

Transcript: Radicalization Explored

Caroline Netchvolodoff: My name is Caroline Netchvolodoff, and I'm vice president for education at the Council on Foreign Relations. I'm here today with Farah Pandith, an adjunct senior fellow at CFR who previously served as special representative to Muslim communities at the U.S. Department of State, among many other positions. We're going to discuss how people become radicalized to join terrorist groups and commit terrorist acts and how the United States and other societies can best respond. Farah, thank you for being with us today. What are the kinds of causes that motivate people to commit terrorism, whether on their own or as part of an organized group?

Farah Pandith: In the fifteen years or so since 9/11, there's been a lot of research around what motivates young people to join a terrorist group like Al-Qaeda or ISIS. The central piece that is motivating young millennial Muslims is the issue of identity. In a post-9/11 world, they're asking themselves questions that the generation before didn't ask. "What does it mean to be modern and Muslim?" "How can I understand the difference between culture and religion?" Identity and belonging are as old as time. Tribes, cultures around the world understand that to belong to something that motivates you to make you feel like you're someone rather than just an individual actor is, you know, a central component to human emotional connectivity. What these terrorist groups have been able to do is lure in young people to make them feel like that sense of belonging only can come from them.

CN: What are some examples from the United States, from Europe, and from elsewhere of this phenomenon taking place?

FP: Each radicalization process is different from another. Sometimes people get radicalized online. Some get radicalized through the connectivity with peers in local communities. Sometimes it's books or articles that they've read. So whether you're looking at a young person in Marseilles or in Malaysia or Tunis, you're seeing this evolution of learning through the ideology of the extremist groups. We know that these young people are under the age of thirty, that they're digital natives. And we know across the world that young people are connecting to ideas from their peer group. There is a real interest in building a belonging that is bigger than themselves. And so these groups—whether it is Boko Haram, the Taliban, the so-called Islamic State, Al-Qaeda—

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have offered these young people a way to have purpose, to have belonging, and to showcase their identity in a real way.

CN: What do we mean when we talk about individuals becoming radicalized or committing terrorism? And what are the steps in this process, what you refer to as sort of a conveyor belt that these young people find themselves on? What does that look like? And where does it lead?

FP: Anything that begins with a young person who is asking questions about their identity is not cause for concern. Every young person asks “What is the purpose of my life?” When they’re beginning to think about themselves as apart and distinct from their communities in such a way that begins to move them to feel the belonging and the influence of the ideology of an extremist group, that is the movement that I have described as moving along a conveyor belt.

CN: You’re isolating your thinking from your family, from your community.

FP: And you’re moving yourself into a mindset that suggests that in order for you to live out your identity, you can’t belong in the system you used to be a part of. You need to belong to a system that is different. And that system that makes sense for you now, as you’re moving emotionally forward, is the system that a terrorist organization has prepared for you. Extremists, whether you’re the so-called Islamic State or Al-Qaeda, you are converting people one-on-one.

CN: Or whether you’re the IRA or a terrorist group in a different part of the world.

FP: Any kind of terrorist organization recruits one-on-one. You don’t do mass conversions. “Where is that person vulnerable? We’re going to give them answers to their questions that make sense and motivate them to continue to want to get answers from us on these questions.” Whether somebody is moved by politics, or moved by religion, or moved by whatever angst, terrorist groups lure them in through that channel and give them answers that make sense for their particular need. Moving a young person from just asking questions, and being angst-ridden to a place where they’ve bought in wholesale the ideology,

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they're now moving toward wanting to be a part of that extremist group because of the belonging. And now they have bought into the idea that violence in the name of this ideology makes sense.

CN: To the extent that young people in that age cohort used to derive that sense of belonging from their local church and synagogue and mosque, has that played a role, in that that doesn't happen anymore? Is that because of the digital age that they are now looking to the world at large for that sense of belonging?

FP: So millennials are millennials, no matter where in the world you are, no matter what country you're living in, whether you're in the city, or you're in a village. And with the social platforms, it is an entry point for many of these young people to find like-minded thinkers that move them along this so-called conveyor belt towards radicalization. And it is important that, as policymakers, in order to fight back against the ideology of the extremist, we must get peer influencers that make sense for these young people. And so, whether it's a graffiti artist, a hip hop artist, or an athlete, these young people can connect with them. We have one-fourth of the planet that is Muslim. Sixty-two percent of that number is under the age of thirty. And that is the number from which the bad guys recruit. The answers to stop recruiting are both available and affordable. We know we need to scale up authentic, credible voices at the local level. We know we need to do it 24/7 at the pace that the extremists are doing it.

CN: When you say "we," who are you referring to?

FP: Communities around the world. This isn't just a problem that governments have to solve. This is a problem that every citizen in the world needs to get engaged in.

CN: It's politicians. It's journalists.

FP: It's businesspeople. It's philanthropists. It's regular citizens. It's teachers. It's peer groups. Young people themselves have a lot of ideas on how to stop their peers from finding this appealing.

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CN: Interesting.

FP: And what we have failed to do is to take the ideas of young people and to scale them up.

CN: I mean, this is incredibly fascinating. It's the same principle as entrepreneurship.

FP: We need to seed a lot of ideas to see which ones sprout to defeat the appeal of the extremist ideology. What we are unfortunately seeing are gigantic statements from governments that say they want to defeat these terrorist organizations, and they're only interested in looking at the military or law enforcement side of things. They aren't looking at the pieces that have to do with ideology.

CN: Is this why the use of the term "radical Islamic terrorism" is such a sensitive one and causes such a problem for not just politicians but for journalists, for teachers, for businesspeople, for everyone?

FP: Everybody is trying to find a term that makes sense. And it's been fraught with difficulties since 9/11. When you see newer terminology that is connected to political constituencies here in America, that suggests that there is an "us" and "them." That suggests that Muslims don't belong in America. That suggests that Islam was not a part of this nation since the very beginning. We must be a nation that abides by our constitution. We must have the legitimacy that comes forward with all of the rights that are embedded in our constitution: that everyone is equal, that everyone can pray freely, that mosques and synagogues and churches and temples can exist side by side in America, that you can wear a turban or a bindi or a cross or a yarmulke or anything else to demonstrate who you are in any way, shape, or form without problems. When we begin to disrupt that and erode what is in our Constitution—

CN: What's in our national DNA.

FP: Correct—it gives the extremist groups an opportunity to tell their potential recruits "You see? America, in fact, hates Islam and hates Muslims,

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and there's no way that you can be both Western and Muslim." This isn't about being P.C. It's about protecting our nation and doing all that we can to stop extremist groups from trying to pretend that they are defining our country in a way that is not correct.