective uniformity. But given the diversity of Islamic groups (*Sunni, Shia, Sufi* etc.), gender roles are based on a group's doctrines that often confine women to economic dependency on men.

Clearly, conceptions of unequal gender roles that subordinate women to male authority add significant dimensions to the complexities of radicalization, without totally eliminating women's agency. Wives of senior JAS commanders play a leadership role over other women, reflecting the larger society's gender norms that expect women not to act or exist as individuals, but as supporters of their spouses

Lessons and Policy Implications

The complex processes and the multiple dimensions of radicalization require policies that are appropriately targeted at different stages in processes and the multiple causes.

Addressing the Complex Processes of Radicalization

- Security forces and government agents responsible for combating violent radicalization should never resort to collective punishment of communities in which radicals are embedded. At all times, security forces and government agents should adhere scrupulously to the highest standards of professional conduct, comply strictly with all the rules of engagement, and should do their utmost not to alienate, or threaten, the civilian population.

- Reported cases or complaints of misconduct by security forces or other agents of government should be expeditiously investigated and addressed in transparent, fair and decisive. The relevant authorities should quickly resolve existing allegations against security personnel, while also addressing the grievances of the security personnel to enable them perform their duties with dignity.

- Upholding the rule of law should be regarded not only as the right thing to do morally, but also as the reliable way of ensuring community support. Impunity is not simply hazardous morally; it is also counter-productive operationally. The incidents of human rights violations by security forces, if unchecked, could serve as trigger for revenge by aggrieved parties. Zero tolerance for lawless conduct and impunity should be considered an indispensable component of the strategy of combating violent radicalization.

Addressing the Multiple Causes of Radicalization

- Reform of the institutions for maintaining internal law and order should increase their capacity for early monitoring and detecting radicalization and security threat. This may require changes or additional training of security forces to enable them to effectively respond to twenty first century challenges. Inclusion of more women within the rank and file, and the recruitment of locals who know the cultural nuances in localities facing security threats would enhance operational effectiveness and reduce potential misunderstanding and violations by security forces who are 'outsiders' to a particular community.

- Giving people a greater stake in the political system can reduce the potential of unaddressed political grievances leading to radicalization. Governance deficits and lack of political participation can lead to the perception that there are no alternatives to violent

retaliation—a major pathway to radicalization. More representative and accountable local governance is needed for effective service delivery and strengthening popular confidence in the capacity of the political system to respond effectively to the needs of citizens.

- Government should encourage community leaders, especially prominent religious figures to develop strong counter-radical narratives and use mass media to disseminate them widely. These counter-narratives must:

  o include the diverse religious perspectives and voices

  o present moderate religious views, stress the importance of inter-faith harmony within the context of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Nigeria

  o Discourage gender-based discrimination and oppression.

- Government and its development partners, including international agencies, should increase the financial support, training and capacity building for faith-based community and women organizations and civil society to play more active roles in articulating and disseminating counter-radical narratives.

- Policies addressing the *economic challenges* that contribute to radicalization should emphasize sector-specific and labour intensive economic activities that can generate jobs with a high youth and female components. Rural industrialisation needs to be *de-centralised* to where the labour and the willingness to develop new skills are available. The machinery should be small-scale, requiring more skills and designs rather than simply facilitating mass production.

- To counteract radicalization stemming from rural-urban migration, the countryside should be enabled to retain its young men and gives them a livelihood that is as good as, if not better than, what a big city can offer. In addition to farm-work, possible jobs might include food processing, training to repair and maintain farm machinery and implements, and for recycling plastics and other reusable materials.

- Providing infrastructure in the rural areas is critical. Network of feeder-roads should be constructed for effective transportation, marketing and distribution of rural products. Logistical support should include reliable supply of electricity, access to appropriate information and communication technologies, banking and innovative financial services. This is another area for the government to attract the support from international agencies and development partners.

- In addition to creative jobs, life in the countryside should be made entertaining by encouraging local sport and athletic activities, and formation of video clubs for showing documentaries, training films, public enlightenment, social and economic benefits of women's empowerment, the costs of violence and the benefits of peace, and uplifting news of success stories from rural areas. Other steps can promote clubs and associations that might serve as <u>local</u> fora for discussions and debates, thereby generating an intellectual excitement in which the countryside's young could participate.

- But above all there have to be opportunities for the young to find meaningful work and environments where they can find friends and support that is not only legitimate but constructive for their careers, and providing the extra help to use their energy and ambition in ways that will benefit them and wider society.