

THE DOUBLE-FACED CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

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Abstract: *In a tumultuous 21st century, our societies face old threats that are updated to the modern times and terrorism is one of them. As the self-claimed “Islamic Caliphate” in Iraq and Syria attracts more and more individuals from our own societies, we start to wonder what is it that actually drives people towards joining an extremist religious view of the world. In this context, the concept of “community” expressed by the need that we, humans, feel for belonging to a certain group represents a key topic to be analyzed in the fight against terrorism.*

The concept of “community” is discussed on two levels: at first, the way in which a “virtual community” attracts people towards extremism and the game that terrorist propaganda plays in creating the fantasy of such a community; secondly, the role that physical communities can have in defending their members against the terrorism distraction. This paper argues that, in the struggle that our society has shown against terrorism, we might have had an important asset waiting for us to use it correctly – the power of a united real community. Bringing together the two levels of our discussion, this research points out that strengthening our communities at home leaves little place for the terrorist propaganda to reach its audience and attract people into its game.

Keywords: *community; terrorism; security; radicalization; extremism*

1. INTRODUCTION

As human beings, we are conducted by the need for identity and belonging, the need to feel part of a larger group, family, community with whom to share our common values, ideals and lives. In this way, the role of the community in our lives is undeniable and double-sided: as well as the community that influences our lives, we, as individuals, influence the community that we are part of. Although it is characterized by ambiguity and polysemy, the community concept is highly used in the practice of social sciences, being embedded in various approaches to understanding older or more recent social phenomena that are emerging in the world we live in. But the evolution of our world, the development in terms of technology and communication has somehow left behind the physical communities that we were used to and, at the same time, it left us with a feeling of alienation and lack of common identity.

The trick of “a virtual community” that brings together all the true believers from all the corners of the world at the distance of a right or left clicks is just a strategy, though clearly a successful one, of terrorist organizations like ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Belonging to the “virtual community” promoted by these organizations have attracted more and more recruits who either couldn't identify themselves with the real communities back home or they were marginalized and couldn't find their places and a common identity to identify with.

In this article, we aim to understand the most important characteristics of physical and virtual communities in order to identify the possibilities for preventing terrorist radicalization through measures aimed at increasing community involvement in the preventive dimension of the phenomenon.

2. DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

The idea of the community impact on radicalization and vice-versa is not new, but the study of this double-sided influence has had a negative preponderant note, with sufficient studies that relate to the negative impact of already ideologically labeled membership groups. Communities have been poorly addressed, however, in terms of the positive effect they can have on preventing the radicalization process. The

first sociological reference to the concept of community belongs to the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies who differentiated in 1887 the notion of community (*Gemeinschaft*) from the notion of society (*Gesellschaft*) based on the social organization. From his point of view, both types of communities can coexist simultaneously, with the observation that most contemporary social pathologies have arisen following the disengagement of the individual from the spirit and the community world.

This differentiation made history quickly, winning both followers and adversaries: T. Geiger (1931) proposed the abolition of the term, while R. Nisbet (1966) considered it to be one of the main categories of sociology (Bagnasco, 147). Indeed, the concept of community is difficult to incorporate in categorical empirical studies, but it is a tool of immense value in understanding the specific social imagery, which are hard to be translated into figures, but with the potential of huge inter-influence for members (Busino, 1978, *apud* Bagnasco, 2009). Given this fact, we propose a theoretical, not empirical approach in order to understand the positive impact of these communities on the radicalization process.

From a psychosocial perspective, Adrian Neculau (1997, 166) considers community to be "a social group whose members are bound by strong feelings of attachment, participatory behavior, and similar interests." For the anthropologist Gheorghita Geana (1993:128) community is "a human social entity, whose members are connected together by the inhabitation of the same territory and by constant and traditional social relations, consolidated over time".

Apart from theoretical similar criteria for a social unit to be considered a community, one can usually find some community-specific features: the members of the group have similar faith and values; reciprocity in social relations (Pitulac, 2010); unity of blood, place or spirit, accepted as necessary (which can be terminologically found in concepts such as extended family, villages, local community, virtual community); common and mutual feelings that determine a common will to which individuals feel themselves bound; an organic, not mechanical, solidarity (Durkheim, 1893); spontaneous social relations, based on status, not contractual relationships (Maine, 1861); it differs from organizations because of the lack of organizational rigor (Neculau, 1997, 166).

Most community studies aimed at identifying models of social interaction, targeting restricted spatial communities such as villages or urban neighborhoods. These approaches are contemporarily

accompanied by innovative concepts such as the "local" proposed by Anthony Giddens in 1984 in his theory of structuration, defined as the physical settings associated with the typical interactions composing collectivities as social systems. Tudor Pitulac (2010) shows that the defining elements of a community are distinctiveness, the diminished size, homogeneity and self-sufficiency (in the sense that community has the ability to give its members almost everything they need). Today, rural or urban communities have distanced themselves from the initial sense of communication, so additional theorizations are necessary. In 1895, Anthony Cohen selected two important aspects from the definition of community, namely that members have something in common with everyone else, and that this fact fundamentally distinguishes them from members of other social groups. So Cohen shifts the accent of the definition from structure (with important geographical accents) to culture, respectively on the symbolic manner of building a community. Accepting that community may be defined using other criteria then localization and structure was the first profound change of community's sociological paradigm.

This paradigm shift was soon followed in 1993 when Howard Rheingold published *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. While his arguments were not entirely convincing, they still managed to divide the specialists of the field according to opposing trends. Michael Gurstein (2000) revises this concept and proposes another one – *community informatics*: the application of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to enable community processes and the achievement of community objectives.

The most virulent critique of what we are calling today virtual communities refers to the impossibility of exercising the social control among its members. This is responsible for numerous skirmishes of social norms found at virtual communities such as radicalization, verbal violence, diffusion of responsibility.

3. THE COMMUNITY AS AN ENVIRONMENT FOR RADICALIZATION

Terrorism is definitely not an easy concept to define and the variety of explanations, definitions and analysis of the topic prove as an argument. At the same time, there is little agreement in either the policy or scholarly communities on how to define terrorism. Schmid (2013:17) identified the common concepts and terms used in more than 200

definitions of terrorism, but there is no uniform definition among the databases or the international legislation. In fact, Schmid (2013:20) underlines that the lack of clarity and consensus with regard to many key concepts (terrorism, radicalization, extremism, etc.) – ill-defined and yet taken for granted – still present an obstacle that needs to be overcome. However, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) released their own definition of terrorism and provided the opportunity for the researchers to limit their search according to specifics of the definition. To be coded in the GTD, the event must be (a) intentional, (b) entail some level of violence, and (c) the perpetrators of the action must be sub-national actors.

Alike terrorism, radicalization has been defined and explained in a variety of ways by researchers and policy-makers. Ladbury (2009:453) underlined that radicalization involves ‘the social processes by which people are brought to condone, legitimize, support, or carry out violence for political or religious objectives’, while McCauley and Moskalenko (2008:416) define radicalization as a change in belief, feeling, or behavior toward increased support for intergroup conflict. In order to prevent and counter radicalization, the Netherlands Intelligence Service focuses on the pursuit and support of changes in society that harm the functioning of the democratic legal order (AIVD, Netherlands intelligence service, 2004). The range in scope of different definitions of radicalization is quite broad.

The “virtual community” has been used as a trammel by the terrorist organizations and it has increased and transformed the threat and likelihood of radicalization. As expressed by Evan Kohlmann (2008), international terrorist organizations can now reach individuals in remote locations around the globe through online training manuals, audio and video recordings and chat forums. The regular publications of the terrorist organizations (Dabiq – now called Rumayya – for ISIS, Inspire for AQAP) and the online manuals and instructions for undertaking operations are just a few examples that have made the real contact or the physical presence in a terrorist training camp unnecessary and less profitable in terms of time, costs and the possibility to be identified by the security forces.

The majority of participants in an interdisciplinary research on community and terrorism conducted in 2013 in Australia, believed that radicalization was a process of moving beyond accepted social or community norms, and that both radicalization and extremism involved intolerance for the viewpoints of others to the extent of

universalizing and imposing one’s own truth claims by a variety of means. Among the analysis of researchers that have tackled the topic of terrorist radicalization there is the theoretical premise that some communities might possess certain characteristics that make the likelihood and/or rates of radicalization higher in those communities (Fishman, 2009, START Report). As the “virtual community” promoted by the terrorist organizations gains more and more territory, the real, physical communities are also in danger of radicalization. There are a few questioned that should be answered at this point: How can a community become a dangerous environment? How does radicalization take place within communities? What types of communities are more likely to turn to radicalization? What are the main factors that lead to radicalization within a community?

According to a START Report dating back to 2009, the participants from different fields and disciplines that were involved in the surveys conducted within the report believed that communities which experience exclusion, isolation or deprivation are especially vulnerable to radical messages. Therefore, according to the 2009 START Report, identifying and analyzing those communities should be a priority for research on radicalization. This paper also supports the argument that marginalized communities that experience relative deprivation (of resources, both financial and otherwise) and communities that have experienced significant social disruption represent an easy target for radicalization given the acidic environment that they have already developed. Similar to cancer, violence and terrorism need a proper environment to evolve and develop and isolated and deprived communities, provide the necessary conditions.

In the same way, identity communities - those communities that are not necessarily connected geographically but are connected ideologically or ethnically - may play an increasingly important role in studies of radicalization. A Diaspora community refers to any community that has been displaced or relocated (by choice or otherwise). Thus, many Diaspora communities within the United States and the European Union are ethnically, nationally or ideologically tied to another community in a different country.

Local communities, which are often ethnic or immigrant communities, provide the “cover” of cultural and economic support for all members of the community, of which terrorists take advantage. However, the investigation and interrogation of members of these communities by police brings

with it a number of: language barriers prohibit effective communication and trust between immigrants and police; immigrants may fear that contact with problems police will threaten their immigration status; the lack of voting rights among immigrant communities limits their relevance in determining the priorities of police and local governments (Newman and Clarke, 2008).

4. THE COMMUNITY AS AN ASSET IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

A community-oriented approach to terrorism means counterterrorism objectives, policies and measures that are pursued through locally driven, co-operative initiatives, tailored to local contexts, to increase effectiveness (OSCE Paper, 2014:14). In the same way, a community-targeted approach to terrorism implies counterterrorism policies and practices that, driven by the security priorities of a state, target communities for intelligence-gathering and enforcement activities to detect suspected terrorists and thwart their activities, especially active plans for attacks (OSCE Paper, 2014:14).

In accordance with the arguments brought by this paper, Schmid (2013) outlines that the primary focus of many counter-radicalization efforts is not the terrorists themselves but strengthening and empowering the communities from which they might emerge. Community outreach is thus a key component of many de-radicalization and counter-radicalization initiatives.

In Canada, for example, agencies involved in these processes have met with community groups to discuss radicalization, with the aim of encouraging community and religious leaders to take steps to monitor and counter radicalization processes within their communities (Whine, 2009). American Muslim communities have also spoken out against intolerant and extremist ideas and have worked with authorities to counter terrorism and violence, often as translators and cultural experts (CACP Prevention of Radicalization Study Group).

A condition for transforming a community into an asset against terrorist radicalization is for that community (for example, the local Diaspora communities in the West) to be as interested as the host government in keeping their neighborhoods free of violent extremists. The results of an interdisciplinary research regarding communities and terrorism in Australia revealed the followings:

- bottom-up grassroots initiatives that empower communities to prevent violent extremism were perceived by the participants in

the surveys as more effective than top-down approaches;

- communities were also seen as better able to identify and support at an early stage at-risk individuals, leaving for the government to support such interventions;

- the need for a greater openness and dialogue between communities and governments about the risk, threat and consequences of extremism and terrorism;

- educating communities for social cohesion and alternatives to violence was central in the thinking of many participants in relation to what government can promote, as well as increased emphasis on cultural diversity, critical thinking and analytical skills in classrooms and other educational settings;

- the main ways in which government could be most effective in engaging communities were identified as prioritizing social cohesion by making it a reality rather than an aspiration;

- driving social cohesion through grassroots community processes rather than high level government policy;

- showing strong political leadership for multiculturalism;

- doing a better job at translational communication of government objectives around social cohesion and community strengthening;

- and narrowing the trust gap between at-risk communities and government

As it is also argued by this paper, the Australian research proved that all communities – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – were perceived by a large majority of participants to have key roles and responsibilities in preventing or mitigating the threat of violent extremism. The role of the general community was perceived by participants to revolve around normalizing cultural difference and community cohesion; encouraging intercultural contact, and reducing community insularity.

There were consistent views expressed by community participants that Muslim communities need to be more outspoken in countering the religious, cultural and political justifications for violent extremism, and in promoting alternative views that help counter the legitimacy of violent extremism as a response to dissent and dissatisfaction with domestic or foreign policy. However, a range of challenges in fostering such cooperation and dialogue were also identified by community-based participants. This included lack of trust in mainstream authorities; the perception that cooperative relationships between communities, police and security agencies were a one-way street; and disunity and disagreement between different

Islamic religious and cultural groups, which can make managing and progressing such relationships time-consuming and uncertain.

If the strategy and cooperation works out, the communities that represent a target for the terrorist organizations can also become the strongest asset in the fight against them. In this way, the strategy conducted by the governments should first look at the reasons that make a certain community a target for radicalization in the first place. Then, it has two options: to remove these factors or to use them in order to track down a terrorist organization operatives.

In terms of de-radicalization and counter-radicalization, communities in cooperation with their governments can play an important role in terms of: promoting integration: some countries (e.g. the U.S. and Canada) have sought to devise interconnected integration and security measures in order to counter radicalization and terrorism (Zimmermann and Rosenau, 2009). In the same way, community outreach: the primary focus of many counter-radicalization efforts is strengthening and empowering the communities from which radicals and terrorists might emerge (Schmid 2013). Key challenges are deciding which partners to approach for collaboration and who initiatives should target (Schmid, 2014).

5. ROLE OF COMMUNITIES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

Individual communities have been recognized by the governments as partners in the fight against terrorism some OSCE participating States are already developing community-oriented approaches to countering terrorism. These measures emphasize public support and participation in order to increase accountability and effectiveness through locally tailored and locally driven initiatives that draw on partnerships among a wide range of actors: traditional security practitioners, other public authorities, as well as civil society organizations, businesses and/or the media (OSCE Paper, 2014)

An example of such a measure is community policing which focuses on establishing police-public partnerships between the police, other public authorities and communities for proactive problem solving. In order to establish such partnerships, the police must be closely integrated into the community to strengthen public trust and confidence in their actions, particularly through policing by consent (OSCE, 2008). Community policing is considered by some OSCE states to be a tangible and durable contribution to broader

strategic efforts to prevent terrorism and counter VERLT¹.

Bearing in mind the realistic expectations, community policy as a measure should not be expected to function as a stand-alone tool to prevent terrorism and counter VERLT. It should be embedded in a comprehensive, coherent and human rights-compliant strategy to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and tackle conditions that are conducive to it (OSCE Paper, 2014).

According to OSCE, the potential benefits of community policing in preventing terrorism are: anchoring policing into respect for human rights and the rule of law; improving public perceptions of, and interaction with, the police; improving communication with the public on counterterrorism; increasing public vigilance and resilience; enhancing police understanding of communities as a basis to better engage and co-operate with them; helping to identify and address community safety issues and grievances; facilitating timely identification and referral of critical situations; and improving relations between the police and individuals and groups that have been hard to reach or not yet engaged with.

The level of trust and co-operation that already exists between the police and the public is a vital factor for the community policing to benefit the fight against terrorism. This is best achieved by showing great interest in knowing the communities that are part of the strategy, caring about their members and understanding their shared values and identity, and engaging communities on broader security and safety issues that are of concern to them, not necessarily in relation to preventing terrorism. As any other strategy community policing implies risks that should be taken into consideration and minimized. Among those risks, it is important to underline: the over-reliance on community policing; stigmatizing particular communities through selective engagement; securitizing their relationship with communities; using community policing to “spy” on communities; the risks to individuals engaging with the police; and unintentionally giving the appearance that the police support particular individuals or groups, which could either undermine the legitimacy of those in a position to exercise a positive influence within the community or alienate other community members or communities.

¹ VERLT stand for Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism.

It is important to mention that intelligence-led policing and community policing are complementary but distinct approaches. As the OSCE paper informs, intelligence may emerge as a by-product of effective community policing, where the public has developed trust and confidence in the police. Community policing, however, is not, and should not be, about purposeful intelligence-gathering for counterterrorism (OSCE Paper, 2014).

6. ROLE OF COMMUNITIES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

This paper suggests that, given the rapid transformation and evolution of terrorism in the past years exemplified by the fast development of ISIS - a reinvented and stronger form of al-Qaeda, the recommendations regarding the role of community in the counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization process should be tackled on two levels: the research and information-gathering level, on one side, and the operational level, on the other side.

According to the START Report (START, 2009), communities where such experiences are most likely should be a priority for research on radicalization. The report also underlines that, from a research perspective, having a comparison group to identify factors that may allow radicalism to surface in one community but not another, would be ideal. As such, studies that consider a range of different and varied communities, with differing levels of radical activity (high v. low), should provide new and important insights into which community characteristics are relevant to the occurrence of radicalization. Analyses built around community-level data collected from around the country over time allow for such insights.

For instance, the information gathered through community-policing should represent an important material for further research in the field of terrorism and radicalization. This may also fill the vacuum of empirical and tested data that is hard to reach for the academics in this domain.

At the same time, the most important results of community policing should be the policy against radicalization and terrorism that can be developed upon the experience and knowledge provided by this approach. However, it is important to keep this strategy as far from hurting the interests of the communities involved and losing their confidence.

In the same way, governments should take the right measures in order to strengthen its local communities and gain their trust. Let us not forget that marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion are terrorism's greatest allies and our worst enemy.

Radicalization has become a race for the hearts and minds of the people, and communities that are targeted by the terrorist organizations should be transformed into trustworthy allies for the governments before the other side reaches them. And for this to happen, our societies need to acknowledge the importance of united communities, of real communication, of shared values, hopes and identities. Along with the technological progresses of our world we have had the illusion of an unprecedented closure to each other, but we have become more and more alienated instead.

To sum up, the main aim of this paper was to raise awareness of the double role that a community can play in the fight against terrorism and radicalization. At the same time, it underlined the fact that governments should rethink their counter-terrorism policies and involve communities through developing a strong and trustful partnership with them before radicalization reach those targets first.

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