

Islamic State appeal really isn't radical at all

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Neil Prakash groomed 15-year-old Farhad Jabar online to carry out a lone actor attack resulting in the death of police accountant Curtis Cheng. Source: Supplied

Islamic State and its media units release more than 90,000 social media posts a day. That's nearly 33 million posts a year. As the head of Britain's MI5 has stated, social media is the command and control network of radical Islam.

To counter the impact of this social media assault on the West and its randomly violent consequences in Paris, Boston, London and Sydney, the Obama administration convened an international summit in February on countering violent extremism.

The summit sought to "prevent violent extremists ... from radicalising, recruiting, or inspiring individuals or groups in the United States and abroad to commit acts of violence". The preferred Western response to jihadi recruitment is, it seems, a program of deradicalisation. But what does deradicalisation mean and does it really address Islamic State's sophisticated ideological messaging?

Islamic State considers the branding aspect of its movement on social media so important that in August it formed the Anwar al-Awlaki Brigade, a special unit consisting of at least 10 Australians to promulgate the message and recruit online.

The brigade's media awareness is attuned to Western sensibilities. Segueing off a L'Oreal ad, for instance, a recent recruitment message targeting young Western women runs, "Cover Girl, No, - Covered Girl Yes. Because you're worth it".

The flow of young, second-generation Muslim men and women reared in secular multicultural societies to Islamic State demonstrates the success of this messaging. Western governments seem as shocked by the cultic appeal of Islamic State as they were surprised by the rapidity and lethality with which it achieved de facto authority over vast swathes of Syria and Iraq. Like a possum trapped in the headlights of an oncoming ute, the Australian government's response is to introduce yet another tranche of counter-terror legislation and throw even more money at the security agencies and counter-radicalisation strategies that singularly have failed to curb the enthusiasm for jihad.

The Abbott and Turnbull governments alone have allocated more than \$40 million to countering violent extremism. In recent months, Justice Minister Michael Keenan made \$700,000 available to an Australian intervention support hub for academics from the Australian National University, Deakin University and elsewhere “to research radicalisation and develop responses” for governments and community workers.

The government devotes \$13.4m specifically to counter radicalisation through programs such as Living Safe Together. After failed Melbourne rapper turned Islamic State recruiter Neil Prakash groomed 15-year-old Farhad Jabar online to carry out a lone actor attack resulting in the death of NSW police accountant Curtis Cheng last month, the Turnbull government announced it would devote more funding to programs aimed at “preventing youth radicalisation”.

Late last month, counter-terror co-ordinator Greg Moriarty hosted a meeting of state and federal officials, police intelligence agencies, and multicultural affairs and education bureaucrats to “develop a more co-ordinated approach for its deradicalisation push”.

The latest approach will stress the need for “social cohesion”. Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs Concetta Fierravanti-Wellshoped to engage “the views of the Muslim community” and address “gaps” in the program of counter-radicalisation. Last week, the Victorian and NSW governments announced funding amounting to \$72m to address radicalisation. Explaining the Victorian programs, terror expert Greg Barton observed that they “aimed at ensuring young people ... do not fall under the spell of those that would seek to radicalise them and damage their lives incredibly badly”.

The new push reflects the fact, despite more than a decade of funding for deradicalisation programs, they have, as one government spokesperson acknowledged, “failed to hit the mark”. Yet in the same week that state and federal government announced the new initiatives, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the transnational Islamist party headquartered in London and that established a presence in Australia after 2001, denounced the Australian oath of allegiance and the “forced assimilation” implied in singing the national anthem.

Evidently, deradicalisation so far has not even got near the mark. In other words, while Islamic State offers jihadi cool messaging, the government responds with insipid pieties about cohesion achieved through culturally sensitive deradicalisation programs that in Europe and Australia have proved expensive and ineffective.

In this context, it may be worth asking, before engaging more academics and bureaucratic agencies in taxpayer-funded programs, what precisely does the counter-terror community understand by radicalism and radicalisation?

A cursory survey reveals that no government agency or counter-terror expert has paused to consider whether the term, in fact, captures the process that converts a young Western Muslim to the Salafist cause.

Yet political terminology matters. An adequate response needs an accurate diagnosis. George Orwell observed in 1948 that “the slovenliness of our language makes it easier to have foolish thoughts”. Political chaos”, he argued, “is connected with the decay of language” or, more precisely, with prevailing orthodoxies that “conceal and prevent thought”.

This is precisely what has happened with the misuse of the term radicalisation. Radicalism, in fact, has a precise etymology. It entered modern usage in the 19th century in the context of political and economic reform and social progress. It was the 19th-century secular, liberal, utilitarian reformers associated with Jeremy Bentham and James Mill (John Stuart Mill’s father) who devised the modern

understanding of radicalism. It stood for a program of rational, constitutional, social and economic reform.

Radicalism as an ideology dismissed religion as irrational superstition and sought political reform along secular, capitalist and progressive democratic lines.

The one thing we know about Islamic State and its message is that it does not do democracy or secular modernity. Thus it is not radical nor does it engage in radicalisation. As Orwell knew, distorting meaning distorts understanding and obscures or prevents thought.

Rather than being radicalised, young Western Muslims are attracted to what a more religious age than our own recognised as enthusiasm, zealotry or fanaticism. This phenomenon has a long history in Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious understanding. Seventeenth-century Europe knew well the revived post-Reformation penchant for religious sectarianism, enthusiastic zealotry and its deracinating social consequences. Ben Jonson satirised the hypocrisy of the religious enthusiast in plays such as *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) where characters such as Zeal-of-the-Land Busy imposed their puritanical views on the wider populace.

Fanatical millenarian sects such as the Ranters or the Fifth Monarchists violated social and political norms during the English Civil War (1642-49) to establish what they thought would be a chiliastic millennium leading to the rule of Jesus Christ in England.

In the aftermath of the political chaos caused by sectaries, 18th-century social commentators, wits and philosophers such as David Hume, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Joseph Addison identified the limited character of the zealot.

Writing in *The Spectator* in 1711, Addison noted that “Zeal is ... a great ease to a malicious man, by making him believe he does God service while he is gratifying the bent of a perverse revengeful temper. For this reason we find that most massacres and devastations which have been in the world have taken their rise from a furious pretended zeal.” Hume thought fanaticism and enthusiasm had produced “the most cruel disorders in human society”. Hume, Pope and Addison would recognise in the activity of today’s jihadi zealots fanaticism, not an anachronistic radicalism.

In other words, a

ny analysis of jihadism’s self-confirming zealotry suggests that those labelled as radicalised are not really radicals at all. Ideological radicalism, properly understood, requires a clear break from traditional religion of whatever form to achieve a pluralist, secular modernity.

By contrast, a scriptural literalism based on the message of the Prophet Mohammed and the hadith of his rightly guided 7th-century successors, the Rashidun (632-662), fuels Islamic State’s thought and practice. They look to past models purified by ultra-violence today to build tomorrow’s religious utopia. Like the 17th-century puritanical zealots, they are fanatics who adapt the tenets of an ultra-traditional literalism to guide present action.

Today’s jihadi is an enthusiast as defined by the *Oxford Shorter English Dictionary* as one who is “possessed by a god” or in “receipt of divine communication”. No matter how deluded their actions appear to modern secular sensibilities, in their minds they are directly engaged in a divine mission to re-create the caliphate.

This renders them immune to community sensitive de-radicalisation programs promoted by Western governments because there is not much that is particularly radical in jihadist self-understanding.

Interestingly, and after much tergiversation, David Cameron’s Conservative government in Britain appears to have grasped this. At the Conservative Party conference in September, Cameron expressed his determination “to tear up the narrative that says Muslims are persecuted and the West deserves what it gets” and to take on not radicalisation but “extremism in all its forms, the violent and the non-violent”.

Malcolm Turnbull, who has much in common with Cameron's brand of conservatism, may be advised to adopt a similar anti-fanatical, counter-extremist policy.

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