NAS attack revealed tragic challenge of radicalization | Guestview

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Guest columnist
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Just over a year ago, <u>a Saudi military officer entered a building on Naval Air Station Pensacola and began shooting</u>. He had been in the United States for about 18 months as part of a well-established — and to that point, peaceful — military training program. Thirty minutes later, three Americans along with the shooter were dead and eight were wounded.

The Navy has <u>recently released a detailed report</u>. It concurs with earlier assessments that the attacker, Lt. Mohammad Saeed Al-Shamrani, had acted alone, had fallen into a "path to radicalization" and had slipped through detection because — in effect — tracing every trainee who does not raise clear red flags is exceedingly difficult. In response, the report offers a practical focus. It identifies procedures designed to reduce stress and alienation as well as track trainees.

Lost in the details is the larger question of radicalization. As the United States transitions to a new administration and confronts growing talk of national violence, such concerns are crucial to effective policy. As the 9/11 Commission found, the rushed Clinton to Bush transition increased U.S. vulnerability to attacks from radicals. In France, this week, leaders are debating a major new anti-extremist law.

What do scholars tell us about the radicalization behind last year's attack?

For me, the answers are more than academic. I have delivered occasional briefings to international officers at NAS Pensacola. At the University of West Florida, I teach courses on war, national security and the relationship between religion and politics.

There are several rules of thumb I try to convey to my students. In short, what often seeds radicalization is not religion or poverty or mental illness but a gap. The gap, in this instance, is between status and reality. Individuals typically believe that they or a community with which they identify deserve a certain level of respect or security or prosperity. If that standing is unfulfilled — or perceived to be actively declining — the ground is fertile for radical mobilization. "Terrorism grows out of seductive solutions to grievances," scholar Jessica Stern concluded after interviewing dozens of violent extremists.

Religion, for example, is a multiplier — not necessarily a cause — of radicalization. Every type of scripture and religious tradition has been used for both violence and peace. They provide a framework for identity, mobilization and sacrifice. Individuals may resort to violence if they feel

like their religious identity or community is under threat. Shortly after 9/11, for example, the political scientist Gabriel Almond observed that in the minds of radical fundamentalists, "Religion must be strong because its enemies are perceived as powerful and potentially overwhelming." Once accepted, religious radicalization can be deep and profound, but it often starts with a perception of loss and threat.

Poverty does not directly drive radicalism. Rather, what moves people is a feeling of loss or — to be blunt — that you deserve more than you have. In a study of Israeli Jews and Palestinians, for example, researchers found that support for violence was associated with perceived deprivations and "psychological resource loss." This is conservation of resource theory. When individuals feel that their status or their group identity is under threat, violence grows as an option for them. We have seen this for decades in the United States. Far-right and ethno-nationalist extremists remain the most likely source of any given U.S. terror plot or attack. Often, these ideologists claim that their country is being taken from them or that their community and culture are under threat. Alone, these feelings are usually insufficient to drive a person to violence. They become catalytic, though, when combined with feelings of personal stress or with extremist recruitment, either personally or indirectly, such as through the internet.

Unfortunately, radical violence is a statistical reality of the modern world. We can identify groups more likely to fall into violence, take action on mental health issues and track individual recruitment efforts. We can fortify likely targets. Still, identifying specific individuals before they manifest the signs of violent radicalism is almost impossible. Even under relatively calm conditions, in any given modern society, some percentage of extremists will exist, and some percentage of those will reach for violence. As one study of thousands of cities found, terror attacks are effectively universal. Further, predicting any given attack is a bit like predicting the development and path of a tornado. On the one hand, the conditions are possible to foresee. Precautions can be taken. On the other hand, without a crystal ball, any given event itself cannot be known and stopped.

At any moment, such violence is almost guaranteed somewhere in the world, and we know the broad factors contributing to it. Still, we cannot predict any given individual's behavior. Navy investigators concluded that the Pensacola shooter self-radicalized, and that the environment of the U.S. training likely contributed to this development; nevertheless, "no one person knew or could have known" this attack would occur.

The Navy's solutions for addressing this attack are sensible. What is beyond the Navy's control is the social and ideological environment of radicalization. For that, governments and societies need something bigger. They need to act with legislation and policy that identify and engage the communities and networks where extremist ideologies meet that perceived gap between status and reality.

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