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The Case for Community-led Counterterrorism

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Community-led counterterrorism presents an untapped opportunity, as it recognises that religiously defined communities have a distinct role to play in responding to growing terrorist recruitment efforts in Europe and North America.

How is security against terrorism risk with a domestic origin to be created in an effective and sustainable way? The first instinct of many politicians, especially on the populist right, is to turn to the state and its diverse apparatus of police, military, and intelligence agencies as the canonical supplier of protection against violent risk. The so-called "travel ban" recently enacted in the United States is one example; the aggressive use of Section 44 stop and search powers in the United Kingdom is another.

But a different dynamic is often at play when terrorism incidents are in fact interdicted—a dynamic that the state and its agents are less keen to publicize:

- In 2008, British police arrested a man named Isa Ibrahim (né Andrew Philip), a convert to Islam, in Bristol, England, on the basis of information from the city's Muslim community. A detective leading the investigation stated, "He was an unknown. Without the information from the community we may not have got to him. Without the community's help he could have killed dozens of people."

- On February 17, 2015, three teenagers from the Bethnal Green neighborhood of east London boarded flights from London's Gatwick airport to Turkey with plans to join the Islamic State. Distraught, their families appealed for their return, but also criticized the Metropolitan Police for

failing to share information that might have allowed parents and close friends to have intervened and thereby prevented the girls' departure. Even if the state would have lacked the authority to act coercively against the girls, family members persuasion and appeals from close relations could have mitigated IS' allure.

- In 2004, a Jamaican-born imam, Abdullah el-Faisal, was convicted in London of solicitation to murder and provocation of racial hatred. Yet a group of Salafists from Brixton had already brought el-Faisal's propaganda in favor of terrorism to the attention of London police some years earlier. The same Brixton-based Salafist group had also attempted (unsuccessfully) to persuade the English-born Richard Reid—later to secure renown as the 'shoe bomber'—to reject el-Faisal's teachings.

In each of these examples—and they can be multiplied—a nongovernmental actor with ties of some sort to an alleged terrorism suspect independently took an action that mitigated the threat of terrorism without priming or prompting by the state. In almost every case, the sheer fact of daily interaction endowed the relevant actor with an epistemic or credibility advantage in comparison to the government. The resulting intervention, to be sure, was not always a success. Sometimes, it was not forceful enough. Other times, the state failed to follow through. But still, each intervention made a terrorist act less likely in expectation. At a minimum, these examples should provoke an investigation of what I call *the social production of counterterrorism*—social mechanisms external to state apparatus that are conducive to collective security against terrorism—to ascertain better its magnitude and significance, its causal predicates, and its policy entailments.

The social production of counterterrorism

Given the increasing claims made on behalf of state coercion and control, there is a pressing need to explore the potential theoretical or evidentiary foundations for an account of counterterrorism's social production. In a series of articles, I have identified three causal mechanisms that might underwrite the social production of counterterrorism: *ideological competition*, *ethical anchoring*, and *cooperative coproduction*. Each works by changing the costs of terrorist groups' action. The first two involve raising the cost to terrorists of transparency at the moment of recruiting; the last involves raising the cost of opacity downstream.

First, *ideological competition* is the possibility that social action can raise the cost of terrorism by providing substitute forms of social solidarity and vehicles of collective political action. The ideological competition mechanism works through the disciplining effect of competition, which, as in any other domain, conduces to higher costs and smaller operating margins. A terrorist organization seeking to attain certain policy goals or appealing on the basis of particular foreign policy disputes must compete in a market of social movements, both political and religious. The greater the competition it faces, the more onerous its task.

By populating the marketplace of ideas more densely, ideological competition raises terrorism's propagandizing and recruitment costs. At the same time, this mechanism is not free of risk: Perhaps a plurality of private associations that share the liminal political views—but not the penchant for violence—of terrorist organizations might instead hinder efforts to minimize terrorism risk. Beyond this enabling effect, an increase in the frequency of antiestablishment messaging by quietist but politically radical organizations may have the effect of legitimating terrorist organizations' calls to arms. Ultimately, the net effect of

ideological competition is an empirical question. The important point here is that ideological competition is at least a plausible candidate mechanism through which the social production of terrorism might work, even if its sign and magnitude may well vary according to circumstance.

A second way in which social action can prevent a person from even considering the possibility of violent political action is through the *ethical anchoring* effect of close affiliations. This mechanism hinges on the manner in which a network of friends, colleagues, and kin members can impose social pressure on an individual to eschew the use of violence for political ends. Political violence necessitates the violation of generally shared ethical commitments, which in turn can lead to breaches with otherwise close members of familial and social networks. To the extent that members of tight social networks reiterate and reinforce those ethical norms, with the implicit threat of ostracism and social sanction in the background, recruitment costs will be higher. And to the extent that these networks furnish affirmative role models, individuals will feel less need to seek out violent forms of social action in the first instance.

Finally, the possibility of *cooperative coproduction* focuses on the manner in which private individuals can substitute more fine-grained epistemic instruments for the blunter investigative methods government otherwise employs. Whereas ideological competition and ethical anchoring raise terrorist organizations' front-end recruitment costs by increasing the price of effective publicity, this third species of social action against counterterrorism is valuable because it increases the cost of opacity during the period in which a terrorist group seeks to render its activities immune from public, and in particular official, scrutiny.

For example, members of the public will be better able than the state to interpret ambiguous and fragmentary social cues from otherwise scattered and disconnected individuals in their social milieu. In the case of the Brixton Salafis, there is some reason to believe that they were able to discern the difference between individuals drifting toward violence, as opposed to those becoming more religiously committed but quietist. Even if the state can develop an extensive and deep system of intelligence collection through electronic data, undercover agents, and paid informants, it is still not at all clear that these sources have the same epistemic competence in situating nuanced social actions in context as members of a close-knit community. Moreover, there is always a concern that the state apparatus itself will be captured by elements with a xenophobic or racist agenda.

Conclusion

Assuming these causal mechanisms are fruitful, can the state promote them? To date, states have not seriously considered how efforts to promote beneficial social action intersect with other policy efforts. Nor have they seriously considered how efforts to promote counterterrorism's social production might interact with other security-related policies.

The place to start in thinking about how to promote the social production of security is programs like the U.K.'s Prevent and the U.S.'s Countering Violent Extremism. These have been subject to considerable criticism, and have not succeeded in the main in fostering healthy relationships between Muslim communities and law enforcement. Often, quite the opposite has occurred. These programs, though, could be reengineered (with considerable effort) to be less directive, more inclusive, and more enabling of a range fof different voices.

Moreover, any government's security strategy will inevitably have coercive elements. At times, these may work at cross-purposes with security's social production. A government that is serious about security (as opposed to mere security theater) will carefully examine any such conflicts, and do its best to mitigate rather than exacerbate them.

Striving to achieve these policy goals at a moment when political pressures bend in a quite different direction will require vigorous argument and clear thinking in the coming years.

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