

Australian, British, and US Approaches to Countering Islamic Extremists

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A Comparison of the Current Australian, British, and US Approaches to the Counter Radicalization of Islamic Extremists

By comparing the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), and Australian approaches to counter-terrorism with a specific focus on their counter-radicalisation strategies, this essay proposes to examine the underlying differences in national policy approach and to postulate which features offer the best options for suppressing the spread and popularity of Islamist terrorist ideology.

An effective and workable counter-radicalisation strategy has not yet been fully implemented in any of the three nation's approaches. Such a strategy would require a combination of soft and hard power programs, utilising the best options from each country's efforts. In order for the strategy to avoid exacerbating religious tensions, it would need to

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covertly undermine the legitimacy of radicalising Islamic doctrines whilst overtly presenting a public face of tolerance and support for moderated Islamic beliefs. A 'best option' scenario would see operations executed so that the outcomes are objectively measurable, thereby enabling program refinement and consequently satisfying public demands for progress in the promotion of social cohesion and harmony.

Each national approach is examined critically in light of current academic debate with reference to its overall strategic approach and efficacy. All three national approaches are then collectively compared in order to establish a theoretical optimal approach for dealing with counter-radicalisation.

Upon examination, the strategic counter-radicalisation efforts of each nation show differing degrees of polarisation toward either community-based soft-power or highly securitised hard-power approaches. Varying degrees of success have been experienced as a result of each system but qualification is problematic owing to the subjective measures of efficacy being applied. Despite this polarity, an overarching similarity exists with all nations possibly seeking to covertly shape Islamic belief systems under the auspices of conducting counter-radicalisation programs. By appropriately combining UK community based and US securitised counter-radicalisation approaches, similar to that undertaken in Australia, a symbiotically effective and workable strategy for curtailing Islamist inspired terror may be implemented.

National Counter-Radicalisation Approaches

The following is a summary and analytical comparison of the counter-radicalisation approaches of the UK, the US, and Australia.

UK Policy Approach

The UK approach to countering the spread of terrorist ideology is clearly stated in the 2011 'Prevent' section of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy,^[1] and further elucidated in the 2014 report on Counter-Terrorism.^[2] The Government's objective is stated as stopping the populace from becoming supportive of terror or joining the terrorist cause.^[3]

The overarching theoretical underpinnings of the UK approach assumes the existence of a connection between the societal level of backing for terrorist violence and a negative attitude toward a pluralist and fully functional multi-faith society. Populations who are averse to the idea of a tolerant and multi-faithed civil structure are those that inevitably fall into radical terrorism as a method of projecting the desired primacy of their chosen belief system at the expense of all others. By the Governmental strategy of promoting an integrative sense of national belonging, all Diasporas and religious groups become increasingly impervious to infiltration by terrorist ideology.^[4]

The UK counter-radicalisation strategy represents a movement away from punitive legal frameworks for dealing with cases of terrorist radicalisation toward a preventative framework that seeks to avoid radicalisation from occurring in the first place.^[5] The strategy also seeks to address non-violent organisations that legally provide extremist narratives and publications that hamper Government efforts to curb radicalisation in the community.^[6] The approach relies on interventions into the local social process of radicalisation. By addressing the social risk factors that contribute to radicalisation, utilising community intervention programs, the strategy seeks to promote an environment that is not conducive to the recruitment of vulnerable persons by radical factions.^[7] This method of responding will also indirectly dry up the fertile ground for Internet based overseas radicalisers, preventing them from gaining local influence using online forums to disseminate terrorist ideology.^[8] The strategy involves the operation of local-level programs designed to promote an inclusive atmosphere of public interaction. This facilitates the peer mentoring of at-risk groups by suitable figures that would act to guide them away from extremist ideologies.^[9] The strategy also involves other soft-power tactics such as the utilisation of non-government groups to design and mass disseminate counter-narratives in order to rebut radicalising online propaganda.^[10]

This UK 'Prevent' strategy also involves hard-power securitisation tactics aimed at curtailing the radicalisation process by implementing travel bans,^[11] the confiscation of passports^[12] and the revocation of citizenship for those

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attempting to undertake overseas terrorist activities or training.^[13] However, even in the securitised sphere, there is Government movement toward forming soft-power programs that aim to not just monitor returning or convicted jihadists,^[14] but also to seek their rehabilitation/de-radicalisation^[15] and subsequently to utilise them as credible witnesses decrying the evils of terrorist extremism.^[16]

Criticism of the UK Approach

A major criticism of the UK counter-radicalisation policy is that it predominantly focuses on a fringe element who is susceptible to radicalisation rather than the whole Muslim community, thence forth, it co-opts religious groups that are themselves radical, to produce a counter-radicalisation narrative.^[17] It has been noted that the Government unit (RICU) that has the central role in developing counter-ideological narratives simply is not adept at rebutting terrorist narratives. Consequently, it relies heavily on the sponsored work of Islamic groups to create culturally relevant counter-radicalisation dialogue on their behalf.^[18] Some of these co-opted non-violent Islamic groups are for the most part regarded as extremist in their doctrinal foundations themselves and are potentially the ones radicalising the Islamic community in the first place.^[19] By including these Islamic groups in the process, the work of de-radicalisation is essentially nullified^[20] in a manner that is analogous to having the fox guard the chickens. That being said, some authorities still maintain that these Non-violent radicals still represent active and beneficial partnership conduits for disseminating counter-radicalisation narratives.^[21]

This policy is designed to promote a feeling that Islamic Diasporas are integrated and included in the UK community, and hence, lull them out of their exclusivist fundamentalist mindsets. Essentially, this entrusts the Islamic community the responsibility for self-policing the counter-radicalisation issue.

US Policy Approach

The US approach to countering extremist ideology is broadly presented in the 2011 'National Strategy for Countering Terrorism'. In summation, the US focus could be defined as leaning strongly toward a securitisation stance.^[22] The overarching strategy seeks to cut off the lines of communication for radicalising messages emanating from terrorist organisations, seeks to disable or remove those promoting the ideologies and to stifle that dialogue with positive discourse regarding a free and accepting US society devoid of the evils espoused by radical extremists.^[23] The general approach has sought to distance the counter-radicalisation effort from the ideological challenge of Islamism, instead choosing to predominantly address the issue as a war on terrorist criminality rather than errant religious ideology.^[24]

The broadly defined strategy seeks to achieve these goals internationally through 'psyops' interventions by the armed forces/intelligence services^[25] and domestically through the department of homeland security and local enforcement agencies.^[26] There is currently discussion about creating a multi pronged, centralized approach aimed at formerly operationalising a counter-radicalisation program. However, it seems the planning stage is an extended one and no firm date has been set for completion.^[27] The likelihood of such occurring is seemingly small, as numerous impediments stand in the way in terms of structural, cultural, and legal complications inherent to the US system.^[28]

The White house has expressed a desire for greater community engagement in the counter-radicalisation process.^[29] Notably, the limited operationalisation of counter-radicalisation strategy that has occurred has been in the form of programs designed to engage and co-opt with local ethnic Diasporas and religious groups.^[30] However, these connections have been dual purposed and extensively utilised also to solicit intelligence from the group's members. The message being unintentionally imparted is that these communities are generally part of the problem unless they are effectively shaped and manipulated.^[31] Further to this, without intervention,^[32] at least some members of those communities will inevitably become radicalised and turn to terrorist behaviours.

Criticism of the US Approach

This predominant securitisation and emphasis on law enforcement within the current engagement-based strategy has been the major criticism of the US counter-radicalisation efforts to date.^[33] Some argue that the approach delivers

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nothing in terms of reducing radicalisation,^[34] and may in fact create further chasms between the Government and the Muslim community^[35] as it tends to infringe on civil liberties. Proponents however point out the policies effectiveness in having prevented all but a couple of attacks on US soil since the 9/11 attacks.^[36]

For the most part, the US counter-radicalisation approach is reluctant to engage with any religious causation of radicalisation^[37] preferring instead to keep the tradition of having state and matters of religion separate.^[38] Some argue that the US urgently needs to address Islamic ideology as a breeding ground for terrorism. It is argued the current practice of whitewashing the issue as “extremism” devoid a known etiology is only practiced so as to avoid provoking the Muslim diaspora. Arguably, this provocation may or may not actually be the likely end result.^[39]

It is evident that a clear and coherent post 9/11 engagement policy with Muslim partners never fully emerged in the US agenda aside from some small rumbling of activity as a by product of other programs.^[40] Clearly lacking also in the US approach are initiatives aimed not just at counter-radicalisation but also at de-radicalisation after the fact.^[41] The current engagement approach lacks centralised strategic planning,^[42] and would benefit greatly if a formalised written approach and guidelines were set on paper.^[43] A clear policy statement stating which Government department holds the primary responsibility for implementing a counter-radicalisation plan of action would also hold a great benefit.^[44]

Remarkably, the UK has a quite polar approach to that of the US whereby the co-opting of Muslims into the task of counter-radicalisation has constituted a significant part of the UK policy approach. This has arguably extended to the point of Government promotion of Muslim belief systems, and inadvertently, Islamist extremist viewpoints as well.^[45] Contrastingly, the US, as mentioned previously, only has scattered initiatives lacking an equivalent of the articulated approach espoused in the UK ‘Prevent’ strategy.^[46]

Australian Policy Approach

The Australian approach to countering ideological extremism is outlined in the 2012 ‘National Counter-Terrorism Plan’, under the heading ‘resilience’.^[47] It emphasises the importance of community driven ‘countering violent extremism’ measures to curtail radicalisation with the added need for rehabilitation programs for extremist offenders.^[48] The plan closely parallels the UK ‘prevent’ strategy in terms of its inclusion of soft-power structural features as well as its expressed desire to co-opt the Islamic religious community to facilitate the Government’s counter-radicalisation narrative.^[49] However, Similar to the US approach, it errs on the side of caution, in time-honoured fashion, seeking to firmly and appropriately apply security and law enforcement responses to prevent extremism as the first line of defence.^[50] To a lesser extent, it focuses resources on programs to promote social cohesion, partnering with religious, community and Government organisations as the spearhead of its counter-radicalisation program.^[51]

The Australian counter-radicalisation framework is operationalised via the formation of broad social policies at the federal level, police/community liaisons at the state level. The final operational component is the implementation via community partners at the local level.^[52] This array of community partnerships is designed to promote resilience to jihadist influence by building communal solidarity and by challenging jihadist ideology with the impartation of positive ideological options.^[53] In addition to these pre-emptive interventions, the framework is operationalised through strategies for disrupting online extremist media and for facilitating the rehabilitation of convicted Jihadi terrorists.^[54]

Criticism of the Australian Approach

The policy, although seemingly progressive and lauded as a step toward a more harmonious and non-discriminatory counter-radicalisation strategy, has received a deluge of criticism regarding the efficacy of its approaches. With no real objective scale to measure the ultimate effectiveness of the program, its appropriateness is often a matter of subjective conjecture.^[55]

Members of the Islamic community assert that the policies are generally modelled on highly securitised US policies, are counterproductive,^[56] and unfairly target the Muslim diaspora as being the cause of extremism.^[57] Additionally, Muslims have expressed general distrust of the Government’s strategies due to Australia actively instigating violent

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conflicts overseas with Islamic countries. Many Islamic organisations recommend that a more effective strategy would involve programs that implement personal counter-radicalisation counselling by qualified and trusted Islamic leaders rather than messages that are originating from Government bureaucrats. They claim the current securitised approach simply leads to resentment and that a softer co-operative approach utilising more Muslim facilitators is needed.^[58]

Some experts are in agreement with the grievances mentioned by the Islamic community. They also assert that the Government programs are largely ineffective. The anti-radicalisation message is seen as not reaching its target 'young Muslim' audience, instead, being drowned out by the mass of extremist propaganda flooding the Internet. The 'Building community resilience' program also comes under fire as being a waste of resources. The resources, it is claimed, could be better utilised for training local Muslims to produce meaningful online counter-radicalisation messages.^[59]

Still other experts claim the policy application is too soft-power focused (similar to that of the UK) and may be inadvertently co-opting with extremist oriented Islamic organisations, hence, further exacerbating the problem.^[60] They claim a better approach would involve de-focusing on community empowerment, instead, engaging more of the hard-power policy focus espoused in the US counter-radicalisation approach.^[61]

Comparing National Approaches

By examining the three national approaches, it appears that they all similarly combine two core elements: securitisation/justice based counter/de-radicalisation systems (hard-power) and social/community based counter/de-radicalisation arrangements (soft-power). What differs is the degree of polarity each country exhibits toward either soft or hard power biases in their approach. The UK showing a distinctly soft-powered community integration approach, the US pursuing hard-powered legal/securitised policies. The Australian approach is thought to maintain the middle ground balance of both soft and hard-power strategies, perhaps mimicking and combining the better points of both UK and US practices.

A significant overarching commonality also exists within the three national approaches regarding Government attempts to possibly instigate a re-interpretation of the Islamic belief system to one that is more consistent with secular Western values.^[62] By partnering with moderate liberal Muslims through community-based strategies,^[63] the Governments are perhaps attempting to empower the moderate voices to challenge the extremist ideologies of more radical fundamentalist Muslims.^[64] Renaming fundamentalist Muslims as 'Islamists' may promote the idea that fundamental 'Islamist' interpretations of Islam are aberrant^[65] and that the true interpretation of Islam is the moderate view.^[66] This view of Islam as a moderate religion is disputed by both fundamentalist Islamist groups^[67] and by some secular religious scholars,^[68] who contrarily state that Islam and Islamism are one in the same.

Some consider these counter-radicalisation strategies as tantamount to centrally defining religious beliefs and consider them an affront to the right to freedom of religion.^[69] However, claims have been made that the Governments fear directly portraying Islam as the cause of terror so as to avoid inflaming societal tensions.^[70] Instead, they choose to hide behind statements that claim the opposite, portraying Islam and terrorism as unrelated phenomena,^[71] whilst concurrently enacting programs designed to target and shape Islamic religious beliefs.^[72] Although this position seems contradictory, it does come with the benefit of allowing Governments to appear to maintain their impartiality regarding matters of religion while still actively working with communities to suppress radical interpretations of Islam.^[73]

The ability to objectively verify the outcomes of these programs would be an important development noting the difficulties in getting these types of interventions to work effectively.^[74] It would also curtail the growth of right wing extremist sentiment that motivates citizens to take matters into their own hands owing to a perceived lack of effectiveness in the Government's dealings with terrorism.^[75]

Overall, this covert religion-shaping strategy is arguably augmented with direct Government interventions to address socio-economic concerns that also contribute to radicalisation.^[76] When these two soft-power tools are

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operationalised in a society that is subject to appropriate hard-power securitisation and counter-terror legal frameworks, it may present the best option for the formation of a workable counter-radicalisation strategy.^[77] Such is the case in Australia where elements of both the US and UK strategies are used in tandem with some degree of success. However, a significant refinement of such a strategy would require the Government's attention regarding two additional areas of concern. Community engagement partners need to be carefully selected to ensure they do not further radicalise vulnerable people groups through inappropriate discourse. Lastly, supplementary focus needs to be applied to the silencing of dissenting Islamist voices that serve to challenge and undermine the Government's covert and overt counter-radicalisation efforts.

Conclusion

By comparing and analysing the counter-radicalisation strategies of the UK, the US, and Australia, disparate approaches are revealed that all contain some degree of effectiveness. There exists however, fundamental downsides within each countries approach relating to public perceptions of their efficacy and fairness. Consequently, a 'best option' strategy would need to combine the more successful aspects of each in conjunction with efforts toward improving the public's opinion of these programs.

It becomes clear that each nation utilises a mix of soft and hard power tactics ranging from community run programs at one end of the spectrum to highly securitised policing programs at the other. With Australia possessing the most balanced mix of both approaches, its strategy may provide the backbone from which to build a better universal counter-radicalisation framework. To be a 'best option', correctional changes must be implemented to ensure the appropriate selection of Islamic community engagement partners. Additionally, a more robust policy for counteracting dialogues that seek to undermine the programs covert attempts at shaping aberrant religious ideology needs to be enacted so as to maintain the perception of oratorical legitimacy within the target audience.

Future research may seek to bring clarity to counter-radicalisation program design by delineating universally measurable variables that would allow objective assessments of the strategic viability of differing program formats. This in turn would encourage program refinements whereby public support can be garnered and gains in social cohesion will naturally eventuate.

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