



## **COMBATTING TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM IN WALES: OPERATIONAL POLICING**

**Date:** November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020

*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 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Andrew Hayes, Detective Chief Inspector for the South Wales Police presented *Combating Terrorism and Extremism in Wales: Operational Policing* at the 2020 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. Main discussion topics included terrorism and extremism in Wales, factors involved in radicalization, and some of the strategies used to safeguard individuals at risk of radicalization.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

Detective Chief Inspector Hayes discussed terrorism and extremism threats in Wales, how extremist organizations are targeting vulnerable individuals, and the importance of understanding how technology and social media can influence and impact individuals. The speaker also explained the categorization of extremist individuals and some of the strategies being used to counter extremism in Wales and the UK.

### **BACKGROUND**

In recent years, the UK has seen an increase in terrorist attacks, and generally speaking, all countries face the same security threats. Therefore, a partnership with other countries is a very critical component for counterterrorism in Wales, where there have been some high profile individuals with connections to terrorism. For example, Siful Sujjan, who was killed by a US drone strike in 2015, was considered one of Islamic State's most dangerous operatives. However, initially he did not give the impression of someone who would become this person; he arrived in the UK in the early 2000s, settled in Pontypridd, Wales, went to university in South Wales, and eventually set up his IT company in

Cardiff. It has been suggested that the death of his sister-in-law was a pivotal moment in his radicalization.

The threat from Islamic extremism is not the only threat that authorities in Wales face. There are also security threats related to single-issue terrorism, and in recent years, there has been an increase in threats from far right terrorist organizations. These organizations have a structure, an external identity, and clear recruitment strategies that focus on young, vulnerable individuals. They exploit the internet the same way that other terrorist groups do, which can affect young people who are just beginning to form their ideas and beliefs. For example, reading that their existence is threatened by Muslims and immigrants, can create an opportunity for those wishing to exploit vulnerable individuals.

Accessibility to online content and the use of social media and other decentralized platforms can provide opportunities for extremist groups to fuel one another's rhetoric, exposing people to a very narrow range of ideas, which can reinforce, accelerate, or drive them to radicalization. Particularly inspiring groups like the Atomwaffen Division have had global reach to many like-minded individuals.

The easy access to these fringe platforms, which facilitate secrecy and concealment of activities, furthers the interest of extremist ideologies. Within mainstream platforms there are wider protective factors, such as warnings that moderate content and families and friends who are observing that content. But when users move to decentralized, fringe platforms, those protective factors disappear. These encrypted and specialized information systems complicate law enforcement and intelligence agencies' efforts to monitor online activities associated with extremist groups.

Although radicalization can take place offline through faith based organizations, prisons, workplaces, friends, and family, the online space has accelerated violent extremism and radical ideologies. Furthermore, while these platforms can sometimes be considered the sole cause of radicalization, we need to consider the social, political, and economic factors that push people towards extremism. So, arguably, the internet may simply complement or accelerate the process of radicalization. The social aspects of police perspectives can help understand how individuals are influenced not only online, but also offline. Radicalization is a social cycle where individuals develop extremist ideologies and beliefs that can be violent and non-violent.

The use of social media and the internet by right wing extremists and Islamist inspired extremists is not so different. The main distinction is the narrative: one

focuses on nationalist ideologies, and the other one is based on religion, but they both have the same impact. Extremist individuals can be categorized into three tiers.

- Tier 1 is normalization - It involves individuals posting things without knowing or understanding the context. The challenges here are qualifying those statements, assessing if there is some deep seeded hate, and dealing with the volume of posts and information out there.
- Tier 2 is acclimatization on fringe platforms - The change of narrative becomes visual, and individuals move into these platforms where speech is less censored. The challenges here are not only to get these platforms to take things down but also the collapse and timeframe to capture users' details.
- Tier 3 is desensitization - Individuals are fully indoctrinated into a culture of conspiracy theories, fascism, and violence. At this point, countering terrorism and extremism is very difficult.

It is imperative to intervene at the earliest opportunity to ensure that we are safeguarding those at risk of radicalization. The UK's counter terrorism strategy is to prevent, pursue, protect, and prepare. Prevent is about safeguarding people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. The prevent delivery model is about tackling the cause of radicalization at the community level to ensure that less people are using social media to spread hate and extremist narratives.

Autistic individuals seem to be at a greater risk of radicalization. Those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) communicate and interact with people differently; they see and process their environment differently, so keeping friends can be very challenging, and so they end up feeling marginalized. They cannot see the danger, and their desperation to belong to a group or to have friends makes them more vulnerable. That is not to say that all individuals with ASD will become extremists, but that the situation in which they find themselves will influence the outcome. Unlimited and unsupervised internet access can have a very alarming impact on these developing minds. Autistic individuals can be as different as everyone else, so while it is a good idea to understand how a person's character functions, the focus should be on the person and to respect unique abilities and complex needs.

Within the UK, various statutory partners manage vulnerability through a program called Channel, which is a multidisciplinary group that partners education, health, and social services to provide a tailored support approach to safeguard individuals from radicalization. Participation in this program is voluntary, confidential, and does not involve any criminal sanction. In Wales, The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare

there is an additional tactical option to manage this vulnerable area. Individuals with autism can be referred to the Wales Extremism and Counter Terrorism Unit, where specialists can help take a person-centered approach by offering support and engaging with these individuals. This option has shown very positive results. It has shown to reduce recidivism, and it moves these individuals away from radicalization allowing them to lead fulfilling lives. Furthermore, in the UK, every high school or secondary school receives lessons on extremism, in which trained police officers discuss behaviours, online activity, and vulnerabilities that may lead to radicalization.

### KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- In the last few years, the threats faced in Wales have increasingly moved toward right-wing extremism.
- Easy access to decentralized social media platforms can reinforce, accelerate, or drive individuals to radicalization.
- Although the online space can sometimes be considered the sole cause of radicalization, it is important to consider the social, political, and economic factors that push people towards extremism.
- Right wing extremism and Islamist inspired extremism focus on different things and have different narratives, but they both have the same damaging effects.
- Autistic individuals feeling marginalized seem to be at a greater risk to radicalization, and when they have unlimited and unsupervised internet access they become more vulnerable.
- Early intervention is important, but early engagement is crucial to prevent people from being drawn into radicalization.



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