



PATH TO VIOLENCE

Date: November 22, 2019

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 22, 2019, Mr. John Pyrik presented on the Path to Violence at the 2019 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a group panel for questions and answers. Main discussion topics included foreign fighters, structured analytical techniques (SATs), and family grooming among right-wing extremists.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

The Path to Violence is a diagnostic structured analytical technique (SAT) that postulates a six-step progression of extremism and is a useful tool to help direct operational decision making and resource allocation. The Path to Violence was applied to the case of Butt, one of the three jihadi extremists behind the 2017 London Bridge Attack that killed 8 and injured 48. The example showed missed opportunities that could probably have been captured at the time by the Path to Violence for MI5 to intervene on and disrupt Butt's escalation towards kinetic violence. In light of limited resources, it is important to be able to identify and categorize threat actors so that investigations and resources can be prioritized towards the most immediate and biggest threats. The Path to Violence can help categorize and visualize an actor's threat level to help decide operational direction and resource allocation.

Question Period

The concept of foreign fighters is a continuing phenomenon, with returning foreign fighters presenting an increasing and imminent threat to national security. One of the main concerns was whether and how SATs can help alleviate this

problem. Another focus of the discussion was the problem of extremism and radicalization, and how it may be alleviated through community engagement.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

In 2017, the UK was estimated to house up to 25,000 Islamist terrorists who could pose a threat to the UK's national security. The vast amount of threat actors mean that counter-terrorism efforts may not be able to prevent all kinetic violence in time. As such, there needs to be a method to help prioritize targets for intervention and disruption.

The Path to Violence shows potential to be a tool for such purposes. The Joint Intelligence Group, in response to protests against the Vancouver 2010 Olympics, had developed the Path to Violence to help categorize and predict violence escalation of threat actors. The model postulates six stages of extremist progression based on observable actor characteristics in this ascending order: grievance, ideation, research and planning, preparation, breach, and direct action. Actors may ascend and descend this ladder at times, and the ascension speed also varies across actors. By identifying an actor's current stage on the ladder, different levels of intervention can be deployed in this ascending order: counselling, peace bond, disruption, and arrest.

There are certain drawbacks to this model. The Path to Violence produces many false positives and false negatives. It is intrusive in its data collection process, and it could require a lot of resources to function properly as the amount of target increases. Lastly, it does not predict the probability nor speed of a group moving from one stage to another.

Question Period

SATs often serve as a useful tool with restricted scope rather than a comprehensive solution to problems. As such, it should probably be used as a supplement on top of human intuition and other existing analytical methods. It serves to prompt and guide rational thought to build upon intuition and experience.

Family grooming among right wing extremists were raised as a concern. However, the consensus is that it does not appear to be a major concern at the

moment. There are a lot of other channels that could draw in moderates and radicalize them such as Wexit, the rising Western Canada separatism movement.

A proposed solution to extremism is community engagement. It is crucial to engage with the community and build trust so that both sides can work together to find a common solution to critical social issues. However, current efforts are held back from lack of insight on how to generate effective community engagement. Evidence-based research on what methods work best and how it may be employed will be greatly valuable in addressing this issue.

It was also suggested that are commonalities and shared interests between groups including but not limited to: public and private corporations, academia, intelligence services, law enforcement, and researchers. Joint programs involving these groups along with the community could be fruitful in addressing extremism and radicalization.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Limited counter-terrorism resources require tools to prioritize targets and resources
- Path to Violence can help categorize threat actors by their observable threat level to direct response and resource allocation
- Different stages offer varying opportunities to collect information: grievance - OSINT, ideation - HUMINT, research & planning - SIGINT, preparation - FINNIT, breach - IMINT.
- Application of Path to Violence to Butt shows how it could have helped highlight opportunities for intervention and need for more resources in response to his escalation into the 2017 London Bridge Attack
- Path to Violence for groups is not as accurate as it is for individuals

Question Period

- SATs are useful supplementary tools for detecting and predicting threats
- Community engagement is a key element to addressing extremism
- Evidence-based research on effective community engagement will be invaluable in light of current reliance on anecdotal evidence
- Joint programs between interest groups should work together to address extremism



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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

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